



Voter turnout and opposition performance in competitive authoritarian elections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between voter turnout in competitive authoritarian elections and the performance of opposition parties. Because the individuals most likely to abstain from voting in such elections are opponents to the regime, increases in voter turnout rates should be positively correlated with increases in opposition vote shares. Evidence from 61 competitive authoritarian elections in the post-Cold War era supports this expectation: higher voter turnout is associated with more votes for the opposition. This relationship holds under a variety of circumstances, even when taking into account differences in electoral misconduct from one competitive authoritarian election to the next. Data from recent state-level elections in Malaysia reveal a similar pattern. By showing that opposition parties tend to fare better when voter turnout rates are higher, this study contributes to our understanding of voting dynamics and opposition performance in non-democratic contexts.

Algerian voters headed to the polls in May 2017 to elect a new parliament. To encourage voters to show up, the dictatorship in power there since 1991 launched the “*Samaa sawtek*” campaign (Arabic for “Make your voice heard”).¹ The regime's leader, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, even released a letter prior to the vote calling on citizens to “vote massively to reinforce political and security stability in the country.”² Despite the regime's efforts, however, voter turnout was only 37%, the lowest rate in its history. Observers called the election's dismal voter turnout “a major blow to the government” and a clear indicator of the regime's illegitimacy in the eyes of Algerian citizens.³ The regime did not get the broad citizenry's stamp of approval through a high turnout, but regime-affiliated parties won 47% of votes, enough to secure a parliamentary majority.

Paradoxically, though the Algerian regime went to great lengths to publicly urge voters to turn out in 2017, higher turnout rates in 2012 actually brought with them more votes for the opposition. Turnout was 7% higher in 2012 than in 2017 (at 43%) and regime vote shares were 17% lower (at 30%).⁴

Like Algeria, most contemporary dictatorships hold competitive elections – as in, elections that opposition parties are allowed to compete in. And, like Bouteflika, most of their leaders publicly urge citizens

to vote in an attempt to convey that the contest will be legitimate (Cornelius, 1975). Yet, we know little about the consequences of voter turnout for the outcomes of these races. While dictatorships nearly always win enough seats in competitive elections to continue their rule,⁵ whether higher voter turnout favors the regime – or hurts it, as occurred in Algeria in 2012 – is poorly understood.

Part of the reason for this lies in the “noisiness” of election data that dictatorships release, most of which come from regime-affiliated election commissions. Authoritarian regimes can and do cheat to make sure their preferred candidates win elections, and they can and do inflate voter turnout numbers to convey that contests reflect the people's “true” will. As observers, we do not know what the true patterns underlying official election results in dictatorships look like; we simply see what regimes allow us to see.

At the same time, this does not mean that authoritarian election results lack valuable information. As Herron (2011, 1557) writes, “Although results must be interpreted with care, authoritarian elections may provide useful insights into hidden elite conflict and/or citizen grievances.” In line with this perspective, this study evaluates the relationship between voter turnout and outcomes in competitive authoritarian elections. Bearing in mind that the election results we as

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¹ Djamilia Ould Khettab, “Algeria votes amid expected low turnout,” Aljazeera, May 4, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/kl3uuk3> (accessed December 19, 2017).

² Djamilia Ould Khettab, “Algeria votes amid expected low turnout,” Aljazeera, May 4, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/kl3uuk3> (accessed December 19, 2017).

³ Djamilia Ould Khettab, “Algeria votes amid expected low turnout,” Aljazeera, May 4, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/kl3uuk3> (accessed December 19, 2017); Tahir Kilavuz, “Low turnout in last week's Algerian elections is a major blow to the government,” The Washington Post, May 12, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybyowec9> (accessed December 19, 2017).

⁴ “Final Report on Algeria's Legislative Elections,” National Democratic Institute, May 10, 2012, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Algeria-Report-Leg-Elections-ENG.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁵ Of the 61 competitive authoritarian elections described in the empirical section below, only 4 (7%) triggered the regime's overthrow that year.

observers see may not necessarily reflect actual behaviors, this study examines how greater voter mobilization influences who will perform well in such contests.

Drawing from the existing literature, I expect that the individuals who oppose the regime will be the most likely to abstain from voting. Supporters of the regime often have good incentive to turn out to vote, either because of the rewards they will receive for doing so or punishment they will face for not. For opponents of the regime, the decision to vote is more complicated. While they want to convey their support for the opposition, they may fear the repercussions of publicly voting for it or see participation to be a legitimization of a rigged system. Because those who abstain from voting in competitive authoritarian elections disproportionately support the opposition, increases in aggregate voter turnout should lead to increases in opposition vote shares. This argument is simple and intuitive, but has yet to be evaluated systematically.⁶

This study views the relationship between voter turnout and election outcomes in dictatorships as endogenous. Opposition vote shares are likely a reflection of opposition strength, which likely influences whether members of the opposition turn out to vote in the first place. The purpose of this study is not to establish that one causes the other, but rather to illustrate that the two move together: lower aggregate turnout rates should bring with them lower opposition vote shares; higher aggregate turnout rates should bring with them higher opposition vote shares.

