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The Electoral Tango: the Evolution of Electoral  
Integrity in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes

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European University Institute  
**Max Weber Programme**

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**Abstract**

In recent decades, the politics of electoral reform has revolved mainly around the implementation of democratic electoral principles rather than around the principles themselves. This means that electoral authoritarian leaders tend to employ forms of electoral abuse that entail giving unfair advantage to pro-regime electoral competitors, rather than excluding either voters or competitors from the electoral arena altogether. When such regimes become weakened, they tend to ramp up forms of manipulation that favour pro-regime political forces. This deterioration in election quality often serves as a focal point which mobilises both domestic and international pressure for electoral reform, as the erosion of established electoral rights generates grievances. Under the right circumstances, such mobilisation can lead to step changes in the quality of elections. This suggests that improvements in electoral integrity commonly follow increases in fraud, in a one-step-back-two-steps-forward pattern which is in several ways quite distinct from existing understandings of the relationship between elections and democratisation. This model, which I term the 'electoral tango', has implications for how we evaluate and address electoral malpractice in the contemporary world.

**Keywords**

Electoral tango, electoral abuse, authoritarian regimes.

*The lecture was delivered on 17 February 2016.*

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## **Introduction**

There has been a recent wave of interest in the subject of electoral integrity among scholars and practitioners alike. On the academic front, students of democratisation and authoritarianism are increasingly turning their attention to the ways in which elections are manipulated in undemocratic and semi-democratic settings as a means of channelling political change (e.g. Birch, 2011; Donno and Roussias, 2012; Donno, 2013a; 2013b; Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012; Levitsky and Way, 2012; Lindberg, 2009; Magaloni, 2006; Norris, 2012; Schedler, 2002a; 2013; Simpser, 2013). Practitioners, for their part, have recently begun to devote resources to codifying and analysing the experience of over six decades of electoral observation, analysis and assistance (e.g. Goodwin-Gill, 1994; International IDEA, 2002; European Commission, 2007).

The burgeoning literature on the ‘coloured revolutions’ in Central and Eastern Europe documents how in case after case, worsening electoral irregularities led groups of citizens to take to the streets in protest (Beachain and Polese, 2010; Beissinger, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; 2010; 2011; Kalandadze and Orenstein, 2009; White, 2010; Tucker, 2007). These protests were less than successful in countries such as Azerbaijan and Belarus, but in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, anti-fraud movements led to wholesale changes of power that improved the quality of electoral conduct (at least temporarily).

At the same time, there is no consensus among either scholars or practitioners as to the principal drivers of change in electoral quality. This is an important question for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical point of view, a better understanding of the factors associated with changes in electoral quality will enable us more clearly to comprehend patterns of political development. From a practical perspective, understanding the drivers of change in electoral quality will enhance our ability to undertake measures to make elections more democratic.

The main argument put forward in this paper is that because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the politics of electoral reform revolves mainly around the implementation of democratic electoral principles rather than around the principles themselves, electoral authoritarian leaders tend to employ forms of electoral abuse that entail giving unfair advantage to pro-regime electoral competitors, rather than excluding either voters or competitors from the electoral arena altogether. When such regimes become weakened, they tend to ramp up forms of manipulation that favour pro-regime political forces. This deterioration in election quality then serves as a focal point which mobilises both domestic and international pressure for electoral reform, as the erosion of established electoral rights generates grievances. Under the right circumstances, such mobilisation can lead to step changes in the quality of elections. The synthesis of these arguments yields a new one-step-back-two-steps-forward model of electoral change which is in several ways quite distinct from existing understandings of the relationship between elections and democratisation. This model, which I term the ‘electoral tango’, has implications for how we evaluate and address electoral malpractice in the contemporary world.

## **Conceptual preliminaries**

The concept of electoral integrity and electoral malpractice are intimately intertwined. Electoral integrity is designated by conformity to democratic standards of electoral conduct: inclusiveness, transparency, impartiality. At its simplest, electoral malpractice is any significant deviation from electoral integrity. More specifically, Electoral malpractice is the corruption of the electoral process. Corruption is conventionally defined as ‘the abuse of public office for private or partisan benefit’. Electoral malpractice can be defined as the abuse of the electoral process for private or partisan ends’.

