

PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL COMPETITION AND THE
INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

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INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

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Doctoral Dissertation in Political Science
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
2022

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Printing: Stema, Borås, 2022

ISBN: 978-91-8009-646-1 (PRINT)

ISBN: 978-91-8009-647-8 (PDF)

<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/70284>

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*To my grandfather, Dave,
who made learning fun.*

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.

Politisk konkurrens anses allmänt som ett kännetecken på en välfungerande demokrati. Konkurrens i valsammanhang gör att politiker kan hållas ansvariga och därmed få staten att förbättra sina insatser för medborgarna. Osäkerheten som genereras av val med små skillnader i resultat kan emellertid också skapa motivation för politiska aktörer att underminera valets integritet för att öka sina segerchanser. Men vi vet fortfarande förhållandevis lite om när och hur jämna val kan vara skadlig för demokratin. Den här avhandlingen vill visa att förhållandet mellan valintegritet och politisk konkurrens bäst förstås utifrån två grundläggande dimensioner i denna konkurrens: intensiteten i valets konkurrens och trovärdigheten hos den information som beskriver den. Samtidigt som en politisk elit kan motiveras att manipulera val på olika sätt för att förbättra sina chanser till seger, kan väljare också komma att fundera över hur konkurrensen beskrivs i termer av dessa två dimensioner, när de skall avgöra om och vem de skall rösta på. Fyra forskningsartiklar studerar olika aspekter av detta förhållande över en rad institutionella sammanhang genom att närma sig på olika metodologiska sätt. För det första så upptäcker en studie av presidentval över flera nationer på två olika demokratiska nivåer att valfusk ökar med valkonkurrens i demokratiska sammanhang. För det andra avslöjar en studie av 2016 års kommunalval i Sydafrika en strategisk politisk ekonomi för att köpa röster. För det tredje så omprövar en kvalitativ jämförelse av sjunkande valdeltagande i Centralasien och Kaukasus den cykliska naturen av förhållandet mellan politisk konkurrens och valintegritet. För det fjärde försöker ett experiment i en undersökning från Turkiet mäta om den uppfattade trovärdigheten hos valundersökningar kan få negativa konsekvenser för uppträddet på valdagen. Det denna avhandling påvisar är att politisk konkurrens – och i synnerhet hur den uppfattas – kan få betydande konsekvenser för genomförandet av val. Därför är det av största vikt att noga följa hur information angående konkurrens påverkas av politiska aktörer under valtider.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time in this programme, I've become indebted to many people around me who have made everything possible. I'm an incredibly lucky person. First of all, I'd like to thank my supervisors, Nicholas Charron and Georgios Xezonakis, for their unwavering support. At the slightest hint of panic, you were always there to put my mind at ease and give your full support to the decisions I made (even including completely changing my subject halfway through the first year). We have also achieved a lot together. For example, I'm pretty sure that Nicholas and I by now hold the world record for "longest time under review" with one of the papers included in this project. I'd also like to thank my fellow Merseysider and teaching guru Marina Nistotskaya for giving me great opportunities and experiences, and most of all always making me feel a step closer to home.

I've been very fortuitous in being able to work alongside some very talented scholars in this project. Nicholas, Mogens Justesen and Alberto Lioy, it has been a pleasure to be able to collaborate with you all and I have learnt a great deal in doing so. This has been a strange couple of years to put it mildly and is an incredible fact I have never been able to meet Mogens in person and have only had the pleasure of meeting Alberto once (when we met at SPSA in Austin, Texas in January 2019). Nevertheless, it was great to collaborate with you both and I hope to be able to meet for a beer sometime in the not-too-distant future.

I'm also extremely grateful to those who, at various points, have taken the time to read through and give feedback on my work. Thank you, Andreas Bågenholm, Carl Dahlström, Ruth Dassonneville, Lisanne de Blok, Eline de Rooij, Jørgen Elklit, Marica Grimes, Jonas Hinnfors, Kristen Kao, Melis Laebens, Victor Lapuente, Kyle Marquardt, Johan Martinsson, Aykut Özturk, Anna Persson, Mikael Persson, Jacob Sohlberg, Maria Solevid, Anders Sundell, Kohei Suzuki and Maciej Sychowiec. You have each supported the completion of this project immeasurably.

During my time at the department, I've also had the great fortune to be a part of some incredibly vibrant and stimulating research groups. It has been a great experience to be a part of the QoG (Quality of Government) team. During the early days of my PhD, the friendly group at QoG instantly made me feel welcome and as though I was a part of a community. It was during the pre-conference skiing trip in Andorra in 2018 that I received perhaps the greatest compliment: that I'm not a bad skier for an Englishman! This besides, the QoG conferences were always a great experience and were the primary forum for presenting a great deal of the work and ideas relating to this project. I'm very grateful to Alice Johansson and Tove Wikehult for their work in organising these events, as well as Amy Alexander, Natalia Alvarado, Sofia Axelsson, Monika Bauhr, Frida Boräng, Rasmus Broms, Stefan Dahlberg, Eliska Drapalova, Niklas Harring, Sören Holmberg, Birgitta Nilsson, Bo Rothstein, Aksel Sundström and Lena Wängnerud for creating and being part of such a great group. Besides QoG, I'd also like to thank the Knowledge Resistance (KR) project and the political science branch headed by Henrik Ekengren

Oscarsson in particular. I'm very grateful for the support that KR has provided me with – specifically regarding assistance with data collection for Paper IV of the dissertation. This paper, quite simply, would not have been possible otherwise.

Of course, none of this work would have been possible if it wasn't for the practical help I have received along the way. I'd like to thank Carl Dahlström and Mikael Persson for their seemingly endless work in organising the PhD programme. I'm also very grateful for the assistance provided by Ola Björklund, Susanne Bågenfelt, Anne-Marie Dere-siewicz, Caroline Fällgren, Anna-Karin Ingleström and Maria Lilleste. A special mention also goes to my friend and – as far as I'm concerned – the oracle of PhD-related issues in the department, Lena Caspers. Without a doubt, you have made my life so much easier during my time in the programme and I can imagine that I am not alone in that belief.

I've also had the good fortune to cross paths and formed friendships with many talented and inspiring young researchers. More than that, however, we have always had a great community among the PhD candidates in the department. I'd like to thank Mattias Agerberg, Dennis Andersson, Magnus Åsblad, Elin Bergman, Daniel Carelli, Love Christensen, Felix Dwinger, Moa Frödin Gruneau, Adea Gafuri, Felix Hartmann, Eva Hoxha, Anne Kathrin Kreft, Josh Krusell, Amanda Linell, Laura Lungu, Elias Markstedt, Niels Markwat, Valeriya Mechkova, Frida Nilsson, Gefjon Off, Per Oleskog Tryggvason, Marina Povitkina, Felicia Robertson, Oskar Rydén, Jana Schwenk, Marcus Tannenber, Elise Tengs, Maria Tyrberg, Aiysha Varraich and Sofia Wiman for being a part of that.

One thing I've learnt over the past 4-5 years is that life is much better when you're a member of the Mushroom Club – our PhD cohort consisting of Dragana Davidovic, Ezgi Irgil, Prisca Jöst, Berker Kavasoğlu, Nicholas Sorak and myself. From the bottom of my heart, I'd like to thank you for all the above and much much more. You've been there at every turn to help me with my work, but also to remind me that work is not everything. I'm so grateful that I've been able to have you all by my side through this process. You'll always be friends who make me laugh first and anything work-related second. It seems sad that we have not been able to share so much time together in the past 18-24 months and some of us have already moved on to new ventures, but you will have a friend for life in me.

Finally, there is absolutely zero chance that writing this dissertation or meeting the people I have already mentioned would have been possible without my family. To my parents, June and Andy, thank you for the sacrifices you have made and for doing everything you possibly could to help me get to this point. To my brother, Phil, thanks for always encouraging me and generally keeping life interesting. I'd also like to thank Anneli, Bengt, Monica, Johanna, Rasmus, and little Vilhelm for accepting me into your family and providing me with a true home away from home. I can't imagine navigating the last few years without your help and generosity at every turn. And to my favourite person, Sara, thank you for putting up with me in this time, for making me laugh every day, and for filling my life with love.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political competition is generally considered as one of the hallmarks of a well-functioning democracy, yet it also creates perverse incentives for many actors involved. Elections are the flashpoints of democratic politics, marking the point at which the public select their political representatives, power is contested, and elected officials are held to account for their actions (Powell 2000; Besley 2006; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). However, political competition also brings in tow considerable uncertainty and pressure regarding prospective winners and losers. Throughout the electoral cycle and across a range of regime types, political parties and voters are confronted with the prospect of electoral outcomes that can have considerable implications for their attitudes and behaviours during the process, and consequently its integrity.

Elections break down and are exploited in a multitude of ways. Even in liberal democracies, the quality of elections has come under increased scrutiny in recent decades (Wise 2001; James 2012; Clark 2016). Nevertheless, there is still much to be done to fully understand why some fall shorter of international norms and standards than others. Previous research efforts have been able to identify many structural factors that are associated with reductions in the integrity of the electoral process. Electoral institutions such as oversight bodies and electoral rules, as well as the independence of the judiciary and media can ultimately be taken advantage of by willing perpetrators (Molina and Lehoucq 1999; Lehoucq and Kolev 2015; Birch and Van Ham 2017; Ruiz-Rufino 2018). Other structural factors such as economic inequality and ethno-linguistic polarization can also provide an environment that obstructs democratization (Lehoucq 2003; Ziblatt 2009; Lehoucq and Kolev 2015; Bishop and Hoeffler 2016). Besides such structural conditions, the literature considering more proximate determinants of election quality is relatively slight. And while there is a considerable vein of research to suggest that the presence of observers can deter manipulative efforts (S. Hyde 2007; Kelley 2012), international observation missions are likely to be deployed to states that have suffered from compromised elections in the past. This dissertation therefore explores the relationship between the integrity of elections across regimes and another proximate factor: political competition. Specifically, this dissertation investigates the role of political competition in winner-takes-all elections where the electoral stakes are more concentrated, and competition is more pronounced.

The idea that competitive elections can be detrimental to the integrity of the process is not likely to sit easily with democracy advocates, as competitive elections are generally regarded as a defining feature of democracy. Competition for votes in democratic settings is generally lauded for its effects on a range of policy and governance outcomes, such as increased education spending, economic growth, higher life

expectancy, and less corruption (Acemoglu et al. 2019; Baum and Lake 2003; Olken and Pande 2012; Stasavage 2005). Political competition is undoubtedly a desirable feature of any democracy. However, during the processes of elections, the dynamics of competition can also create incentives for political actors to manipulate the process to improve their chances of winning office. If the outcome of an election remains unclear during polling day with no clear frontrunner, agents of perpetrating parties may be incentivised to corrupt election officials or unlawfully affect the electoral choices of voters.

