Catch Us If You Can: Election Monitoring and International Norm Diffusion

Susan D. Hyde Yale University

Why has the decision to invite foreign election observers become an international norm? More generally, how do international norms develop in the absence of incentives for cooperation or activism by norm entrepreneurs? Motivated by the case of election observation, I argue that international norms can be generated through a diffusely motivated signaling process. Responding to increased benefits associated with being democratic, international election observation was initiated by democratizing governments as a signal of a government's commitment to democracy. Increased democracy-contingent benefits gave other "true-democrats" the incentive to invite observers, resulting in a widespread belief that all true-democrats invite election monitors. Consequently, not inviting observers became an unambiguous signal that a government was not democratizing, giving even pseudo-democrats reason to invite observers and risk a negative report. I evaluate this theory with an original global dataset on elections and election observation, 1960–2006.

Until 1962, there were no recorded cases of international election observation in sovereign states.[1] Today, election monitoring is widely referred to as an international norm, and it is rare for any country to hold an election without inviting international observers.[2] Nearly 80% of all national elections are now monitored, but puzzlingly, many leaders invite foreign observers and orchestrate electoral fraud in front of them.[3] As illustrated in Figure 1, the global rate of observed elections increased substantially between the late 1980s and 2006, even while increasing numbers of elections were criticized by international observers.[4] Negative reports from monitors have been linked to domestic uprising and electoral revolutions, reductions in foreign aid, exclusion from international forums, and other forms of internationally imposed sanctions. Given the potential costs associated with inviting observers and being internationally condemned for election fraud, the fact that so many leaders of sovereign states continue to invite international observers presents an empirical puzzle. Why has the decision to invite foreign election observers—and the corresponding international involvement in clearly domestic political processes—become a widely accepted international norm? More generally, how do international

Susan D. Hyde is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, Department of Political Science, Yale University, PO Box 208301, New Haven, CT 06515 (Susan.Hyde@Yale.edu).

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[1]For replication data, see http://hyde.research.yale.edu. Data on election observation were collected with the support of the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the Brookings Institution, Yale's MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies and the Institute for Social and Policy Studies, and Princeton's Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance.

[2]I define a norm as a "shared standard of behavior appropriate for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Florini 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Klotz 1995). For discussions of the norm of international election observation, see Bjornlund (2004), Carothers (1997), Kelley (2008a), Rich (2001), and Santa-Cruz (2005).

[3]Prior to 1962, several plebiscites in nonsovereign or disputed territories were internationally supervised (Beigbeder 1994; Wambaugh 1920, 1933), as were several elections in occupied countries in the immediate post-WWII period.

[4]An observer report is coded as *Negative* if, in a postelection statement or final report, foreign observers seriously questioned the winner of the election or the legitimacy of the process.

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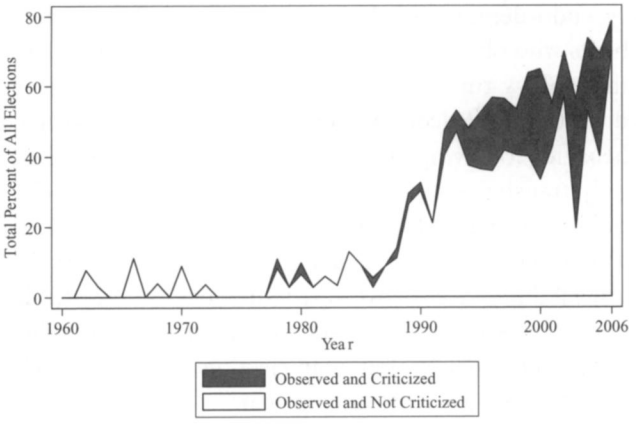
FIGURE 1 Rate of Internationally Observed Elections, 1960–2006



Note: Includes 1,754 election events in 157 independent states, excluding those with population < 250,000.
Source: Author.

norms diffuse in the absence of advocacy or incentives for international cooperation?

I argue that states seeking international benefits can generate unintended yet consequential international norms. As prominent scholars argue, international norms help govern international interactions in the absence of global government (Fearon and Wendt 2002; Katzenstein 1996; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998; Krasner 1983; Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986). This literature documents a variety of conditions under which international norms "matter," yet in explaining the initiation and diffusion of international norms, the international relations literature to date has focused primarily on two mechanisms of norm creation: advocacy by norm entrepreneurs, who are motivated by principled ideas and whose efforts bring about desired changes in state behavior; and norms created because they help facilitate cooperation within international institutions.[5]

At least one other class of norms is important in global governance and does not fit neatly into either of the previous categories. "Signaling norms" are distinct in the mechanism that creates them and frequently in their consequences, as I argue below. These norms are generated through a process initiated when state leaders react to changes in the international environment, and become widely shared—and enforced—international norms, or "standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891).

[5]For representative works involving norms and international cooperation, see Schelling (1960); Keohane (1984, 1986); Krasner (1983); and a more general discussion by Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner (1998). For widely recognized work on norm entrepreneurs, see Finnemore (1996), Finnemore and Sikkink (1998); Keck and Sikkink (1998); Klotz (1995); Nadelmann (1990); Price (1998); Risse-Kappen, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999); and Thomas (2001).

Existing Explanations of Norm Formation and Diffusion

This article presents a theory of how new behaviors diffuse throughout the international system and become widely adhered to international norms. Although the model was developed to explain why leaders invite election monitors even when they engage in widespread election fraud, the argument has the potential to explain the diffusion of a number of other puzzling behaviors among states. By outlining an alternative causal explanation for the diffusion of new international norms, this article also contributes to a well-established research agenda within international relations on the causes of international norms.

