Elections and Protests: International Diffusion, Learning and

Collective Action

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Abstract

Elections have become more common and now occur in more countries where electoral integrity is often questioned. Elections provide opportunities for collective action and can increase the risk of riots and protest. Many studies examine factors related to individual elections that make protest more likely, such as fraud or lack of transparency, but few studies so far have examined the role diffusion and learning from previous experiences. We argue that actors are likely to be informed of events elsewhere and change their actions accordingly. We consider the effect of neighboring events in shaping the risk of post-election protest. The empirical results are consistent with our expectations and suggest that diffusion and learning can play an important role in mobilization around elections after the Cold War.

Introduction: Elections, Protest, and the International Dimension

Elections have become more common and now occur in more countries where electoral integrity is often questioned. Elections that are less than free and fair generate motivation and provide opportunities for collective action and can thus substantially increase the risk of riots and protest. Although many studies have examine factors related to individual elections that make protest more likely, such as fraud or lack of transparency, few studies so far have examined the role diffusion and learning from previous experiences. We argue that actors are likely to be informed of events elsewhere and change their actions accordingly. We consider the effect of neighboring events and international monitoring in other states and how these interact with regime characteristics and prior experiences in shaping the risk of post-election protest. We expect post-election riots in the neighborhood to increase the likelihood of riots in a country, especially when there is no prior history of riots in the country in question, and that the effect of international monitor should be conditional on experiences with previous riots in a country and neighbors. The empirical results are consistent with our expectations and suggest that diffusion and learning plays an important role in mobilization around elections after the Cold War.

While the practice of democracy clearly generates consent and legitimacy even among the losing side in established democracies (see e.g., Anderson et al. 2007), many have also argued that transitions to democracy often are associated with increasing conflict and contention, especially around the time of the first elections (e.g., Brancati and Snyder 2011; Cederman, Hug, and Krebs 2010; Collier 2009). The so-called third wave of democratization and the end of the Cold War has seen a sharp increase in the number of countries aiming to establish democratic institutions, often in places with only limited experience with previous democratic rule (e.g., Gleditsch and Ward 2006). Not surprisingly, this has led to a dramatic

increase in the number of elections. Elections play a central role in democratic rule, and should in principle allow the population to influence the selection of executive rule and punish existing leaders. Although transitions to democratic institutions are not necessarily defined by elections alone, transitions cannot be complete unless elections are held at some point. As can be seen in Figure 1, the average number of elections per year during the Cold War period is only about half of that seen in the post-Cold War period.
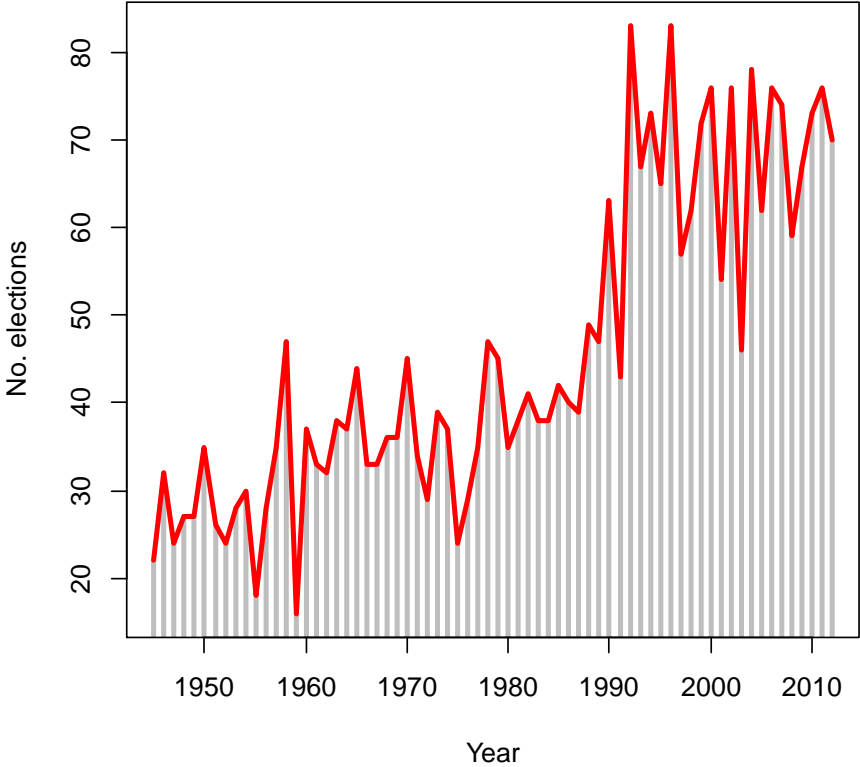

