



Who monitors the monitor? Effect of party observers on electoral outcomes[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We investigate whether electoral monitors, who are in charge of assuring the fairness of elections, interfere with their outcome. More precisely, does the monitors' presence bias the results in favor of their own preferences? To do so, we construct a novel dataset from the raw voting records of the 2011 national elections in Argentina. We exploit a natural experiment to show that electoral observers cause, on average, a 1.5% increase in the vote count for the observers' preferred party, which can reach up to 6% for some parties. This bias, which appears under various electoral rules, occurs mainly in municipalities with lower civic capital and weakens the accountability role of elections.

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1. Introduction

“If the opposition does not monitor the election, then it is my moral duty to commit fraud.”¹

Electoral design generally is known to influence election results. However, there are specific, less studied rules and procedures that may also affect elections, such as media regulations, spending and/or advertising limits, registration rules, and voting and monitoring procedures. We focus on the primary monitoring tasks that are conducted during elections by electoral officials and observers who are

not necessarily neutral and may attempt to influence the electoral results.²

Identifying the effect of electoral officials (authorities at polling booths) and observers is a difficult task: their preferences may not only be unobservable but also may be correlated with local political ideology. To overcome these difficulties, we construct a unique dataset of Argentinian national elections that matches the partisan affiliation of the electoral observers with the election results at each polling booth. We utilize a quasi-natural experiment – the way that voters are allocated to booths – to identify observers' party-specific effects on the outcomes.

Legitimate or not, the strength of this bias is heterogeneous across parties, regions and electoral contests. For instance, while for some political parties, we do not find any effect, for others, the presence of monitors can increase their party's vote count by as much as 6%. Moreover, regional and national positioning in electoral races party drives these results because local challengers and runners-up show the largest effects.

These biases are not necessarily due to electoral fraud because observers might be using lawful instruments to alter outcomes. For instance, observers may audit the vote count or help resolve classification issues only when such interventions benefit their preferred party. To elucidate the possible mechanisms, we also explore whether traditional gimmicks can explain our results. We find that

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¹ Our translation of a quote attributed to a party leader from the *Union Cívica Radical*: “Si la oposición no me pone fiscales, mi deber moral es hacer fraude”.

² Throughout the paper, we use “observers” and “monitors” interchangeably.

the usual suspects (ballot stuffing, turnout buying and vote buying) are not consistent with our evidence. Because observers are responsible for replenishing the ballot papers corresponding to their parties in Argentina, their absence allows for obscure tactics, such as other observers (or electoral officials or voters) stealing ballot papers, which can prevent citizens from voting for their preferred candidates or choices. Our evidence is consistent with the presence of observers preventing this particular type of illegitimate influence on their parties, which is considered pervasive by the Argentinian media and NGOs and is acknowledged by the Argentinian national electoral justice system and by international electoral missions.³ Finally, we show that the extent to which observers influence electoral outcomes depends on the municipalities' civic capital: The “disappearance” of ballot papers is more prevalent in precincts characterized by lower levels of civic capital (see Guiso et al. (2011)).

For purposes of this paper, the 2011 Presidential and National Legislative elections in Argentina allow us to clearly identify the effects of partisan observers. On the one hand, within a precinct (typically a school), voters are assigned to polling booths (typically a classroom) alphabetically. Because voters' political preferences are orthogonal to the first letter of their last names, any two polling booths in the same precinct must be ex ante ideologically identical. However, because there are more than 30 thousand polling booths, not all political parties can have an observer at each classroom. Therefore, there is enough variation in the number and affiliation of the partisan observers across classrooms within schools. By exploiting these characteristics of the dataset, we can overcome the difficulties of identifying, detecting and measuring the causal effect of observers on the electoral outcomes.

The presence of this bias is not innocuous. Unless all parties – or none – have an observer at a polling booth, the presence of partisan observers introduces a bias in favor of their own parties. Hence, the logic of accountability is weakened, possibly altering the political-economic equilibrium. This effect is especially worrisome when incumbents drive it because it prevents voters from removing them from office (Enikolopov et al., 2013). These situations would constitute yet another instance of perverse accountability (Stokes, 2005) by which (incumbent) politicians – whose actions should be accountable – remain in office by manipulating institutions (Acemoglu et al., 2010) or by committing electoral fraud (Fearon, 2011).

Unfortunately, our results are in line with the latter, and they may be pervasive in numerous democracies not only because partisan observers are the cornerstone of electoral monitoring but also because electoral officials presumably have partisan preferences.

