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Electoral authoritarianism and political unrest

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, elections and parties have become common features of most authoritarian regimes. While recent research on hybrid regimes has often focused on how dictators use these nominally democratic institutions to maintain their non-democratic rule, there is reason to suspect that electoral authoritarianism may pose particular threats to a regime's stability. Theories of collective behaviour suggest that electoral authoritarian regimes might face higher levels of anti-regime mobilization since parties and elections can help regime opponents overcome collective action problems and coordinate their efforts to challenge incumbents. An analysis of 136 authoritarian regimes over the last several decades indicates that regimes that hold nominally competitive elections are characterized by higher levels of political unrest than those with no elections. Furthermore, election years serve as a focal point for mobilizing anti-regime activity. These findings imply that authoritarian rulers face a trade-off when instituting a system of regular elections; while legislatures, parties and elections provide numerous benefits to incumbents, they also increase the frequency of anti-regime protests and other disruptive, mass political action.

Keywords

Authoritarianism, protest, elections, competitive authoritarianism, democratization

Introduction

In recent decades, elections have become a common feature of many authoritarian regimes. Most non-democratic polities now have some form of multiparty electoral system and routinely hold national elections for various offices (Schedler, 2002). Despite a good deal of theorizing, there is still no consensus on what effects, if any, electoral politics have on stability and survival of authoritarian regimes.[1] While earlier scholars have contended that electoral authoritarian regimes are inherently unstable due to their mix of democratic and authoritarian institutions (Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986), more recent work has highlighted how dictators use elections to remain in power by manipulating electoral institutions in order to gain

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legitimacy and co-opt opposition leaders (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007a, 2007b; Remmer, 1999). But in addition to helping autocrats pursue their goals, parties and elections may increase the chances that a regime faces mass political dissent. Political parties and elective offices give opposition leaders vehicles and venues to organize protest, and elections marked by fraud and manipulation have led to mass outrage. In some cases it is reasonable to suspect that anti-regime activists might use the occasion of elections to coordinate activities across various groups. Are electoral institutions and elections themselves associated with more mass protest and instability in non-democracies?

The present study explores the potential link between electoral authoritarianism and political unrest. Drawing on the literature on hybrid regimes and democratization as well as work on electoral protest, it provides an explanation for why electoral authoritarian regimes may face higher average levels of political unrest. Political parties provide structures for mobilizing not only electoral challenges but also mass protest and other anti-regime activity. Elections themselves may serve as focal points for collective action, providing greater incentives for individuals to openly challenge the incumbent regime. The empirical analysis below demonstrates that electoral authoritarian regimes face higher average levels of political unrest. Furthermore, election years are characterized by higher levels of anti-regime mobilization, indicating that not only the adoption but also the repetition of elections is associated with inceased protest.[2]

When dictators hold elections there is likely always manipulation at some level – some candidates or parties may be barred from participating (others might boycott), media outlets may be censored or, worse, may be propaganda organizations for the incumbent, or the results of elections could be entirely fabricated. As has been seen over the last decade, the result of this manipulation can sometimes be outrage, expressed as mass dissent or political unrest. Perceived electoral fraud has been the catalyst for mass anti-regime protest that has, in some cases, toppled regimes (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; Tucker, 2007). The colour revolutions that occurred in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine in the early 2000s were all spurred by elections that appeared to be deeply flawed. Similarly, Iran erupted in anti-regime protest following the elections of 2009, leading to violent crackdowns by government militias, and some months later dictators in Egypt and Tunisia (who relied on rigged elections to legitimize their rule) were brought down as a wave of mass protest swept across North Africa and the Middle East.

Even without widespread outrage over fraud, electoral institutions and the occasion of elections themselves may increase the likelihood of anti-regime mobilization. Parties and the networks that they facilitate can be co-opted by opposition activists and used to organize mass dissent. Elections themselves can help regime opponents coordinate their activities at particular times. Even the decision to institute elections might embolden activists who view the move as a sign of weakness on the part of incumbents.

The literature on hybrid regimes has largely ignored the effects that electoral institutions and electoral participation can have on other forms of mass participation in non-democracies. In doing so, the potentially destabilizing effects of adopting nominally democratic electoral institutions has been overlooked. The analysis presented here suggests that while electoral authoritarianism may offer certain benefits to dictators, it also carries significant costs in terms of the mobilization of mass resistance to the policies of the regime. This finding complements studies that examine the regime-sustaining impact of authoritarian elections and offers some support to earlier work which argued that unfree elections could destabilize authoritarian regimes. Additionally, this analysis builds upon a growing body of research on protest participation in non-democracies (for example, see Almeida, 2008), and authoritarian elections and democratization (Brownlee, 2009; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Lindberg, 2006a; Schedler, 2009).

