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Can elections reinforce autocratic power? An analysis of the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections under authoritarian rule.

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Abstract

Electoral practice has long since been associated with the well established tenets of democracy. However, in the modern world elections are practiced across the globe in countries which have little or none of the recognisable institutions or practices which would be classically associated with democracies. For many decades in an effort to become more sophisticated elections, among other things, have been adopted by autocratic leaders so as to disguise the inner workings of their regimes and shield them from scrutiny. Elections have become multiuse tools which perform a number of useful functions. The purpose of this study is to analyse how effective elections are in conjuring regime stability. This study seeks to show the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections and the reasons behind them. This will be achieved initially through definition and the exposition of key theoretical groundwork and then through an analysis of four separate case studies: Mexico, Kenya, Singapore and Belarus.

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Introduction

This project asks the question of whether elections can be used as a reliable method for an authoritarian executive to gain a firmer grip on power. With the aid of four case studies; Kenya, Mexico, Singapore and Belarus this project will identify, explain and analyse the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections in non-democratic countries.

There is great diversity between modern authoritarian states and they are heterogeneous (Svolik: 2012). This, in turn, means that non-democratic elections can take a different shape and hold a different meaning in each country that they are implemented. Since before the end of the Cold War in 1991 a number of scholars have strived to better understand the determinant factors behind the persistence of authoritarianism. In order to better understand the mechanisms behind the success in these non-democratic countries it is important to look at the tools they use to secure stability. The main objective of this project is to understand how elections are used, in some cases skilfully, as a political instrument and their effectiveness in providing legitimation and stabilisation for autocratic leaders.

Electoral manipulation can take on an almost infinite number of guises, depending on the opportunities which present themselves in the institutional architecture under which elections are carried out and the socio-economic construction of the regime in question. Electoral abuse tends for the most part to be systemic, in the sense that it is deeply ingrained in the political culture of the context in which it occurs, and it involves relatively stable electoral economies based on the exchange of votes for benefits of some type. (Magaloni: 2008)

The purpose of these elections is rarely to give the common people a voice and the outcome is often to serve those already in power. The methods for ensuring victory can range from the

blatantly enforced to the subtly engineered. Electoral manipulation is multifarious in nature but is widely understood to have three predominant forms; the manipulation of institutions, the manipulation of vote choice and the manipulation of the voter and voting (Schedler: 2002).

The manipulation of a pre-established governing framework of elections is often relatively costless to incumbent rulers and if it is implemented carefully it often carries a relatively limited risk to legitimacy. Other forms of manipulation such as the purchase of votes may also result in a relatively low risk to legitimacy in that such acts may often be tolerated or even welcomed by the domestic population, and they are problematic for the external international community to scrutinise (Schedler: 2002). The buying of votes has the added advantage for non-incumbents that no formal political power is required; it can be performed by anyone with sufficient capital and influence. Vote-buying is however costly and requires a lot of time and effort if it is to be successful, this may well be a potential deterrent to many actors. On account of these considerations it is plain that blatant fraud, such as ballot-box rigging, impersonation and the favourable augmentation of the vote-counting process are relatively unattractive methods to secure victory. This is due to the fact that they all carry a very high risk, as they tend to be easily detectable by local and international actors. They can also carry relatively high costs to enact them, as all those who are complicit in such activity typically have to be compensated for their collusion, either directly or in terms of promotion or favourable treatment.

Now that it has been established how regimes might manipulate elections to satisfy their own ends it remains to be established what the content of those ends are. Ultimately regimes use elections to legitimate the regime among the populace also these elections can allow for the

creation of pocket opposition which are semi-competitive, within the regime's control, rather than outside as a non-systemic opposition. This dilutes the support a legitimate opposition may garner in opposition to the established regime. In other cases, where the opposition is not manufactured, there can be control methods in place which gives the opposition a voice, but stops 'short of rotating power or allowing fair elections that would risk their secure tenure in office' (Brownlee, 2007: 6).

Elections can also be used as a method to test new political tactics in order to uneven the electoral playing field further (Kratsev and Holmes, 2012: 36-38). Furthermore, if regimes do not use elections to learn or test out new tactics then they may not be able to deal with civic unrest or demonstrators in the future. By that measure elections also allow the regime to ascertain how effective regional elites are and their proficiency in a number of key areas. If they cannot return victory for the ruling party then they are ineffectual and need replacing

The principle function of the first part of my dissertation will be definition. This groundwork allows the further conceptual discussion in this paper to take place and it is necessary so the examples presented later on have context. Once the concepts have been established this paper will then move to introduce case studies where this theoretical grounding is given real world application.