Looking at 61 post-Cold War competitive legislative elections in dictatorships, I find evidence in support of these dynamics, even when accounting for variations in electoral misconduct from one election to the next. Data from recent state-level elections in Malaysia reveal similar patterns.

The findings therefore suggest that there are systematic differences in terms of who is likely to vote in competitive authoritarian elections. Opponents to the regime are the most likely to abstain from voting, such that when they do turn out opposition candidates usually fare better. This pattern appears despite “noisiness” in the election results dictatorships release, which should bias towards overestimates of voter turnout and underestimates of opposition vote shares. In these ways, this study deepens our understanding of voting dynamics and opposition performance in non-democratic contexts.

Though most dictatorships issue public calls for citizens to vote, regime-affiliated parties actually fare worse when they do.⁷ Assuming that dictatorships are attuned to these patterns, this (unsurprisingly) means that they do not truly want *all* citizens to turn out, just those who support them.

This study takes the following form. The first section offers background information on competitive elections in dictatorships, why regimes hold them, and how they win. The second section presents my argument regarding who is likely to abstain from voting in competitive authoritarian elections and how this influences the outcomes of those races. The third section tests my argument quantitatively, and the final section provides concluding remarks.

1. Background

Since the end of the Cold War, the majority of dictatorships hold regular competitive elections in which opposition parties are able to

⁶ A handful of studies on individual dictatorships document a positive relationship between turnout and opposition votes, such as work by Herron (2011) on Azerbaijan's 2008 presidential election. This is the only study, to my knowledge, to examine this relationship cross-nationally.

⁷ It is important to note that the focus of this study is on the relationship between voter turnout in competitive elections in dictatorships and opposition vote share, not the broader impact of voter turnout or opposition performance on dictatorships' decisions to step down from power. The conditions under which opposition mobilization in authoritarian elections destabilizes authoritarian regimes is a separate area of inquiry, which falls outside the scope of this analysis.

compete amid an electoral playing field tilted in the regime's favor (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2014). Candidates in the opposition faction or party occasionally win these elections and hold political posts, but control over state resources and policy stays in the hands of the regime leadership.

There are a variety of reasons why dictatorships allow such contests. Competitive elections in dictatorships serve the purpose of mobilizing support for the regime, legitimizing the system in the eyes of both domestic and international observers, managing intra-elite conflicts, and identifying supporters of the regime for the purposes of patronage distribution.⁸ Importantly, dictatorships use competitive elections as a means of coopting the opposition. By allowing opposition groups some representation, the regime can lure them into contesting the regime according to the rules the regime has established. In doing so, the regime brings opponents out from underground, gaining greater information about their identities, support bases, and activities. Additionally, by letting the opposition participate in elections, the regime gives the opposition reason to fight for change within the system rather than seek to overthrow it. For these reasons, dictatorships that hold competitive elections last longer in power than those that do not (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2014).

Of course, letting opponents contest elections would be a bad strategy if dictatorships were likely to lose to them. Dictatorships have a variety of tactics at their disposal, however, to ensure they come out on top. Cheating is the most obvious way to do secure victory, and indeed it is common for dictatorships to use fraud to some degree.⁹ But fraud is not the only go-to tool dictatorships use to win elections, given its potential to trigger unrest. Research shows that elections that are stolen outright substantially increase the chance of mass protests (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Beissinger, 2007; Tucker, 2007). When dictatorships win elections by stealing them, it creates “an imagined community of millions of robbed voters,” whose moral outrage reduces barriers to collective action sparking the onset of large anti-regime demonstrations (Kuntz and Thompson, 2009, 162). Dictatorships must therefore use fraud carefully because of its potential to bring about mass protests.

Many also rely on subtler forms of manipulation and leverage to influence electoral outcomes in their favor, such as patronage distribution, biased media coverage, and sponsorship of armed groups to harass and intimidate opposition candidates and their supporters (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010a). Dictatorships leverage state resources to serve their purposes – using them to buy votes and outspend opponents – thereby turning an otherwise meaningful contest into an unfair race (Greene, 2009). Additionally, even if the opposition does win a sizable share of the vote, the regime can ensure disproportionate representation through carefully crafted electoral rules that give it substantially more seats per vote, as in Singapore under the People's Action Party (PAP) (Tan, 2013). It can also gerrymander districts, as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was known to do during its reign in Mexico (Gillingham, 2011). Because dictatorships make use of creative tricks such as these to tilt the race in their favor, vote counts on election day may not necessarily be too far off from their actual values (Magaloni, 2010, 753). Evidence from Mexico under the PRI, for example, shows that electoral fraud was not always necessary for ensuring regime victories; the same has been said of Botswana under the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) (Levitsky and Way, 2010b). To summarize, elections in authoritarian regimes, by definition, do not reflect a free and fair contest, but dictatorships have a variety of tools at their disposal to win them in addition to the use of fraud on the day of the

⁸ See Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) and Morgenbesser (2016) for a review of this literature.

⁹ For example, among the post-Cold War competitive authoritarian elections in my sample (explained below) with data on election-day fraud (which is just one way in which dictatorships can cheat), 29% used fraud either in the voting process or in the counting of votes. Data on election-day fraud come from the Free and Fair Elections data base from Bishop and Hoeffler (2016).

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