Figure 1: Number of elections by year, based on the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data (Hyde and Marinov 2012)

However, although incumbent leaders in many countries may have agreed to initiate political reform or open for elections, many are also highly reluctant to let go of political power and not necessarily willing to embrace open political competition with an actual impact on executive rule (Hyde 2011). Prior to the Cold War it was relatively common to simply restrict formal competition by either not holding elections at all or banning certain parties or restricting entry into elections. Such blatant forms of undermining the electoral processes, however, have become relatively less common with increase pressure to pay at least lip service to democratic competition, often given way to less blatant forms of electoral malpractice (cit). As elections have become more common, there have also been a rising number of disputed elections with allegations of efforts to rig the outcomes of elections through fraud, voter intimidation, and other practices contrary to the spirit of open political competition. Figure 2 displays three measures of electoral concerns and malpractice. The blue line indicates pre-election concerns over whether elections will be free and fair. The purple line indicates evidence of government harassment of the opposition. The yellow line is an indicator of whether there were critical reports of the government handling of elections circulated after the elections. Although unfree elections obviously pre-date the end of the Cold War, the latter two forms of electoral malpractice have become substantially more common.
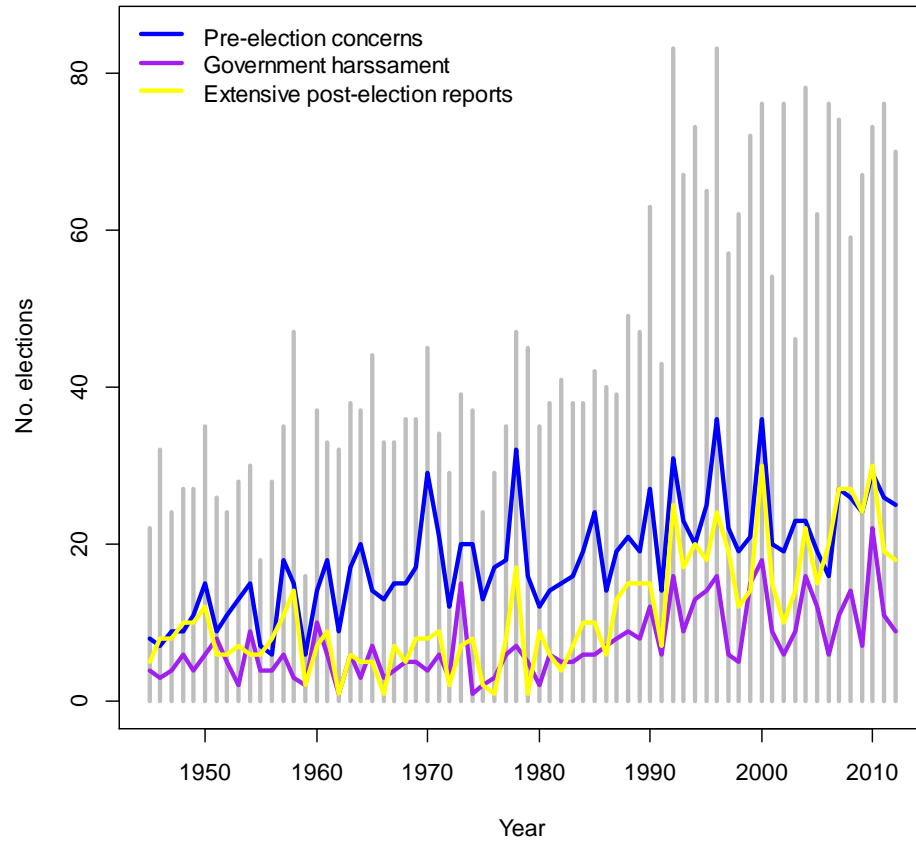
Figure 2: Forms of electoral malpractice, based on the NELDA, with histogram of all

elections

In general, democratic elections should favor regular political participation over direct

action since individuals have opportunities to pursue their objectives through regular political

means and are more likely to perceive the process as fair (e.g., Anderson et al. 2007; Bond 1994).