Electoral malpractice takes three principal forms: the illicit manipulation of electoral rules, the illicit manipulation of electoral procedures and the illicit manipulation of the behaviour of voters (Birch 2011). Assuming the leadership of an authoritarian state controls the legislature, the manipulation of electoral rules is arguably the easiest, cheapest and safest form of electoral manipulation, as it involves subtle and not-so-subtle alterations to the laws and other rules governing the electoral process. Domestic and international commentators may complain about ‘unfair’ electoral laws, but they typically refrain from deeming this form of abuse ‘fraudulent’ or ‘illegal’. Moreover,

there is considerable variation even among the world's most democratic states in standards of electoral institution design (Goodwin-Gill, 1994), which gives potential manipulators considerable leeway to adjust electoral institutions while at the same time avoiding full-blown international censure.

Yet the manipulation of electoral rules is often not felt by leaders to be sufficient to guarantee their electoral success, and they often employ other techniques alongside rule manipulation in order to be sure of securing a comfortable margin of victory. The manipulation of voters' voluntary choices is a strategy that may often be seen by leaders as having an acceptable risk profile. Voter manipulation includes both carrots and sticks – vote-buying and intimidation and/or harassment that induce electors to cast a vote for a candidate or party other than their true preference. Voter manipulation also takes the more insidious form of the alteration of voters' true preferences through ensuring media bias, blocking oppositional media channels, and engaging in slanderous smear campaigns against the opposition. The use of state resources for partisan electoral campaign ends is another way in which leaders of electoral authoritarian states often build an unfair advantage into the electoral campaign. When leaders are unsure that manipulation of the rules and the voters will suffice to give them the electoral outcome they desire, they might decide to engage in the third type of electoral malpractice: manipulation of voting procedures. Yet manipulation of voting is considerably riskier than either of the other two forms of malpractice, as it carries considerable risk to both domestic and international legitimacy if it is discovered, and large-scale vote manipulation is difficult to conceal.

Having surveyed three types of electoral malpractice, one might pause to ask how important this phenomenon really is. Given the pressing need of many of the world's people for food, clean water, sanitation, health care and other basic necessities, a sceptic might aver that the manipulation of electoral institutions is not in fact that large a problem. But social and political problems are closely connected, and electoral malpractice does have a number of very negative consequences for many of the countries in which it occurs. First and foremost, corruption of the electoral process ushers in a wide range of other types of corruption, as it projects into positions of supreme power individuals who are prepared to sacrifice democracy to their own personal and partisan ends. Moreover, many forms of electoral malpractice are costly, which puts further pressure on elected politicians to engage in corruption in order to fill their electoral war chests. A vicious cycle thus forms between electoral malpractice and corruption in public office. Electoral abuse also undermines regime legitimacy, which makes it more difficult for leaders to lead, reduces the willingness of citizens to comply with the law, and undermines citizen efficacy and political engagement. In some circumstances, electoral malpractice can even prompt widespread violence, as has happened in recent elections in Cote d'Ivoire, Libya and elsewhere. Far from being a minor irritant to a well-functioning state, electoral malpractice eats away at the very fabric of good governance and prevents democracy from taking hold.

## **I The Electoral Tango: An Overview of the Argument**

Election is an ancient institution that has only in modern times been harnessed to the ends of representative democracy (Katz, 1997, chap. 2; Posada-Carbó, 1996; Staveley, 1972). The increasing importance of elected assemblies as tools of governance in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the first stage in this process. Since that time, representative democracy has evolved along two principal fronts: elected representatives (assemblies and executives) have gradually eclipsed non-elected institutions, and elections have come increasingly to embody values we associate with 'freeness', 'fairness' and 'credibility'.