Elections and protest

A positive association between authoritarian elections and political unrest has been suggested in prior theoretical studies of elections in authoritarian regimes. First, Tucker (2007), applying a collective action framework, argues that mobilization is spurred by electoral fraud. Specifically, he asserts that instances of electoral fraud in authoritarian regimes serve to both increase the benefits and decrease the costs of protest participation.[3] Second, recent work on authoritarian elections and democratization has suggested that the institution and repetition of elections in non-democracies may alter a society's political culture and political institutions in ways that increase the probability of regime liberalization (Lindberg, 2006a, 2006b). The same mechanisms that are expected to drive greater democratization also imply an increase in the level of political unrest that a regime faces. Finally, political process theory, developed in political sociology, suggests that giving citizens new ways to express their opinions to and about the government leads to more protest mobilization.

Electoral authoritarianism

Authoritarian regimes can be classified in a number of ways. Perhaps most well-known is Geddes' (1999) typology of regimes which relies upon an autocrat's sources of political power. Recently, scholars have offered alternative typologies that explicitly address the variation in electoral competitiveness across non-democracies (Brownlee, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002). The latter provide the distinction necessary to examine the question motivating this study.

Levitsky and Way (2002) offer a typology of authoritarian regimes by degree of electoral competition allowed. Specifically, they first divide all non-democratic regimes into two categories, *Closed* regimes and *Electoral* regimes. The latter are those dictatorships that provide for some multiparty polling, albeit tightly controlled. *Closed* regimes on the other hand are those which either provide for no elections whatsoever, or only allow limited involvement in elections in which all or all but one party are explicitly banned. *Electoral* regimes are then subdivided into *Competitive* and *Hegemonic* regimes, in order to distinguish between the differences in degree of competition that exist in those cases where minimally contested elections do occur. Some examples of the different regime-types include the following:

Competitive: Indonesia and Mexico until the late 1990s, and Uganda.

Hegemonic: Egypt under Mubarak, Iran, and Singapore.

Closed: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Chile under Pinochet.

Since this study is primarily interested in the differences between regimes that hold and do not hold minimally competitive elections, the *Electoral–Closed* distinction will be the focus of the theoretical and empirical presentation below.

Many *Electoral* regimes have seen a good deal of large-scale protest mobilization.

Why elections?

Holding elections is costly. First, there are the direct costs of establishing the infrastructure necessary to allow citizens to cast a ballot (polling places, staff and ballots). More importantly, elections in non-democracies may provide the opposition with a venue to challenge and possibly unseat

incumbents. Given the risks involved and the seeming incongruence of representative institutions, what explains the prevalence of Electoral authoritarianism?

The literature on political institutions under authoritarian rule has offered several compelling and complementary explanations. These explanations frequently point to how ruling parties and elections help non-democratic leaders stay in power by reducing the risk of coups (Geddes, 2005; Lehoucq and Perez-Linan, 2013), ensuring the cooperation/cooptation of potential rivals (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Lust-Okar, 2005; Svolik, 2012), or maintaining good relations with international allies and benefactors (Levitsky and Way, 2010). For example, although winning a rigged election might not be an informative signal of a dictator's popularity, it can be an indication of the regime's ability to mobilize its supporters, lessening the incentive to join a coup aimed at unseating an incumbent (Geddes, 2005; Lehoucq and Perez-Linan, 2013). Alternatively, party or coalition positions may be distributed strategically in order to co-opt some opposition groups and isolate others, thereby postponing potential threats to the regime (Lust-Okar, 2005).

Institutional inertia may also be a factor in the decision to maintain electoral competition in a non-democratic setting. Many dictators inherit parties and electoral systems from democratic regimes that preceded them. In some cases the electoral process is suspended entirely, as was the situation in Chile after the coup by Augusto Pinochet. But in others dictators chose to continue elections, even including sanctioned opposition parties and coalitions, as in Brazil following its return to military rule in the 1960s; Mainwaring (1988) notes that the choice to continue multiparty polling in Brazil was driven by the malleability of existing parties and the understanding that ending elections would reduce the legitimacy of the regime.

