



Does electoral observation influence electoral results? Experimental evidence for domestic and international observers in Mozambique [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Electoral fraud is a common problem in young democracies. Election observers constitute one possible remedy. Yet, quantitative evidence of the causal effects of different types of observers is scarce. Data on the random assignment of observers during Mozambique's 2009 general elections are used to estimate the impact that observers have on electoral results. We are able to distinguish between domestic observers that stayed in the same ballot table for the whole of the election day, who were deployed countrywide, and international observers that circulated across a number of ballot locations, assigned within selected districts. We show that the presence of domestic observers reduced voter turnout and increased the share of blank votes countrywide. This suggests a reduction of ballot fraud activities. For the selected districts in which international observers were active findings are less clear, as we do not find ballot fraud-reducing effects for any of the two types of observers. A possible interpretation is that local politicians anticipate the presence of international electoral observers in convenient districts or use different fraudulent strategies.

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1. Introduction

Many developing countries have been facing difficult democratization processes since the early 1990s. Elections have been cen-

tral to democratic transitions in these countries. Although much progress has been achieved, these elections are often subject to irregularities such as electoral fraud. At the same time, electoral observers have been playing an active role in the promotion of democracy and in the validation of electoral processes. They are believed to reduce electoral fraud and increase the quality of elections (Kelley, 2012).

The main research question that we address in this paper is whether different types of electoral observers managed to affect electoral results at the polling location level during the Mozambican elections of 2009. We examine two types of electoral observers: domestic observers that stay at one particular polling location during the whole of the election day (fixed), and international observers that visit multiple locations during the election day (mobile). Our focus of attention lies on variations in electoral outcomes that suggest the reduction of ballot fraud. Ballot fraud can be implied by high levels of turnout (ballot box stuffing), invalid votes (spoiling of ballot papers), and low levels of blank votes (validation of blank votes).

The effect of electoral observation on electoral outcomes is estimated in the context of the randomized allocation of electoral observers during the 2009 elections in Mozambique. We worked with both domestic observers deployed by a consortium of national NGOs and international observers organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). We employ in our analysis

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the official disaggregated electoral results from the 2004 and 2009 Mozambican general elections, including voter turnout, null and blank votes, and voting for the different candidates/parties. We focus our attention on difference-in-differences estimations at the level of the polling location.

There exists a small but growing body of literature using field experimental techniques to evaluate the impact of electoral observers on fraudulent electoral activities. So far, these studies have been focused on the impact of either international or domestic observers on turnout and party vote shares. Hyde (2007, 2010) studies international mobile observers and analyzes changes in vote shares. More recent work has been focused on domestic fixed observers, see for example Sjoberg (2012), Buzin, Brondum, and Robertson (2016), and Asunka, Brierley, Golden, Kramon, & Ofosu (2017). With this paper we complement the literature by simultaneously evaluating domestic and international observers on fraudulent electoral activities in Mozambique. Consequently, we are able to study some of the differences in effects between the two. Furthermore, we are interested in assessing regional differences of the impact of observers that may arise from different degrees of local party support and political competitiveness (Asunka et al., 2017; Harvey, 2016; Rundlett & Svulik, 2016). Finally, we look at possible spillover effects of electoral observation to neighboring polling locations (as in Asunka et al., 2017; Enikolopov, Korovkin, Petrova, Sonin, & Zakharov, 2013; Ichino & Schündeln, 2012).

On domestic electoral observation, we find that the polling locations that were visited by those observers countrywide seem to suffer less from fraudulent activities in comparison to their unobserved counterparts. The presence of domestic observers suggests a reduction in ballot box stuffing inferred from lower voter turnout in areas where the incumbent party has strong support. We also observe a higher share of blank votes for observed polling locations, which suggests a lower degree of undue manipulation of blank ballot papers in observed locations. However, we do not find any reduction in the share of invalid (null) votes. On international electoral observation, we show no evidence of a clear effect on ballot fraud of those observers. Still, we see an increase in the vote share of the opposition party in provinces known to have a more competitive political environment. Moreover, we identify a spillover effect by which nearby polling locations have similar effects to those observed. Note that international observers were only deployed in a selected set of Mozambican districts.

