



Resource disparity and multi-level elections in competitive authoritarian regimes: Regression discontinuity evidence from Hong Kong[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 January 2013
Received in revised form 30 April 2013
Accepted 1 August 2013

Keywords:

Competitive authoritarianism
Multi-level elections
Authoritarian elections
Political machine
Regression discontinuity

ABSTRACT

Much research has been done to study how competitive elections affect autocracies and their opposition. Electoral institutions, however, may have different social and political effects. In this paper, I examine the effect of an understudied electoral institution: lower-level elections. I argue that elections at grassroots levels tend to favor the ruling party by allowing it to more fully utilize its resource advantage to buy political support, which would in turn undermine the opposition's ability to develop a local support network that is important to its struggle for democratization as well as for elected offices. Evaluating the effect of lower-level elections is empirically challenging because the effect is likely to be confounded with voter preference. I tackle this identification problem by taking advantage of a quasi-experiment afforded by the electoral formula of Hong Kong, which allows me to use a regression discontinuity design to test my causal argument. I find strong statistical evidence supporting my argument; the ruling elite's aggressive expansion in the District Councils, the lowest elected tier, aims to drive out the opposition elites, who, by occupying a District Council seat, are able to increase their vote share of that constituency by 4–5 percentage points in a subsequent legislative election.

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1. Introduction

Recent studies of authoritarian regimes find that holding regular elections helps the incumbent achieve various political objectives. [Geddes \(2005\)](#) argues that authoritarian elections provide a peaceful and relatively low-cost

means to deter potential challengers. Drawing on the experience of the Arab world, [Lust-Okar \(2005\)](#) points out that by excluding some opposition leaders from participating in elections, authoritarian leaders effectively undermine the unity of the opposition elite. In her study of the hegemonic party in Mexico, [Magaloni \(2006\)](#) finds that elections provide an opportunity for the ruling party to showcase its invincibility through orchestrating expensive election campaigns, which in turn discourage defection of the ruling elite. [Gandhi and Przeworski \(2007\)](#) suggest that dictators can co-opt the opposition elite by allowing them to contest and win some seats in the dictator-controlled legislature. [Blaydes \(2010\)](#) points out that elections in Mubarak's Egypt ease the distributional conflicts among the ruling elite.

These studies examine the generic effects of authoritarian elections. But as scholars of electoral studies have

[☆] I would like to thank two anonymous referees, Michael DeGolyer, Barbara Geddes, Siu-Hing Lo, Ellen Lust-Okar, Ngok Ma, Dixon Sing, Alvin So, Daniel Treisman, and the participants at the Conference on Trust-building and Governance in Hong Kong and Macao for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, and Tim Tang, Amina Yam, Yalin Hung, and Kiu-Yan Wong for research assistance. Special thanks go to Ngok Ma, who shared part of the election data. I am responsible for the remaining errors. Funding of this research was partly provided by the Academic IT Steering Committee and the Faculty of Social Science of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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long observed, different electoral arrangements and political institutions produce different economic, social, and political outcomes (for example, [Persson and Tabellini \(2005\)](#); [Lijphart \(2012\)](#)). Electoral institutions are not uniform across autocracies ([Geddes, 1999](#); [Hadenius and Teorell, 2006](#); [Cheibub et al., 2010](#)). Therefore, we have reason to suspect that their political effects also vary.

This paper studies the effects of one underappreciated, albeit important, electoral institution in authoritarian regimes: lower-level elections. There are dictatorships such as China where competitive elections exist only in villages, whereas the authoritarian state of Malaysia runs elections at both national and local levels. Despite this variation, nearly all autocracies that hold regular elections at the national level run some form of local elections.