Disputed and rigged elections, however, may undermine the perceived opportunities or

efficacy for regular political participation and promote direct action instead. Although restricted

opportunities for political participation could motivate direct action at any time, we are

particularly likely to see collective action around the time of disputed elections. Elections perceived to be stolen can on the one hand increase outrage among dissatisfied individuals and increase recruitment to the opposition. At the same time, election events create focal points that can facilitate rapid mobilization and likely types of mobilization.

For example, Milosevic was able to largely neutralize the often divided opposition during his period as the de facto or de jure ruler of Serbia from 1989 to 2000, and even survived in the aftermath of the loss of an international conflict with NATO in 1998 and the de facto secession of Kosovo. However, many of the most important challenges to his rule arose around disputed elections. Local elections in 1996 generated extensive protests against electoral fraud, and eventually led to Milosevic recognizing some opposition victories in 1997. In 2000, the opposition candidate Kostunica was widely perceived as having been robbed of a majority in the first round of voting, again generating an extensive campaign of anti-government protest. Faced with the escalating protest and its ramifications, Milosevic eventually resigned voluntarily, citing the revised decision of the electoral commission and the proverbial need to spend more time with the family.

So far much of the attention over the links between elections and mass mobilization has focused exclusively on the use of violence, often traditional civil war. However, protest can be carried out by means other than violence, and there are often strong tactical concerns for avoiding the use of violence. One the one hand, post-election protest is often motivated on the basis of outrage over the electoral process, and this is often difficult to reconcile with adopting violent responses and may alienate many potential supporters. Moreover, post-election processes are likely to focus on the center of government power, where the regime is strongest. Protests are much more likely to have an impact on incumbents when the opposition can

mobilize large numbers and generate more extensive governance cost through popular non-compliance (Chenoweth and Stepan 2011; Dahl et al. 2015; Gleditsch, Olar, and Radean 2015). Durable armed challenges to governments tend to be more common in the periphery, and post-election mobilization rarely allow for the long-term development that is necessary to establish a credible armed organization, unless prior mobilization is already in place. As such, we believe that it is essential to focus on a broader range of dissent, including protest and non-violent direct action.

A quick glance at existing data further supports the claim that disputed elections indeed more often provide the setting for protests. According to data from the Non-violent and Violent Campaigns Data (NAVCO, see Chenoweth and Day 2013) shown in Table 1, the likelihood of seeing a non-violent campaign in a year with a disputed election is about 2.67 times higher than in years without disputed elections in the post-Cold War period, but the difference is much more modest during the Cold War period. Moreover, the absolute likelihood of a campaign in the context of a disputed election is over twice as high in the post-Cold War than during the Cold War period. This supports the claim that disputed elections can increase the motivation for dissent and expand the opportunities for protest, although collective action obviously is difficult and campaigns can occur for other reasons and outside elections. However, the clear differences before and after the Cold War suggests that there must be some factors just beyond disputed elections where concern is expressed in advance per se that contribute to make protest a more likely response. However, it should be kept in mind that the NAVCO data have a high mobilization threshold requiring mobilization of more than 1000. As such, Table 1 will thus likely to miss many instances of lower level and less organized dissent post elections.