In the most widely cited theory of norm creation, social constructivists focus on norm entrepreneurs who, motivated by principled ideas, seek to change international or domestic behavior through the generation of new international norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Although instrumental logics play a part in many related arguments—the work of these activists may be intended to, for example, generate costs for actors who fail to comply with the new norm—norm entrepreneurs are central in initiating and spreading the new behavior through advocacy. As I discuss below, entrepreneurs and activists were conspicuously absent when election observation was initiated and spread.

Among scholars of international relations, neoliberal institutionalists offer the other leading theory of norm formation. For institutionalists, norms are embedded within international institutions and are therefore generated along with them, usually resulting from demand for interstate cooperation. For example, the international norm of reciprocity has been established as a powerful explanation for cooperation under anarchy (Axelrod 1986; Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Keohane 1984, 1986). Exactly how norms are created within institutions varies somewhat, but in many cases, collective action problems mean that powerful states help establish norms because of their disproportionate ability to set the agenda, offer side-payments, and reap the benefits of cooperation. As Kenneth Abbot and Duncan Snidal argue, "powerful states exert disproportionate influence over norm elaboration and structure legislative processes to ensure their influence" (1998, 15).

Although my focus on strategic interaction is similar to the approaches common to institutionalist arguments, there are a number of important differences between the types of norms discussed by institutionalists, such as the norm of reciprocity, and the creation of the norm of election observation.[6] To be explained by existing institutionalist theories, the norm of election observation would have to help facilitate cooperation or serve as a focal point within an international regime, yet it is unclear how election monitoring would facilitate cooperation between states that invite observers, nor how benefits from cooperation would motivate states to invite observers, as I discuss in greater detail below.[7]

Signaling and International Norm Development

In contrast to theories that focus on activist pressure and incentives for cooperation within international institutions, I argue that the norm of international election observation was created through a diffusely motivated process. In response to increased rewards associated with recognition as a democratizing state, election observation was initiated as a signal of a government's commitment to democratization. Particularly for leaders of regimes that were not already established democracies, democracy-contingent benefits created an incentive for incumbent leaders to identify a credible signal that they were, in fact, holding democratic elections. To make this argument, I outline a simple signaling game as a heuristic device to explain the diffusion of the norm of international election observation. The signaling game is referenced, but the formalization is confined to the online supplementary information (SI).

The two central actors are the "incumbent" state leader and "democracy promoters." Before the incumbent makes any decisions, democracy promoters establish the degree to which they value democracy in other states. The assumed incumbent can be one individual or a group of leaders, depending on the regime type. After elections are announced, the incumbent chooses whether to invite international monitors and whether and how they will manipulate the election. Among governments with regime types that are not well established, I assume that there are two general types: "true-democrats" and "pseudo-democrats." True-democrats are those incumbents who obey the letter and the spirit of electoral laws: they follow rules regulating electoral competition (they do not commit electoral fraud) and comply with expected behavior following an election (if they lose, they peacefully transfer power). Pseudo-democrats also hold elections, but manipulate elections to their benefit in order to maintain their (or their party's) hold on power. The crucial differences between true-democrats and pseudo-democrats are that pseudo-democrats are willing to cheat and, if they are defeated in an election, they do not willingly transfer power to another party.

Democracy promoters share a preference for working with and rewarding democratic governments. Democracy promoters include powerful Western states, foreign investors, international organizations, and any other actors with a preference for democracy and the ability to allocate international benefits. Democracy promoters make international benefits available, but they do not need to pressure for election observation per se. Rather, simply by valuing and rewarding countries that they believe to be democratic, they create incentives for other incumbents to identify a credible signal of their country's democratic credentials.

In the model, democracy promoters prefer to support true-democrats and withhold benefits from pseudo-democrats. The maximum value of democracy-contingent benefits can change over time. For both true and pseudo-democrats to invite observers, the anticipated "democracy premium" must be large enough to outweigh the costs and risks associated with inviting observers. Because they increase the risk that they will be caught and sanctioned for election manipulation, the expected cost of inviting observers is greater for pseudo-democrats. Pseudo-democrats weigh the benefits of inviting (and the costs of not inviting) against the likelihood and costs of being caught.

Following an election, democracy promoters update their beliefs about the government's type. Given that election observation exists, the updated beliefs of democracy promoters are informed by whether international observers were invited, and if so, their reports about the quality of the election. The postelection beliefs of democracy promoters are also informed by their expectations about the likely behavior of leaders based on their type. From the perspective of democracy promoters, prior to the norm of election observation, a noninviting incumbent could logically be a true-democrat or a pseudo-democrat. If inviting observers is more costly to pseudo-democrats,

[6] As Axelrod argues, norms like the expectation of reciprocity among a given population can facilitate cooperation, but the creation and diffusion of norms is not the central focus of his work. See also Schelling (1960) and Sugden (1989) on focal points, norms, and cooperation.

[7] Note that neoliberal institutionalists attempt to explain international cooperation in the absence of a hegemon, as in Keohane (1984), titled *After Hegemony*.

and international benefits are sufficiently large, all true-democrats have the incentive to invite. After election observation is initiated, assuming democracy promoters are aware of these incentives, they should expect that all true-democrats invite observers.

The establishment of the belief that all true-democrats invite international observers marks the creation of the norm and also creates the conditions for widespread norm diffusion and compliance by pseudo-democrats. Logically, if democracy promoters believe that all true-democrats invite international observers, any noninviting incumbent must be a pseudo-democrat. Note that this does not require that *only* true-democrats invite observers. Once the norm exists, any leader who holds an election but does not invite observers is perceived as a pseudo-democrat with certainty. By inviting observers, pseudo-democrats can gamble with the probability that their election manipulation will be uncovered by international observers, and they maintain some positive probability of gaining democracy-contingent benefits.