It is the second of these developments that is the topic of this paper. Three key phases or 'waves', to use Samuel Huntington's terminology, can be identified in the evolution of standards of electoral integrity. The first and second of these phases revolved around the increasing inclusivity of elections. In the first wave of electoral reform, which began in Europe and the Americas in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and was largely complete by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, franchises were expanded, and the entire adult citizenry was, with limited exceptions, gradually incorporated into electoral processes (Przeworski, 2008; 2011). By 1945, virtually all developed states had accepted universal suffrage, as had a number of non-democratic and less-developed states. There are of course exceptions, such as Switzerland, which only granted women the vote in 1974, the United States, which imposed effective

restrictions on voting by blacks till the 1950s, and South Africa, where genuine universal suffrage was only established in 1994. However, franchise inclusivity was largely achieved by the end of the Second World War.

The second major wave in the development of modern standards of electoral integrity took place largely in the immediate post-Cold War period and is associated with inclusivity of contestation, by which I mean opening of electoral systems to competition by virtually all parties and individuals who desire to compete. This development was associated largely with the decline in the number of single-party regimes and the increase in the number of ‘competitive authoritarian’ regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2010) in the post-Cold War Era. Whereas the first wave of electoral reforms effectively eliminated voter exclusion, the second wave dramatically reduced the number of states that formally limited the range of parties and candidates which were, in theory at least, allowed to compete in elections (Diamond, 2002; Gandhi, 2008: 40; Schedler, 2013: 3).

For several decades commentators used the terminology of ‘free and fair’ to describe elections. Though this language has somewhat fallen into disuse in recent years, we can say that the first two waves in the evolution of electoral integrity were largely about elections becoming ‘freer’, in the sense that they experienced a gradual process of inclusion. By contrast, the third wave of electoral reform has largely revolved around making elections ‘fairer’ by creating a level playing field for competition. Of course, the manipulation of electoral procedures has for centuries been an aspect of electoral competition, and periodic reforms to address problems such as undue influence and vote-buying have long been debated. However, it has only been recently that the focus of efforts to improve elections has fallen squarely in the implementation of electoral procedures, rather than on the establishment of basic electoral rights.

This ‘third wave’ of electoral reform, which is ongoing, began to gain momentum in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a growing realisation that many of the states that had recently opened up their electoral processes to multiparty competition nevertheless carried out elections that were fundamentally flawed in many ways (Bjornlund, 2004; Schedler, 2002a).

In the contemporary world, there are very few states that hold no elections to national-level institutions, and there are also few that impose significant suffrage restrictions. There are a number of what are often termed ‘hegemonic authoritarian’ states (Diamond, 2002; Donno, 2013a; Levitsky and Way, 2010) that impose substantial *effective* restrictions on competition, such that regime opponents are regularly denied ballot access. Yet in most states with ‘problem’ elections, *formal* electoral rights of inclusion are guaranteed, and the principal obstacles to electoral integrity revolve around the levelness of the electoral playing field (Birch, 2011). It follows that the main objects of dispute in states that hold problematic elections tend to be those pertaining to electoral ‘fairness’, and when reforms are introduced, they tend to involve such measures as guaranteeing independent electoral commissions, improving voter registers and ensuring that there are impartial electoral dispute resolution mechanisms available to all electoral actors.

The result has been a gradual shift from exclusion to bias as a means of manipulating elections, and the argument I would like to make here is that this shift has had important implications for how mass publics react to electoral abuse. Whereas previously the terrain of contestation had been largely about specific rights – the right to vote and the right to stand for election – now the grounds for grievance about elections are much more likely to revolve around how elections are conducted on the ground. In other words, objections to electoral conduct are more likely to focus on the *implementation* of the basic principles subtending elections than on the basic principles themselves. Granted, electoral laws are common objects of complaint; indeed, a recent study has found that the manipulation of electoral laws to be the most common form of manipulation in three regions of the world between 1995 and 2007 (Birch, 2011). Nevertheless, in only a small minority of these cases was the basic right to take part in an election – either as a voter or as a candidate – at issue.

