Magaloni (2006) and Blaydes (2008) discuss two functions of elections to the authoritarian governments. First of all, electoral results provide information about the geographic distribution of support and dissent. In Mexico, Magaloni (2006) found that areas where the ruling PRI captured a greater vote share were deemed as centers of government support, whereas areas with low PRI vote shares were considered opposition strongholds. Similarly, for Egypt, Blaydes (2008) remarked that “election results provide the regime with a map of areas of political support for the opposition.” In both cases, the two authoritarian governments were able to know which sub-national units have higher or lower concentration of regime supporters by looking at where they received a higher or lower vote share. In Mexico, the PRI used this information to reward their supporters, whereas in Egypt the regime instituted a “punishment regime” in opposition strongholds by withholding their public goods investment.

Additionally, electoral results also provide information about the competence and loyalty of lower-level party members. In both countries, the task of mobilizing voters on behalf of the ruling party is delegated to lower-level party bureaucrats, with the national level playing little to no direct role. These bureaucrats are not candidates themselves, but play important role in making sure that the ruling party’s candidates get elected. Electoral results, reflected through turnout as well as vote share of the ruling party, are just a function of how well these sub-national party members do their job. Blaydes (2008) remarks further that a failure to deliver good results may also be a function of disloyalty, for example when a local party member forgoes careerist goals within the ruling party to pursue short-term material gains offered by the local opposition candidates by mobilizing on behalf of the opposition instead.

Although each of these two functions of authoritarian elections make sense on its own, neither Magaloni (2006) nor Blaydes (2008) recognize that they can be incompatible. From the perspective of the authoritarian leaders, the level of popular support in each province and the level of competence or loyalty of the party bureaucrats there are two different narratives explaining a same outcome. In explaining for example an electoral upset in a certain sub-national unit, the ruling party may blame the lack of supporters there, but it may also blame the bureaucrats in this unit; it is likely that both factors have a share in the blame, but as long as the ruling party believes in both narratives it will never be able to determine how much weigh to give each of them individually.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the case of Vietnam, whether the regime uses election to learn about the geographic distribution of support or about the competence/loyalty of lower-level party bureaucrats lead to very different observable implications. **If the regime believes that electoral results reflect the distribution of support, it will likely increase transfer to areas where it underperforms.** Note that this is opposite to what Magaloni (2006) and Blaydes (2008) would have predicted – in both their narratives, the regime punishes, not compensates, provinces with lower ruling party vote share. The reason for this opposite prediction is that in Vietnam there is no organized opposition, and so a low vote share would only reflect dissatisfaction towards the VCP, not affinity to any particular opposition party. Additionally, despite the negative result, general support for the party is still high, and very few people would count as dissidents. A punishment regime would therefore be less effective than a buying-off strategy, in which the regime soothes the dissatisfaction with pork, in the form of central transfer. This logic is indeed found at the national level by Miller (2012, 2013, 2015), and can be said as describing “bottom-up accountability.”

**If the regime believes instead that electoral results reflect the incompetence or disloyalty of local party bureaucrats, it will likely punish the party bureaucrats in areas where it underperforms,** either by withholding promotion or decrease central transfer (to reduce opportunity for graft). In Vietnam, it is less likely that withholding promotion is chosen as the punishment, since unlike in Egypt the main overhaul of leadership positions in Vietnam takes place *before* the election. As a result, cutting opportunity for graft through lowering public goods investment remains as the most plausible response to electoral upsets, conditioning on the regime’s believing that electoral results are primarily determined by party bureaucrats. This logic of punishing lower-level party cadres for failing to perform a target set by national leadership can be said as describing “top-down accountability.”

Because the two theories have diametrically opposite observable implications (“information on geographic distribution of support” predicts *increased* central transfer following electoral upsets, “information on party cadres” predicts *decreased* central transfer), it is unlikely that both of them can hold true in Vietnam. Without looking at the evidence, it seems more likely that the regime sees elections as providing information on geographic distribution of support. The reason is that, unlike in Egypt or Mexico, the Vietnamese Communist Party has many other channels to ascertain the competence and loyalty of its provincial leaders, and so do not have to rely on elections for this goal. In addition, it also ties promotion decision on other metrics that are much more relevant for the regime’s substantive interest e.g. FDI promotion (Jensen and Malesky 2015); any signal from elections would therefore interfere with those from these metrics. Finally, outside of elections the Vietnamese regime has very few sources of information on its popularity – common channels such as protests or the media are always kept under tight control. As a result, the VCP would make better use of its resources if it dedicates elections to the task of gathering information on the geographic distribution of support for the regime.

1. In political science lingo, the ruling party is unable to point-identify how much each factor contributes to the bad result. To achieve point-identification it may be necessary to hold one factor constant or ignorable, for example by randomly assigning bureaucrats to provinces. But it is unlikely that politicians always see and behave like social scientists. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)