More generally, a signal can become a norm and diffuse widely when the relevant audience develops the belief that all desirable types engage in a specified behavior. Note that this interaction between the "givers and takers" of international benefits is dynamic. If all states with a given desirable characteristic send the same signal (or international actors believe that they do so), even states that do not actually possess the valued characteristic should attempt to fake the signal. Once a signaling norm exists, any actors who refuse to signal reveals with certainty that they are an undesirable type. Thus, undesirable types (pseudo-democrats) should attempt to mimic the signal when possible, even when it is considerably more costly for them to do so.

Signaling behaviors have previously been linked to social norms by Robert Axelrod, who argues that individuals follow existing social norms in part because "violating [the norm] would provide a signal about the type of person you are" (1986, 1106). Axelrod links this concept to the creation of new social norms, which grow out of "behavior that signals things about individuals that will lead others to reward them" and that "as more and more people use the signal to gain information about others, more and more people will adopt the behavior that leads to being treated well" (Axelrod 1986, 1107). States seeking international benefits tied to democracy, in my theory, are similar to individuals seeking social approval in Axelrod's argument. However, Axelrod does not discuss mimicry of signals by "bad" types, which is fundamental to my theory in that it explains why signaling norms diffuse widely, even among states that do not actually possess the characteristic valued by other international actors.

The norm of election observation diffused widely because (1) international actors initiated and then increased democracy-contingent benefits, and (2) a government's commitment to democracy is difficult for democracy promoters to observe directly. The existence of democracy-contingent benefits, and the universe of countries that can compete for them, have changed dramatically over time. During the Cold War, democracy promoters were primarily confined to the United States and its allies, as were the potential recipients of democracy-contingent benefits. Anticommunism outweighed any preference for democracy, so only anticommunist states were eligible for democracy-contingent benefits. The end of the Cold War diminished the importance of anticommunism, and at the same time, an expanding number of actors declared their preference for supporting democratization. Since the 1990s, democracy promoters frequently act in concert through intergovernmental organizations in order to encourage democracy in other states with a combination of rewards and sanctions. Countries that choose to ignore international pressure for democracy now risk international isolation and treatment as a pariah state (McFaul 2004; Pevehouse 2003; Rich 2001). Organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the European Union have officially proclaimed their preference for democracy and transparency in other states in the world, and they have backed up this preference with significant increases in the costs of nondemocracy and the benefits linked to progress toward democratic and transparent institutions (Donno 2010).[8]

Democracy promoters allocate rewards for democratic elections and direct sanctions toward governments that are not believed to be democratizing. A variety of costs can be imposed on leaders who are caught stealing elections. For example, following the 2002 presidential elections in Zimbabwe, which were strongly criticized by international observers, President Robert Mugabe faced international economic sanctions, reductions in foreign assistance and trade, expulsion from the Commonwealth, and criticism from countries around the world for stealing the election and attempting to muzzle foreign and domestic media. As British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw summarized, Mugabe "... has been profoundly shocked" that Western and African states alike "... condemned his cheating, [and] condemned the fact that he has stolen

[8]See Carothers (1997, 1999), Davis-Roberts and Carroll (2010), and Goodwin-Gill (2006) for discussions and documentation of international commitments to democracy.

the election, which wholly weakens his legitimacy."[9] Similarly, following the 2005 elections in Ethiopia, opposition-targeted violence provoked criticism from international observers, widespread international condemnation, and suspension of foreign aid and planned talks on debt relief.[10]

Additionally, the link between democracy and international benefits is usually made clear to leaders before elections. Prior to the 2001 elections in Belarus, a U.S. State Department spokesman was quoted as saying that "only by creating conditions for free and fair elections can Belarus win the respect of the international community, improve relations with the United States and end its self-imposed isolation."[11] Such indirect threats give states the incentive to modify their behavior in anticipation of international benefits. For example, in explaining the structure of the new African Union in 2002, Jennifer Windsor said that "by pledging to conduct democratic elections and respect the rule of law—and to intervene when member states violate human rights—[member states] hope to attract more than $60 billion annually in new trade and investment from wealthy countries."[12] For countries that experience coups and other obvious cases of democratic backsliding, sanctions are often imposed, and resumption of foreign support is usually conditioned on internationally certified elections. Not coincidentally, most coups after 1990 have been followed quickly by competitive elections (Goemans and Marinov 2008).

Evidence from a variety of other studies suggests that many international actors are more likely to reward democracies than nondemocracies, particularly in the post–Cold War period. A diverse body of research also suggests that democracy-contingent benefits flow from many sources, including foreign direct investors (Jensen 2003, 2008; Li and Resnick 2003), international actors who recognize the "democratic advantage" (Schultz and Weingast 2003), the increase in international legitimacy due to democracy (McFaul 2004; Rich 2001), the post–Cold War increase in foreign aid for democracies (Brown 2005; Dunning 2004; Knack 2004; Wright 2009), and even the increase in tourism apparently enjoyed by democratic states (Neumayer 2004). Enforcement of commitments to promote democracy is rarely coordinated among international actors, but so long as an individual leader perceives that democracy-continent benefits (or autocracy-contingent costs) exist, even diffuse responses to state behavior by international actors should influence the decision calculus of leaders.

Election observation was initiated during the Cold War, and until the late 1980s, democracy-contingent benefits were available primarily to a subset of states that were already Western allies. Anticommunism outweighed any preference for democracy, and only anticommunist Western allies could reasonably expect to increase their share of international benefits by signaling a commitment to democracy. The end of the Cold War increased the availability of democracy-contingent benefits and diminished the value of anticommunism. Together, these changes increased the amount of democracy-contingent benefits and the range of eligible countries that could compete for them. This change gave true-democrats the incentive to invite observers and led to the belief among democracy promoters that all true-democrats invite observers, thus creating the conditions for widespread norm compliance. Pseudo-democrats seeking to maximize international benefits were forced to engage in a complicated calculation, weighing the anticipated value of democracy-contingent benefits, autocracy-contingent costs, and the probability that they could manipulate the election, cheat, and avoid a negative report.