These concerns are addressed in this dissertation which consists of four research articles that revolve around the central research question of: *what are the implications of political competition for the integrity of elections?* In attempting to answer this question, I argue that political competition is best understood from the perspective of two primary dimensions: the intensity of electoral competitiveness, and the credibility of the information that portrays it. Political parties, I argue, are incentivised to craft strategies to bend or break the rules of electoral conduct to improve their chances of victory in different ways and at different times depending on the intensity of competition. This proposition relating to the first dimension of competition is tested in two research papers which ask the sub-questions of (1) *can electoral competition explain why some elections are more fraudulent than others?* and (2) *does electoral competition affect electoral clientelism?* A third paper considers the dynamic nature of the relationship between competition and electoral integrity by asking (3) *what explains dramatic decreases in electoral participation?* In a fourth paper, I take a step back from this dimension and suggest that the perceived credibility of one of the primary representations of political competition – opinion polls – can have implications for how and whether an individual votes, thus reducing the integrity of the process when this information is subject to bias or distortion. Using a conjoint analysis followed by a survey experiment this paper relates to the second dimension of competition and asks *how does the credibility of opinion polls affect voting behaviour?*

The findings of this dissertation suggest that political competition can have important consequences for the conduct of elections. The intensity of competition seemingly contributes toward the selection, timing, and target of different manipulative strategies by political parties. This dissertation is therefore able to contribute to a growing literature on the quality of elections in democratic, semi-democratic, and authoritarian states. Secondly, this dissertation also signals a potential further consideration in the study of the integrity of elections. Polling information – as the most concise illustration of political competition before elections – is subject to several biases that can distort the reality of competition, and as such may have adverse consequences for voting behaviour. This is not to suggest, however, that political competition is necessarily unhealthy for democracy. Rather, this dissertation highlights the importance of paying closer attention to information relating to political competition and how it is used by political elites and voters to inform their attitudes and behaviours during elections.

This chapter will begin by first overviewing the concepts of political competition and electoral integrity individually before proceeding to discuss how they relate to one another along the two dimensions of the intensity and credibility. It then proceeds to outline the research design of four research papers that comprise the dissertation, including data considerations and methodological strategies. Following this, a brief summary of each constituent paper is presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the key contributions and implications of the findings produced by the dissertation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

What is the nature of the relationship between political competition and electoral integrity? Previous efforts to answer similar questions have produced largely mixed findings. Nyblade and Reed (2008) demonstrate a negative effect of competition on political corruption in contrast to a positive effect on electoral cheating. The authors argue that while electoral accountability is enough to dissuade would-be perpetrators from rent-seeking, the prospect of winning office can overcome such fears. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that political competition can deter manipulative efforts. This may be due to the increased level of scrutiny in such contests (Lehoucq and Molina 2002), or it may be a feature of the exaggerated use of manipulation in uncompetitive elections in autocracies (Simpser 2013). Agents may also be unable or willing to follow through with the wishes of party leadership (Rundlett and Svulik 2016), or they may target safe rather than competitive areas with clientelist benefits to reward loyal supporters (Corstange 2018). However, many of these findings are derived from research undertaken in quite different regime contexts, such as early 20th century Costa Rica (Lehoucq and Molina 2002) Japan (Nyblade and Reed 2008), Russia (Rundlett and Svulik 2016), Lebanon (Corstange 2018), and cross-national comparisons of autocracies (Simpser 2013). Much of this research also considers political competition in a (sometimes overly simplistic) unidimensional manner, and as will be elaborated in section 2.2, in some instances conflates two or more different forms of manipulation, thus neglecting many of the nuances that characterise this relationship.

2.1 POLITICAL COMPETITION

Despite being a familiar and frequently referred to issue across a range of subfields of political science, political competition is a relatively underdeveloped concept. In the field of regime dynamics, it is often referred to akin to a threshold where autocracy meets democracy, whereas scholars of democratic party systems may think more about how parties compete for voters or issue ownership (Downs 1957; Roemer 2001; Green-Pedersen 2007). In addition to these more abstract conceptualisations, political competition also has a more dynamic face. Political competition can refer to a horse race between competing parties in an election campaign, with competitive districts or swing states being the focus of party and media attention. The following section will explore how the concept of political competition can have different connotations across a multitude of fields, and work to identify the similarities and differences between them. Ultimately, I argue that political competition is rather perception-based than objective, and it is therefore of incredible importance to view competition from

this perspective to understand how it may influence the attitudes and behaviours of political parties and individuals across regimes.

The comparison of competition in democratic and autocratic contexts is riddled with difficulties, as “nominally democratic” electoral institutions serve a functionally different purpose in dictatorships (Gandhi 2008; Lust-Okar 2004; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2010). Researchers have suggested that elections in autocracies are used for a multitude of reasons, such as building relationships between elites (Lust 2009), maintaining coalitions (Svolik 2012), or keeping up appearances to an international or domestic audience (Brownlee 2007; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010; S. Hyde 2011). Explanations also include the collection of information about the citizenry, or rewarding loyal members of the dominant party (Wintrobe 2000; Magaloni 2006). Largely absent from these explanations is the contestation of political office, as elections in autocracies are rarely competitive to the same degree as in democracies. In a notable exception, Simpson (2013) tests the “conventional wisdom” that where there is relative parity between incumbent and opposition parties, electoral competition should incite manipulative efforts. Instead, he finds that the majority of manipulative strategies used in authoritarian contexts are blatant and excessive. Rather than being used to tip the balance of the election in one’s favour, elections in autocracies serve as a signalling mechanism to show the dominance and power of the incumbent party.

In such fields, competition may be conceived as synonymous with democracy. And while it is true that most democracies have competitive elections and most autocracies do not, it is overly simplistic to suggest that they are one and the same. A growing literature has begun to explore how competition can vary sub-nationally in multiple regime types (Nyblade and Reed 2008; Gibson and Suárez-Cao 2010; Berliner and Erlich 2015). For example, disproportional electoral rules used in democratic elections in the US and UK give birth to terms such as “red or blue states” or “safe seats” where competition is traditionally very low and outcomes are generally foregone conclusions. The development of the regime dynamics literature has also provided more nuanced typologies to the states that lie in the “wide and foggy zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism” such as competitive authoritarian states (Schedler 2002). Closed authoritarian regimes aside, it would therefore be excessively reductive to think of political competition dichotomously – whether present or absent. While most elections in illiberal democracies or other hybrid regimes may not be closely (or fairly) contested on polling day, political actors still have to contend with opponents at earlier stages in the electoral cycle.

Is political competition a slow-moving, structural phenomenon linked to regime types or is it more dynamic, varying between and within electoral cycles? In the study of parties in democracies, for example, political competition is closely tied to the concept of accountability. When competition is high between (and within) parties, prospects of increased political standing and electoral success incentivise politicians to increase their performance levels or engage in less corruption, for example (Schumpeter

1947; Persson, Tabellini, and Trebbi 2003; Olken and Pande 2012). This conception of competition has also been associated with such policy outcomes as economic growth, higher life expectancy, increased education spending, and more public good provision (Acemoglu et al. 2019; Besley, Persson, and Sturm 2010; Baum and Lake 2003; Stasavage 2005; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). In this sense, political competition is characterised by the realistic expectation of an individual or party being removed from or gaining political power.

In sum, political competition has considerably disparate connotations across sub-fields of political science. To reconcile these different conceptualisations, this dissertation considers political competition simply as a function of the relative position of those vying for political power and what is at stake in an election. This is considerably more apparent and less contingent in the case of winner-takes-all contests where the electoral stakes are indivisible, which this dissertation primarily concerns itself with theoretically and empirically. In more democratic contexts, the relative position of parties and candidates is likely to take a more dynamic form represented by fluctuations in the popularity of candidates or parties with a similar resource base. In less democratic contexts, however, it is more structural and akin to the relative strength of, and resources available to, incumbent and opposition parties respectively. This is to say that competition is – albeit to varying extents – present across a range of regime types and exists (and may be subject to influence) not merely during electoral campaigns, but throughout the political cycle.

2.1.1 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION BY PARTIES AND CITIZENS

At the heart of the presumed effects of political competition is the idea that it is somehow understood by relevant stakeholders. The threat of electoral defeat cannot be based on poor incumbent performance in isolation, and a viable opposition needs to be present for competition to exist and fluctuate. Political competition therefore needs to be perceived by the relevant actors for them to change their behaviours accordingly. For example, the results of previous elections are a key heuristic of political competition and the viability of opposition candidates and parties. The attitude and behaviour of the incumbent is therefore likely to be a function of the results of the previous election and/or the expected results of the contemporary election.

Candidates and parties can also adjust their behaviours using gauges of political competition between elections (Enos and Hersh 2015). One prominent way of tracking the live state of political competition is opinion polls, which in most states are conducted at regular intervals throughout the electoral cycle and are often used to inform the behaviour and policies of political parties and candidates (Mutz 1995; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Indeed, it is not only political parties and candidates that pay attention to such polls, as the electorate may also use them to help inform their political attitudes and behaviour.

Polls could encourage individuals to cast their vote for whom they consider the most likely to win (i.e. jumping on the “bandwagon” (Simon 1954; Hardemeier 2008; Moy and Rinke 2012)) either directly as people fear the prospects of social marginalisation (Noelle-Neumann 1984), or as a result of the increase in resources – such as members and campaigners – produced by an upward trend in their electoral prospects (Strömbäck 2012). For some, casting a vote for a winner serves as a form of validation of the action if they are unable to otherwise differentiate between candidates. The very fact that a given candidate is ahead in the polls suggests that a plurality of the electorate has determined this option to be the best one. Polls also play a role for smaller parties, incentivising voters to consider the likelihood of such parties forming governing coalitions and acquiring sufficient votes to surpass electoral thresholds, thus having implications for the strategic choices of voters across institutional contexts (Cox 1997; Blais, Gidengil, and Neville 2006; Fredén 2016). In brief, opinion polls present a direct route through which actors can become aware of the state of public opinion – and as such the intensity of political competition – and update their views accordingly.

There are several avenues through which political parties and the electorate can become aware of the state of political competition. This section has overviewed the different ways in which competition is often conceptualised across various subfields of political science and sought to provide a working definition that reconciles these perspectives: the relative position of those vying for political power. It has also illustrated the ways in which the two key sets of actors for this dissertation – political elites and voters – become aware of this information. Importantly, the way this competition is perceived can have considerable consequences for the attitudes and behaviours of parties and citizens throughout the electoral cycle.

2.2 THE INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

There have been several attempts to conceptualise the dark side of elections (Schedler 2002; Elklit and Reynolds 2005; Birch 2011; Norris 2014; Van Ham 2015). Terms such as fraud, malpractice, manipulation, quality, and integrity have all frequently been used in some way to describe the problematic issues surrounding the conduct of elections. These terms broadly relate to the same phenomenon but deviate in some key respects that have significant implications for how these issues should be theorised about and studied empirically.

