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Can television bring down a dictator? Evidence from Chile's "No" campaign[☆]

Felipe González^{*,a}, Mounu Prem^b

^a Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Instituto de Economía, Av. Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul, Santiago, Chile

^b Universidad del Rosario, Department of Economics, Calle 12c #6-25, Bogotá, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Can televised political advertising change voting behavior in elections held in authoritarian regimes? We study the case of Chile, where the opposition used television campaigns weeks before the election that ended the seventeen-year dictatorship known as the Pinochet regime. Using national surveys conducted before the election and administrative electoral data, we provide evidence of a positive effect of television exposure on opposition votes. When compared to similar estimates in democracies, the effect of campaigns in Chile appear large. These results suggest that televised political campaigns can help to defeat dictators at the polls.

1. Introduction

Can political advertisement help to democratically defeat authoritarian regimes? Although electoral fraud is a major threat to elections under authoritarianism, history reminds us that dictators can indeed be defeated at the polls. The study of elections in authoritarian regimes, and the conditions under which democratization can occur, has seen a rapid increase in the last decade.¹ Research has pointed to a number of conditions for elections to lead to democratization – e.g. international pressure – but media-related variables have been relatively overlooked. The increasing number of elections in non-democratic regimes (Lindberg, 2009), together with increasing exposure to media outlets, calls for deeper attention to the role of a potentially powerful tool to defeat dictators: campaign advertising.

We study the case of Chile, where the opposition used television campaigns in the weeks preceding the election that ended the seventeen-year dictatorship known as the Pinochet regime. We find that televised political campaigns changed voting in this election, providing one of the first pieces of evidence that media can affect elections held in authoritarian regimes. There were two political alternatives in this election known as the “1988 plebiscite.” The “Yes” option represented support for the incumbent regime of Augusto Pinochet and the “No” option represented a support for opposition parties.

To test for the effect of television exposure on voting patterns, we combine national surveys conducted before the election with administrative voting data across counties. Our identification strategy relies on the differential television exposure of counties while controlling for unobserved heterogeneity in political preferences – derived from voting behavior in the 1970 presidential election – and other predetermined characteristics. The 1970 election was another critical point in Chilean history in which Salvador Allende

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: fagonza4@uc.cl (F. González).

¹ See Schedler (2006), Howard and Roessler (2006), Lewitsky and Way (2010), Bunce and Wolchik (2010), Donno (2013), Schedler (2013), Pop-Eleches and Robertson (2015), and Morgenbesser (2016), among others. See Gandhi and Lust-Okar, (2009) for a review of the early literature.

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was elected president of the country in a highly contended election. The explanatory power of the voting behavior in the 1970 election makes our approach particularly appealing. In addition, a collection of empirical exercises exploiting other media sources and particular features of the institutional context provide further evidence for the importance of television.

Our main result suggests that a one standard deviation increase in television exposure increased votes for the opposition by two percentage points. This result controls for unobserved heterogeneity in political preferences revealed by the vote shares for the left and right wing candidates in the 1970 presidential election and is robust to control for observable variables such as income, education, population, urbanization, and regional fixed effects. We formalize the importance of our control variables using the econometric framework proposed by [Altonji et al. \(2005b\)](#). The magnitude of the estimated coefficient implies that television campaigns were important for the opposition.

Two additional findings provide further evidence of the importance of television campaigns. First, we show that television exposure had no effect on the percentage of people voting, with the coefficient being a precisely estimated zero. This finding is reassuring because the voter registration process finished before television campaigns launched. Voting in the 1988 plebiscite without having previously registered to vote was not possible, an institutional feature that helps us to provide a causal interpretation to our previous result. Second, the effects of *radio* exposure – a different media outlet without particularly salient political campaigns – on vote shares and turnout are also precisely estimated zeros. Although radio exposure represents an imperfect placebo, we argue that its importance as media outlet in 1980s Chile makes it informative and allows us to rule out effects of overall media penetration. Taken together, these findings suggest that televised political campaigns can help to defeat dictators at the polls.