Why would autocracies have incentive to hold local elections? This paper aims to advance a simple argument: competitive elections at a lower level of government favor autocratic regimes for three reasons. First, ideology plays a relatively insignificant role in shaping the electoral contests at the grassroots level, which implies that the opposition that advocates programmatic changes such as political liberalization would have difficulties using its cause to mobilize popular support. When programmatic policies fail to attract voters, electoral success often depends on the provision of constituency services and the distribution of spoils. Given its resource advantage, the ruling elite can easily outcompete the opposition in this respect. Second, low-level elections help solve a commitment problem of machine politics. In her study of political machines (or clientelist parties), [Stokes \(2005\)](#) points out that the functioning of an effective political machine requires voters not to renege on the implicit deal where the machine offers services and the recipient votes for the machine. In authoritarian regimes, low-level elections require the ruling party to gather voter preferences sometimes down to the neighborhood level, thereby improving the party's ability to monitor voters in higher-level elections. Finally, capturing seats in low-tier governments is also conducive to warding off political challenges from the opposition because it can prevent opposition parties or their coalition from developing a local network from which they draw political and financial supports.¹

To illustrate my argument, I provide a case analysis of Hong Kong. Since the city's sovereignty transfer in 1997, pro-Beijing parties have aggressively expanded their political presence in the District Councils, the lowest elected tier in Hong Kong's political structure. Thanks to their superior resource advantage over the pro-democracy opposition parties, they have achieved great electoral successes in the past decade. Capturing the seats in the District Councils is not an end in itself, however. More importantly, it serves as a stepping stone for the ruling elite to undermine, from the ground up, the electoral support for the pro-

democracy opposition in legislative elections, which are the major battlefield. I conduct statistical analyses based on a regression discontinuity design to examine the importance of this bottom-up strategy. The empirical results indicate that by capturing a seat in a District Council constituency, the pro-democracy opposition elite is able to increase its vote share of that constituency by 4–5 percentage points in a subsequent legislative election. For this reason, driving out the opposition from the District Councils is a sensible move by pro-Beijing parties to curtail its rival's political influences.

A methodological advantage of using Hong Kong as the case is that it has a unique political structure that allows for a rigorous test of the electoral effect of capturing a District Council seat on a higher-level election. Simply showing that the vote share received by pro-democracy parties in District Council elections is positively correlated with the vote share they receive in legislative elections is insufficient to identify the effect of interest. The positive correlation may merely reflect idiosyncratic district characteristics. For example, pro-democracy districts are likely to record a low vote share for the incumbent party in District Council elections and a high vote share for the opposition party in legislative elections. In other words, voter preference is confounded with the effect of interest. I take advantage of the electoral formula of the District Councils, the plurality rule, which involves a distinct cutoff point to decide winners and losers, to apply a regression discontinuity design to isolate the District Council effect from other confounding factors such as voter preference.

Hong Kong differs from a typical authoritarian regime in a number of important respects. First, it is not a sovereign state, but a city of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Historically, no substantial decolonization movement ever took place in Hong Kong. Nor did the city undergo any violent pro-democracy movement before and after the sovereignty transfer. Politically, while the rest of China is under the tight control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hong Kong retains a high degree of autonomy and civil liberties under the "one country, two systems" principle.

Although these unique features limit the external validity of theoretical insights drawn from the experiences of this city to other competitive authoritarian regimes, it is problematic to say that Hong Kong as a polity is so unique and unprecedented that observations drawn from its political institutions can never yield any comparative value in the studies of politics. In fact, upon closer examination, Hong Kong in many ways is qualified as a competitive authoritarian regime.

First, despite being a city of China, Hong Kong has a political system distinct from that of the mainland. The "one country, two systems" principle has effectively set Hong Kong's political system apart from that of the PRC. That principle is an institutional arrangement designed by Beijing back in the 1980s to reassure Hong Kong people, who had been gripped by the fear of pending Communist rule, that Beijing would tie its own hands after the reunification, such that neither the Chinese state nor the CCP would meddle with the city's rule of law and small open economy. The CCP has indeed refrained from playing a visible role in Hong Kong's politics (it does not even have a

¹ This is not to say that the challenge coming from the opposition is the only source of threat against the political survival of authoritarian regimes. Various authors have pointed out that intra-elite power struggles are another common cause leading to authoritarian breakdown ([Zolberg, 1966](#); [Geddes, 1999](#); [Svolik, 2012](#)). In the current paper, I will not deal with the struggles within the ruling elite.

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