Table 1: Non-violent campaign by years with and without pre-election concerns, based on data from NAVCO and NELDA

	Cold War (<1990)		Post Cold War (≥1990)	
	No campaign	Non-viol. Campaign	No campaign	Non-viol.cmpn
No elections/ no concerns	4784 (0.974)	126 (0.026)	3453 (0.969)	112 (0.031)
Pre-election concerns	500 (0.962)	20 (0.038)	318 (0.916)	29 (0.084)

In this manuscript we consider how diffusion may influence the likelihood of post-election riots. Although several studies have identified factors that they argue increase the risk of post-election riots, they have tended to focus on purely domestic factors or how international factors can affect fraud, and not considered how learning from previous experiences elsewhere may influence collective action directly.

What do we know about elections and protest?

There is an extensive literature on when elections are more likely to see fraud as well as when they are more likely to generate protest and the eventual outcomes of elections in democratizing states in terms of whether transitions to democracy follow or not. A number of studies focus on the incentives for government to use fraud in elections. Hyde & Marinov (2014) argue that incumbents in weak democracies always will be accused of fraud, which gives them little incentives to not cheat. Donno (2013) finds that elections in autocracies are more likely to lead to democratization, especially when the incumbent is relatively weak, which presumably should influence their incentives to cheat. This finding is corroborated in a comparative case study by

Seeberg (2014). Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski (2014) find that incumbents to resort to violence when they are uncertain about their re-election chances and face little or no institutional constraints on the use of the state's repressive capacity. This is in line with Fjelde & Höglund (2014), who find that majoritarian electoral systems increase the likelihood of post-election violence. They explain this finding with the inherent uncertainty of a winner-takes-all system, in particular in conjunction with ethnoreligious cleavages.

Another set of studied examine *when* elections are more likely give rise to protest. Beaulieu (2014) argues that the opposition is likely to initiate direct action or protest when the government and opposition are unable to come to an agreement on common standards for electoral conduct and the opposition perceive the processes as fraudulent or unfair. Hyde and Marinov (2014) further find that experiences with previous protests in a country also make renewed protests much more likely. Klaus and Mitchell (2015) find that underlying grievances can be utilized by political leaders to mobilize supporters based on a claim of fraudulent elections, which is more likely to be successful in the areas where the incumbent is weak. These are also the districts that are more likely to see incumbent violence prior to the election (Fielding n.d.).

Straus (2015) identifies disputed elections as a more general trigger event of atrocities, given the structural conditions that generally are conducive to such outcomes (See Salehyan & Linebarger 2015 for a review). Interestingly, Wilkinson (2004) and more recently Weintraub, Vargas and Flores (2015) find that elections under the shadow of violence tend to favor more hawkish candidates, which in turn might contribute to post-election violence.

Beyond domestic factors, many studies also acknowledge the role of international factors in elections and their outcomes. Pressure from other states has important effect on the

initial likelihood of international reform and the pressure for democratization (e.g., Gleditsch and Ward 2006). Donno (2013) finds that elections in autocracies are more likely to yield democratization, provided there is sufficient pressure on the regime from either domestic or international actors. Beaulieu (2014) finds that election boycotts increase the likelihood of democratic reform when such boycott efforts receive international support. Hyde (2011) argues that international election monitoring can help prevent electoral fraud by making various forms of malpractice more difficult to carry out. Moreover, accepting international monitoring can serve as a signaling device for honest democratizing states that they will conduct fair elections. Conversely, not accepting international monitoring is a strong indication that the government has less than honest intentions with regards to free and fair elections. Beyond their direct effects on fraud taking places, international monitoring may increase the likelihood of riots following elections with fraud by detecting and informing domestic actors about the extent of fraud. Daxecker (2012) finds that the combination of actual fraud and international observers notably increase the number of conflict events, even after matching countries on information on past election fraud and protest events. Hyde and Marinov (2014) also find that fraud claims by international observers has a large effect on the probability of post-election protests. As can be seen in Figure 3, the proportion of elections with international monitoring has grown substantially after the end of the Cold War, to the point where nearly all elections are monitored at the present.

Daxecker (2014) finds that the anticipation of international observers makes pre-election violence more likely. If so, we are clearly looking at a game-like situation where different actors try to optimize their outcome based on expectations about other actors. It is then quite important to understand the foundation of these beliefs.