Costs and benefits of mobilizing

Tucker (2007) asserts that fraudulent elections can bring about more protest by changing the cost–benefit calculation of anti-regime activists. He argues that citizens in authoritarian regimes face a collective action problem; they would like to overthrow (or destabilize) their government but the individual costs of engaging in protest against a repressive regime are too high to make participation individually rational (Tucker, 2007). Instances of electoral fraud help to solve this collective action problem. Higher expected turnout at protests following fraudulent elections reduces the individual cost of participating by reducing the risk that any single individual becomes the target of state repression. Electoral fraud also increases the expected benefit of mass collective action because if protestors succeed in forcing the elections to be overturned, a meaningful transition of power may very well take place. By changing the individual-level, cost–benefit analysis of regime opponents, instances of electoral fraud act as focal points that help aggrieved citizens in an undemocratic regime to overcome their collective action problem and engage in protest against their government.

Tucker's application of the collective action framework to the coloured revolutions can be extended to authoritarian elections more generally, regardless of perceived instances of fraud. When dictators hold elections, those elections can still act as focal points for citizens to overcome their collective action problem. If the elections include elements of an opposition (they are multiparty), then there is good reason to expect that citizens who oppose the regime will organize and potentially participate outside of the electoral arena. This expected increase in participation could then be expected to decrease the (expected) costs of protesting as discussed above. Also, the election need not be fraudulent in order to increase the expected benefit of protest. If opposition parties are included then protest can still potentially lead to a meaningful transition of power, as Howard and Roessler (2006) point out:

> Protest may weaken the legitimacy of the incumbent and provide signals to the electorate that the incumbent is vulnerable to defeat. Moreover, the more motivated and mobilized the electorate, the more likely people are to vote in the elections, whereas a demoralized and apathetic citizenry will probably not bother participating in the electoral process. In cases of extremely high mobilization, sustained protest may force an autocratic incumbent to step down, as occurred in Indonesia in 1998 and Peru in 2000. (Howard and Roessler, 2006: 372)

Thus, elections can be expected to have the effect of increasing the expected benefits of protest. Extending Tucker's logic to all authoritarian elections leads to the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** In authoritarian regimes, election years should see higher levels of political unrest, on average, than non-election years.

Mechanisms and mobilization

Lindberg (2006a, 2006b) suggests several mechanisms that might lead to greater liberalization in regimes that adopt nominally democratic electoral institutions. The mechanisms include: (1) changes in how citizens view themselves in relation to the government; (2) denser networks among political activists; and (3) new roles for existing institutions that may promote individual liberties and reduce the viability of repressive responses to mass unrest. Lindberg argues that these are potential processes that may drive regime liberalization but each of these also has direct implications for aggregate levels of political unrest.

Elections and culture

Citizens may view their relationship to state authority differently in authoritarian regimes that have adopted nominally democratic electoral institutions, as opposed to those that have not. Lindberg (2006a) argues that when dictators offer individuals the opportunity to go to the polls, even in tightly controlled elections, citizens can begin to see their role in the polity as more than simply subjects of the autocrat. Holding elections means that individuals are being asked to participate in decisions concerning either the policy or the leadership of the government (generally the latter). Even if the election is simply a referendum on the incumbents, and even if it is marked by fraud, the simple fact that citizens are offered some participatory role may foster the belief that the regime ought to be accountable to the people. The role that citizens see for themselves in electoral authoritarian regimes should then be less one of a subject and more one of a citizen or voter.

It is reasonable to expect that individuals are easier to mobilize when they already view a participatory role for themselves in the political game. Elections serve to foster precisely those kinds of beliefs, and so it makes sense to expect that there is more mass mobilization in authoritarian regimes that hold elections than in those that do not. Elections may, in and of themselves, cause a shift in the political culture that increases the potential for mass, anti-regime activity.

Networks and organizations

Electoral and closed (non-electoral) authoritarian regimes should also differ in the density of political communication networks and the number of political organizations. The institution of elections leads to a proliferation in the number of organized political groups in a society, at least where there is minimal respect for freedom of association. Relatedly, elections should lead to more political communication both within and between various organizations as new electoral opportunities

present themselves. Both of these phenomena can be expected to lower the costs of recruiting and mobilizing political activists, and coordinating mass activity like protests and strikes. With the emergence of interest groups and parties the ability of challengers to organize mass opposition to the regime increases, driving up the potential for mass, anti-regime mobilization. As a result, all else being equal, higher levels of political unrest in electoral authoritarian regimes than in closed regimes would be expected.