One might question why democracy promoters would rely on a signal if it were imitated by pseudo-democrats. If the only information revealed to democracy promoters was whether a government invited observers or not, the signal would grow less informative as it was imitated. However, inviting observers remains useful to democracy promoters despite mimicry because international observers issue negative reports when fraud is detected, and an incumbent is only perceived as a true-democrat if he or she invites observers and receives a positive report. By inviting observers, pseudo-democrats risk a negative report, and must either devote effort to cheating in a manner that is unlikely to be caught, or accept the consequences of elections condemned as fraudulent. Observers, true-democrats, and democracy promoters may also work to increase the accuracy of the signal, thereby increasing the costs to pseudo-democrats.

Empirical Implications

Thus far I have focused on outlining how the dynamics of signaling can cause the diffusion of new international norms. I now turn to whether the empirical evidence is

[9] Chris McGreal, "Defiant Mugabe Shackles Media; Zimbabwe Faces Sanctions, Expulsion," *The Sun Herald* (Sydney, Australia), March 17, 2002.

[10] "Mr. Good Governance Goes Bad," *New York Times*, November 27, 2005.

[11] "U.S. Denounces Belarus Authorities," *Associated Press*, August 3, 2001.

[12] Jennifer L. Windsor, "Better Development through Democracy," *New York Times*, July 19, 2002.

consistent with the argument. Like most cross-national research in international relations, establishing causality is difficult. However, if the theory is true, several observable implications derived from the model must not be contradicted by the evidence. I present these implications below, and then evaluate them using original data on national-level elections from 1960 to 2006.

Two general sets of variables are important in explaining an incumbent's decision to invite observers and the diffusion of the norm: uncertainty about a given incumbent's type (true-democrat or pseudo-democrat) and the availability of democracy-contingent benefits. I frame my expectations as general hypotheses, and then define the variables used to evaluate them. The first hypothesis is that if a government's commitment to democracy or autocracy is not well established, the incumbent should be more likely to invite observers. Conversely, if a government's commitment to democracy (or lack thereof) is unquestioned, the incumbent should be less likely to invite observers.

The second hypothesis is that if democracy-contingent benefits increase, the number of countries inviting international election observers should also increase. Increases in democracy-contingent benefits are reflected in two ways: an expansion in the countries that can compete for them and in increases in the amount of benefits. During the Cold War, democracy-contingent benefits were allocated by the West and should have only been available to Western allies. Therefore, Cold War alliance patterns should dictate patterns of observation before 1990, but not after the end of the Cold War.[13] With the end of the Cold War, the international rewards associated with anticommunism decreased as the value of democratic political institutions increased, and formerly Soviet allied and nonaligned states became eligible for the growing pool of democracy-contingent benefits.

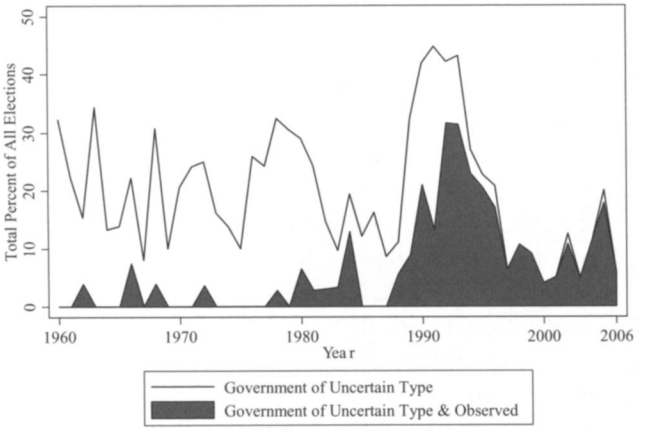
Finally, my theory also implies that more pseudo-democrats should have invited observers after 1990 than before. The third hypothesis is therefore that if democracy-contingent benefits increase and democracy promoters develop the belief that all true-democrats invite observers, more pseudo-democrats should invite observers. However, I do not attempt to measure whether each incumbent government is a true or pseudo-democrat. If this information were readily observable, election observation would not be an informative signal. Nevertheless, there are two testable implications of this hypothesis. First, the rate of negative reports should be low initially, when more true-democrats invited, and the rate of negative reports should increase over time, as norm diffusion among pseudo-democrats is driven by increases in democracy-contingent benefits. The second implication relates to the behavior of pseudo-democrats who are caught cheating. Because democracy-continent benefits continue to exist, pseudo-democrats who are caught cheating should continue to invite observers.

I now introduce the variables used to evaluate these implications of the model, which are further summarized in the SI. For some governments, the structure of political institutions means that little ambiguity exists about whether they are democratic. Governments that never hold national elections, like China and Saudi Arabia, are clearly perceived as nondemocracies. A country must be holding national elections to be included in the relevant universe of cases. Similarly, if a government holds elections in which opposition electoral competition is banned, they stand little chance of gaining a positive report, even if they invite election observers. I therefore include a measure of whether opposition parties are allowed to participate in elections, called *Opposition Competition*, which should be positively associated with the presence of observers. *Opposition Competition* is a dichotomous indicator equal to one if all of the following three conditions hold: opposition parties are legal, opposition is allowed (even minimally), and there is a choice of candidates on the ballot. If any of these conditions do not hold, or if there is any uncertainty or ambiguity about whether these conditions hold, it is coded as zero (author).

Similarly, if a country is already a well-established consolidated democracy, or becomes widely viewed as such, the incumbent should be less likely to invite observers. Note that this has begun to change as the norm has become widely accepted and most OSCE member states, including countries like Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, have invited observers since 2002 (OSCE/ODIHR 2005). Nevertheless, from 1990 to 2006, there is little evidence that external actors questioned the democratic credentials of the long-term developed democracies of Western Europe and North America, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Countries that were successful in joining the European Union after 1989 are also coded as consolidated democracies beginning in the year that they formally became members of the organization. Additionally, several countries initially invited international observers but were told by prominent international observer organizations that they no longer needed to invite observers because they were considered democratic, including Chile after 1992 and the Czech Republic after 2003. Thus, *Consolidated Democracy* is equal to one if the country is one of the long-term developed democracies, if it is a member

[13] Kelley also emphasizes the Cold War, but focuses on how Western powers were able to "shape prevailing norms" (2008a, 33).