Figure 3: Proportion of elections with international monitors, based on NELDA
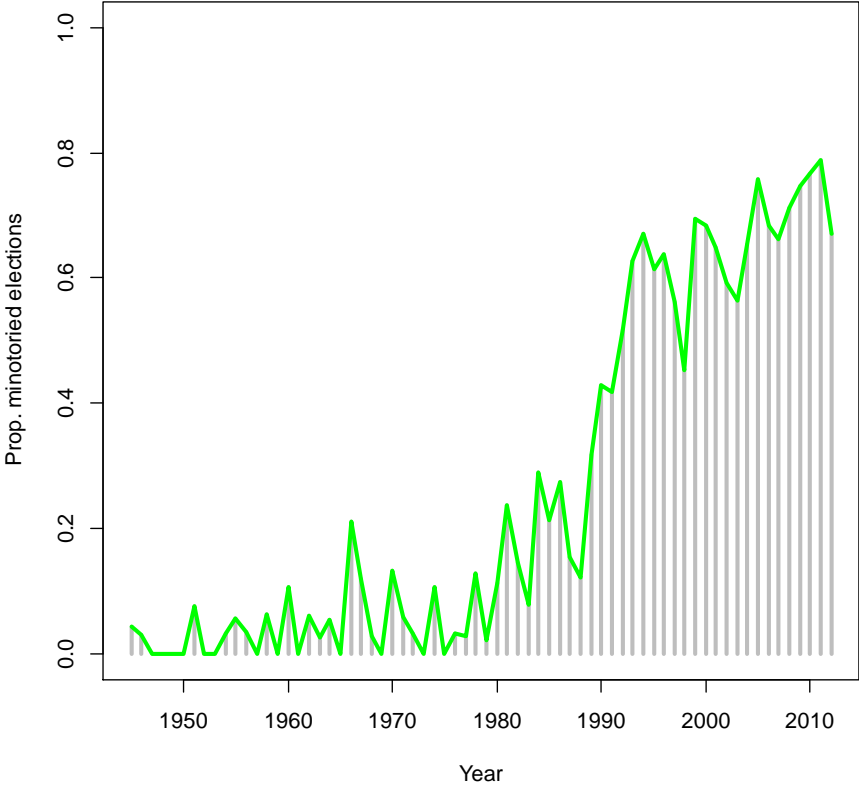
Existing work has in our view taken an overly limited view of the role of international factors in elections of protest, only considering their influence on the incentives of leaders to hold elections when they would otherwise be reluctant to do so and their informational role in motivating protest. We argue that learning from experiences in other countries can play a similar role in informing potential protesters and facilitating collective action. We develop our argument in the next section.

Learning, Emulation, and Collective Action

No matter how justified motivation or outrage may be, all dissent such as election riots involve collective action, and face the usual collective action problems. Even if many individuals sympathize with protests collective action involves a host of coordination problems, information problems, as well as the problem that costs of participation are individual while any benefits are collective.

Contrast to popular opinion, protest rarely emerges spontaneously, but require organization and the ability to coordinate on specific forms and places for dissent. Even initial communication is difficult in a climate of censorship and displays of disloyalty with a regime could be subject to punishment. This makes it difficult to assess the extent of dissatisfaction with others and asses how many people would be willing to participate. Since the costs to individual participants decline with the magnitude of mobilization, many would be happy to participate if they expect participation to be widespread. However, in the absence of better information about feasible prospects for dissent the costs of participation are likely to prevent mobilization (see, e.g., Kuran 1995; Lichbach 1995; Sandler 1992).

Existing research has identified a number of ways in which collective action problems may be overcome. As discussed above, elections can create a very interesting situation, as they offer better prospects for conditions organizing collective action by creating a specific focus for dissent and opportunities for contestation. Practice makes perfect, and mobilization is much more likely when there are existing organizations in place that can take a lead on organizing mobilization, as clearly shown in existing research on post-election protest. The idea of information cascades has often been set forward to explain why demonstrations and

revolutions seems to cluster in time and space, as in the European revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1989 and more recently the Arab Spring (Kuran 1989; Weyland 2011).