The role of existing institutions

Lindberg (2006a) suggests that institutions that predated the adoption of elections may take on new roles in electoral authoritarian regimes. Particularly, security forces or the military may adopt a new role as protectors of individual civil liberties in order to advance their own standing in society or gain popular support. Functionally, this means that they could become less willing to engage in violent, large-scale acts of repression.[4] Greater restraint on the part of security forces means less (though certainly non-trivial) risk associated with mass anti-regime mobilization. The decrease in the expected costs of challenging the regime means that more political unrest on average in electoral authoritarian regimes than in closed regimes would be expected.

Political process theory

Political process/opportunity theory states broadly that mobilization is affected by the political context in which it occurs (McCarthy, McAdam and Zald, 1996; Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1988). Scholars have theoretically and empirically evaluated the impact that various contextual factors have on social movement mobilization, activity, and success (McCarthy, McAdam and Zald, 1996; Meyer, 2004; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Most of this work has been in the context of the United States of America and Western Europe, with a few notable applications to authoritarian settings (see Almeida, 2008; Schock, 1999). But the political opportunity framework and its findings should be applicable to the examination of mobilization in authoritarian regimes more broadly, as long as certain caveats are taken into account, especially the increased likelihood of state repression.

Political process theory asserts that openings in the political opportunity structure are positively associated with mobilization (Eisinger, 1973; Kitschelt, 1986; McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1988; Tilly, 1978). The emergence of elections and parties is an example of such an opening, the predicted effects of which follow similar logic to some of the mechanisms Lindberg proposes. Activists can use the political organizations and networks generated by political parties to increase all kinds of anti-regime activity. Furthermore, some regime opponents may be emboldened by the opening of the political sphere to even ephemeral competition, as it could be taken as a sign of weakness on the part of incumbents.

Taken together, political process theory and the mechanisms discussed above suggest a second hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2:** Regimes that have instituted a system of multiparty elections will face more political unrest, on average, than regimes that have not.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predict more political unrest in electoral authoritarian regimes than in fully closed regimes and more political unrest in regime-years in which elections were held than in non-election years. This question is quite pertinent given the relationship between political unrest and regime breakdown[5] and the fact that in recent decades most authoritarian regimes have implemented some form of competitive electoral process.

Elections and protest in the Philippines

The Philippines' electoral authoritarian experience under Ferdinand Marcos demonstrates how elections can lead to higher levels of anti-regime protest. After declaring martial law in 1972, Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines for over a decade and a half. Throughout his stay in power, Marcos held elections in an attempt to legitimize his rule and ensured his victories through a combination of widespread electoral fraud and repression. Opponents successfully used these elections, allegations of electoral malfeasance, and violence toward opposition leaders to mobilize mass protest against the regime (see Lim, 2011).

The 1978 legislative elections provided an opportunity for a newly formed, pro-Marcos political party (KBL) to take control of the National Assembly, providing him with a legislative ally and legitimating his stay in power. Regime opponents saw the election as an opportunity to organize and challenge the dictator; different segments of society from the clergy to labour and student groups joined an electoral coalition to challenge the incumbent party. Opposition forces also used the occasion of the election to protest against Marcos' rule in the streets of the capital. Supporters of imprisoned opposition leader Benigno Aquino planned a short, noise-making protest on the eve of the election that grew into an hours-long demonstration of broad opposition to the Marcos regime (Machado, 1979). Elections increased both the salience and the mobilizing capacity of disparate elements of the opposition, providing them with an opportunity to coordinate and protest against the incumbent. This suggests that some of the features of elections, including their role as focal points for collective action and the mobilizing capacity of political parties, contributed to the extent of mass, anti-regime mobilization.

After his party's victory in the 1978 elections, Marcos faced significant dissent from opposition groups who claimed that the election had been a sham. Many of them coordinated to boycott the subsequent presidential election in 1981, hoping to deny the regime a false veneer of legitimacy. Five years later, the assassination of Benigno Aquino, as he returned to Manila after spending three years in the United States, helped to spur a new and powerful wave of anti-regime protest. The widespread and sustained mobilization that followed Aquino's death is generally seen as the beginning of the people power movement that toppled the regime just a few years later. Marcos called for snap elections in 1986 in an attempt to reassert his control, but as Schock (1999) describes, this directly led to the unification of regime opponents from across the political spectrum. The electoral coordination of regime opponents and sustained protest in the wake of the election ultimately toppled the Marcos regime.