In a pioneering work, Lehoucq notably and succinctly defined electoral fraud as “clandestine and illegal efforts to shape election results” (2003). Developing from this, Birch (2011) introduced the notion of unintentionality in her conceptualisation of electoral malpractice. For Birch, electoral malpractice is not necessarily an “effort” to take Lehoucq’s semantics, but rather malpractice could be (and oftentimes is) unintentional due to a lack of capacity, expertise, or experience in the conduct of elections. However, when malpractice is intentional, Birch claimed manipulation can be aimed at one or several of three constituent elements: the law, the voter, and the vote, with the eventual

aim of “[substituting] personal or partisan benefit for the public interest” (ibid, p.11). As manipulative strategies are aimed at different subjects, they are also conducted at different stages of the electoral process and are not entirely restricted to polling procedures. Whereas the manipulation of the law is likely to take place well in advance of the election (or upstream), the manipulation of the voter and particularly the vote will tend to take place in approximation to polling day (downstream). Essentially, Birch’s typology of electoral malpractice provides justification for the extension of the field to cover more items on the “menu of manipulation” (Schedler 2002, 2006), whilst maintaining an awareness of how these items can occur at different stages, and can be directed at different objects.

The electoral cycle also serves as a cornerstone of Norris’ more normative conceptualisation of electoral integrity, which cites the adherence to “international conventions and universal standards about elections reflecting global norms... throughout the electoral cycle” (Norris 2014, 21). A normative approach in this regard is beneficial, in that it circumvents several issues confronting researchers of the quality of elections. In contrast to a more legalistic interpretation of election quality, this approach makes comparative cross-national research easier when legal frameworks may differ across borders (Garnett and Zavadskaya 2018). Secondly, a normative approach also extends the net beyond what is strictly considered legal to also capture manipulative strategies that fall within the law, such as legal reforms that restrict media or opposition organisations, or the dissemination of misinformation. This is perhaps more pertinent today as in electoral autocracies and democracies alike, voters are exposed to more information during elections than ever before. Thus, while a concept such as electoral integrity is broad enough to encompass traditionally researched overt and covert manipulative strategies, it is also nuanced enough to include the evolving international norms and standards regarding elections.

While a broad conception of electoral integrity is useful in that it enables researchers to assemble the ways in which elections can be compromised, this dissertation argues that the disaggregation of the composite sub-types is of pivotal importance when it comes to empirical assessments of their relationships with other – and particularly dynamic – phenomena. The manipulation of elections can take a “panoply of forms” (Lehoucq 2003, 233), but that is not to say that each of these will be induced by the same stimuli to the same degree. Such strategies are likely to be employed on the basis of several different cognisant or tacit considerations, such as resources and opportunities, as well as more structural factors.

2.2.1 THE ACTORS OF MANIPULATION

Most research on the integrity of elections has focused on the incumbent government as the primary – or even sole – perpetrator of manipulation. Afterall, states that fall short of the ‘liberal democracy’ categorisation tend to be where we are more easily able to identify manipulative strategies in action, and it is in such states that there is the biggest disparity in terms of resources among political contenders. Acutely

disproportionate campaign funds or political clout as well as an increased reach through local agents empowers incumbents to affect elections in a multitude of ways throughout the electoral cycle (Van Ham and Lindberg 2016). However, there are indeed several of the same strategies that can also be employed by opposition actors. Electoral clientelism such as vote or abstention buying also takes place at the behest of opposition groups. Nevertheless, incumbents have a much more extensive tool kit when it comes to manipulative techniques (Schedler 2013). The use of state-appropriated media and public sector institutions, and military organisations helps to disrupt opposition movements and voters, for example. In more democratic contexts, electoral reforms such as introducing stricter requirements for voter ID or gerrymandering electoral boundaries can also aid an incumbent's electoral chances while reducing integrity. Incumbents may also use compromised administrative and public sector resources to conduct electoral fraud by stuffing ballot boxes or forging results. It is therefore important to note not just that there are a multitude of different forms that manipulation can take, but also that these strategies can be utilised by different actors. Furthermore, some methods are more viable for the opposition vis-à-vis the incumbent, which ultimately may shed light on who the perpetrator of a given strategy may be.

2.2.2 *THE TARGETS OF MANIPULATION*

Beyond the actors, manipulative techniques also differ in terms of who (or what) the target of the act is. To reiterate Birch's (2011) terminology, manipulative strategies can be targeted toward the vote, the voter, or the law. While attempts to affect the voter can be carried out by either the incumbent or opposition, attempts on the vote and the law are more in the domain of the incumbent. Electoral fraud, which is defined in this dissertation as "illicit attempts to manipulate the contents of the ballot box...", is the clearest example of an attempt to manipulate the vote, specifically with regard to the falsification and misreporting of results. In the case of fraud, the target is at the aggregated level, and can only be accessed through state apparatus such as electoral management bodies or other public sector organisations. The involvement of state actors is also required in the manipulation of the law, by requiring legislation to consolidate incumbent power. However, such legislation is ultimately directed toward the voter – either by reducing the effectiveness or freedom of their vote (e.g., by stifling the opposition or gerrymandering), or by suppressing their turnout entirely (e.g., by restricting the voter registry).

Other attempts to manipulate the voter are perhaps less easy to define, especially when one asks what constitutes manipulation in this regard. For example, there may be a fine line between what we conceive as a manipulated vote and a free vote in the context of false and misleading information in electoral campaigns. More classically defined, however, attempts to manipulate the voter are typically thought of as coercive or co-optive; political actors can opt to use a carrot (e.g. vote-buying) or a stick (e.g. violence, intimidation, or withholding particularistic benefits) to sway an individual's vote choice (Van Ham and Lindberg 2016). The selection of these strategies is not

random, and the decision to target the vote, the voter, or the law is therefore likely to be determined by the socio-political context of the state, as well as the particular dynamics of specific elections.

2.2.3 THE TIMING OF MANIPULATION

A third important way in which the sub-types of manipulation can differ is the time at which they are carried out. Being aware of when a particular event occurs in the electoral cycle is of pivotal importance to understand its motivation and objective. Figure 1 (Norris 2014) illustrates the electoral cycle and the points at which elections can be subject to manipulation or malpractice. Electoral cycles are inherently dynamic processes and the motivation for the use of one strategy over another during the election campaign is likely to be based on specific election dynamics. For example, the selection of electoral fraud over intimidation and violence has been found to be dependent on the location of observers and patterns of electoral competition (Asunka et al. 2017). Resource availability has also been found to be a key factor in determining whether political actors engage in coercion or vote-buying (Van Ham and Lindberg 2016). The use of some downstream strategies is also likely to be at least partly contingent on the success of upstream efforts such as electoral reforms before the beginning of the campaign. For example, if an incumbent has the capacity and will to introduce laws limiting the freedom of association of opposition groups, then coercion or co-optation at the polling station may not be as necessary. The timing and form of the strategy can therefore reveal important information about why it is being implemented and suggest a pro-active or reactive approach on the part of the perpetrator.

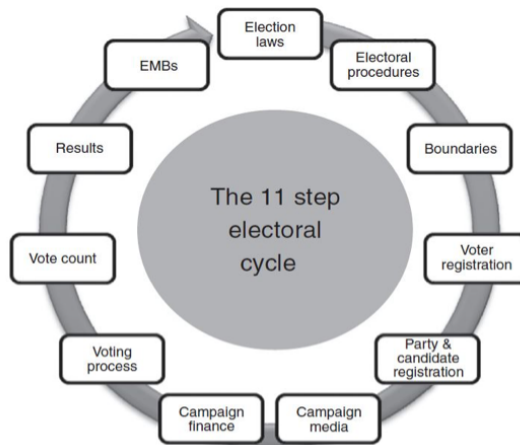


Figure 1: The electoral cycle (Norris 2014)

An illuminating example of how incentives and mechanisms between the sub-types of manipulative strategies can differ is offered by contrasting two of the primary sub-types investigated in this dissertation: electoral fraud and vote buying. Within the bounds of the broad conceptualisation of electoral integrity, electoral fraud and

electoral clientelism share certain similarities and have often been operationalised collectively (Lehoucq 2007; Rundlett and Svulik 2016). In each case, the intention is to alter a vote from what it would be otherwise, either in terms of its existence or the choice made within it. This action is performed by local agents, nominally very close to or on election day. However, these methods also differ in some key respects, suggesting a measurement that consists of both elements to be problematic. First and with the previous discussion in mind, electoral fraud and vote-buying fundamentally deviate in terms of their target – with the former concerned with the aggregation of results, and the latter concerned with how (and whether) an individual votes (Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter 2014). By extension, this implies that it is not equally possible for both the incumbent and opposition to engage in such activities to the same extent. As a result, the logistics – and consequently the mechanisms – of how these operations work take a very different course.

I therefore argue that it is of pivotal importance to hypothesise and empirically test these sub-types in their own right. While they share similarities in terms of their overarching aim (electoral success) and who the perpetrator *may* be, this is not necessarily the case. Here, I have taken two sub-types of manipulation that are often compounded in empirical research to demonstrate how the actors, targets, and timing could conceivably be different in each case. While it may be true that a cause of each could be the same phenomenon – indeed, that is what this dissertation investigates – the specific mechanisms, incentives, and behaviours of relevant actors are liable to differ along these three dimensions. This is of particular importance for the investigation of the influence of factors such as electoral competition, as incumbent and opposition parties compete and react to an evolving political environment.

In sum, this review of previous research has illuminated the complexity that lies behind two concepts that at first glance may appear straightforward. The first section attempted to reconcile a series of fairly disjointed conceptualisations of political competition across various subfields of political science relating to regime dynamics, party competition, and democratic accountability, and discussed the various channels through which the intensity of political competition can be perceived by parties and citizens. The second section illustrated the empirical and theoretical value of disaggregating the various ways in which elections can be manipulated, demonstrating how some sub-types of manipulation can differ in terms of their actors, targets, and timing through the electoral cycle. In the proceeding section, two primary dimensions of political competition will be identified which – it will be argued – can have considerable implications for different aspects of the integrity of elections.

3. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The preceding section suggests that the relationship between political competition and electoral integrity may be a little more complex than it first appears. Indeed, any attempt to tackle this matter must first confront the conceptual imprecision surrounding both phenomena before any kind of comprehensive answer is attempted. What is evident from the discussion so far is that in order to have an attitudinal or behavioural effect on stakeholders during an election, political competition must first be perceived through one or more channels such as previous election results or opinion polls, for example. Thus, it is helpful rather to think of the *perception* of political competition – that is, how the state of political competition is thought to be – which can have implications for electoral integrity through not only the intensity of that competition, but also its perceived credibility. The following discussion will describe the proposed processes along these two dimensions in turn.

