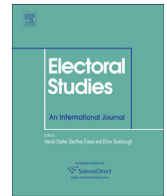




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Autocratic adaptation: The strategic use of transparency and the persistence of election fraud



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ABSTRACT

Why would an autocrat want, or at least make it appear to want, to reduce election fraud? In recent years, non-democratic rulers have surprisingly begun to embrace fraud-reducing technologies, like web cameras or transparent ballot boxes. The reason for this is found in the relative ease by which one type of fraud can be replaced with another. With the help of new fraud identification techniques, I argue that the installation of web cameras in polling stations changes how fraud is conducted. Web cameras do not reduce fraud, but rather make certain blatant forms of fraud, like ballot box stuffing, more costly. Autocrats then substitute for other types of fraud, such as fabricating the vote count out of view of the cameras.

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1. Introduction

Why would an autocrat want to reduce election fraud? It seems counter-intuitive that autocrats would voluntarily increase the cost of such a useful electoral tool. As of late, a large number of non-democratic states have embraced new anti-fraud technologies. For instance, in the most recent Russian presidential elections, web cameras and transparent ballot boxes were installed in polling stations across the country, in what authorities have labeled as a unique transparency initiative. Other countries are reportedly considering installing polling station webcams. In order to understand this seemingly paradoxical emphasis on electoral integrity in less than democratic regimes, we need to understand the menu of manipulation available to political actors (Schedler, 2002).

There is a range of institutional setups that have been adopted throughout history in an attempt to increase the integrity of elections. The secret ballot (Bertrand et al., 2007); independent electoral commissions (Eisenstadt, 2004; Lehoucq, 2002); centralized counting, transparent ballot boxes, and different forms of monitoring (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012) are all examples of innovations that ostensibly seek to improve the integrity of elections. Altering the institutional setup in which elections are organized often occur in contexts where there is competitive pressure for reform (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Przeworski, 2009). All such reforms are associated with both benefits and costs to the ruling party. The benefit to the ruler relates to trust in the electoral process and the prevention of possible post-electoral challenges. The costs arise from not being able to use a particular form of manipulation anymore. Regimes vary in how much they need voters to trust the electoral process and how dependent they are on a particular manipulation technique. For instance, independent

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electoral commissions increase the trust by ensuring impartiality in the administration of the elections. Electoral management bodies that are independent from the ruling party also means that voter registration, distribution of voting materials, tabulation and aggregation of results cannot be manipulated. A capable autocrat might not fear an independent electoral commission since there are other components of an election that could still be manipulated.

The threat of revolution often compels ruling parties to make piecemeal reforms that increase the integrity of the electoral process. Each of these interventions can result in perverse side effects when the ruling party adapts by recalibrating the use of manipulation techniques. After all, ruling parties are in the business of winning elections. The argument in this article is that institutional reforms can have unintended consequences and capable autocrats are well placed to reduce the potential downsides associated with certain democratic reforms. Institutional innovations may alter how fraud is conducted, but not the amount of fraud, a pattern seen over 100 years ago in United States:

Thus, assuming that voters and managers were rational, *institutional* change from an identifiable party ballot to a secret ballot would lead to a *behavioral* shift in the nature, but not necessarily in the extent, of electoral corruption (Cox and Kousser, 1981).

In this paper we are explicitly interested in such behavioral shifts at the micro-local level. The overarching question about why autocrats want to reduce fraud by adopting fraud-reducing institutions is inherently linked to the adaptive capacity of the regime. An intervention that is supposed to increase the integrity of the electoral process might be embraced simply because the negative effects can be dodged by using other forms of manipulation.

In order to fully understand why an autocrat would proactively embrace election monitoring we first need to know the micro-level effects of such interventions. The question is therefore: what are the effects of webcams on the micro-dynamics of fraud? As a particular monitoring technology, web cameras capture only a small fraction of activities within a polling station, opening up the possibility that while, for instance, blatant ballot box stuffing is reduced, other fraudulent practices go on unabated, or even increase. This way, the ruling party incumbents perpetuating fraud may not necessarily be punished in terms of votes and thus escape any potential negative consequences of monitoring. The capacity of autocracies to adapt can explain why monitoring in its different forms is so widely accepted. If an autocrat that invites election observers or installs webcams can adapt by having local officials deliver the vote by other less detectable means, then the cost that the ruler incurs by embracing monitoring is negligible. In theory it would therefore make sense for an autocrat to adopt such a technology since it can only benefit them by appearing to be sincere in their efforts to improve electoral integrity.

Explaining the puzzle about why autocrats would embrace monitoring requires two important steps. First, we need valid and reliable measures of election fraud. In existing literature, statistical proxies like turnout and vote share of the ruling party have been used, but require non-negligible assumptions (Hyde, 2007, 2010; Herron, 2010).

Recently developed fraud forensics techniques can provide a good complement by getting directly at vote anomalies (Beber and Scacco, 2012). Second, we need an identification strategy that allows us to draw causal inferences in a context where monitoring is not randomly assigned. Without accounting for the biases in terms of how a particular monitoring technique is being applied, we run the risk of biased estimates and arriving at simply incorrect conclusions.

When subjected to a web camera that streams live footage from the polling station, turnout-enhancing fraud such as ballot box stuffing should be deterred since cameras can easily capture the violations. That is, we should observe a reduction in turnout in polling stations with a webcam installed. The easiest compensation for this reduction in votes is to simply manipulate the vote count, often times outside the purview of the camera, and in any case hard to accurately identify on screen. Vote-count fraud as evidenced by last digit deviation from what can be expected under conditions of a clean count should therefore increase in the presence of a webcam. This possible compensation mechanism, in which one type of fraud is replaced by another may not lead to any negative effects on the ruling party vote share at the precinct level.

The article begins by presenting some theoretical considerations based on the literature on election fraud and election monitoring. I then devote considerable attention to methodological concerns, both in terms of identification strategy and measurement of election fraud. To provide support for my hypotheses, I utilize polling station level data from the 2008 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, the first ever case of large-scale web camera deployment. In contrast to previous studies that failed to account for how web cameras were allocated, I suggest that web cameras were installed in polling stations less prone to election fraud. Understandably an autocrat might hesitate to expose blatant fraud and therefore opt for selectively allocating webcams to less fraudulent precincts.

In the 2008 elections in Azerbaijan, I show the magnitude of the webcam effect is a 7-percentage point reduction in officially reported turnout. This reduction, it is argued, comes from less ballot stuffing in the presence of web cameras. Interestingly I find more miscounting of ballots and therefore more outright fabrication of the results in the webcam-monitored precincts. As a consequence of this compensation mechanism, there is no effect on the vote share of the ruling party in polling stations with a camera. The theory developed shows that authorities adjust their fraud strategies in the presence of a particular monitoring technique; one type of fraud is simply replaced with another form of fraud. The article finishes with some practical implications for the study of elections in non-democracies, including warnings about relying on technology-driven quick fixes to problems of electoral integrity.

2. Theoretical framework

Manipulation of the electoral process is widespread in authoritarian states (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2002, 2010; Schedler, 2002, Schedler, 2006; Simpson, 2012). This manipulation comes in many forms, of which outright fraud is only one. Conceptually, election fraud can

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