Data and model

Data on 136 authoritarian regimes between 1975 and 2004 were compiled from Norris's *Democracy Time Series Dataset* (2009). Authoritarian regimes were identified using the coding from Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (2000). The resulting dataset spans three decades, including 136 regimes and 2,332 regime-years.

Counting protest events

The dependent variable of interest is *civil unrest*. Banks (2004) provides cross-national data on annual counts of anti-regime protests, riots and general strikes.[6] Following Przeworski (2009), this current study uses the sum of protests, riots, and strikes as a measure of general unrest. The inclusion of riots and strikes is intended to generate a broad measure of unrest that includes activities beyond demonstrating. Since different manifestations of unhappiness with the political status quo

Table 1. Electoral authoritarian regime sub-types.

Regime classification	Coding protocol	*N*
Closed	1–4 on both scales	1412
Electoral	5–7 on either scale	922
Total		2334

are likely across various nations, it makes sense to try to analyse as many different forms as possible. While they may or may not be explicitly anti-regime, riots and general strikes are clearly political acts opposing the status quo, and reflect some challenge to incumbents and/or their policies. With a cross-national, annual count of incidences of unrest (from here on referred to as *protest events*), this study proceeds to evaluate the relationship between competitive authoritarianism, elections, and unrest.

Operationalizing electoral authoritarianism

To measure competitive authoritarianism, this study draws on Brownlee's (2009) operationalization of Levitsky and Way's (2002) typology of electoral authoritarian regimes. Levitsky and Way first divide regimes into electoral authoritarian and fully closed regimes. Electoral authoritarian regimes are then subdivided into hegemonic and competitive subtypes. Operationalizing this typology, Brownlee uses the World Bank's Database of Political Institutions (DPI) to create a series of dummy variables representing each category of regime. While Brownlee distinguishes between competitive and hegemonic regimes, this study's analysis treats all electoral authoritarian regimes the same; the distinction of interest here is between closed and electoral authoritarianism.

To create the regime dummy, this study relies on the DPI's 7-point measure of legislative and executive competitiveness: 1 = no legislature; 2 = unelected legislature/executive; 3 = elected legislature/executive, one candidate/post; 4 = one party, multiple candidates; 5 = multiple parties are legal but only one party won seats; 6 = multiple parties did win seats but the largest party received more than 75% of the seats; and 7 = largest party got less than 75%. As Brownlee notes, the DPI coding on this indicator is reported for the year before an election, effectively building in a one year lag.

Central to this analysis is the distinction between fully closed authoritarian regimes and regimes in which some multiparty polling occurs. Regime-years that scored between one and four on both competitiveness scales were coded as fully closed. These regimes are characterized either by the absence of elections or the presence of wholly uncompetitive elections. Alternatively, scores between five and seven on either scale indicate regime-years in which multiparty elections were provided for, albeit at varying levels of competitiveness. These regime-years were coded as electoral authoritarian regimes; the dummy variable indicating whether a regime is electoral or not will be the key explanatory variable in this analysis.

Levitsky and Way's typology and Brownlee's coding are summarized in Table 1 along with their frequencies in the data.

Controlling for endogenous elections. Whether a dictator calls new elections to legitimate his rule or avoid a violent conflict, there is good reason to suspect that high levels of political unrest will have preceded and influenced his decision. Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) also note the endogenous relationship between unrest and elections, asserting that it poses a distinct challenge for those attempting to analyse the potential link between electoral authoritarianism and democratization.

The strategy used in this study for overcoming this issue was to look exclusively at elections that had been scheduled or called for at least twelve months prior to polling.[7] Focusing on just those elections that were previously scheduled or mandated reduces the likelihood that any observed election was partially the result of civil unrest. Reducing the endogeneity between elections and unrest allows for the systematic evaluation of the impact that competitive elections and election years have on overall levels of political unrest in authoritarian regimes.

Eschewing observations of unscheduled elections also makes it more difficult to find a statistically significant effect for Scheduled Election Year. If dictators might call elections when facing insurmountable unrest or when facing a challenge that they believe they can silence, then the observations that differentiate Election Year and Scheduled Election Year should show a positive relationship between protest and election years. As expected, in this study's data, unscheduled elections are strongly correlated with levels of political unrest, indicating that a focus on scheduled elections makes it more difficult to find support for Hypothesis 1.