3.1 SCOPE CONDITIONS

To reiterate, this dissertation considers political competition to be the relevant position of those vying for political power. However, at this point it is also pertinent to be cognisant of the fact that what constitutes a competitive election in this sense is likely sensitive to electoral procedures. Winner-takes-all contests operating under majoritarian or plurality-based rules have a much more pronounced sense of competition than proportional seat allocation systems that typically rely on a constellation of parties and hypothetical coalition combinations to form the executive body. Thus, the theoretical discussion that follows (and the empirical approaches of the research papers included in this dissertation) refers to winner-takes-all contests where the electoral stakes are indivisible (i.e., a single representative is elected). In expectation, this can apply to both executive and legislative contests, yet the former is the focus of the empirical research papers that are to be introduced in the subsequent section.

3.2 DIMENSION 1: THE INTENSITY OF COMPETITION AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Across regime types, the manipulation of elections is almost invariably linked to concerns of political competition. Even in democracies, where the public exposure of intentional wrongdoing can counterproductively impact a candidate or party's chances of victory, electoral fraud and other forms of manipulation continue to plague

many elections. But if being called out for cheating undermines the legitimacy of results, then why are elections manipulated in such states? One answer relates to the form and timing of the manipulative strategy. Many forms of manipulation do not become evident to the public until after the election has taken place, at which point the perpetrators may find themselves in positions of power. Election day irregularities such as tabulation discrepancies, ballot box stuffing, fraudulent voting, and polling station offences rarely interrupt the declaration of results, and allegations pertaining to such events are frequently anecdotal. Without evidence, it is more difficult to hold suspected officials to account through the judicial system than the electorate.

A second answer relates to the dynamics of specific elections, and the intensity of competition within a given contest. As elections are perceived to be closer, parties may consider themselves to have a stronger chance of victory and as such attempt to illicitly tip the scales in their favour. This consideration inevitably comes from a perception of competition estimated via media reports or opinion polls, for example. We can think of this in terms of votes having a certain value to the actors involved in the process. In zero-sum contests such as winner-takes-all elections, the value of votes is likely to vary significantly in accordance with the intensity of competition in a given electoral jurisdiction. Political parties and candidates are usually well aware of the state of political competition throughout the electoral campaign, as public and internal opinion polls are collected and disseminated frequently. This allows parties to be both proactive and reactive in their pursuit of illicit votes throughout the campaign, depending on the state of competitiveness at any given point. Feasibility and opportunity aside, the prospect of tipping the scales in one's favour is an incentive that is likely to exist across regime types. The particular manipulative strategy is also likely to feed into this dynamic environment of evolving political competition, as resource constraints and the administrative capacity of the perpetrators may make some upstream or downstream tactics more viable and/or effective than others.

A clear demonstration of this is in the case of electoral fraud. As defined here, electoral fraud consists of illicit attempts to manipulate the contents of the ballot box, either in terms of what is deposited into the box (e.g., ballot stuffing), or in terms of what is withdrawn from the box (e.g., tabulation discrepancies). Electoral fraud is therefore an example of late-stage election manipulation, as it can only be committed once the ballot box physically exists – either on, or in the immediate vicinity of election day. Any attempt of electoral fraud is therefore reactive; perpetrators are likely to have at least some sense of uncertainty regarding the eventual outcome of the election if they are willing to engage in a risky procedure such as ballot box tampering. Representations of electoral competition such as opinion polls showing a tight race could therefore conceivably incite a reaction on the part of the would-be perpetrator. For example, attempts to cheat may be directed at late notice to areas or districts where results are expected to be tighter (Rundlett and Svulik 2016). It is possible that this could work in one or both of two directions, however. A marginal lead vis-à-vis a marginal deficit could lead to fraudulent attempts out of consolidation and desperation, respectively. Nevertheless, the options from the menu of manipulation open to

actors in this position are significantly restricted due to the simple fact that time is running out. Agents on the ground on polling day may consider the potential career rewards of victory – or repercussions of defeat – as compelling enough to secure a result through illicit means. Of course, electoral fraud as a last resort is not an option available to all parties equally, and the implementation of such a strategy is largely dependent on the incumbent’s resources and infrastructural capacity.

While electoral fraud is one example of when manipulation can be directed at valuable votes in a more aggregated abstract sense, electoral clientelism offers a case where specific individuals may be targeted on the basis that their vote could mean more to overturn eventual electoral outcomes. Much as it would be redundant to fraudulently manipulate an election when it is not necessary for victory, the use of finite resources for the purposes of electoral clientelism – that is, exchanging material benefits to a voter in return for their vote – may also be strategic and rational on the part of the broker. Put simply, political parties and their agents may consider three elements that constitute the value of a vote in their targeting strategies: the potential returns (the likelihood of a vote having an impact on results), the cost of the vote, and reliability (whether the transaction will be followed through with). Within this context, electoral competitiveness could also be seen as a contextual factor as the competition – or election – takes place at the level of the jurisdiction where an individual resides and votes. Various individual- and jurisdiction-level factors can therefore interact with the competitiveness of the area that increase or decrease the value of an individual’s vote.

In contrast to electoral fraud, electoral clientelism provides one example of a manipulative strategy being more proactive than reactive, albeit within the bounds of the same electoral cycle. Although there is some variation, clientelist exchanges typically take place earlier in the electoral cycle than electoral fraud, for example. Purely from a logistical point of view, the resources needed to buy votes en masse – especially when the practice is not ubiquitous – are much more difficult to restructure and redistribute among agents at short notice. However, even if this determination is made slightly earlier in the process, the driving force behind the channelling of resources into specific electoral arenas is likely made largely on the back of estimations of political competition. A second way in which the relationship can differ between fraud and clientelism is the perpetrators. In contrast to fraud, electoral clientelism is also an available option to opposition parties and candidates. In fact, given that electoral clientelism is a relatively resource-intensive form of electoral manipulation, coupled with the fact that resources are typically more limited for challengers, it is plausible that the targeting of individuals may be even more precise in the case of opposition parties.

These two examples demonstrate that the intensity of competition in a particular election in many cases can incite different manipulative strategies which have different targets, at different times, and can be committed by different actors throughout the electoral cycle. But why would actors choose one strategy over another? The answer to this question is at least in part context dependent. For example, electoral clientelism

is likely to be a much more viable option in contexts where patronage networks exist and are well-established. As already mentioned, whether the perpetrator is the incumbent or opposition – as well as the resources they have available to them – is also likely to feed into such a decision as some types of manipulation are more expensive than others. Similarly, perpetrators are likely to know in advance if – for example – an election will be monitored by domestic or international observers. Research has demonstrated the ability of parties to reallocate downstream manipulative efforts dependent on the distribution of observers (Asunka et al. 2017).

In this dimension of competition, it is dynamic and can fluctuate significantly before and during electoral campaigns. However, it would be naïve to suggest that there could not be a reciprocal relationship between methods of manipulation and competition. This is undoubtedly the case. Particularly in less democratic contexts, competition can be stymied in advance of the election campaign through structural and opportunistic intrusions placed on opposition parties, thus negating the need to use other manipulative techniques in closer proximity to the election. Thus, it may be the case that when the incumbent has a more disproportionate share of resources, they use more upstream methods of manipulation to mitigate the intensity of competition in the later stages of the cycle. Ultimately, however, any effect of electoral manipulation on later attempts to manipulate must pass through the screen of the perception of political competition. In other words, the perception of political competition may affect the incentives of parties to manipulate the process at various stages of the electoral cycle both directly and as a mediator of prior manipulative attempts.

3.3 DIMENSION 2: THE CREDIBILITY OF COMPETITION AND THE VOTER

So far in this discussion, we have established how political competition can be highly influential for the very nature of political discourse. We have also been able to identify that it is not competition per se that can influence the attitudes and behaviours of political actors, rather the perception of that competition by voters and elites. In doing so, we have assumed that competition can be perceived along one primary continuum: from low to high. While this assumption is unproblematic for political competition in itself, the introduction of how it is perceived somewhat complicates the matter. Ultimately, any communication that contains information about political competition needs to be collected and disseminated before it is perceived by the relevant actor. This is of particular pertinence for the prospective voter, who may be more susceptible to biases surrounding this information. In this regard, political competition can vary in terms of its perceived credibility just as much as its intensity.

One of the foremost ways of the public becoming aware of the current state of political competition is pre-election opinion polls, which serve as information short cuts to indicate the viability of candidates and parties (Bartels 1996). In the case of opinion polls, a polling or market research company must conduct the field work and

present the data to political parties or media outlets who broadcast the information either internally within parties or externally to the public. There are therefore several points between – and including – the initial measurement and eventual perception of competition that may be subject to distortion and bias.

A growing literature has begun to consider the credibility of political information (Austen-Smith 1990; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Przeworski 1999; Chiang and Knight 2011). Generally, objective credibility of information is thought to be primarily determined by the incentive structure of the sources of the information. Lupia and McCubbins (1998), for example, emphasise two key dimensions that contribute toward credibility: the expertise and trustworthiness of the source. Focusing on the latter of these, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2016, 62) consider information to be credible when “the source does not have an incentive to lie about the information it disseminates.” Weitz-Shapiro and Winters also distinguish their definition of credibility from affinity, which refers to a pre-established fondness of the source, such as a particular media outlet (see also Chiang and Knight 2011). Important to note is that these conceptualisations seem to assume an objective nature of credibility. That is, some pieces of information are the product of high expertise and trustworthiness (to use Lupia and McCubbins’ terminology) and are considered as such by all. It is therefore interesting to think of pre-election opinion polls in this light as although they are supposedly reflections of objective information about political competition, there are several steps that can distort this reflection.

The first step to be considered between political competition and its perception is the organisation that collects this information, which in the case of opinion polls is the polling vendor. Given that previous definitions of information credibility are based on the motivations of sources, we must also ask what the incentives of pollsters are in creating this information. Is the intention limited to checking the pulse of the electorate? In short, this tends not to be the case, and (especially in high information environments) polling companies tend to be in direct competition with one another (Holtz-Bacha and Strömbäck 2012; Clinton and Rogers 2013), many of whom use post-measurement techniques to transform these polls into predictions of the outcome (Jennings and Wlezien 2018). Polling vendors therefore have the tools and incentives to alter their raw data – irrespective of the nature of their intentions – when the transparency criteria (e.g., sample size or margin of error) advocated by watchdogs are infrequently adhered to, especially during publication by media outlets.

The sender of this information – typically a media organisation – is therefore a second step to be considered in the link between political competition and its public perception. Just as pollsters may attempt to make their polls more marketable, some (particularly partisan) media organisations are also likely to disseminate polls that are appealing to their readership. This is particularly problematic when one considers the effect that selective media consumption can have on political inclinations, as partisans have been shown to seek out and resolutely stand by even inaccurate information when it is favourable to their party (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Peterson and Iyengar

2021). The disseminators of this information therefore have incentives to actively select which information to publish based on their content, and subsequently represent or frame it in a way that conforms to their – or their audience’s – political inclination.