FIGURE 2 Elections, Uncertain Regime Type, and Election Observation, 1960–2006



Note: Includes 1,754 elections in 157 independent states.
Source: Author.

of the European Union, or if it was explicitly announced by a well-respected international monitoring group that the country no longer needed to invite observers.

In addition to variables that define unambiguous types, there are several observable characteristics that indicate that a regime type is uncertain. Following an interruption of democratic rule, or during a transition from autocratic rule, the commitment to democracy of incumbents who hold elections is highly uncertain, and can lead to democratization or further entrenchment of autocracy. I therefore create a variable, *Uncertain Type*, that indicates whether the election is the first multiparty election, whether previous elections were suspended, or whether the election was run by transitional leadership tasked with holding elections. Figure 2 shows the over-time pattern in elections held by governments defined as "uncertain" types and the diffusion of election observation among them. Consistent with expectations, many elections were held by governments of uncertain type between 1960 and 2006, and such incumbents began to invite election monitors in the early 1960s. Consistent with my argument, by the early 1990s, nearly all elections held by governments of uncertain type were internationally observed.

I use several variables to measure change in access to democracy-contingent benefits. First, I include a binary indicator of alliance with the United States during the Cold War, *U.S. Cold War Ally*.[14] This variable should predict access to democracy-contingent benefits, and therefore invitations to observers, during the Cold War, but not after. After 1990, nearly all states that held multiparty elections and were not already considered democratic could attempt to gain benefits tied to democracy. Second, the relative size of democracy-contingent benefits is an important parameter, although it is the most difficult to measure. In theory, incumbents are aware of their potential share of international benefits before they choose to invite observers, and should be more likely to invite observers when democracy-contingent benefits (or autocracy-contingent costs) are greater (the full model is in the SI). Incumbents, however, seek a diverse array of international benefits such as foreign aid, preferential trading arrangements, and membership in international organizations, and may seek benefits that are not easily quantifiable, such as legitimacy, and these benefits may be supplemented with an increase in domestic demand for democracy. The ideal measure of democracy-contingent benefits would be an indicator of what each state leader expected to receive as a result of inviting observers and gaining a positive report. Unfortunately, these data are impractical for many reasons, including that they would be very difficult to collect and pseudo-democrats would be unlikely to admit to their true motivations for inviting observers (i.e., that they are attempting to fake democracy in order to gain international benefits). Aggregating expected international benefits in a comparable cross-national measure would also be problematic, as it would involve the aggregation of diverse types of benefits, ranging from increased foreign direct investment to international prestige.

I instead focus on one way in which democracy promoters communicate their support for democracy to potential recipients of democracy-contingent benefits. Bilateral official development assistance is one country-specific indicator that can be disaggregated by sector, including foreign aid targeted toward democracy and governance. This proxy for international interest in supporting democratic states should be positively correlated with the broader range of democracy-contingent benefits, although it is not intended to measure them directly. Data were compiled by a team of researchers in cooperation with USAID and are available for the United States and other OECD donors from 1990 to 2005 (Finkel et al. 2007). For each country, I use the percent of total official development assistance (ODA) devoted to democracy and governance, averaged over the previous two years, labeled *Democracy and Governance/ODA*. This measure is based on the assumption that the percent of aid spent on democracy and governance in a country should correlate with international interest in supporting democracy in that country. Incumbents can also observe this measure as a pre-election indicator of interest in promoting democratization.

To account for the establishment of the norm and temporal dependence, I include a measure of whether any

[14]Cold War alliances patterns coded from Walt (1987).

previous election in the country was observed, *Previous Observed*. Additionally, even after 1990, strategic importance may outweigh interest in promoting democracy in specific cases. Therefore, I include a variable indicating the percentage of total U.S. military assistance received by the country in the previous year. Countries receiving a higher percentage of *U.S. Military Assistance* should be less likely to invite observers. A country's decision to invite observers may also be related to the size of the economy or the country's economic development, and I include *GDP (logged)* and *GDP per capita (logged)* (World Bank 2007). *Previous Negative* indicates whether any observers seriously criticized the country's previous election.[15]

Data

Each observation in the dataset is a separate election, and the data include all direct national elections held in 157 countries, totaling 1,754 individual elections. The only countries excluded from the analysis are microstates and the five independent states that did not hold any direct national elections between 1960 and 2006: China, Eritrea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The list of included countries, summary statistics, and more detailed variable descriptions are provided in the SI.

Election observation data were first collected from organizations that sponsor election observation missions. Because some reports have been lost or are no longer public, for each election after 1978, newswire reports on dates surrounding elections were also searched for mention of international observers. Whether an election was monitored was checked by organization and by election. For each election (each observation in the dataset), there is an indication of whether or not it was observed and, when possible, by whom. Many elections are observed by multiple groups, and both international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are recorded as sponsors of observation missions.[16] Unless otherwise referenced, all data were collected by the author.

Analysis and Results

Before 1990, observed elections were relatively rare events and, as Figure 1 shows, monitoring quickly diffused in the post-1990 period. Pooling these two distinct time periods is methodologically difficult, in part because of the step-function increase in the rate of election observation, and in part because the data are not traditional time-series cross-sectional. Additionally, the variable used as a proxy for democracy-contingent benefits is only available after 1990. Rather than introducing a more complicated modeling strategy, I split the sample into two time periods, 1960–90 and 1991–2006. My theoretical focus on the diffusion of the norm of election observation (rather than its initiation) is reflected in the 1991–2006 time period.