These waves can be seen as learning processes, and there is no inherent reason why learning should be limited to events with a country's borders (Myers and Olivier 2008). Thus, observing protesters in one country following fraudulent elections should thus provide valuable cues to the opposition. The opposition or the disgruntled population at large can observe that discontent is widespread in countries perceived to be similar, as seen in the Arab Spring. The specific timing or mode of protest can also be important, and protest following elections can thus be emulated by actors in other countries. Moreover, learning can inspire tactical innovation, so mobilization is not necessarily discouraged by a lack of success if people can find ways to try to overcome challenges faced previously.

Also, the incumbent should also be expected to draw lessons from recent experiences. The presence of post-election riots in the region or recent history and/or demands for international observers should exacerbate the tensions brought on by the uncertainty inherent in elections. Anticipating post-election riots, the incumbent might very well pre-empt these actions with either the state security apparatus or the services of pro-government militias.

Such learning could in principle be global, and the rise of electoral monitoring has by some been interpreted as a global norm that affects all countries alike (see Hyde 2011). However, we believe that neighboring countries are likely to be the most relevant influences. Neighboring countries are more likely to be similar, and despite some claiming that distance is dead in the age of electronic media (see, e.g., Cairncross 2000), in practice the extent of information and perceived relevance become more closely associated with distance as the

volume of information increases (see Goldenberg and Levy 2009 for an analysis of internet links).

Summarizing the discussion, we expect

1. previous post-election riots increase the likelihood of renewed riots;

2. international monitoring increases the likelihood of riots; and

3. riots in neighboring post elections increase the risk of post-election riots.

Research Design

The NAVCO data that we used above pertain to a relatively high level, and the lack of precise start dates make it difficult to identify how they align with election events. As an alternative, we use the NELDA data set (Hyde and Marinov 2012), which contains a wealth of information on elections, their outcomes, and a number of features relevant to our purposes. Our core unit of analysis is the individual election, and we have information on a total of 2,601 elections from 1945 to 2013. In 355 of these, Hyde and Marinov (2012) find evidence of post-election riots. We use their indicator of post-election riots (nelda29) as our dependent variable. Cases coded as "unclear" are assigned a value of 1.

Our core explanatory variable is the presence of election riots in other countries. We measure this by taking a spatial lag over all neighboring countries within 500 kms over the last

500 days. As a result, our spatial lag indicates the proportion of neighborhood countries with post-election riots within spatial and temporal window[1].

We also consider a number of other characteristics about elections likely to be associated with post-election riots. First, given the role of past event in facilitating new riots, we consider past election riots in the country itself the lag[2] of the dependent variable. Second, we consider the presence of international observers, which previous work has found to influence the likelihood of post-election protest. We also consider whether elections are the first multiparty elections (nelda2), or the second multiparty elections, using the previous value of nelda2. In additional test, we also consider whether there were significant concerns over irregularities expressed by observed ahead of the election (nelda11), as well as whether reports indicating fraud where widely available to the domestic public after the elections (nelda29).

The presence of pre-election irregularities can be viewed as an intermediate variable, since there is good reason to believe that government forces will attempt to execute their violent strategies prior to the eventual arrival of international observers.

The likelihood of election protest is also likely to vary by political regime type. Elections are less likely to be subject to fraud or considered illegitimate in democratic regimes than non-democratic regimes. However, it is also plausible that the risk of election protests may be low in particularly autocratic regimes, if these deter collective action through a high likelihood of repression. We include dummy variables for democracies and autocracies (above 6 and -6

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[1] This variable is generated in a two-step process. We first create a country-day dataset where all countries with riots in the past 500 days are represented with a 1 and the opposite is denoted 0. We then calculate the spatial lag of these experiences for each country on every day where there is an election in one of the. See the replication material for more details.

[2] The lag here refers to the previous election in the same country.

respectively on the Polity scale), with anocracies as the reference category (Jaggers and Gurr 1995).

Our main results are based on estimates from logit models, given the binary nature of response and the very probable multiplicative nature of the effects. However, we also present fixed effects OLS/linear probability models to ensure that our results are not driven by other unmeasured differences across the individual countries.