Given that pre-election opinion polls are the attempted measurement and reflection of real-time political competition, we can therefore surmise that the link between competition and its perception by individuals and political parties is subject to bias in the intermediary steps, conceivably distorting the reflection. In contrast to traditional conceptions of polls as objective information, a growing research field has demonstrated determinations of poll credibility differ considerably between scholars and experts on the one hand, and the general public on the other (Panagopolous et al. 2009; Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017). Rather than methodological transparency and sampling concerns, citizens are more likely to consider polls to be of higher quality when they are congruent with their own or their preferred party’s beliefs (Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017; Madson and Hillygus 2020). Perceptions of political information are therefore sensitive to such biases, and opinion polls can not only represent, but also distort the perception of political competition.

To complicate matters further, opinion polls are rarely consistent and coherent. During intense electoral campaigns, it is likely that prospective voters are exposed to several different polling estimates at various points in time. A multitude of pollsters operate in any given election and tend to vary significantly in terms of the nature and purpose of the organisation, their methodology, as well as when and where they choose to publish their results. Individuals encounter several polls throughout the campaign cycle, and as political developments are tracked and reflected in these figures, estimations can fluctuate significantly – from day to day and from source to source. For example, in the 2020 US presidential race, two polls published between 21-25 October by YouGov/Yahoo and Pulse Opinion Research/Rasmussen Reports showed a 12-percentage point lead for Joe Biden on the one hand, and a 1-point lead for Donald Trump on the other. When opinion polls contradict in such a way, voters may give more credence to polls that they consider to be more credible. Even if some pollsters and polls are objectively more credible than others, they may not necessarily be viewed as such, especially in electoral contexts where partisan polarisation is high. Information is generally viewed as being of higher quality when the content conforms to an individual’s prior expectations (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006).

Relatedly, information representing political competition can also be instrumentalised – or even manipulated – by parties and candidates. Given that we have established multiple steps that may be subject to bias in the production of this information, it is not inconceivable that political parties could be responsible for some of these biases, especially if they presume this information to influence voters or other relevant parties. For example, prior to negotiations with the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly had poll numbers reported in a daily newspaper manipulated to favour his Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Bozkurt 2020). Information relating to political competition therefore represents an

upstream opportunity for would-be perpetrators to affect the integrity of elections by influencing the perceived state of competition. If an opposition party perceives an election to be a foregone conclusion, they may be less likely to heavily invest resources in a campaign. Once again, this is suggestive of the cyclical nature of the relationship between electoral integrity and political competition that operates not just between but also within electoral cycles. Nevertheless, even though the credibility dimension of political competition presents an opportunity for political actors to affect the perception of competition, the primary way in which this can have implications for the integrity of elections is through the voting behaviour of citizens.

The consequences of this potential distortion of political competition are at best unsavoury and at worst a threat to electoral integrity. For voters, their subjective perception of political competition can influence their decision of whether to vote and for whom. In the preceding discussion we have established that information relating to political competition is created and conveyed through several steps that are subject to bias and distortion. At each stage in the attempt to measure and convey the state of political competition, actors have the opportunity to distort, frame, and perceive this information in several ways. Upon reception by the voter, this information could well have very real consequences for electoral outcomes. Thus, the perceived credibility of information indicative of political competition can have considerable downstream implications for the integrity of elections.

In this section I have argued that political competition can have implications for the integrity of elections through two primary channels: the intensity of competition and the perceived credibility of the information that conveys it. In elections where there can be only one winner, political elites may look to tip the electoral scales of a close election in their favour by illicitly manipulating the process in a multitude of ways. While voters also perceive the intensity of competition, it is unlikely to encourage large-scale manipulation on their part. The intensity of competition therefore relates more to political parties as the primary drivers of electoral integrity in this framework. For voters, the decision of whether to vote and for whom is often shaped by information indicative of political competition which is itself subject to several potential biases including the role played by political elites. The second dimension considered in this section – the credibility of competition – therefore relates primarily to voters and their electoral choices with respect to its expected effect on electoral integrity.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This section outlines the research strategy taken in the dissertation. Four research papers assess the relationship between political competition, its perceptions among elites and voters, and the integrity of elections. An outline of the key elements of the constituent papers is provided in Table 1, and these are individually summarised in the subsequent section (5).

| | RESEARCH Q | IV (LEVEL) | DV (LEVEL) | CASE(S) | DATA | METHOD |
|------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| PAPER I | Can electoral competition explain why some elections are more fraudulent than others? | Pre-election poll closeness (national) | Electoral fraud (national) | Cross-country, presidential elections | Observational, quantitative | Statistical analysis, OLS |
| PAPER II | Does electoral competition affect electoral clientelism? | Previous election results (local) | Electoral clientelism (individual) | South Africa, municipal elections | Observational, quantitative | Statistical analysis, Logit |
| PAPER III | What explains dramatic decreases in electoral participation? | Electoral manipulation (national) | Electoral participation (national) | Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia & Armenia | Observational, qualitative | Qualitative comparative analysis |
| PAPER IV | How does the credibility of opinion polls affect voting behaviour? | Subjective poll credibility (local) | Voting behaviour (individual) | Turkey, mayoral elections | Experimental | Conjoint analysis & survey experiment |

Table 1: Summary of research designs of papers in the dissertation

How these papers relate to one another with respect to the key concepts and relationships explored in the dissertation is illustrated in Figure 2. This figure portrays how the two dimensions of the perception of political competition – specifically intensity and credibility – can have implications for the integrity of elections by affecting the behaviours of political elites and voters respectively. With regard to the intensity dimension, Papers I and II investigate how more competitive elections influence the manipulative strategies of political elites, while Paper III considers the consequences of uncompetitive elections for political participation. Paper IV, on the other hand, also considers the effects of political competition on voters, but focuses on perceptions of credibility in information relating to competition and its consequences for voting behaviour.

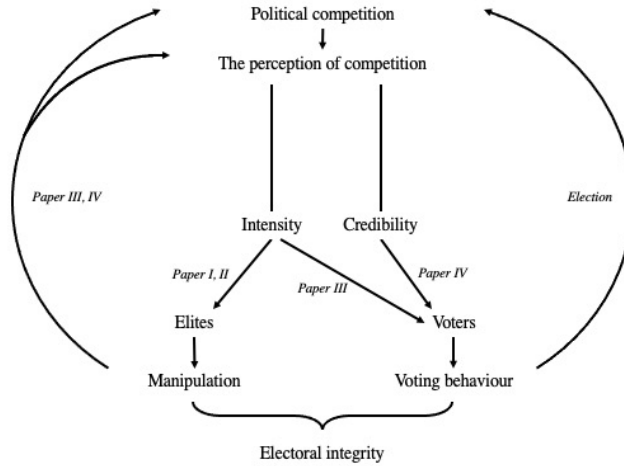


Figure 2: Mapping the research papers withing the relationship between political competition and electoral integrity.

There are two other important aspects of how the theoretical set-up relates to the research strategy to note that are reflected in Figure 2. First, and as discussed at length in previous sections, this dissertation does not equate political competition with the perception of that competition. As will be developed upon in section 4.2.1, the distinction between objective and subjective measures of competition is relevant to theoretical and empirical considerations in each paper. Secondly, Figure 2 also demonstrates the endogenous nature of the relationship between the broad concepts of political competition and electoral integrity, which is theorised in Paper IV and empirically investigated in Paper III. For example, the credibility of information which affects voting behaviour may itself be a consequence of elite manipulation, which can be a product of the intensity of competition. Note, however, that Figure 2 is not intended to be a comprehensive representation of the theoretical framework presented in this dissertation. Rather, it is merely a method of mapping how the research papers of this dissertation relate to one another with respect to the key concepts discussed in the previous sections. The remainder of this section will detail the methodological and data considerations that were made to empirically investigate this complex relationship.

4.1 METHODOLOGY

This dissertation employs multiple methodological techniques to assess the relationship between political competition and the integrity of elections. Developments with data sources have enabled a swathe of research in recent times to establish some of the key determinants and covariates of election quality (e.g. Molina and Lehoucq 1999; Ziblatt 2009; Bishop and Hoeffler 2016; Birch and Van Ham 2017). Typically

employing cross-national quantitative analyses covering a majority of the world's democratic national elections, researchers have been successful in their attempts to identify which *types* of states tend to have problematic elections more than others. This is indeed a priceless endeavour, as the international community is able to mobilise observation missions and aid to elections and states where they are likely to be needed.

This is the strategy employed by Paper I, which contributes one way of being able to identify not just which types of states experience poorly executed elections in full- and semi-democracies, but also which elections in particular are more susceptible within those states. However, there is only so far that cross-national studies can go to explain the strategies of perpetrators. With that in mind, the second and fourth papers of this dissertation use more fine-grained data on the sub-national and individual levels in single country studies to investigate the effect of political competition on the integrity of two forms of voting behaviour. Paper III on the other hand, uses a qualitative comparative analysis to investigate how the interaction between competition and upstream methods of manipulation can have consequences for the conduct of elections. Paper IV departs from the observational data used in the three previous papers of the dissertation by employing an original survey experiment to investigate the potential causal nature of the relationship, thereby constructing variables to specifically test the research question.

A theme that permeates three of the papers (I, II, and IV) in this dissertation is the effort to avoid – or at least limit – fears of endogeneity and reverse causality. In the field of election quality these issues are particularly arduous as any events or equilibria in a given electoral cycle are likely to be to some extent the product of previous elections (and thereby any manipulative efforts that took place in reference to those elections). The disaggregation of electoral manipulation aids this effort to some degree, as time-specific events such as electoral fraud can to some extent be isolated to a specific election, provided that the phenomenon is not habitual as in electoral authoritarian regimes. This issue is taken up further in Papers I and II, which use OLS and logistic regression analyses respectively of observational data. Paper I, for example, measures opinion polls that were collected approximately one month prior to the election, thus limiting the impact of any manipulative techniques that took place following the previous election but prior to polling day. A similar technique is used in Paper II to ensure that the measure of competition is temporally prior to the outcome variable. In addition, electoral clientelism is measured at the individual level following the elections of 2016, which is not likely to affect the state of competition in the previous election at the district level. This is less of a concern in Paper IV, which uses a survey experiment to ensure that treatments are allocated to subjects prior to the measurement of the outcome. It should be noted, however, that Papers I and II do not make causal claims about electoral manipulation. Rather, their intention is to test observable empirical implications of the stated theories. This consideration is not a factor for Paper III, which is an inductive process whereby a theory is constructed as an outcome of the observation of the electoral processes in four specific cases. As such, hypotheses are developed rather than tested in this paper.

