

Perceptions of Political Competition and the Integrity of Elections

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Lioy, A. and Dawson, S. (2020). Competition, stakes, and falling participation in Central Asia and the Caucasus: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11(2). 144-157.

Dawson, S. (2022). Poll Wars: The effects of pre-election polls on voting behaviour. Unpublished Manuscript.

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Abstract

Political competition is generally regarded as one of the hallmarks of a well-functioning democracy. Competitive elections hold politicians to account, thereby increasing government performance to the benefit of citizens. However, the uncertainty generated by close elections can also create perverse incentives for political actors to undermine the integrity of the contest to improve their chances of victory. Yet we still know relatively little about when and in what ways close elections can be detrimental to democracy. This dissertation suggests that the relationship between electoral integrity and political competition is best understood from the perspective that there are two primary dimensions of this competition: the intensity of electoral competitiveness and the credibility of the information that portrays it. While political elites may be incentivised to manipulate elections in different ways to improve or consolidate their chances of victory, voters may also consider portrayals of competition along these two dimensions when deciding whether and for whom to vote. Four research articles study different aspects of this relationship across a range of institutional contexts and using several methodological approaches. First, a cross-national study of presidential elections across two levels of democracy finds that electoral fraud increases with electoral competition in democratic contexts. Second, a study on the 2016 municipal elections in South Africa reveals a strategic political economy of targeted vote-buying. Third, a qualitative comparison of falling participation levels in Central Asia and the Caucasus reconsiders the cyclical nature of the relationship between political competition and electoral integrity. Fourth, a survey experiment in Turkey attempts to gauge whether the perceived credibility of opinion polls can have adverse consequences for voting behaviour. The findings of this dissertation suggest that political competition – and importantly how it is perceived – can have significant consequences for the conduct of elections. It is therefore of great importance to pay close attention to how information relating to competition is interacted with by political actors during elections.

Key Words: political competition, electoral integrity, democracy, information credibility, political behaviour.