The average number of elections held by a given country ranges from 1 to 27 elections in the full 1960–2006 dataset. The data are pooled by country, but the variation in the number of temporal observations for each country means that widely used statistical tools for binary time-series cross-sectional analyses are not appropriate.[17] The inclusion of *Previous Observed* helps account for temporal dependence, and a *Year* variable is included in all models to account for remaining unexplained temporal variation.

The estimation method is logistic regression. All models include robust standard errors, clustered by country. The specification of the baseline model (Model 1) is: $\boldsymbol{P}(\textit{Observed} = 1 | \boldsymbol{x}_i) = 1 / (1+e^{-x}{}_i\boldsymbol{\beta})$, where $\boldsymbol{x}_i\boldsymbol{\beta} = \boldsymbol{\beta}_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta}_1$ *Uncertain Type* $+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_2$ *Opposition Competition* $+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_3$ *US Ally* $+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_4$ *Previous Observed* $+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_5$ *GDP (log)*$+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_5$ *GDP per Capita (log)* $+ \boldsymbol{\beta}_6$ *Year*

As outlined above, the cross-national results include those associated with uncertainty over a state's commitment to democracy and those associated with a state's desire for democracy-contingent benefits, as shown in Table 1.[18] Following the first and second hypotheses, governments should be most likely to invite observers when their regime type is uncertain and when they can gain democracy-contingent benefits. As Model 1 shows, between 1960 and 1990, U.S. allies are significantly more likely to invite observers, as are those with uncertain type, those which allow opposition competition, and those who invited observers previously. Moving to the 1991–2005 period, *U.S. Cold War Ally* is no longer statistically significant, consistent with the argument that democracy-contingent benefits became available to all states, including former Soviet allies, nonaligned states, and newly independent states. The effects of *Uncertain Type*, *Opposition Competition*, and *Previously Observed* continue

[15]Because of their methods, observers are unlikely to wrongly criticize a democratic election, and more likely to make the mistake of failing to condemn a problematic election. For a more detailed account of how observers detect election fraud, see Hyde (2008).

[16]The full list of election-monitoring organizations is included in the supplementary materials.

[17]Because the number of time points is not "reasonably large" for all units, Beck, Katz, and Tucker's (1998) recommended method for BTSCS data is not appropriate.

[18]The measures of a country's democratic status are distinct: *Opposition Competition* & *Uncertain Type* correlate at −0.04, *Opposition Competition* & *Consolidated Democracy* at 0.29, and *Uncertain Type* & *Consolidated Democracy* at −0.23.

to match theoretical expectations after 1990, all increasing the probability that an election would be observed. Also as expected, *Consolidated Democracy* decreases the probability that an election will be observed.[19]

Model 3 introduces the post-1990 proxy for international interest in supporting democracy in each state. As expected, the percent of aid devoted to democracy and governance in the country in the previous year is a significant predictor of whether that country invites international monitors.[20] Model 3 also includes *U.S. Military Assistance*, which helps account for other valued characteristics of states that may outweigh democracy-contingent benefits. As expected, countries receiving a greater percentage of U.S. military assistance are less likely to invite observers, although this particular result is sensitive to the inclusion of Egypt and Israel.[21]

The third hypothesis, that pseudo-democrats should be more likely to invite observers after 1990, is evaluated in part using Figure 1. First, as predicted, the rate of negative reports after 1990 increases as more pseudo-democrats invite observers. In addition, Model 4 includes *Previous Negative,* a measure of whether the country's elections had previously been criticized by observers. Following my theory of norm diffusion, if democracy-contingent benefits are sufficiently large, and democracy promoters believe that all true-democrats invite observers, the risk of a negative report should be preferable to refusing observers entirely. As expected, receiving a negative report in a previous election does not reduce the probability that observers are invited.

Robustness and Alternative Explanations

I now consider several alternative explanations suggested by the existing literature on election monitoring and the global diffusion of policies in the international system, several of which were already discussed. Presented simplistically, the leading alternative explanations for the widespread diffusion of election monitoring are (1) that international norms like election monitoring are created to facilitate international cooperation in the context of international institutions; (2) that international norms like election monitoring are generated by the work of activists who pressure states to invite observers; or (3) election monitoring can be explained by other theories of international policy diffusion.

In relation to the first two alternatives, I argue that election observation was initiated by governments rather than advocated by norm entrepreneurs or created to help facilitate cooperation. There is little evidence that activists pressured governments to invite observers. Some scholars infer the existence of norm entrepreneurs because election observation is now an international norm, but evidence of norm entrepreneurship in election observation is nearly all after the end of the Cold War, and well after election observation was initiated and diffused widely, undermining confidence in its explanatory potential (Kelley 2008a). Even prominent election observers—and potential norm entrepreneurs—like Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center were explicit in their reluctance to pressure governments to invite international observers. As Eric Bjornlund writes, "(e)lection monitoring became the most prominent activity of the [Carter Center] almost by accident, as an extension of its efforts to promote peace" (2004, 75).

During the initial diffusion of election observation, to the extent that international organizations, states, and NGOs commented on election observation, they advocated noninterference in the domestic politics of sovereign states, and were explicitly reluctant to support election observation (Beigbeder 1994; Bjornlund 2004; Slater 1967). The first known invitations from leaders of sovereign states to potential international observers were refused on the grounds that international election monitoring violated sovereignty, and this argument continued within several prodemocracy international organizations. For example, the United Nations received its first invitation to provide election observers in 1958, yet despite dozens of subsequent invitations, refused to send election observers to any sovereign states until 1990 (Beigbeder 1994; Ludwig 1995).