Taken together, these studies attempt to establish the nature of the relationship between political competition and the manipulation of elections across national, local, and individual levels. The use of these different data levels is preferable, helpful, and even necessary due to the corresponding levels of the varieties of electoral manipulation that this dissertation explores. Whereas electoral fraud could take place on the individual level through the fraudulent use of postal ballots or impersonation at ballot stations, the impact of such occurrences is likely to be minimal in terms of election results. Rather, electoral fraud in the form of ballot stuffing and the falsification of results, for example, occurs at the aggregate level. By way of contrast, vote, turnout, and abstention buying are all ultimately directed toward individuals. The same is also the case for the somewhat more subtle form of vote-affecting studied experimentally in Paper IV. Paper III addresses one of the key issues of this dissertation by developing on the potentially dynamic relationship between competition and the different forms of manipulation.

This structure also allows me to investigate several aspects of the concepts of political competition and electoral integrity. While the scope of the concepts studied is by no means exhaustive of the myriad of ways in which elections can be manipulated, the various approaches taken by these research papers each reflect one or several of the aspects of the dynamic relationship between competition and electoral integrity referred to in Figure 2. Papers I and II, for example, seek to isolate the direct relationship between competitiveness and a specific method of manipulation that typically occurs in the vicinity of the election itself. Paper III addresses the issue of how and why manipulative efforts early in the process can reduce competition such that the incentives to manipulate later in the process can be influenced. Papers III and IV also both consider to what extent the perception of competition can impact electoral outcomes.

The selection of cases in these papers is based on two key concerns. First, each of the cases studied correspond to the scope conditions of the theoretical considerations discussed in the previous sections, which speak specifically to political competition in winner-takes-all contests. Papers I and III for example, both consider only presidential elections in their respective analyses. Similarly, Papers II and IV study local mayoral elections in the cases of South Africa and Turkey which also employ majoritarian electoral rules. The second key concern is their suitability to the specific research question and aim in each case. For example, Paper II takes the case of South Africa, where electoral clientelism is present but not ubiquitous and political competition varies considerably at the local level. Competition (and representations of it) varies to a similar degree at the local level in the polarised context of Turkey, which is the case considered in Paper IV. The process was different in the case of Paper III, which employs an inductive method of research based on similar instances of dramatic turnout decline in the cases of Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. That being said, these states share a common geopolitical environment and culture while varying in the strength of their democratic institutions.

4.2 DATA

4.2.1 POLITICAL COMPETITION

Political competition is problematic to measure in the context of contentious elections for two primary reasons. First, any quantitative measure of political competition that uses election results themselves as a proxy for competition are likely to bear the fingerprints of any manipulative efforts that they are being measured against. This is particularly the case when studies use the result of the election of interest specifically, but the same may also apply when using previous elections as a proxy. Secondly, and of particular relevance to Paper IV, if prospective voters become aware of the state of political competition prior to the election (through opinion polls, for example), it may alter their voting intention and as such alter the state of competition. Political competition, in effect, could be affected by the very act of attempting to measure it, provided that voters become aware of such information. This risk is notably heightened when we consider how opinion polls may be subject to manipulation themselves. Official elections results and pre-election opinion polls may both therefore be subject to these biases. Consequently, the trade-off between these measures concerns temporal proximity (i.e., polls may be a more accurate reflection during campaigns) and reliability (e.g., there is no margin of error in election results).

The selection of measures of competition in each paper is made with these factors in mind, and each case attempts to – as far as possible – use measures that improve upon alternatives used in previous research. Paper II, for example uses the results of the preceding municipal elections in South Africa in 2012 to assess what may and may not be considered a competitive area. The primary reason for this approach is data availability (public opinion polls at the municipal level in this case simply do not exist), but this also represents a more objective estimation of competition relative to previous measurements, which have relied on subjective binary determinations of competitiveness, for example (e.g. Corstange 2018). While electoral competition is likely to fluctuate throughout the electoral cycle, the measure used in Paper II simply identifies the more (or less) competitive municipalities, which is unlikely to be sensitive to sudden fluctuations. Furthermore, past electoral results are likely to be a heuristic that parties base their perceptions of electoral competition on, especially in more rural areas.

Paper II, on the other hand, uses original opinion poll data for 109 national presidential elections between 1996-2016. In comparison to other measures mentioned above, the use of polling data provides a potentially much more accurate and live reflection of the information that is available to candidates, parties, and voters in the run up to elections. Given that this dissertation argues that the incentives to manipulate elections based on competition are perception-based, this measure is likely more valid than previous results given that these polls are made public and are available to politicians and voters alike. And while candidates and parties could plausibly have in-house estimations of the electoral race that differ from those available to the public, Paper I bases the selection of polls on source credibility to decrease the likelihood that

these estimates will differ greatly given the integrity of methodology. In Paper IV, opinion polls and their credibility are the subject of the experimental treatments.

Paper III departs from this by taking the form of a qualitative comparative analysis, using document analysis from several news agencies to collect data. The data indicative of political competition was therefore determined by their relevance to three themes identified during the analysis: incumbent strength, opposition strength, and electoral stakes. While this approach does not provide a “hard” measure of competition like the approaches taken in the other paper of this dissertation, this approach provides a more nuanced account of how competition may have deviated throughout the electoral cycle, which is well-suited to the ambitions of the paper.

Finally, an important data consideration in this dissertation is a concept that overlaps to some extent with both electoral manipulation and political competition: regime dynamics. Democracy level is ultimately closely related to political competition on a systematic level – competition is generally much higher in liberal democracies than it is in autocracies – and less manipulation inevitably contributes to elections and countries being considered less democratic. Democracy is therefore likely to some extent to be measured on both sides of the equation. To navigate this issue, in its empirical analysis Paper I uses a measure of democracy from a different source (Freedom House) to the fraud variable (V-Dem). Papers II and IV, on the other hand only empirically investigate specific country cases (South Africa and Turkey respectively) and as such the analyses are effectively able to hold constant institutional country-level variables such as democracy level. A similar approach is taken in Paper III, which uses four case studies (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Georgia) that represent a range of levels of democracy but a similar geopolitical environment.

4.2.2 *ELECTORAL INTEGRITY*

Efforts to unlawfully influence elections are inherently difficult to detect and measure. In most incidences, the intention of unlawfully manipulating elections is not only to produce electoral results on the part of the perpetrators, but also to go undetected in doing so. Getting caught with one’s hand in the ballot box, so to speak, would be costly for those who are seeking to win what they hope to at least appear as a fair contest. Researchers have therefore largely relied on observational data generated by country-wide expert surveys or observer reports in determining which elections are cleaner than others. To that end, numerous datasets have emerged in recent times portraying the many elements of electoral manipulation. Most notably, those based on observer reports include the IEM (Index of Electoral Malpractice) and QED (Quality of Elections Dataset), and those based on expert surveys include NELDA (National Elections across Democracies and Autocracies), PEI (Perceptions of Electoral Integrity), and V-DEM (Varieties of Democracy). While these data sources do provide disaggregated measures of electoral manipulation, studies employing them typically use index measures that combine various manipulative techniques to provide aggregated estimates of election quality or integrity.

However, this is not to say that such resources can be used interchangeably. Van Ham (2015) found considerable disagreement in her comparative study of eleven measures of electoral integrity, alluding to many of the issues in the disconnect between conceptualisations and measurement techniques. The operationalisation of the components of election quality depends largely on specific research purposes, which dictate whether the distinction of intentionality is made, for example (Van Ham 2015, 726). It is therefore important to bear in mind the subtle (and sometimes not so) differences between electoral fraud, integrity, quality, freeness, and fairness. These concepts and measurements often overlap, yet they vary in scope considerably. While there is undoubted value in broad assessments of the conduct of elections, researchers are limited in their ability to investigate the more dynamic aspects of electoral campaigns and how some manipulative tactics may be used more than others. While the ambition of manipulative attempts earlier in the cycle (e.g., alterations to electoral laws) are similar to those conducted in closer proximity to the election (e.g., electoral fraud), the reasons to pursue one tactic in particular may differ. It is therefore likely that more dynamic covariates such as electoral competition will relate to different types of manipulation to different extents. As discussed at greater length in the previous section, this dissertation favours the approach of disaggregating such indexes both conceptually and methodologically, with two of the four studies focusing specifically on items that generally contribute toward such indexes: electoral fraud and electoral clientelism.

To measure electoral fraud across time and space, Paper I uses observational data taken from V-Dem's expert survey and the "election other voting irregularities" variable, which consists of an assessment of the extent to which there was an "intentional lack of voting materials, ballot-stuffing, misreporting of votes, and falsification of votes" (Coppedge et al. 2018, 55). While this perception-based measure is by no means perfect, the fact that it is temporally confined to the immediate vicinity of the election enabled the study to investigate competition as a potential proximate cause of fraudulent attempts to compromise the process. One drawback of this variable is that its values relate to an election-year. As such, the analysis is unable to differentiate between fraud that may relate to different elections that may have taken place within a country in the same year (such as simultaneous presidential and legislative elections, or presidential run-offs).

Although varieties of electoral clientelism such as vote buying are often estimated at the country level in the data sources referred to above, the phenomenon is more frequently measured in the literature using individual-level survey data. Unlike electoral fraud, types of electoral clientelism such as vote-buying, turnout-buying, and abstention-buying relate to the voting actions of an individual, and therefore pertain to the individual level. While it is for the most part impossible to ask an individual whether their vote was fraudulently manipulated in some way, vote-buying requires some form of consent – and therefore awareness – from the voter. It is for this reason that electoral clientelism is traditionally measured using individual-level survey data

using questions relating to respondents' personal experiences, or their perceptions of the communities they live in. This is the approach taken by Paper II, which uses survey data collected following the 2016 South African municipal elections. Specifically, the measure of electoral clientelism used in this paper is comprised of a battery of three separate questions relating to whether a respondent was the target of three different varieties of electoral clientelism: turnout buying, vote buying, and abstention buying.

While survey responses at the individual level are a more fine-grained and valid estimate of vote buying or electoral clientelism more generally than macro expert assessments for example, they are also likely to hold their own biases. A considerable body of literature has explored the effect of social desirability bias in survey response items concerning vote-buying (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012; Wantchekon and Gallego 2012). Essentially, this literature convincingly contends that an individual may be unwilling to admit that they sold their vote due to fears of reprimand (especially if the offending party was successful in the election) or because it may be seen as an admission of criminality on their own part. Using methodologies such as list experiments, researchers have shown that this bias is particularly problematic as certain individual characteristics such as income, education, and gender often correlate to a tendency to under-report vote buying. While this is indeed a valid concern and a key concept to bear in mind when conducting research on such sensitive issues as clientelism, the magnitude of the underestimation is also likely to vary by social context. Indeed, social desirability bias with regard to electoral clientelism has been shown to not be a major concern in the setting of Paper II: South Africa (Bøttkjær 2019). This paper therefore uses direct questions of personal experiences to measure electoral clientelism. A similar social desirability bias may also be a concern for Paper IV's reliance on direct questions about voting intention for its dependent variables, as respondents often over-state their intention to vote (Holbrook and Krosnick 2009; Dahlggaard et al. 2019). Nevertheless, given that this bias is likely to be consistent across control and treatment groups, any variation in reported turnout can be attributed solely to treatment effects. The intention of this measure is rather to determine the difference between experimental groups than an accurate description of public opinion.