Methodology, Aims and Approaches

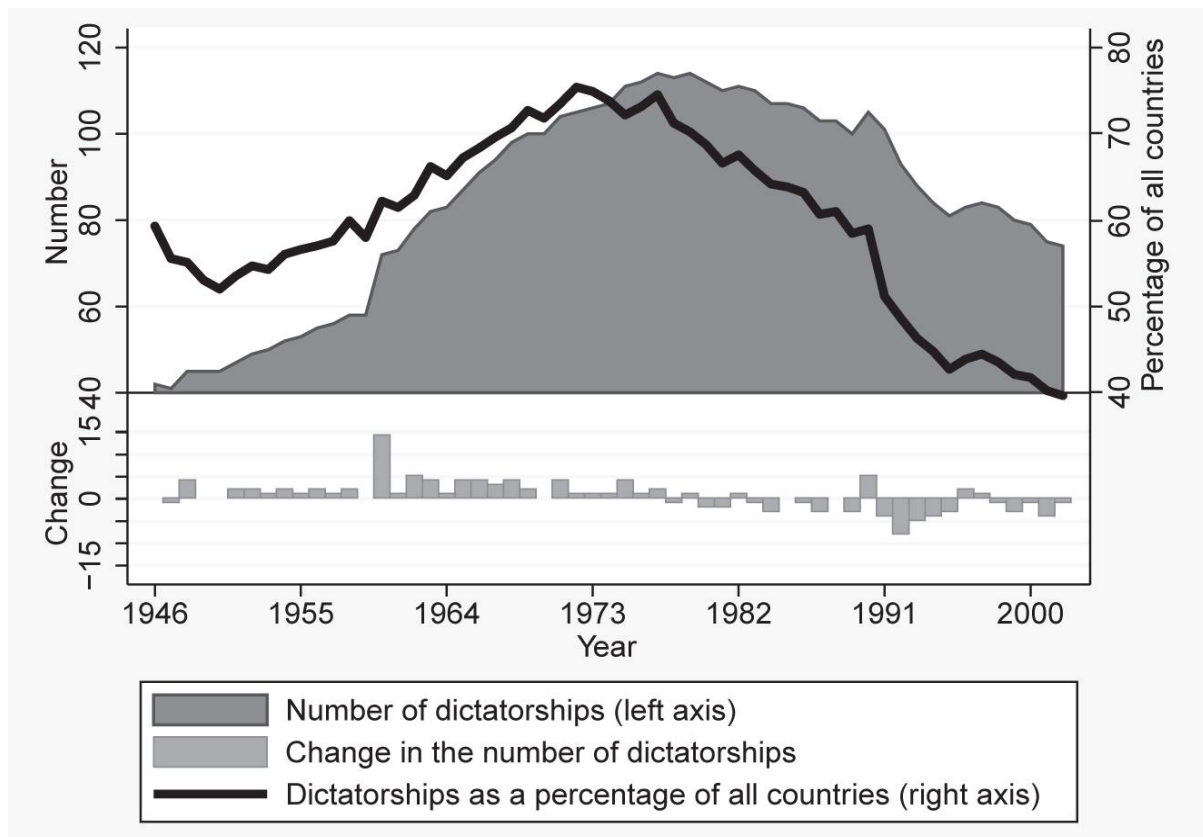
0.1 Impartial Spectator

This dissertation adopts a predominantly qualitative approach but makes use of some quantitative data in the form of graphs. It is hotly contested (Bryman, 2007) whether or not both methods are appropriate to be used in combination in the same study but it seems that in this case that the data complements the research focus. The central research focus of this project is the case studies which will be analysed through an impartial spectator model so as to remove bias and ensure the integrity of this study. It has been noted by many scholars that the impartial spectator model is useful when considering deliberation and the political behaviour of others (Fleischaker, 2015). Politics has an undeniable moral dimension; this means that when events are considered historically they are given a certain moral value which can influence how they are viewed. This morality, even though it is of vital importance to human life, can get in the way of the impartial and unbiased reporting of the truth. For instance, the moral view which I may project onto the world has developed through years of western influence and so is likely to be at odds with a moral view which has developed elsewhere in the world. This disparity between the moral codes of people globally highlights the importance of impartiality when considering academic work.