Another way of seeing this shift is from up-stream to downstream aspects of the electoral process – from what happens when electoral rights are being decided to what happens during the electoral period itself before. This shift can thus be understood as having relevant temporal and behavioural dimensions. Temporally, there is a greater focus on what goes on before, during and after elections. Elections in the Soviet Union were fairly low-key affairs, as the script underlying them was

well-known to all those involved; nothing that happened during the electoral process was at all likely to affect the fundamental fact that there was only ever one candidate on the ballot paper. In post-Soviet Russia, by contrast, the right to competition is constitutionally guaranteed, and even if the results of recent electoral contests have been foregone conclusions, there has been far greater focus both domestically and internationally on *how* elections are carried out (McAllister and White, 2011). The behavioural implications of this shift from contestation over rights to contestation over processes have resulted from the fact that actors are in contemporary electoral authoritarian states typically included in the electoral process, but then cheated of fair treatment. In other words, they are given a stake in electoral institutions, and then left to watch their stake eroded by manipulative practices. This sense of having been cheated, of having something given and then ‘stolen’ or taken away, has the potential to lead to widespread grievance. Being formally included but effectively disenfranchised is also more likely to generate *episodic* disquiet and thus mobilisation. And electoral processes are the ideal background for contentious politics. They are predictably circumscribed in time, they follow well-defined, highly ritualised patterns, and they involve virtually the entire adult population (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011: 16). It is thus not surprising that repertoires of contentious activity should develop in many contexts where elections are viewed as being unfair (e.g. Blaydes, 2011; Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; 2011; Eisenstadt, 2004), as when an election is manipulated ‘for once, the entire country is experiencing the same act of abuse simultaneously’ (Tucker, 2007: 541).

A number of scholars have noted that such protest activity has been the principal motor of electoral reform in many states (Beissinger, 2007; Bunce and Wolchick, 2009; 2010; 2011; Norris, 2012; Schedler, 2013; Thompson and Kuntz, 2004; 2006; Tucker, 2007). These findings have been confirmed at the individual level in a recent survey-based study by Pippa Norris, which finds that lack of confidence in electoral integrity encourages political activism (Norris, 2012). The way in which popular protests against electoral fraud play out has also been the subject of several macro-level analyses (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Case, 2006; Cox, 2009; Lehoucq, 1995; Magaloni, 2006; 2010; Schedler, 2002b; 2013; Thompson and Kuntz, 2006).

Building on these studies, I would like to take this argument one step further and argue that electoral fraud and malpractice that sparks protest when incumbents are weak tends to result in improvements in electoral quality, due both to the direct impact of underlying regime weakness, and also to the fact that democracy-promoting international actors are more likely to pressure authoritarian regimes which are exhibiting signs of weakness. In sum, elections often need to become problematic before they get better – a two-step-back-one-step-forward process that, to adapt Lenin’s famous phrase, may be called the ‘electoral tango’.

Specifically, the basic model proposed here is that in electoral authoritarian regimes, political weakness – which may be due to failure to manage the economy, intra-elite divisions, incumbent turnover, military defeat or other factors – leads elites to use electoral fraud and other forms of electoral malpractice intensely in order to stay in power. Provided the leadership is liberal enough in its approach to information to allow a modicum of press freedom and freedom of association, the intensification of fraud is likely to crystallise popular opposition to the regime around demands for electoral reform (as opposed to other policy demands). Incumbent leaders then have the choice of either engaging in proactive reforms in the hopes of retaining power democratically, or further intensifying fraud and repressive measures with the aim of maintaining power through force. Their decision is conditioned by a variety of factors that have been examined elsewhere (Cox, 2009; Eisenstadt, 2004; Donno, 2013a; Lehoucq, 1995; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Magaloni, 2006; 2010; Howard and Roessler, 2006; 2009; Schedler, 2002b; 2013; Thompson and Kuntz, 2006).

I would not of course claim that this process outlined here is the sole route to integrity-enhancing reforms, as other factors such as proximity to other democratising or democratic regimes (‘linkage’ in Levitsky and Way’s formulation) can also account for improvements in electoral quality even in the absence of protests sparked by malpractice. Likewise, there are cases, such as Ghana, where elections exhibit gradual improvements over time without significant backsliding (Lindberg, 2009a: 14-15). However, as the analyses in subsequent sections seek to demonstrate, the ‘electoral tango’ route outlined here appears to be becoming increasingly common.

