



Detecting manipulation in authoritarian elections: Survey-based methods in Zimbabwe



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the feasibility of using social surveys to detect electoral manipulation in authoritarian regimes. It compares official results from the July 2013 elections in Zimbabwe with findings from a nationally representative pre-election survey. The comparison confirms that the dominant incumbent party won the elections but by far smaller margins than officially reported. This discrepancy provides analytic leverage to identify the possible presence of coercive mobilization and vote suppression and to pinpoint their geographic location. The election results are re-estimated using a set of voting simulations based on novel proxy indicators and an original list experiment designed to reveal the political preferences of fearful voters. The paper concludes by discussing why autocrats manipulate elections and whether or not they succeed in their objectives.

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1. Introduction

Competitive elections have proliferated around the world, not only in democratic regimes, but also under autocracy (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). As a result, the average quality of elections has declined in recent years (Diamond, 2015; Puddington, 2015). Political leaders have learned that going through the formal motions of electoral competition yields practical dividends in terms of extending their hold on office. They recognize that periodic elections are the gold standard for legitimizing a leader's right to rule and, furthermore, offer valuable opportunities to test popularity, discipline subordinates, divide opponents, and appease the international community (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Geddes, 2006). So autocrats may be tempted to compel loyalty and suppress opposition in order to ensure that they always win and to signal to rivals that their grip on power is unassailable (Simpser, 2013).

To allege the existence of systemic electoral manipulation is one thing; to estimate its extent is quite another. Anecdotal evidence abounds that candidates and parties indulge in a variety of illicit

practices, particularly in competitive authoritarian regimes. The “menu of manipulation” (Schedler, 2002; Elklit and Reynolds, 2005; Vickery and Shein, 2012) is broad; it spans all stages of the electoral process, from vote buying to political intimidation, from tampering with the voters roll to restricting access to the mass media, and from ballot stuffing to falsifying the vote count. But because all these acts are illegal and usually secret, the exact nature of manipulation is difficult to trace and its impact on final results is often obscure. The problem of attribution is especially pronounced in situations where manipulation is suspected of altering outcomes, namely who wins and who loses an election.

This paper addresses the following question: Does the official statement of election results reflect the genuine will of the electorate? The primary concern is to detect, among other factors, possible evidence of manipulation. In short, does the combined effect of observed malpractices call into question the accuracy of certified election results? We argue that, compared to the somewhat quixotic quest to identify the exact nature of hidden causal mechanisms, the challenge of estimating a margin of electoral manipulation may actually be somewhat more tractable.

The paper explores survey-based methods for identifying the presence of electoral manipulation in one electoral authoritarian regime in Africa. It focusses on the July 2013 elections in Zimbabwe,

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where official results gave Robert Mugabe, the country's long-time leader, a seventh presidential term with a resounding 61 percent of the vote and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) more than two-thirds of the elected seats in the House of Assembly. The paper compares these outcomes with results from a nationally representative pre-election survey conducted by Afrobarometer¹ just one month before the day of the election. The comparison reveals that, while the incumbent president and party surely amassed more votes than their main opponents – the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) led by former trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai – the margins of victory were far smaller than officially reported. The discrepancy between official and survey results provides analytic leverage to explore the extent of possible electoral manipulation.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, a theoretical and methodological section justifies the measurement of electoral manipulation from a pre-election, public opinion perspective. Second, an empirical section describes the electoral environment in Zimbabwe in 2013, including self-reported citizen experiences. A subsequent analytical section implements the research design, which hinges on a comparison between official results (as reported by the national electoral commission) and voting intentions in the pre-election survey (which, we contend, represent voters' true preferences absent restrictions on a free vote). In reporting discrepancies in these results (Section 4), we detect the presumed effects of coerced mobilization and opposition suppression at both national and provincial levels for presidential and House of Assembly elections. We also report a set of voting simulations (Section 5), which employ novel proxy indicators and an original list experiment to estimate the unrevealed political preferences of reticent and dissembling voters. These analyses reveal not only the presence of electoral manipulation but also its geographic location, which in turn help to interpret the winning party's electoral strategy. A final section concludes by discussing why autocrats manipulate elections and whether or not they succeed in their objectives.