The impartial spectator model which this dissertation uses of makes an attempt at safeguarding the truth by approaching social sciences in a similar way to empirical science. It is the simple and effective method of separating, as far as possible, rhetoric from argument. What this means is that the information presented in this dissertation has been selected without attaching any moral claims. It is information selected for the sole purpose of demonstrating the effectiveness of elections as a tool for stability.

0.2 Country Selection

Figure 1.1: The number and change in the number of Dictatorships 1946-2008.



From Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 25.

This graph shows that around forty per cent of the countries in the modern world today remain autocratic and so there was a wide list of prospective candidates to choose from. The case studies presented in this paper have been selected for a number of specific reasons which will be discussed in this section and will be further developed in the rationale section of each chapter.

In addition, there are also a number of general reasons which can be discussed in this section.

Firstly, they were chosen because they are different countries from different parts of the world and so hopefully this allows this dissertation to draw conclusions which have global relevance. In order to exclude regional specific factors and the factor of contagion it was

necessary to choose countries which were several land borders apart. Given this some historical and geopolitical factors can also be immediately dismissed. This renders the selection to be primarily focused on country specific factors which excludes any coincidental similarities between cases. This is helpful because it ensures that this study is fully focused on the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections in each individual case. The main aim of this study is to illustrate, with the help of case studies, that elections under authoritarian rule can have stabilising and destabilising effects and explore the reasons for these different effects.

With the example of Mexico this paper seeks to show how elections can offer stability and legitimisation for authoritarian leaders. The Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) remained in power for more than 80 years only losing in 2000 when the Presidency was ceded to an opposition candidate. During the last half-century of its rule, the PRI selected a new leader every six years. In the case of Mexico, the regular reselection of leaders was vital for regime stability and survival.

The example of Kenya seeks to illustrate the opposite and show how elections and electoral outcomes can have a negative influence on regime stability. President Daniel arap Moi held power from 1978 to 2002, five years after Moi left government the 2007 elections in Kenya marked a period of great instability.

The example of Singapore will further elucidate the stabilising effects which elections can have. Since 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) has sanctioned more elections than any other country in south-east Asia and they control 83 of the 89 seats in the Parliament of Singapore. The regular call for elections has been vital in ensuring the stability and success of the regime.

The case study of Belarus seeks to explore the influence of external factors, such as the foreign policy of Russia, on the outcome and effects of elections. The 2006 presidential elections are of particular interest due to the fact the opposition contested the election after the ten years of dictatorial rule under Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

It can be seen that two case studies, Mexico and Singapore, are instances where elections have been used to bolster the support of their respective regimes. It can also be seen that the other two case studies, Kenya and Belarus, are instances where elections have not been successful in producing either regime legitimacy or stability. This even split is intended so the conclusion can draw on a balanced body of evidence and judge the reasons behind the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections under authoritarian rule.

1: Conceptual Context

1.1 Classical and Non-Classical Elections

Elections have been as an indicator of democratic practice and have been argued as being the first step of the liberalising process towards democratisation in countries regarded as non-democracies (Lindberg 2006, Lindberg 2009). The principle function of elections in democracies is to facilitate an agreed, smooth transition between one government and another based on a majority or plurality of votes. Guy Hermet makes a neat distinction between classical and non-classical elections in his 1978 article: 'State-Controlled Elections: A Framework,' from the position of voter he states where there is a difference in opportunity. Meaning that in classical elections the voter has a host of entitlements and opportunities that would not be afforded to their counterparts in a non-classical election.

Firstly, voters participating in 'free' elections are entitled to registration, secondly they have a right to cast their ballot free from hindrance. Thirdly they have a right to vote without being segregated into categories such as along the lines of ethnicity, education or wealth. Fourthly they have the right to decide how to vote, or not to vote, without any influence from others. Lastly and crucially, voters participating in free elections have a right to expect that their ballot will be counted and reported accurately. Contravening one of these five conditions renders an election 'restricted', 'non-classical' and authoritarian. One will immediately notice when considering non-democratic elections that they don't always have a clear defined purpose or function due to this absence of the established tenets of democracy.