The last part of our analysis provides a discussion and interpretation of results by calculating the “persuasion rate” implied by our estimates ([Enikolopov et al., 2011](#)). Given that institutional features of the election under study constrain television’s effect on turnout, the persuasion rate in our context corresponds simply to the percentage of voters that were exposed to television before the 1988 plebiscite and were persuaded to vote for the opposition (“No”) instead of the regime (“Yes”). We calculate a persuasion rate between 10 and 13 percent, an estimate that lies within the upper range of previous estimates in the literature.

This paper contributes to the understanding of media and voting in authoritarian regimes. The empirical study of media and political preferences has been focused almost exclusively on democracies, where researchers have found that television, newspapers, and radio have significant effects on turnout and vote shares. For example, [DellaVigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#) show that the entry of Fox News across U.S. cities in the late 1990s is associated with an increase in turnout *and* vote share for the Republican party. Previous research has also showed that free newspapers subscriptions increase support for the Democratic Party in the U.S. ([Gerber et al., 2009](#)), and exposure to independent television increase voting for opposition parties in Russia ([Enikolopov et al., 2011](#)).²

Empirical research on the role of media in elections held in authoritarian regimes is limited. Our contribution is to provide novel evidence of media effects in consequential elections within a non-democratic regime using administrative electoral data. One exception is [Boas \(2005\)](#), who uses a matching approach with post-election survey data in Chile and finds a positive effect of campaigns on self-reported, opposition votes. Given that retrospective data is subject to endogeneity problems, we exploit administrative voting data and national surveys *before* the election to estimate the effect of television on the 1988 plebiscite. Other work exploring the role of media in non-democracies include [Yanagizawa-Drott \(2014\)](#), who shows how radio increased violence during the Rwandan Genocide, [Adena et al. \(2015\)](#), who show how radio affected votes for the Nazi party in Germany, and [Bursztyń and Cantoni \(2016\)](#), who estimate the effect of exposure to Western television on consumption patterns in East Germany after 1990.

Our findings also contribute to debates about the importance of television in explaining the outcome of the 1988 plebiscite and Chile’s return to democracy. Several authors have argued that television campaigns were crucial. For example, [Hirmas \(1993, p. 82\)](#) states that “Televised political advertising was pivotal to the results. Some analysts claimed it was the most important factor in producing the victory.” Despite the importance of this election in Chilean history, and the potential role of televised campaigns, an empirical evaluation of the role of television has been elusive.

The next section provides details about the election that ended the Pinochet regime and provides suggestive stock market evidence for the importance of television campaigns. [Section 3](#) presents the data and empirical strategy. [Section 4](#) presents results, including placebo and robustness exercises. [Section 5](#) discusses the interpretation and magnitude of our estimates. Finally, [Section 6](#) concludes.

2. Background

This section presents background on the 1988 election that ended the Pinochet regime in Chile (1973–1990) and the televised political advertisements used by the incumbent regime and the coalition of opposition parties. We also present patterns in the stock market that suggest television campaigns were perceived as shifting political power from the incumbent regime to the opposition.

2.1. Television and the “1988 plebiscite”

After overthrowing Salvador Allende, Augusto Pinochet’s regime ruled Chile between September 1973 and March 1990. Although the regime is popularly known for the implementation of market-oriented policies and the oppression of opposition parties, the role of

² See also [Gentzkow \(2006\)](#); [George and Waldfogel \(2006\)](#); [Gentzkow et al. \(2011\)](#); [Hayes and Lawless \(2015\)](#); [Conroy-Krutz and Moehler \(2015\)](#), and [Spenkuch and Toniatti \(2016\)](#) for the U.S. and [Greene \(2011\)](#), and [Larreguy et al. \(2017\)](#) for Latin America, among others. [Strömberg \(2015\)](#) provides a thorough review of the literature.

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