Controls. To control for economic development, this study includes a measure of logged per capita gross domestic product (GDP). Theoretically, it might be assumed that wealthier dictatorships are able to subdue civil unrest by making transfers to key constituencies or funding a robust, repressive security force. The change in GDP from the previous year is also included since years in which a country saw an increase in wealth may help to quiet some criticism of the regime, while relative decreases might be expected to create greater discontent.

Included as controls are measures of a regime's age in years and a logged measure of population density. It might be expected that there are qualitative differences between old and new authoritarian regimes, particularly in that older regimes may have had time to consolidate power. If a regime has consolidated power and instituted a stable degree of control over citizens' ability to engage in contentious political activity, it may influence this study's findings. Population density could play a role as well. Tilly (2004) and others have pointed out the positive effect that population density can have upon dissident communication, trust and organization and, subsequently, on levels of social and political unrest.

The repressiveness of the state is a key control variable. This study uses Freedom House's civil liberties score to account for the degree to which citizens are systematically repressed by their government. The civil liberties score rates regimes annually on various aspects of freedom of expression, rule of law, rights of association, and personal autonomy. The civil liberties scale ranges from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free).

Finally, the level of mobilization in a regime may be related to the degree to which opposition leaders believe that they will succeed in replacing incumbents. This belief is likely more evident in regimes with high authoritarian turnover; in states where challengers have frequently been able to unseat dictators and take control for themselves. To capture this, the Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (2000) variable STRA is included in this study, which is a count of all previous transitions to authoritarianism in a given country. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the control variables in the analysis.

Model specification

The negative binomial model can be used to deal with count data that are characterized by over-dispersion (King, 1989). Over-dispersion is simply one form of unobserved heterogeneity. Specifically, over-dispersion refers to the idea that the probability of observing one protest event in a given regime-year increases the probability of another protest being observed in that regime-year, and another and so on. The negative binomial allows the variance of each observation to be an

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for control variables.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Scheduled Election Year	.013	.115	0	1
Authoritarian transitions	.303	.709	0	5
log(GDP)	2.870	.540	1.146	4.539
Δ GDP	.002	.281	−2.201	1.483
log(population density)	6.830	1.432	3.091	12.032
Civil liberties	5.262	1.292	2	7
Age	32.996	31.589	1	131

N=2,334.

increasing function of the mean. With this specification, this study can effectively model the idea that protest events in a given regime-year are not wholly independent of one another. Furthermore, the negative binomial allows this study to test this assumption by parameterizing the elasticity of the variance and estimating it directly in the model as the term α. If α is insignificant or close to zero then over-dispersion is not a problem and a Poisson model could be used instead.[8]

Robust standard errors clustered on regime are employed to relax the assumption that observations within a given regime are independent. Clustering robust error estimates on regime also partially accounts for the presence of temporal dependence (autocorrelation). While a number of more complicated alternatives exist for modelling the structure of the temporal dependence, Zorn (2001) shows that clustered, robust standard errors usually produce variance estimates that are similar to those estimated with alternative approaches, such as generalized estimating equations.[9]

Results

The results of two negative binomial regressions are presented in Table 3. The first two columns report the regression coefficients and incident rate ratios (IRRs) for the full model. Columns 3 and 4 report the results from a regression including only electoral authoritarian regime-years, so that this study can additionally examine the effect of election year in only those regimes that hold regular elections. The significant α value indicates that the presence of overdispersion makes the negative binomial the appropriate choice for this analysis. The sign of the coefficients can be interpreted as the direction of the effect of an increase in the relevant variable (or flip from zero to one for dummies) on the number of protest events experienced;[10] since count model coefficients are somewhat difficult to interpret (beyond the direction of the effect), IRRs are also reported. IRRs can be interpreted as the predicted factor change in the number of protest events associated with a one-unit increase in the corresponding independent variable.

The results offer significant support for the idea that instituting competitive elections increases overall levels of political unrest. The regression coefficient on *Electoral Authoritarian* is positive and significant, indicating that regimes that hold elections in which incumbents face electoral challengers can be expected to experience significantly more political unrest than regimes that do not. The IRR for *Electoral Authoritarian* indicates that authoritarian regimes that hold nominally competitive elections can be expected to see nearly twice as many protest events as regimes that hold no elections.[11]

Among all authoritarian regimes, election years are characterized by significantly more political unrest than non-election years. The coefficient on *Scheduled Election Year* is positive and significant, indicating that, on average, election years in authoritarian regimes are characterized by higher levels of protest. The IRR for *Scheduled Election Year* illustrates the magnitude of the

Table 3. The effect of elections on anti–regime protest in authoritarian regimes.Dependent variable = number of protest events.