Hermet (1978, 13-17) states that elections are signs of good conduct to the 'outside' world and that electoral legitimation is a political resource of the most importance where national unity is fragile. Elections constitute the most efficient method for promoting a nationwide

message which unifies among several key cleavages such as the rural and urban populations, centre and periphery, the affluent and the less affluent and across religious or ethnic divides. Furthermore, the purpose of elections lends itself to a number of interpretations and so appeases across the social divide. Crucially elections allow a formal and apparently consensual tie between the governors and the governed.

1.2 Theory of Autocratic Stability

Gerschewski (2013) offers a theory of autocratic stability which seeks to expound why some regimes survive and others don't. Co-optation, legitimation and repression were identified as the three pillars of autocratic stability. Furthermore, Tolstrup (2015) offers a theoretical checklist pointing out the factors which authoritarian leaders must recognise if elections are to be used as a successful stabilising tool. First elections should be won by a comfortable margin signalling the strength of the regime which could result in the disillusionment of political opposition. Secondly, the incumbent must fight to break up the opposition and keep it weak, potentially using insiders to fragment it. Thirdly the elite core of your support must be deterred from defection and any internal challengers dealt with. Fourthly, the incumbent must be prepared to put into place coercive or repressive methods to cease the popular mobilisation of people and to dissolve demonstrations. Lastly, the incumbent must be able to resist external criticism and democratising pressure.

1.3 Typology of Authoritarian Regimes

The importance of Barbara Geddes 1999 article: 'What do we know about democratisation after 20 years?' to the study of authoritarianism is considerable. Before it was written there was a generally held view was that countries that aren't yet democratic were all on course to democratisation. Even though some countries may be going at different speeds it was

accepted that in the end they would end up a recognisable democracy. Geddes (1999) viewed these countries as non-transitional regime types rather than prospective democracies. This allowed Geddes to expose the construction of these different authoritarian regimes. Geddes (1999) classified these regime types by proposing a tripartite typology which is specifically aimed at describing the various shapes which modern authoritarian states take, based on the question of who the ruling entity is.

Since Geddes' paper was published there have been other scholars such as Hadenius and Teorell (2007), Morse (2012) and Svobik (2012) who have tried to make advancements on Geddes original typology. Hadenius and Teorell note that Geddes omitted so called 'electoral' or 'competitive' (Levitsky and Way: 2010) autocracies and include them in an improved typology. Electoral regimes constitute a heterogeneous set of countries, each of which holds popular elections for parliament or executive office. Among electoral regimes, there are three broad types: the no-party regime, the one-party regime, and the limited multiparty regime. Elections are held in no-party regimes but all political parties, or at least candidates representing a party, are prohibited. Elections in such regimes may display an element of competition, but only among individual candidates. (Hadenius and Teorell: 2007)

It should be noted that however clear the distinction may be made theoretically, real case study examples do not always fit cleanly into one category or the other. There tends to be a lot of overlapping which results in most countries being a hybrid of two or more of the three types. Instead of three fixed regimes types it is better to understand Geddes' typology as various modes of rule (Brooker: 2014).

2: Case Study Mexico

With the use of this example this paper seeks to show how elections can offer stability and legitimation for authoritarian leaders. In the case of Mexico, the regular reselection of leaders and regular elections enhanced the chances of regime survival and bolstered their popular support. The Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) remained in power for more than 70 years only losing in 2000 when the Presidency was ceded to an opposition candidate. During the last half-century of its rule, the PRI selected a new leader every six years.

Beatrice Magaloni has done considerable academic work on Mexico and the survival of the PRI in the twentieth century. Her 2006 book 'Voting for Autocracy, Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise' essentially catalogues the seventy-one years, from 1929 until 2000, that the Revolutionary Institutional Party maintained power. It is motivated by two central research questions. It asks initially what the mechanisms of authoritarian survival and demise are and then asks under which conditions an autocratic incumbent may be willing to peacefully concede power when it loses an election.

The pre-existing scholarly work on this topic focussed on the dynamics of hegemonic party survival and democratic transition without advancing a theoretical explanation. Magaloni provides one comprehensive framework, Hegemonic Party Autocracy (HPA), and uses it to explain the nature of the opposition coordination dilemma, the basis of mass voter support for the hegemonic party and most importantly behavioural incentives of elites to support and remain loyal to the ruling regime (Duquette, 2007). Magaloni (2006) defines HPA as a 'system in which one political party remains in office uninterruptedly under semi-authoritarian conditions while holding regular multiparty elections' in which the opposition parties engage in regular participation through electoral institutions (p. 32).