Similarly, there is little additional evidence that election observation was generated as a norm to facilitate international cooperation, or that countries within international institutions pressured governments to invite observers before election monitoring became a widely accepted international norm. Other scholars have documented this more exhaustively, but it is not clear how the norm of election observation would have helped facilitate cooperation, nor whether pressure from other states

[19] *Consolidated Democracy* is not included in Model 1 because there are no consolidated democracies that invite observers during this period.

[20] The SI includes estimates of the substantive effects of the central independent variables on the probability of *Observed.* Based on Model 3, it presents the following estimates (with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses): *Uncertain Type* is associated with an 11% increase (6–16%), *Opposition Competition* is associated with a 24% increase (8–44%), *Consolidated Democracy* is associated with a decrease of 30% (−64–0%), *Dem & Gov/ODA* is associated with an increase of 4% (0–8%), and *Previous Observed* is associated with an increase of 62% (53–71%).

[21] When Egypt and Israel are excluded from the model, the coefficient on *U.S. Military Assistance* decreases to −0.01 (s.e. = 0.14). The results for *Democracy and Governance/ODA* are nearly identical when Egypt and Israel are excluded.

TABLE 1 Binomial Logit Regression, Observed Elections

	(1) 1960–1990	*(2)* 1991–2005	*(3)* 1991–2005	*(4)* 1991–2005	*(5)* 1991–2005	*(6)* 1991–2005	*(7)* 1991–2005
Uncertain Type	1.39**	1.91**	2.06**	2.06**	2.06**	2.06**	2.07**
	(0.43)	(0.33)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.35)
Opposition Competition	1.34	1.41**	1.39**	1.37**	1.37**	1.19*	1.40**
	(0.71)	(0.40)	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.49)	(0.43)
Consol. Democracy		−1.81*	−1.67*	−1.62*	−1.63*	−1.55	−1.68*
		(0.73)	(0.79)	(0.76)	(0.81)	(0.85)	(0.80)
U.S. Cold War Ally	1.04*	−0.30	−0.14	−0.15	−0.15	−0.15	−0.13
	(0.43)	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.36)
Dem. & Gov./ODA			2.65	2.62	2.59	2.54	2.56
			(1.42)	(1.43)	(1.42)	(1.40)	(1.41)
U.S. Military Assistance			−0.18*	−0.18*	−0.18*	−0.17*	−0.19*
			(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Previously Observed	3.26**	3.21**	3.09**	3.01**	3.10**	3.06**	3.08**
	(0.53)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.32)	(0.32)	(0.31)
Previous Negative				0.26			
				(0.50)			
GDP (log)	−0.30*	−0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02
	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
GDP per capita (log)	−0.13	−0.32*	−0.39**	−0.38**	−0.38**	−0.36*	−0.37*
	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.15)
Year	0.12**	0.10*	0.08*	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
POLITY						0.02	
						(0.03)	
POLITY^2						−0.00	
						(0.01)	
Neighbor% Observed							0.26
							(0.33)
Constant	−235.64**	−191.44*	−152.61*	−146.49	−135.28	−140.22	−147.70
	(60.03)	(75.25)	(76.41)	(77.25)	(76.73)	(78.63)	(76.69)
Observations	809	710	703	703	687	687	703
Area under ROC curve	0.91	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.93

Robust standard errors in parentheses are clustered by country. *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%.
Note: If *Previously Observed* is excluded from Model 4, *Previous Negative* is positive and statistically significant (coefficient 1.46, standard error 0.46).

would have succeeded in spreading election observation. As above, among leading democracy promoters, concerns about whether election monitoring violated sovereignty were raised on numerous occasions, especially within the Organization for American States and the United Nations (Slater 1967). There is also little evidence of imposition of the norm by a powerful state within the OAS or another institution. As Santa-Cruz argues, international election monitoring was "not just a practice imposed by the United States on its weak neighbors" (2005, 679).

There are two additional alternative explanations offered by the existing literature. Kelley (2008b) provides one of the few other cross-national studies of election observation, and finds that countries in the "middle" of the *POLITY* scale are most likely to invite observers. This is similar to my argument about whether there is uncertainty about a government's commitment to democracy, but is more general, and does not detail a precise causal mechanism about why mid-levels of regime type should predict election observation. To evaluate this claim relative to my argument, I add Kelley's measure of a government's regime type to my model: the *POLITY2* measure from the *POLITY* IV data, and the same measure squared (Marshall and Jaggers 2002). The 21-point *POLITY2* scale

ranges from −10 to 10, or most autocratic to most democratic. The *POLITY* data introduce new sources of missing data, and so I first replicate Model 3 without the observations for which *POLITY* scores are missing. As shown in Model 5, dropping these observations does not significantly change the results presented from Model 3. Model 6 adds *POLITY* and *POLITY Squared* to Model 4.[22] When included in a model with measures of uncertainty over a government's commitment to democracy and levels of international democracy-contingent benefits, the variables are jointly insignificant, indicating a lack of support for the level of democracy as an explanation for why governments invite observers.[23]

A final alternative explanation for election monitoring is suggested by the literature on international diffusion of policies. Although the policy diffusion literature is not intended to explain international norm formation and diffusion, my theory can be connected to it in several ways. Across this literature, international norms are treated as a potential explanatory variable rather than a topic to be explained, and several scholars set up norm-based explanations for diffusion as an alternative to strategic explanations for diffusion. For example, Gleditsch and Ward present the argument that "norms and values. . .favor the development and durability of democratic rule" as an alternative to their explanation (2006, 911–12). Simmons and Elkins argue that one way that the policy choice payoffs can be altered are "ideational" and "work through the more subjective pressures of prevailing global norms" (2004, 172). This contrast presents an incomplete picture of the role of international norms in explaining the widespread diffusion of a variety of policies and practice among states. Although these scholars do not attempt to explain international norms, many of the substantive topics they explore would be perhaps better understood with attention to international norm formation and the changing beliefs among international actors about the appropriate behavior of other states.

