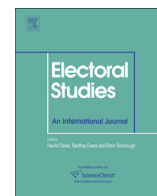




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Election administration and perceptions of fair elections[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of democracy proposes an important relationship between the quality of elections and democratic legitimacy, but there are few studies of how the conduct of elections affects perceptions of elections being fair. We examine how election administration and individual-level demographic traits affect public perceptions of fair elections in the US. Since administration of US elections is largely the responsibility of individual states we are able to exploit variation in the quality of how elections are conducted to assess effects of electoral administration on public perceptions. We find evidence that administrative performance is positively and significantly related to perceptions of elections being fair. Voter identification laws, in contrast, are not associated with greater confidence in elections. We also find some evidence that speaks to the limits of these findings, as individual-level factors such as partisanship and minority status have larger effects than administration on perceptions of electoral fairness.

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1. Introduction

It is well established that, after an election, winners and losers differ in their attitudes about the winner's right to govern (Nadeu and Blais, 1993), their trust in government, their satisfaction with democracy, and their views that elections make officials respond to the public (Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Banducci and Karp, 2003; Bowler and Donovan, 2007; Esaiasson, 2011; Singh et al., 2012). Yet as some basic level, democratic elections 'work' because (or if) losers and winners see the outcome as the result of a fair, legitimate process. One important theme from a recent

body of research on electoral integrity is that the procedural quality of elections should contribute to democratic legitimacy (for an overview, see Norris, 2014; Birch, 2008). Part of the process by which supporters of losing parties and losing candidates see winners as having legitimate authority is that at some level, they view the electoral process as fair, and consent to the results of elections they lose (Anderson et al., 2005).

But how is it that people come to perceive outcomes of elections as legitimate and procedurally fair? In older, established democracies, it is likely that citizens have some base level of political socialization that causes them to view electoral procedures as fair in themselves. In these nations, the same social processes that transmit civic duty (Blais et al., 2004; Blais, 2006), patriotism, or even party loyalties (Campbell et al., 1960; Niemi and Jennings, 1991) likely also build some reservoir of support for the outcomes of democratic institutions (Dalton, 2009). Regardless winning or losing, and regardless of procedural faults or glitches on election day, socialization processes may cause

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people in established democracies to see elections as routine events and to regularly accept election results as legitimate (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002). Political socialization is not, however, sufficient to explain how all people view electoral integrity at a particular point in time. Although socialization may well provide a reservoir or benchmark of support it is not plausible to suggest that the level of support remains unchanged through a life cycle of perhaps a dozen or more national elections. Several scholars note that younger generations are being socialized toward democracy differently (Denemark et al., 2012), with less deference to authority (Inglehart, 1990) and with civic duty acting as a weaker force in motivating political participation (Blais et al., 2004). The media environment that generates information about democratic institutions has also changed (Moy and Pfau, 2000) – a competitive, partisan media context can increase incentives news outlets have to bring attention to procedural flaws in elections, and allegations of fraud.

Beyond any socialized acceptance of election results then, citizens' views of electoral legitimacy are conditioned by their *perceptions* of electoral and political performance (Norris, 2014, 2004; Elklit and Reynolds, 2005; Elklit and Reynolds, 2002). For example, Europeans who perceived that officials were bribed were less trusting of democratic institutions (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003). Russians who perceived elections as unfair were less supportive of political parties, parliament, and their government (McAllister and White, 2011). Although we have evidence that satisfaction with democracy is related to broad measures of procedural performance of government (Norris, 2004),¹ and evidence that specific electoral rules (proportional representation and publicly financed elections) correspond with greater popular confidence in elections (Birch, 2008), we know less about how the quality of how election administration affects mass perceptions of electoral performance in established democracies.

2. The research question

In light of the preceding discussion our research question can be stated: To what extent are perceptions of electoral performance affected by the actual procedural quality of elections? By investigating this question, we can broaden our understanding of how citizens reason about political institutions in general. That is, are popular attitudes about democratic institutions, at least in part, structured by the quality of institutional practice?

Our primary question also has implications for the utility of efforts to improve the administration of elections. We know that, independent of the procedural quality of elections, a particular event or election rule can be viewed quite differently by different groups. In the US, for example, partisanship plays a major role in structuring whether or not people view key aspects of elections as unfair or corrupt. Party structures how people perceive the role of campaign finance in elections (Persily and Lammie, 2004),

how they view the relationship between campaign finance and the legitimacy of election results, how they viewed the legitimacy of the disputed 2000 presidential election (Craig et al., 2006), and how they viewed the utility and fairness of voter identification laws (Bowler and Donovan, 2013:30–31; Bentele and O'Brien, 2013). Indeed, at the mass and elite levels, Americans' attitudes about what does and what does not constitute electoral 'fraud' are defined sharply by their partisanship (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Ansolobehere and Persily 2008).

However, if we find that people view elections as more legitimate where objective measures show they are better administered, this would suggest that efforts that succeed at improving electoral performance can enhance the ability of democratic elections to impart legitimate political authority. We should note that there are some grounds for scepticism that election administration will have an independent effect on public opinion. Bowler and Donovan (2013) have demonstrated a wide range of electoral rules and reforms have little identifiable relationship with political trust, efficacy, and citizen engagement with politics. These findings suggest a more limited role for "institutional effects" than one might expect given the argument that "institutions matter." We might also see these results as suggesting a limited role for the effect of election administration. One reason for such null results with respect to broad institutional changes is that although an electoral rule may exist, it need not necessarily be implemented in a fashion that citizens are able to detect. In this study, however, we are not assessing how the presence or absence of an electoral institution affects attitudes, rather, we examine how the *implementation* of elections affects attitudes.

At this point we should note that the general hypothesis of interest is quite straightforward: better administration of elections should produce more positive views of the electoral process among mass publics. In order to test that general argument, however, we need to substantiate both that the US case is an appropriate case study and that appropriate measures of election administration exist.

3. The advantage of the American case

As Norris notes (2014), there are a number of problems with attempts at establishing causality when investigating the relationships between electoral performance and public attitudes about elections. For one, there are very few cases where we have survey data measuring attitudes about electoral performance collected before and after a jurisdiction transitioned to democratic elections. Even in established democracies, it is rare to find polls with suitable items conducted over a time span that is adequate enough to capture the potential effects on attitudes of problems with electoral performance. As such, cross-national studies of opinions taken as a snapshot in time have been our best chance for teasing out the effects of electoral performance on popular attitudes.

An additional research design problem is that of being able to measure electoral performance objectively, across a large number of jurisdictions (see Elklit and Reynolds, 2002). Up to this point, most studies have relied on subjective measures of electoral performance (e.g. corruptions

¹ Also see Putnam et al. (1994), who argue that government performs better where there is greater civic engagement.

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