2. Framework

Analysts possess various techniques for ascertaining the accuracy of reported election results. First, they can rely on the assessments of international election observers and domestic non-governmental monitors, which provide general qualitative judgments about whether an election is free, fair or otherwise credible (Birch, 2012; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). Second, observers and monitors can mount a parallel vote tabulation (PVT) to make an independent tally of votes from a random sample of polling stations. The purpose is to verify – or challenge – aggregate results announced by an election management body (Estok et al., 2002). Third, statisticians can conduct post-election forensic analysis of polling results in order to search for anomalous patterns that are consistent with electoral fraud (Beber and Scacco, 2010; Mebane, 2012; Myagkov et al., 2009). Finally, analysts are able to draw upon quantitative databases of expert opinion in order to compare the integrity of elections on a cross-national basis (Bishop and Hoeffler, 2014; Coppedge and Gerring, 2011; Norris, 2014; Norris et al., 2014).

These techniques for detecting electoral manipulation have

differential strengths and weaknesses. Election forensics and PVTs are based on objective evidence but focus only on the election-day vote count. In that sense, they are best suited to revealing malpractice at a single, albeit important, moment in the election process. Norris and colleagues note, however, that “the end stages of the electoral cycle, involving the process of vote tabulation, electoral procedures, and the announcement of the final results (are) ... the *least problematic stage*” (2014, 796, emphasis in original). International observer missions and (especially) domestic monitoring groups now therefore pay greater attention to the pre-election period, during which voting contests are often initially won or lost (Daxecker 2014; Bhasin and Gandhi, 2013). And experts compile composite indices of electoral quality based on observations across the full electoral cycle. But these latter techniques feature subjective assessments, which may be formed using incomplete or biased information. Finally, all these techniques for analyzing the accuracy of election results are post-hoc; they take place after the fact.

This paper proposes an alternative approach to detecting electoral manipulation using systematic *pre-election* observations. This approach takes advantage of detailed individual-level data about expected election quality and intended voting behavior drawn from mass surveys of representative samples of eligible voters during the late stages of an election campaign. The theoretical logic for employing data on public opinion and self-reported electoral behavior is as follows. Regardless of the nature of the regime – democratic, authoritarian or hybrid – elections represent a peak moment for popular participation in the political process and a valuable opportunity for citizens to demand vertical accountability (O'Donnell, 1994; Bratton and Logan, 2014). Citizens enter the electoral arena with recollections (positive or negative) about previous electoral contests, opinions about the openness (or otherwise) of the current electoral environment, and views about how well (or badly) the authorities will conduct the upcoming election. They also possess, and may be willing to express, intentions about whether to vote and, if so, which party to vote for.

In principle, a well-designed pre-election survey should be able to accurately measure these opinions, as well as actual and intended behaviors. It can provide a record of whether eligible voters report exposure to political coercion or vote buying and whether they experience difficulty in gaining access to the voter register or the polls. The resultant data can be used to forecast the likely quality and outcome of the election and serve as a baseline against which to verify – or challenge – results reported by an official election management body. In short, the logic of the research design in this paper is as follows: a large deviation between anticipated and actual election outcomes is a signal of possible election manipulation; it can also shed light on the nature of irregularities, an estimate of their extent, and a guide to their particular sub-national locations.

As with any electoral measurement tool, the advantages of pre-election surveys may be offset by certain shortcomings.

First, can election outcomes be accurately forecast? In established democratic regimes, a standard set of aggregate pre-election indicators – such as the state of the economy, the partisan breakdown of voters, and whether an incumbent is in the race – routinely predict the outcomes of national elections with a considerable degree of precision (Campbell and Garrand, 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). Granted, these macro-level indicators generally do a better job of election forecasting than micro-political data on voters' intentions (Gelman and King, 1993). In advanced democracies, pre-election polls are increasingly

¹ The main goal of Afrobarometer is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion about democracy, governance and related subjects. Since 1999, the Afrobarometer has conducted more than 200,000 face-to-face interviews in six rounds of surveys in up to 36 African countries with nationally representative samples of eligible voters, that is, adults aged 18 years and older. Full details of Afrobarometer coverage, network, questionnaires, research protocols, data, results and publications are available at www.afrobarometer.org.

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