Nevertheless, the literature on policy diffusion suggests a second alternative explanation for the spread of election monitoring. My theory explicitly involves mimicry of election monitoring by other states, and I account for this empirically by specifying the characteristics of individual regimes that are most likely to benefit from mimicking the signal, and therefore to invite observers. Related arguments in the diffusion literature would suggest that a country would be more likely to invite international observers if that country's neighboring states also invited observers. Therefore, to evaluate the explanatory power of a more general diffusion argument, I include a variable, *Neighbor Percent Observed,* that measures the percentage of all elections that were internationally monitored in contiguous states, as defined by the Correlates of War Direct Contiguity Data.[24] Model 7 adds *Neighbor Percent Observed* to Model 3, which is not statistically significant.[25]

The comparison suggests that the election and regime-specific variables derived from my theory are better predictors of internationally monitored elections than the more general measures of regime type and regional diffusion suggested by the existing literature. These findings support the empirical implications outlined above and lend general support to my theory relative to the central alternative explanations that can be evaluated in this framework. Note that the alternative explanations evaluated in Models 6–7 are sufficiently general that they are also consistent with my argument. Nevertheless, the cross-national empirical evidence provides evidence that is strongly consistent with the empirical implications derived from my model, and shows that variables associated with my signaling theory of norm development are more strongly correlated with observed elections than leading alternative explanations.

Extending the Theory to Other International Norms

The theory presented in this article has the potential to be applied to the diffusion of other international behaviors and the creation of other signaling-based norms. Information between international actors is often asymmetric: states possess accurate information about their own type, and other international actors can have difficulty judging whether another state is an undesirable type. Across a variety of issue areas, international actors benefit from interacting with or promoting certain types of

[22]In related work on this subject, I also included *POLITY* and *Regional Percent Observed* as variables explaining internationally monitored elections (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009).

[23]The null hypothesis that the coefficients for *POLITY* and *POLITY Squared* are both equal to zero cannot be rejected, with $\chi^2(2) = 0.69$ and prob. $> \chi^2 = 0.71$ (Wald test).

[24]Data on adjacency are from the Correlates of War Project. *Direct Contiguity Data, 1816–2006*. Version 3.1. Available online: http://correlatesofwar.org.

[25]The null hypothesis that *Neighbor Percent Observed* is equal to zero cannot be rejected, with $\chi^2\ (1) = 0.60$ and prob. $> \chi^2 = 0.44$. Measures of the percent of elections observed in the region in the previous year and the lagged *Neighbor Percent Observed* show a similar relationship.

characteristics among other states in the international system, and therefore have the incentive to support states that are believed to possess valued characteristics. For states possessing such characteristics but lacking a matching reputation, this type of international "market" gives them the incentive to identify credible signals of their valued characteristics.

Many states in the international system seek international benefits—such as increased investment, trade, foreign aid, military support, membership in international organizations, legitimacy, or prestige. Such international benefits are targeted toward states possessing valued characteristics and withdrawn from states that are revealed not to possess them. Benefit-seeking leaders possess more information about their own characteristics than other international actors. Even when influential international actors prefer to interact with specified types of states, they cannot always distinguish good types from bad types and, all else held equal, they often prefer to avoid rewarding states of uncertain type. Thus, benefit-seeking states are motivated to find a solution to this market failure. A credible signal of their type represents such a solution (Spence 1973).

Within international politics it is well known that states vary in their type. Yet in many issue areas, international benefits are allocated by a diffuse set of actors, including other states, international organizations, international NGOs, and multinational corporations. In most cases there is no supranational body that coordinates clear standards for how states can credibly signal that they possess a given characteristic. The signals that become expected behaviors, or international norms, are not necessarily mandated or even articulated by benefit-giving actors, who can simply continue rewarding states whose reputations are not questioned, and that are already believed to possess valued characteristics. The impetus is on benefit-seeking states to identify credible signals of their type. Signals are most likely to diffuse as international norms when international benefits are associated with specific characteristics, when signals reveal information to benefit-giving actors, and when sending the signal is more costly to "bad" types.

Conclusion

This article began with an empirical puzzle. Many leaders invite international election observers, cheat in front of them, and face negative consequences as a result. For pseudo-democrats, being caught cheating by international observers can lead to international condemnation, domestic uprising, and an overall reduction in the probability that they will maintain their hold on power. The existence of the norm of election observation explains this puzzle. Without the norm, held and enforced by the international community, the rate of observed elections should have begun decreasing by the end of the 1990s as observers grew better at catching election fraud and more likely to sanction fraudulent elections. Instead, the rate of observed elections continued to increase during this time period, even as the risks associated with inviting observers grew. In other issue areas within international relations, the diffusion of such costly norms has been explained as the result of pressure from activists, or because of incentives for international cooperation. Election observation, in contrast, was initiated by state leaders to signal their government's commitment to democratization. As more international benefits were linked to democracy, leaders who were not necessarily committed democrats also had the incentive to invite observers. This repeated behavior resulted in acceptance of election observation as compatible with respect for state sovereignty, and in the widely shared belief that all true-democrats invite observers and receive their endorsement.

This theory of norm formation was developed to explain election monitoring, but could also be applied to other international norms triggered by changing values or preferences among influential international actors. Any exogenous change in the characteristics valued by international actors can provoke a similar strategic response by states seeking to maximize their share of international benefits. A further implication of this theory is that international benefits tied to democracy and the resulting incentive to "fake" democratization may in part explain why many countries continue to inhabit the institutionally ambiguous space between democracy and autocracy. Similar dynamics may be at work in other issue areas like human rights, labor standards, and environmental policy. Further research should explore these issues, as well as the domestic effects of election observation, the credibility of international and domestic monitors, and other consequences of international pressure for democracy.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table 1: Summary of Notation
Table 2: Countries Included in Analysis
Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

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