Despite the clear countrywide results obtained for the domestic observers, we do not find effects of these observers in the districts selected for international observation. This pattern of results is consistent with a setting in which the districts observed by international observers are not comparable to the (representative) countrywide locations observed by the domestic observers and have less ballot fraud to be deterred. This could be interpreted as a confirmation of a common concern about international electoral observation. Namely, that resourceful politicians recognize that international observers are more likely to visit conveniently located districts, which in turn leads to a higher concentration of fraudulent activities in areas that are less likely to be observed (Hyde, 2007). Instead less risky activities such as vote-buying and voter intimidation³ could be deployed in areas with potentially more (international) observers (Harvey, 2016).

The paper continues as follows. Section 2 discusses the existing literature on the impacts of electoral observation. In Section 3 we provide contextual information on the political scene in Mozambique. Electoral observation and research design are discussed in

Section 4. We present the hypotheses in Section 5. The data and the measures of fraud are described in Sections 6 and 7, respectively. The estimation strategy is explained in Section 8. Section 9 examines the estimation results, and Section 10 concludes with a discussion about the implications of these results.

2. Related literature

Electoral observation is considered to be an important tool in the promotion of democracy. The presence of credible and impartial observers is taken as creating confidence about the legitimacy and quality of an electoral process. It has become a norm for young democracies such as Mozambique to invite international observers (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). International legitimacy became a condition for receiving international aid and maintaining regional relations because of the strengthening of democracy and human rights from the end of the Cold War (Kelley, 2012). Beyond international legitimacy, domestic legitimacy is just as important. The first multiparty elections in Mozambique, held in 1994 in the aftermath of its civil war, are the perfect example for how essential national validation is to convince citizens that domestic institutions are reliable: there was then a lot of international support (for example via electoral observers) to avoid a conflict similar to the one that resumed in Angola in 1992; the incumbent party won the elections, which were generally regarded as free and fair; the main opposition (rebel) group did not reject the results while it had threatened a boycott in the case of an unfavorable outcome; the absence of observers would probably have led to different actions (Lyons, 2004).

The general rationale behind electoral observation can be well described as follows: “States, IGOs, NGOs, and scholars who support electoral observation argue that it increases voter and political party confidence in the electoral process, deters fraud when it exists, and generates a third-party evaluation of election quality for international and domestic audiences, thus making negative consequences for a leader who holds fraudulent elections more likely” (Hyde, 2010, pp. 5–6). Critics however argue that especially international observers are often biased and label them as “glorified tourists” (Carothers, 1997). Different case studies were written founded on anecdotal evidence or cross-national qualitative data aiming to understand if, why, and how electoral observation works.⁴ However, these case studies lack the ability to compare observed elections to a proper counterfactual, and thus have clear limitations in attributing causal effects to electoral observation (Hyde, 2010). Consequently, recent literature on electoral observation has shown increasing interest in the use of experimental designs to evaluate the impact that observers have.

The innovative study by Hyde (2007) was the first to explore this area, following the allocation of international observers in Armenia in 2003. Hyde compares the incumbent vote share averages across treatment and control groups. A clear decrease in vote shares of the incumbent is identified in the observed locations. Hyde argues that the incumbent party is the party most likely to commit fraud, and thus the result suggests that electoral observation deterred fraud. During the 2004 presidential elections in Indonesia, Hyde (2010) randomly assigned international observers to polling locations. This author finds a positive relation between the presence of observers and the vote shares of the losing incumbent party. The unexpected results show that observers might have had an effect on the final results, although not necessarily through fraud prevention. In both studies the international observers were mobile, visiting multiple polling locations throughout the corresponding election days.

³ See Vicente (2014), Collier and Vicente (2012, 2014) for recent theoretical and empirical work on these illicit electoral strategies.

⁴ See for example, Bjornlund (2004) and Kelley (2012).

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