	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR
Electoral authoritarian	.873**	2.394**		
	(.294)	(.704)		
Scheduled Election Year	1.107*	3.026*	.967**	2.631**
	(.447)	(1.353)	(.315)	(.828)
Authoritarian transitions	1.141**	3.131**	.863*	2.371*
	(.186)	(.583)	(.388)	(.921)
Δ GDP	−1.220**	.295**	−1.067*	.344*
	(.345)	(.102)	(.458)	(.158)
log(GDP)	.143	1.154	.296	1.344
	(.387)	(.354)	(.643)	(.864)
log(population density)	.190*	1.210*	.216	1.241
	(.097)	(.118)	(.173)	(1.24)
Civil liberties	−.147	.864	.186	1.204
	(.101)	(.087)	(.136)	(.163)
Age	.022**	1.022**	.017**	1.017**
	(.004)	(.004)	(.006)	(.006)
Constant	−2.977*		−4.114	
	(1.396)		(2.599)	
ln(α)	1.850**		1.705**	
	(.119)		(.164)	
Observations	2334		922	
Log pseudo-likelihood	−2177.915		−1108.942	

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.
Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on regime are in parentheses.

expected effect; on average, election years in authoritarian regimes see almost three times the political unrest of non-election years. The magnitude of the effect of *Scheduled Election Year* is similar when looking exclusively at electoral authoritarian regimes (columns 3 and 4 in Table 3); *Scheduled Election Year* remains highly significant when omitting closed regimes from the analysis. Finally, by limiting the focus to *scheduled* elections, this study has reduced the potential for endogeneity between elections and unrest.

Simulation results indicate that the effects of both key independent variables are significant at substantively meaningful levels of the control variables. For a hypothetical country at the mean on all of the control variables, adopting minimally competitive elections increases the expected count of major protest events by about .37 ($p < .05$). While that may appear small, it is quite meaningful since this study is dealing only with *major* protest events that occur relatively rarely and can be highly destabilizing – the average number of events per regime-year in the sample is only about .90. Looking exclusively at *Electoral* regimes and holding all controls at their means, switching from a non-election year to a scheduled election year increases the expected count of protests by more than 2 ($p < .05$). Overall, these findings support the conclusion that the adoption and repetition of elections leads to significantly more protest in authoritarian settings, even while controlling for a number of other relevant factors.

Both regime age and population density appear to positively impact the average number of protest events in authoritarian regimes, though only the effect of population density is substantively meaningful. Older regimes, on average, tend to have more protest events than younger ones,

but the magnitude of the effect is suffciently small that no substantive difference is really observed. The effect of population density is much more pronounced, indicating that, as predicted, more densely populated dictatorships face a better organized, more coordinated opposition that is able to produce higher overall levels of political unrest. A one-standard deviation increase in population density is associated with a roughly 31% increase in the expected count of protest events.[12]

While GDP does not appear to be significant, change in GDP has a strong negative impact on levels of unrest. A one-standard deviation increase in GDP growth is associated with a reduction in the expected count of protest events of roughly 29%;[13] this is in line with the expectation that economic downturns lead to dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime and more mass unrest.

Finally, the proxy for repressiveness, Freedom House's civil liberties score, is in the expected direction in the full model, indicating that more repressive regimes face less protest, though the result does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The number of prior transitions to authoritarianism is positive and significant, suggesting that countries with more frequent turnover see higher levels of mass unrest.

Discussion

Many issues remain to be addressed, but the relationship between elections and political unrest is well supported by the empirical evidence presented here; several points have been raised that deserve further comment.

First, the evidence presented here lends indirect support to Lindberg's (2006a) claim that elections lead to real changes in the political dynamics of authoritarian regimes. The observed link between elections and protest is consistent with the argument that even un-free elections can lead to more efficacious and politically involved citizens, denser networks for mobilization, and greater protection of individual rights and liberties. However, more work is needed to empirically assess the particular mechanisms involved in order to better elucidate the micro-foundations behind the observed link between elections, protest and democratization.

Second, this paper has addressed one destabilizing effect of authoritarian elections but many others may exist. For example, it is reasonable to assume that the legalization of an opposition might lend opposition forces more legitimacy within the state, perhaps eroding the autocrat's previous monopoly on the legitimate exercise of political power. Elections may also make it easier for opposition groups to raise money for funding not only electoral challenges but also non-electoral attacks upon the power and legitimacy of the regime. Finally, holding elections could increase international pressure for a regime to liberalize. In particular, if elections were instituted partially as a means of complying with certain international agreements, then foreign actors may use these venues to press for further liberalization of the regime.