Similar to the data on political competition, Paper III's qualitative approach and document analysis allows the collection of data on various forms of manipulation that occurred throughout the electoral cycles in the four cases studied. Data was therefore collected from news agencies on their reporting of issues relating to a wide range of events such as institutional reforms that unfairly benefited the incumbent vis-à-vis the opposition, active co-optation or coercion on the part of the incumbent and related actors, and the conduct of the election itself.

5. RESEARCH PAPERS IN BRIEF

PAPER I. ELECTORAL FRAUD AND THE PARADOX OF POLITICAL COMPETITION (DAWSON 2020)

The first paper of the dissertation focuses specifically on electoral fraud and addresses the problematic proposition that while competitive elections are considered a hallmark of healthy democratic functioning, they may also lead to more attempts to fraudulently affect the outcome. While previous research has established links between election fraud and several structural factors such as electoral rules and the independence of judiciary and media institutions (Molina and Lehoucq 1999; Birch and Van Ham 2017), these findings tend to shed light on which kinds of states are more prone to experience fraudulent contests rather than which specific elections within those states. To that end, this paper offers the state of electoral competition as a possible answer to the question of why some elections are more fraudulent than others.

While tight democratic elections have previously been linked to electoral outcomes such as increased turnout (Bursztyn et al. 2017), their impact on the integrity of the process has remained largely anecdotal and somewhat of a “conventional wisdom” (Simpser 2013). Furthermore, little research has sought to compare the nature of this relationship across regime dynamics and levels of democracy. While elections in autocracies are often manipulated to the extent that they are non-contests – ultimately serving a different purpose to their democratic counterparts (Gandhi 2008; Simpser 2013) – in democracies it is precisely when elections are expected to be close that political parties and candidates are incentivized to manipulate the balloting process to tip the scales in their favour. This article contends that the value of an individual vote – and subsequently the incentive to unlawfully capture this vote – is likely to vary significantly in winner-takes-all elections, and that this value is at its highest when polls predict a tight race. The indivisible nature of the prize at stake accentuates the desire to emerge successful from the ballot due to the lack of consolation for losers. In close contests, and when uncertainty dominates the discourse of election day, tensions regarding the result are heightened to the largest degree. However, due to resource imbalances between parties, the paper also suggests that this relationship is likely stronger in less democratic states. Additionally, two competing hypotheses are proposed that predict the effect to be stronger when the incumbent party is ahead or behind in the race, due to the mechanisms of consolidation and desperation, respectively.

Using observational data on the prevalence of electoral fraud from V-Dem in conjunction with novel pre-election polling data from 109 presidential elections that took place between 1996-2016, this paper produces evidence to suggest that in such winner-takes-all elections, ex ante closer contests incite greater attempts to manipulate the ballot box. Interestingly, the magnitude of the association is strikingly similar in semi-democratic states and more established democracies. These results are robust to alternative measures of democracy and poll accuracy. The findings indicate no apparent difference when the incumbent is behind or ahead in the race, however, suggesting that the mere uncertainty of the prospective result is enough to encourage political actors to engage in illicit attempts to alter the election results.

This paper contributes to the literature on the integrity of elections in two primary ways. First, by combining the time-specific disaggregated measure of electoral fraud with polling data gathered prior to the election, the analysis is able to empirically separate the perceived state of electoral competition prior to the election from the election results themselves, which are often problematically taken as an indicator of competition. Secondly and importantly within the context of this project, this paper provides an explanation for why electoral fraud in particular could be the chosen course of action for would-be perpetrators. As polling day approaches and the outcome remains uncertain, political actors may be incentivised to illicitly tip the scales in their own favour.

PAPER II. ELECTORAL COMPETITION, POLITICAL PARTIES AND CLIENTELISM: EVIDENCE FROM LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The second paper, co-authored with Nicholas Charron and Mogens Justesen (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark), turns to the topic of electoral clientelism and investigates the question of whether *electoral competition shapes parties' use of clientelist strategies during elections*, thus analysing a form of manipulation targeted at the voter. This paper takes as its point of departure the mixed conclusions drawn by the literature with regard to the relationship between electoral competition and clientelism (Weitz-Shapiro 2012). Developing upon previous research that has highlighted some voters to be targeted by clientelist strategies, we argue that many of the established determinants of vote buying can be incorporated into a broader rational framework of targeted electoral clientelism, and are conditioned by electoral competition.

Previous efforts have been able to highlight several micro- and macro-level factors that increase an individual's likelihood of being offered money or other material benefits in exchange for their vote choice. These include – but are not limited to – poverty, party loyalty, political interest, and population size (Jensen and Justesen 2014; Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Corstange 2018; Muthadi 2019; Gunes-Ayata 1994; Çarkoglu and Aytac 2015). The findings with regard to electoral competitiveness are somewhat more mixed, however (e.g. Corstange 2018; Pierskalla and Sacks 2019). Where the practice is not ubiquitous and resources are limited, we argue that more competitive

areas will experience more electoral clientelism. We argue that these factors comprise a rational political economy of electoral clientelism, where instigators consider the potential returns, cost-effectiveness, and reliability of attempting to mobilise turnout, encourage abstention, or sway party choice (Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter 2014). This paper also investigates the different ways in which competitiveness can shape the clientelist strategies of dominant vis-à-vis opposition parties, given that our expectations suggest that limited resources can incentivise opposition parties to target competitive areas to a greater extent.

We use individual-level survey data collected following the 2016 South African municipal elections along with municipal data on the previous contest to assess whether electoral clientelism is more prevalent in competitive districts. South Africa is a case in which electoral clientelism is present but not prevalent, with a reported 8% of respondents experiencing some form of offer in exchange for their vote. Our data also enables us to investigate the extent to which resource imbalances between parties may result in different strategies by splitting the analysis according to which party (the dominant African National Congress, main opposition Democratic Alliance, or other) instigated the clientelist efforts. The paper finds substantial, robust support for the notion that there is a rational political economy of targeted electoral clientelism in South African municipal elections; parties seem to systematically target individuals in municipalities that are competitive. Interestingly, however, these strategies do seem to differ between the dominant and opposition parties, with the latter more inclined to pursue supporters of the ANC than their own in the most competitive municipalities, for example.

Building upon the work of the likes of Weitz-Shapiro (2012), this paper contributes to the literature on electoral competition and clientelism by showing how this relationship connects to several individual- and municipal-level factors that shape electoral clientelism. The case of South African municipal elections is also useful for shedding light on the nature of these relationships when electoral clientelism is present but not pervasive. A contribution of this paper is therefore theoretical in that it reconciles and integrates previous findings regarding the determinants of electoral clientelism under an umbrella of rational targeting. Secondly, the paper also offers an empirical contribution by disaggregating these effects by party type, demonstrating differences in the targeting strategies of dominant and challenger parties.

PAPER III. COMPETITION, STAKES, AND FALLING PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS (LIOY AND DAWSON 2020)

The third paper, co-authored with Alberto Lioy (University of Hradec Kralové), takes a closer look at the role played by competition in the elections of authoritarian and hybrid regimes by seeking to explain several instances of large negative variations

in voter turnout. Based on evidence from a qualitative comparative analysis of four elections, this paper builds a theory of dramatic falls in voter turnout. Electoral participation is traditionally thought to be negligible in such states due to artificially high turnout estimates, yet such assumptions cannot account for – especially dramatic – fluctuations over time. Based on evidence from a qualitative comparative analysis of four elections across different levels of democracy in Central Asia and the Caucasus, this paper builds a theory of dramatic falls in voter turnout based on the strength of the incumbent, the weakness of the opposition, and the electoral stakes.

While a considerable body of research considers possible explanations for individual- and aggregate-level turnout in established democracies, relatively little is currently understood about why participation varies in less democratic contexts. Fundamentally, elections in authoritarian regimes in particular are thought to serve a very different purpose than that for democracies, such as collecting information about the citizenry or identifying potential threats to the regime (Wintrobe 2000; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Magaloni 2008). Authoritarian elections are also used to signal regime strength and/or distribute goods as part of clientelist networks (Magaloni 2006; Lust-Okar 2006). Within this context, turnout and electoral participation is often neglected as a subject of interest, in part because of the lack of reliability with regard to estimations. Yet electoral participation in such states can and does fluctuate, as evidenced by a minority of studies that have demonstrated that citizens in such states have political and economic reasons to vote (e.g. Blaydes 2010; Herron 2009; Jamal, de Miguel, and Tessler 2015).

We use a qualitative comparative analysis to track the developments of four presidential election campaigns that took place in Central Asia and the Caucasus between 2005 and 2015. Specifically, we focus on Kazakhstan (2005), Armenia (2013), Georgia (2008), and Kyrgyzstan (2011) which constitute a range of levels of democracy and a similar geopolitical environment (Hale 2015). Data was collected using a document analysis approach (Bowen 2009), focused on several English-language news agencies – which are less prone to incumbent bias – and their coverage of the term of office immediately preceding the elections of interest. We subsequently recorded the similarities and differences of events between the cases and were able to identify three dimensions through which the state of electoral competition was altered: the strengthening of the incumbent, the weakening of the opposition, and the reduction of electoral stakes.

The paper concludes the inductive process by building a theory of dramatic falls in voter turnout. In brief, we argue that incumbents are incentivised to pre-emptively stifle political competition to avoid costly proximate manipulative approaches such as large-scale ballot box stuffing. Autocratic incumbents may therefore choose to run “free” elections with lower levels of turnout, thereby signalling the integrity of the process and a commitment to democracy to observers. From the point of view of the citizens, an early collapse of electoral competition leaves citizens with little to gain by voting at the ballot box. This paper therefore offers a significant theoretical

contribution to research on elections and voting behaviour in autocracies and hybrid regimes. Additionally, our comparative qualitative methodology enables us to retain a focus on the details of each case, whilst also assessing a phenomenon that is not limited to one case or regime type.