1.1. Literature

There are two broad lines of work on the limits to political accountability. One branch focuses on its limitations under properly functioning institutions (for instance, Maskin and Tirole (2004)), while the other branch focuses on malfunctions in electoral processes.⁴ Our paper is more closely related to the latter body of literature, which investigates these less observable strategies for influencing or manipulating electoral outcomes. Some of

these strategies are related to clientelism – vote buying (Finan and Schechter, 2012; Morgan et al., 2010; Stokes, 2005) and turnout buying (Casas, 2012; Nichter, 2008) – while others involve tampering with the electoral count directly.

The strategies described above are even more worrisome when they are perpetrated by incumbents. Some authors focus on this issue and study the incentives and instruments that incumbents use to perpetuate in power: Fearon (2011) and Little (2012) highlight the agency problems inherent in representative democracies in which the same officials who organize the elections may also be better equipped to organize or incentivize electoral fraud (as in Enikolopov et al. (2013) and Rundlett and Svulik (2016)). Unfortunately, the persistence of incumbents due to reduced accountability may also result in the persistence of bad governments and autocracies (Acemoglu et al., 2010).

Specifically, we aim to uncover the effects of election administration on the vote count; in other words, we examine whether the logistics of the election might be “used” to decrease politicians' accountability. More importantly, we focus on a widespread procedure: monitoring by electoral officials and partisan observers.

Detecting such bias is challenging. Although it may be difficult to estimate the effects of publicly measured variables (i.e., advertising), it is even more difficult to detect the bias when the actors try to conceal their actions (i.e., electoral corruption). Two indirect methods are widely used to detect the latter type of bias: electoral forensics and experimental methods. Electoral forensics consists of unmasking irregularities that are defined as deviations from expected distributions. For instance, Mebane (2008) searches for distributions of the last digits of electoral reports that deviate from the expected distributions (also called the first digit law or Benford's law). Beber and Scacco (2012) use variations of this law to detect corruption in Nigeria, and a related synthetic approach is used in Cantú and Saiegh (2011) to study fraud in Argentina during the 1930s. A different approach within electoral forensics looks for “odd” turnout patterns and their relationship to incumbents' vote shares (Klimek et al., 2012; Myagkov et al., 2009).

The experimental methods vary in design: some exploit the (quasi) natural assignment of observers to polling booths, while others conduct experiments in the allocation of international (Hyde, 2007) or domestic observers (Asunka et al., 2014; Enikolopov et al., 2013; Ichino and Schündeln, 2012). For instance, Callen and Long (2015) study the effect of monitoring on electoral discrepancies between the initial and officially reported vote counts in Afghanistan. Although this paper finds that irregularities are reduced with the treatment, the authors acknowledge that rather than deterring fraud, it may be merely diverted. In Asunka et al. (2014), Ichino and Schündeln (2012), the treatment they implement in Ghanaian elections allows them to measure, to some extent, whether fraud is crowded out to other polling booths (the control group). Our research design is more closely related to experimental methods, with three large differences. Rather than a subsample, we observe the whole population of Buenos Aires province (more than thirty thousand classrooms and 10 million voters); hence, we not only have a very large dataset but are also unconcerned about its representativeness. Second, rather than being preoccupied with unexpected effects of the treatment (such as the displacement of fraud), we observe the “undisturbed” behavior of all political actors, i.e., without any intervention on our part. Finally, while international and domestic observers have been at the center of electoral monitoring since the post-Cold War years, several issues have been raised regarding the multiplicity of observer missions, their interests and neutrality (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2009, 2010). We can address these points because we observe multiple party representatives per polling station and their political affiliation rather than “neutral” observers, which allows us to disentangle the effects of the multiplicity of observers from the effects of ideology on the effectiveness of

³ For instance, after the 2009 legislative elections, the national electoral justice system in Argentina published the proceedings of a seminar on electoral transparency regarding that year's election. The report indicated that the disappearance of ballot papers was less troublesome than in 2007 (Electoral, 2009), a conclusion confirmed by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights' (CAPEL) and its observer mission. After the 2011 elections, several newspaper articles discussed the ballot papers issue (for instance, Clarín (2007)), and in 2013, 73% of complaints lodged through the NGO's Ser Fiscal (2013) website were related to missing ballot papers.

⁴ It has been argued that electoral outcomes may depend on relatively institutionalized characteristics, including voting rules (Myerson, 1993), information about candidates (Ferraz and Finan, 2008), and advertising (da Silveira and de Mello, 2011).

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