Third, this study has focused particularly on how elections threaten regime stability. This is in marked contrast to recent literature which provides strong support for the idea that elections also help to sustain dictators in power. It appears that elections are a double-edged sword in authoritarian regimes; while they may allow a dictator to co-opt elite opponents and garner legitimacy for their authority, they likely also serve to undermine political stability. These countervailing effects make it difficult to assert firmly if the aggregate impact of electoral authoritarianism is to strengthen or weaken a given regime. The question of whether or not any generalizable patterns exist with respect to elections and regime change is yet to be addressed.

Dictators may institute elections strategically in order to co-opt the competition but doing so entails certain risks. This paper has addressed one of these risks, specifically the possibility that instituting elections may lead to more political unrest. Elections present groups not aligned with the regime an opportunity to coordinate, mobilize supporters, and pursue anti-regime activities.

Furthermore, applying a collective action framework yields the insight that authoritarian elections reduce the costs and increase the benefits of anti-regime action. Additionally, elections themselves serve as a focal point around which mass political action can be coordinated.

Overall, the destabilizing effects of authoritarian elections are clearly evident in this study's analysis. Dictatorships that hold competitive elections are likely to see significantly more political unrest than are regimes that hold no elections. However, among all authoritarian regimes, election years are characterized by an average of about 200% more protest events than non-election years. In regimes that might be near the verge of collapse, elections may very well provide a critical boost to mass unrest that ultimately shakes a dictatorship to its foundations and results in the fall of the regime. While this study's analysis provides no prediction about the nature of the regime that might follow a fallen dictatorship, other scholars have shown empirically that electoral authoritarian regimes are significantly more likely to be replaced by democratic regimes than are fully closed authoritarian states (Brownlee, 2009). Taken together with the current contribution, this suggests that there is a clear relationship between authoritarian elections and democratization. More work remains to done, but it appears that the proliferation of hybrid regimes around the world in recent decades does not portend the perpetuation of illiberal states. Instead, regimes that hold elections but continue to be led by dictators may be sowing the seeds of their own democratization.

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Notes

1. See Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) for a review.
2. The terms 'protest' and 'political unrest' are used interchangeably to refer to all mass political mobilization targeting the incumbent regime. This includes activities such as general strikes and riots in addition to large scale, anti-regime demonstrations.
3. Meirowitz and Tucker (2013) do, however, question whether electoral fraud can lead to increased protest in subsequent elections or if the mobilization that occurred in the case of the colour revolutions was just a 'one-shot deal'.
4. The different roles assumed by the military can be illustrated quite clearly by the different military responses to the protests in Tiananmen Square in China and those in Tahrir Square in Egypt.
5. For example, the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 succeeded in ending the Mubarak regime that had been in place for nearly three decades. The contemporaneous spread of mass anti-regime protests across the Middle East and North Africa has led many to question the stability of a number of established authoritarian regimes.
6. Anti-government demonstrations are peaceful gatherings of more than 100 people protesting the policies of the incumbent regime; riots are violent mass demonstrations involving 100 or more participants; general strikes must involve more than 1000 industrial or service industry workers from more than one employer.
7. First, a dummy variable was created, *Election Year*, coded 1 if a national election (executive, legislative or both) was held in that year, 0 otherwise. Next, coded as *scheduled* were all elections that had been scheduled more than twelve months prior to the date of polling. With this information a new dummy variable was created called *Scheduled Election Year*, coded 1 if a scheduled election was held in that year, 0 otherwise.
8. Diagnostics indicate that the negative binomial is appropriate in this case.

9. Specifying the model via a generalized estimating equation and specifying an AR1 error process does not significantly affect the results.
10. Technically, the coeffcient demonstrates the change in the log of the expected count for a one unit increase in the relevant independent variable.
11. This captures the impact of electoral authoritarianism on political unrest while controlling for the timing and frequency of elections themselves by including *Scheduled Election Year*.
12. In addition to the standard IRRs reported in Table 3, incident rate ratios corresponding to a one-standard deviation change (rather than a one-unit change) in population density were calculated, since one-unit of logged population density is not an easily comparable quantity.
13. One-standard deviation IRRS were calculated for GDP growth to ease interpretation and comparison of effects.

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