Magaloni uncovers a considerable amount about the electoral practice in Mexico and how the elite in the PRI secured victory and ensured stability. The PRI provides an example of how informal institutions, such as clientelism, can be used to create legitimacy and stability for a political body. It is shown that in order to secure a large electoral base the PRI simultaneously promoted state-wide industrialisation and created a poverty trap. The peasants were unable to rise out of this poverty due to the constructed permanent land reforms which restricted their rights to land ownership. Without property rights these peasants were unable to become independent or successful farmers and businessmen. Thus they became dependent on cash hand-outs from the state to provide for them. Not only did the PRI manipulate the political landscape by providing a huge number of jobs and opportunities for supporters but also used patronage against unions and other possible rivals in an effort to quell any opposition. (Magaloni: 2006). It can be seen from this case that elections alone are not absolutely effective one way or the other in conjuring regime stability. These elections are deemed effective or not based on how well they are used and not by another objective standard.

3: Case Study Kenya

With the example of Kenya, this paper seeks to show how elections and electoral outcomes can have a negative influence on regime stability. President Daniel arap Moi remained in power from 1978 to 2002, five years after Moi left government the 2007 elections in Kenya marked a period of great instability. After a contentious and bitterly fought campaign between the incumbent Mwai Kibaki and the challenger Raila Odinga, Kibaki was proclaimed the winner of Kenya's presidential election on December 29, 2007 despite widespread reports of vote-rigging. The announcement sparked violent protests that quickly transformed into ethnic clashes, and led to a state of emergency that virtually shut down roads and markets (Dupas and Robinson 2012). Due to the over-reliance during the Moi era on informal institutions like clientelism and the resulting proliferation of other social disparities there is a host of negative implications which have a great impact on future electoral outcomes.

4: Case Study Singapore

With the case study of Singapore this paper seeks to show how non-democratic elections can be used to gain support and regime legitimacy resulting in stability. Since 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) has sanctioned more elections than any other country in south-east Asia. Despite widespread claims of ballot manipulation and polling day misconduct, most citizens see the ruling party at the centre of the regime as legitimate. The lack of free and fair electoral practice has been shown to have very few consequences for the PAP's legitimacy (Chang 2013). In this instance elections are an effective stabilising tool which have little, if any, negative impact on the reputation of the regime.

5: Case Study Belarus

With the example of Belarus this paper seeks to explore the influence of external factors on the outcome and effect of elections. Additionally, how these external factors should be considered in further study of the subject of non-democratic elections will also be discussed. The 2006 presidential elections are of particular interest due to the fact the opposition contested the election after the ten years of dictatorial rule under Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

During the Belarusian presidential election of 2006, most opposition factions suffered from the arrest of prominent leaders (Marples, 2006: 352). The Belarusian regime controlled media access using it to get its message across and limiting opposition voices (Marples, 2006: 358; Forbrig et al, 2006: 11). Collectively these things have made elections highly uncompetitive (Silitski, 2006: 21). It would be impossible to meaningfully discuss the political landscape in Belarus without mentioning the continued influence of Russia. Since the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russia, understandably, has had a keen interest in the goings on in former soviet states. It was hoped that this would mark a period of democratic change for the country but with the ‘black knight elections bolstering’ (Tolstrup, 2015) of Russia, Lukashenka held on to power.

Conclusion

This study has explored the stabilising and destabilising effects of elections in non-democratic countries and the reasons behind them. Initially space was afforded to the exposition of a conceptual distinction between classical, democratic, and non-classical, undemocratic, elections. With this in place the study then sought to offer an account of regime stability so as to define the term remove any ambiguity and narrow the focus of this dissertation. A distinction between the various modes of rule which authoritarian states take was then necessary so as to provide a context for the case studies discussed in the later part of the study. The example of Mexico showed how regular reselection of leaders was vital to the success of the regime and the stability which was conjured through the use of elections was unachievable by any other means. The case study of Kenya then showed the negative influence which elections can have on the stability of a regime, especially one which shows many traits of a personalist regime. The example of Singapore clearly highlighted that the frequent calling of elections allowed the ruling executive to maintain a tight grip on the political landscape and eradicate any opposition. Lastly the case study of Belarus showed the emphasis which must be put on the influence of external factors in assessing the reasons behind instability or stability which has been stimulated by an election or electoral outcome. Conclusively this dissertation has argued that elections can reinforce autocratic power in certain circumstances and that elections do not have an absolute effectiveness in producing a particular outcomes.

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