

APSA 2021 – Section on Democracy & Autocracy – Best Fieldwork Award – Prize Citation

The committee, Natalie Letsa (University of Oklahoma), Başak Taraktaş (Boğaziçi University), and Kurt Weyland (University of Texas at Austin – Chair), faced the difficult task of choosing among a significant number of very strong submissions. Yet after two rounds of careful consideration, one project clearly stood out and unanimously emerged as the winner: Mashail Malik’s “The Microfoundations of Identity Politics in Pakistan’s Megacity.” Malik conducted impressively thorough and comprehensive field research to unearth the reasons for the puzzling difference in the electoral behavior of two ethnic groupings and thus elucidate the conditions for political accountability in a new democracy. Specifically, why have Muhajirs built a strong ethnic party that they loyally support despite its dismal performance in local office, whereas Pashtuns engage in much more performance-based voting?

To explain why ethnic identity among Muhajirs is so intense that it shields politicians from accountability expectations, Malik conducted about 200 in-depth interviews that uncovered the crucial importance of ethnic groupings’ different migration experiences. Fleeing from anti-Muslim harassment and violence in India led Muhajirs to invest their refuge in Karachi with a profound sense of belonging (“collective psychological ownership”) – and endorse and support their co-ethnics’ rule despite its frequent incompetence. By contrast, the predominantly economic motivations for (temporarily) moving away from their true homeland in Northwest Pakistan gave Pashtuns a much more pragmatic outlook on politics in Karachi.

What is impressive is how Malik discovered the different components of this innovative theory through her careful and comprehensive field research, which she also used to design her focus groups and survey experiments. Her thorough grounding in the local context, including her grasp of linguistic nuances, allowed her to penetrate her interlocutors’ memories, thoughts, and loyalties. In the best tradition of qualitative research, Malik achieved admirably deep understanding.

Malik then skillfully used these insights to construct a multi-step explanation for her puzzle, in dialog with an interdisciplinary variety of theoretical literatures. In this way, she sheds important new light on the complicated relationship between ethnic identities and democratic accountability, a crucial topic for APSA’s section on Democracy and Autocracy. With the depth and perceptiveness of her research, which gave rise to a superb dissertation, Mashail Malik amply deserves the section’s best fieldwork award for 2021.

The committee also awards an “Honorable Mention” to Michelle Weitzel for her wide-ranging field research on “Drones, Sirens, and Prayer Calls: Unheard Consequences of a Politics of Sound.” In a particularly innovative approach, Weitzel elucidates the role of sound as an instrument for state domination and the regulation of citizens’ lives. Documenting the use of “sonic power” across three different settings (France, Israel/Palestine, and Morocco) through interviews, ethnographic observation,

and written testimonies, Weitzel investigates how democracies and authoritarian regimes employ various forms of sound, ranging from alarm sirens to church bells and low-flying jet fighters, for purposes of disciplining people, guiding and controlling their movement, and imposing a “fissured normalcy” in conflict zones. The novelty of this research focus and Weitzel’s impressive efforts to draw on a broad range of literatures to make sense of her findings stood out.

Hearty congratulations to our winner, Mashail Malik, and runner-up, Michelle Weitzel, on their exceptional field research about topics of democracy and autocracy!