Analysis

Table 1 presents a first set of simple models where we include only the two main existing factors believed to influence election riots – that is past election riots in a country and international monitors that may uncover evidence of fraud – as well as the spatial lag of events in other countries. As can be seen from the Logit estimates for Model 1 we find that all of these are positive and significantly related to post-election riots. Comparing the size of the coefficient suggests that the positive impact of events in other countries actually could exceed that of international observers for states with extensive post-election riots in neighboring countries, consistent with the argument that we have advanced above. Figure 4 provides a coefficient plot, illustrating the standard errors as well as the coefficients. Model 2 in Table 1 indicates that the estimate for the spatial lag remains significant even when introducing country fixed effects, and is over twice the magnitude of the coefficient for international observers.

Table 1: Likelihood of post-election riots

	(1) Logit	(2) FE OLS
Past election riots	1.923***	0.204***
	(0.137)	(0.0208)
Spatial lag of election riots	1.039***	0.0973*
	(0.287)	(0.0422)
Intl. election observers	0.608***	0.0404*
	(0.126)	(0.0166)
Constant	-2.683***	0.0828***
	(0.105)	(0.0108)
Observations	2508	2508

Standard errors in parentheses
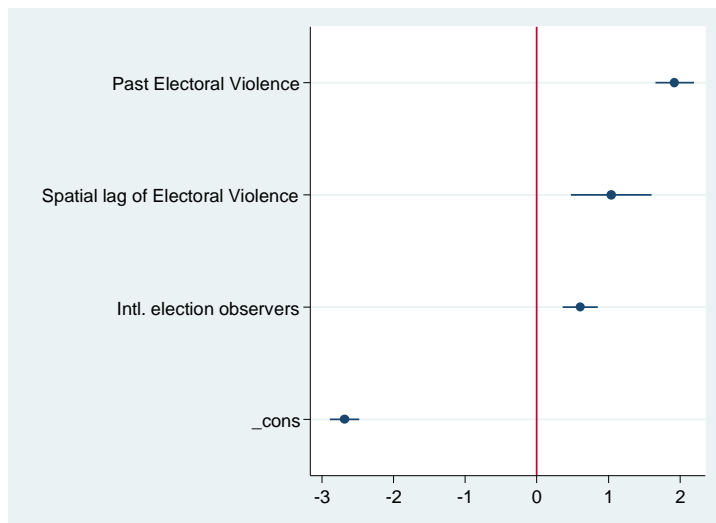$^{+} p < 0.10,\ ^{*} p < 0.05,\ ^{**} p < 0.01,\ ^{***} p < 0.001$

Figure 4: Coefficient plot for Model 1 in Table 1

Table 2 adds a series of other features of elections that may be related to likelihood of post-election riots as well as indicators of regime type. These results suggest that the electoral sequence in of itself does not have a clear and consistent impact, although the negative term for second multi-party elections is significant in the fixed effects model. Both democracies and autocracies are less likely to see election riots, relative to anocracies. However, adding these covariates does not undermined our previous findings with regards to past events, international observers, or the effects of events in other states. The findings are generally substantively similar in the fixed effects model, although the coefficient estimate for international observers is now not significant while the spatial lag of election protest remains significant at 0.05 in a one-tailed test.

Table 2: Likelihood of post-election riots

	(1) Logit	(2) FE OLS
Past electoral riots	1.837***	0.196***
	(0.139)	(0.0208)
Spatial lag of election riots	0.756*	0.0756+
	(0.296)	(0.0424)
Intl. election observers	0.577***	0.0283
	(0.131)	(0.0180)
Autocracy	-0.402*	-0.0860***
	(0.164)	(0.0218)
Democracy	-0.897***	-0.0765***
	(0.152)	(0.0210)
First multiparty elections	0.205	0.00201
	(0.218)	(0.0254)
Second multiparty elections	-0.369	-0.0487*
	(0.236)	(0.0248)
Constant	-2.161***	0.151***
	(0.145)	(0.0180)
Observations	2508	2508