PAPER IV. POLL WARS: THE EFFECTS OF PRE-ELECTION POLLS ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR

The fourth paper of the dissertation concerns how information regarding electoral competition that voters are exposed to in the run up to elections – namely opinion polls – can influence an individual’s voting behaviour. People have greater access than ever before to information regarding political competition around elections. Polling vendors release – often contradictory – projections regularly in the run up to elections and while some states have taken the step to limit or outright ban this information as polling day approaches, there is still little in the way of a scholarly consensus about their possible effects. This has the potential to become even more problematic in contexts where the partiality and integrity of the organisations producing and disseminating this information is in question. This paper therefore focuses on the context of Turkish local elections, where political competition is high and polls – and their sources – vary considerably in terms of their content and credibility. In a first step, this study uses a conjoint analysis to determine whether – and in which ways – poll credibility is viewed subjectively. A survey experiment then attempts to determine the causal impact of this perceived credibility on voting behaviour. By taking this approach, this paper seeks to determine (a) whether credible polls are taken into account more than dubious polls, (b) what the determining attributes of that credibility are, and (c) how these factors impact on voters’ electoral choices.

Classic theories of the bandwagon and underdog effects suggest that individuals can be swayed to turnout or vote for one party or another based on their perceived popularity (Gallup and Rae 1940; Simon 1954). However, such effects have proven difficult to consistently replicate empirically across observational and experimental methods. This paper therefore applies the theoretical perspective of partisan motivated reasoning to the effects of opinion polls, which has demonstrated that political information such as polls are often perceived differently across different political and social identities (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2017; Madson and Hillygus 2020). When confronted with mixed polling information, this paper expects poll effects to be driven by polls that are perceived as credible.

The primary research question of how voters respond to conflicting polling information is investigated through the use of a survey experiment of 1,877 respondents in Turkey, fielded between September and October 2020. The experiment is designed to simulate a hypothetical mayoral election in which respondents are split into either a pure control group or one of three treatment groups where they are exposed to either a subjectively credible poll, a non-credible poll, or a combination of both. Departing

from previous studies which have assumed an objective form of credibility in experimental designs (e.g. Chiang and Knight 2011; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2016; Kuru, Pasek, and Traugott 2020), a conjoint analysis, conducted in April 2020, established the determining attributes of poll credibility along three dimensions: the content (who is leading and by how much), the source (polling vendor), and the sender (publishing newspaper). The results of the conjoint analysis are then used to construct subjectively credible treatments for the survey experiment.

The results of this paper suggest that the credibility of polling information is indeed perceived differently along partisan lines. While government-supporters preferred polls based almost exclusively on who was leading and by how much, opposition-supporters place more weight on the distributing media organisation. With regard to their effects on voting behaviour however, the impact on party choice is limited to the supporters of smaller parties who strategically coordinate between coalition partners. However, the paper does identify a potentially suppressive effect of polls on turnout, as those who are confronted with non-credible and mixed polling information show a greater tendency to spurn the ballot box. This finding suggests the sensitivity of political information to biased perceptions and subsequent political behaviour, and warrants a closer inspection of the potentially disruptive impact of polls during contested elections

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the nature of the relationship between political competition and the integrity of elections. In this chapter, I have argued that political competition and the conduct of elections are inextricably linked, and that this relationship is best understood from the perspective of how competition is perceived by political elites and voters. How competitive an election is – or is anticipated to be – is determined by how political parties and voters interpret the state of affairs through available information, which ultimately can be perceived along two dimensions: (i) the intensity of competition and (ii) the credibility of the information that depicts it. When competition is intense and elections are near, parties are incentivised to illicitly capture more valuable votes to aid their electoral prospects. However, this dissertation has also considered how competition itself (or the perception thereof) can be subject to manipulative efforts upstream in the electoral cycle such that it is stifled by incumbent parties, thus reducing the need for other forms of manipulative efforts closer to – or on – polling day. When information relating to competition is deemed not to be credible, this dissertation also finds that electoral participation can be suppressed. Perceptions of political competition may therefore have negative consequences for the integrity of elections both directly – using this information to inform manipulative strategies – and indirectly – as voters may be adversely influenced by its biased representation.

Individually, the papers in this dissertation make a number of contributions to the study of elections and the complex role that political competition can play in various contexts. One of the key questions that remains largely unanswered by research on electoral integrity is why perpetrators select specific items from the menu of manipulation at specific points in the electoral cycle (Birch 2011). This issue is taken up by Papers I-III by adopting methodological approaches suited to this purpose. Papers I and II, for example, use temporally confined measures of competition and specific methods of manipulation to make this argument. On the other hand, the qualitative approach taken by Paper III provides for the ability to track the detailed developments of electoral processes. The theoretical work in this dissertation emphasises the importance of bearing in mind the timing, actors, and targets of manipulative strategies. This is an important framework to understand the many nuances of electoral integrity, and in many ways compliments Birch's assertion that manipulation can be directed toward the vote, voter, or law. The actors aspect of this framework is important, as this dissertation has shown that some strategies are not available to all actors, and there can be variation in their implementation even when they are. Paper II, for example,

demonstrates how the use of electoral clientelism differs between incumbent and contender parties. This distinction is an important contribution of Paper II, but it also opens further questions regarding more specific party types (subject to their position on economic and social dimensions) and whether they may also have different tendencies with regard to their conduct during elections.

Regime dynamics is a continuing theme of the research design of the dissertation, with papers II, III, and IV focusing on specific country cases that fall to varying degrees short of liberal democracy. Papers II and IV consider variation in competition on the sub-national level, thus enabling these papers to assess the role of competition independent from varying regime dynamics. In the case of Paper III, four country cases are assessed across a range of levels of democracy in a similar geopolitical environment to allow for a reasonable comparison. While it is no surprise that electoral integrity is liable to suffer in such contexts, Paper I presents an interesting finding by showing similar trends in terms of electoral fraud in democratic and semi-democratic states. The problems caused by intense competition are therefore shown to be a phenomenon not limited to less democratic contexts. Furthermore, these papers also provide justification for the further study of the nuances of political competition across regime types.

6.2 LIMITATIONS

There are, of course, several aspects of this relationship that this dissertation is not able to fully investigate. Contentious elections are notoriously difficult to measure and gather reliable data on. This dissertation has taken four different approaches in this regard, by employing expert survey data, a measure of individual experiences, qualitative document analysis, and experimental data. Each of these – to varying extents – may be subject to their own biases. Expert surveys, for example, may well be reliable and cross-referenced sources of information, but it is also possible that – within the context of political competition – close elections are placed under greater scrutiny from political and media actors, thus increasing the likelihood of uncovering fraud, for example. The self-reported experiences with clientelism used in Paper II are also subject to social desirability bias, especially in contexts where its occurrence is rare. And while a list experiment connected to the data collection process in this case showed this bias to be minimal, such experiments are also likely to underestimate cases. Data collection efforts in Paper III were focused on English-language news agencies to limit the risk of biased framing, but a result of this approach is that the data is subject to the stories these agencies decide to cover. Additionally, Paper IV measures intended behaviour in the context of a hypothetical election, which runs the risk of limited external validity outside of experimental conditions.

This dissertation is also only able to speak to a somewhat limited interpretation of political competition. As the scope conditions of this framework refer to winner-takes-all elections – the respective research designs focus on executive contests operating

under first past the post rules – it is unable to make precise inferences about the link between competition and electoral integrity in contests with more diffused electoral stakes. And while this theoretical framework is expected to generalise to legislative contests with single member districts, the stakes for executive positions are generally higher and local levels of competition are perhaps not as easily perceived as that at the national level. Furthermore, how might would-be perpetrators go about tipping the scales in their favour in multi-party parliamentary elections where constituency seats are distributed proportionally, and where post-election bargaining and negotiations determine the composition of government? The added complexity regarding the stakes of such electoral systems could be one reason why such elections are generally less fraudulent (Lehoucq and Kolev 2015; Ruiz-Rufino 2018). What comprises a *competitive* election in such contexts is not nearly as clear cut as those which are explored in this dissertation. The particular actors, targets, and timing of manipulative efforts in elections with more diffused stakes therefore present a potentially important area for future research which the theory proposed here cannot cover.

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the adverse consequences of competition detailed here, it is not a conclusion of this dissertation that political competition – or the information that portrays it – is necessarily bad for democracy or democratisation. Competitive elections are indeed one of the hallmarks of a healthy democratic process. By holding politicians accountable to their actions, political competition rewards good governance and punishes poor performance and the abuse of office. Publicly available measures of competition such as legitimate opinion polls can act as a benchmark for election results to signal possible discretions. That being said, this dissertation highlights how competition can also create perverse incentives for political actors to bend and break the rules at the detriment of the election itself or the integrity of a voter’s electoral choices. This highlights the importance of paying closer attention to information relating to political competition as well as the actors and incentives surrounding its production and dissemination.

The conceptualisation of political competition developed here is also a contribution of this dissertation. Across this chapter and in the individual papers I have made the argument that any effect of political competition on the attitudes and behaviours of political actors is rooted in how it is perceived. For voters, one aspect that has not been developed by previous research efforts is the credibility of the information disseminated. Paper IV makes a key contribution in this regard, by studying how such information is perceived, and what its consequences may be for political behaviour. While previous studies of the effects of opinion polls on voters suggest a tenuous impact on voting behaviour, the coherence of the information is typically unproblematised. By opening the debate on polls and competition more broadly to include subjective perceptions of credibility, the dissertation has aimed to provide a new way of thinking about how voters perceive elections and their integrity.

DISCUSSION

The ways in which elections can be subject to manipulation are constantly evolving at each stage of the electoral cycle. Indeed, this is not limited to overt acts such as those focused upon in Papers I-III. Assaults on the integrity of elections can also be indirect, understated, or unintended. Erroneous or biased information in and around elections is a growing concern for democracy. This dissertation argues that representations of political competition are and should be a key element of this discussion. For example, while Paper IV does not suggest any intentionality in the misrepresentation of competition information, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that incumbents instrumentalise and even manipulate opinion polls to improve their own standing prior to elections and other important political events.

This dissertation is by no means exhaustive of the manipulative techniques that are implemented during the course of the electoral cycle. Rather, I have focused on a few aspects of electoral integrity that can interact with political competition in various ways. There is therefore much more to be done in the area with regard to other frequently used techniques such as intimidation and violence in the later stages of the campaign, as well as a plethora of strategies used earlier in the process such as alterations to electoral law. Given the theory produced by Paper III, it is likely that strategies used at this earlier stage interact with competition – and each other – in different ways. After all, the purpose of any manipulative effort is to alter the true state of competition as measured at the point of the election. This does not mean, however, that the relationship is riddled with endogeneity and its investigation should therefore be abandoned. On the contrary, attempts to manipulate the electoral process are often rooted in perceptions of political competition, and with an eye on future states of the true state of competition (at the time of the election). In this dissertation I have therefore sought to isolate some links in this complex chain. However, in its entirety it is complex and reciprocal, particularly if the conceptualisation of electoral integrity is broad and extends beyond sovereign constitutional law. There is therefore far more to unpack in the relationship between political competition, its perceptions, and the integrity of elections.

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