Standard errors in parentheses
$^+ p < 0.10,$ $^* p < 0.05,$ $^{**} p < 0.01,$ $^{***} p < 0.001$

Some may wonder whether the effects of events in other countries on electoral protest are conditional on expected or actual electoral malpractice. The NELDA data does not contain a single direct indicator of electoral fraud, and electoral protest may in principle arise even if

there is not actual electoral fraud (for example through what Collier 2009 calls the sore loser phenomenon). In Table 3 we consider possible conditional effects of the spatial lag for three possible indicators of expected or actual malpractice. The first measure looks an anticipated concerns before the election. The second is a measure of regime type, based on the idea that non-democracies may be more likely to engage in electoral fraud. The third is an indicator of whether there exists reports on electoral fraud that are widely available to the domestic public.

For the first two models we find no evidence of any conditional effects although the potential fraud indicators appear to have independent effects on the likelihood of electoral riots. For the reports we find some evidence of a negative conditional effect. A plausible interpretation of this is that evidence from events elsewhere is important when there are no domestic sources of information (possibly due to suppression), and that added value of information declines as one has more information and evidence on fraud from the country at large. This is largely consistent with our perspective. In sum, we do not find much evidence that conditional effects clearly undermine our inferences.

Table 3: Effects on electoral protest with conditional effects of indicators of fraud

	(1) depvar1	(2) depvar1	(3) depvar1
Past election protest	1.801***	1.826***	1.834***
	(0.140)	(0.139)	(0.156)
Intl. election observers	0.593***	0.648***	0.234^{+}
	(0.128)	(0.127)	(0.138)
Spatial lag of election protest	0.728	1.121*	1.379**
	(0.459)	(0.522)	(0.452)
Pre-election concerns	0.957***		
	(0.173)		
Pre-election concerns x spatial lag	0.110		
	(0.600)		
Democracy		-0.824***	
		(0.180)	
Non-democracy x spatial lag		-0.438	
		(0.626)	
Fraud reports available			2.506***
			(0.192)
Fraud reports x spatial lag			-1.248*
			(0.624)
Constant	-3.101***	-2.339***	-3.559***
	(0.140)	(0.124)	(0.153)
Observations	2508	2508	2508

Standard errors in parentheses
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Based on Model 3, Table 3 we estimate that the probability of electoral protests in a country with no prior experiences and no fraud reports available but with the presence of recent electoral protests in the neighborhood is about 13.2% with a 95% confidence interval between 6.5% and 22.3%. This is quite a large number. If we imagine a virgin neighborhood consisting of six countries and let one of them have post-election protests, then there is about 58% probability that at least one neighbor also will experience protests in the next election, with a confidence interval between 33% and 78%.

If we add reports of fraud to this scenario, the estimated risk jumps up to 34.1% (confidence interval between 19.8% and 49.8%). If we also add previous experiences of post-election protests, the probability is estimated at 75.4% (confidence interval between 60.3% and 86.7%).

Post-election protests must therefore be seen as highly contagious in time and space, to the extent that we must ask what stops the spread of such events. Table 2 indicates that liberal democracy is a strong antidote, particularly after the first election cycle.

Our spatial and temporal window of 500 km and 500 days may be seen as somewhat arbitrary. Other relevant alternative linkages could include structural similarity between more distance countries and longer lags in time.

Conclusions

We find previous election riots influence the likelihood of new election riots, consistent with our claims learning from events elsewhere can play an important role in mobilizing election protest, especially under conditions of widespread uncertainty.

The presence of international observers does not reduce the risk of protests, which in part might be due to the fact that these observers are present because the elections are expected to produce trouble, and in part might be because the observers uncover irregularities that otherwise would have been underreported.

Recent experiences of protests in the neighborhood does increase the risk of protest in a country provided that this country does not have previous experiences of such riots. This points in the direction of a mechanism whereby collective action problems are overcome through lessons learned from similar experiences in other countries.

Based on these results, we would not be surprised if the recent erosion of democracy in countries like Hungary and Turkey will be followed by a wave of electoral unrest.

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