Before examining the key stages in this process in greater detail, it is worth identifying the principal ways in which the account presented here differs from other analyses of common trajectories of electoral conduct. Firstly, it identifies aspects of the post-war world which distinguish the drivers of electoral reform in this period from those present in previous periods. When striving to improve electoral integrity involved struggles over the franchise or multiparty politics, the dynamic of reform was stark; people were either included or they were excluded from electoral competition, and once they were included, it was very difficult to exclude them again. Reforms thus tended to go in one direction: greater inclusivity. The same is not true in the contemporary era where the struggles for electoral integrity focus more on making electoral procedures fairer. In this context, there is far more scope for backsliding, which opens up the possibility for considerable variability in electoral quality from one election to the next, with consequent disenchantment for electors who enjoy a brief period of relative electoral integrity, followed by a renewed wave of abuse.

Secondly, the argument outlined in this paper helps enhance our understanding of the causal mechanisms behind commonly-observed phenomena. Howard and Roessler's (2006) study of the determinants of 'liberalising elections' goes a considerable way toward providing an account of the circumstances under which elections are likely to lead to democratic outcomes: the key variables in Howard and Roessler's model are opposition coalitions, opposition mobilisation and incumbent turnover. Valuable though this account is, it nevertheless leaves many questions unanswered. Specifically, it does not provide a satisfactory understanding of the factors that enable opposition coalitions to form and to mobilise large sections of the population.

Thirdly, this analysis takes forward analyses put forward by scholars recently that the very holding of elections leads to their gradual improvement. The argument that elections are drivers of democratisation in electoral authoritarian states is most closely associated with Staffan Lindberg, who views the risk of protest against electoral malpractice largely as a deterrent which thwarts such behaviours:

[I]terative, multiparty elections change the cost of both repression and toleration and are thus key events that affect the cost-benefit analysis for the incumbent as well as for reformers. [...] If large numbers of the electorate turn out for elections and vote for the opposition, the cost of electoral manipulation and intimidation goes up. A more massive scheme of fraud and use of force needs to be put in place and shielded from outsiders, the risk of adverse reactions from the international community increases, the risk of post-electoral protest and violence goes up, and so on. At the same time, the benefits for the opposition elites of daring to mobilize citizens for protest increase. (Lindberg, 2009c: 325-6).

Lindberg acknowledges that in some cases the movement toward democracy involves backsliding and increased electoral manipulation which helps to mobilise popular opposition to the regime (2009a: 16; 2009b: 338), but the main emphasis of his causal argument is on the democratising role played by electoral competition itself in instilling norms and providing relevant electoral experiences (Lindberg, 2009b: 338-40; cf Lindberg, 2006).<sup>1</sup> The analysis presented here, by contrast, pinpoints temporary backsliding as one of the key causal mechanisms behind such change, rather than as a caveat.

In a similar vein, Gary Cox (2009) argues that the leaders of authoritarian states risk holding elections so as to gain information about the strength of their rivals and thereby reduce the chances of violent removal from office. It follows that over time, elections ought to become increasingly democratic as leaders will, if they behave strategically, refrain from the most blatant forms of electoral abuse in order to prevent threats of reaction from increasingly powerful opponents that might put them

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<sup>1</sup> At one point Lindberg even explicitly discounts the causal role of increased electoral manipulation in bringing about democratic change: 'the link between democratization and elections is not theoretically tied to the freeness and fairness of elections. Disappointments during a particularly bad experience with electoral practices [...] naturally may stimulate activism in society even more than free elections do. [...] The focus in the following is not on all those *per se* but on how the subgame of repetitive multiparty elections constrains and enables strategies for actors in the transition game' (2009b: 328).

at risk of violent removal from office. This implication of Cox's analysis is articulated in the closing paragraph of the paper:

The model suggests a path-dependent story about democratization. Once an electoral process is established, each new generation of competitors for power have an incentive to invest in the ability to mobilize popular support and win elections. As the military power of the rival(s) increases, the incumbent offers fairer and fairer elections, and is more and more likely to step down after an electoral defeat. (Cox, 2009: 29)

As in Lindberg's account, the emphasis here is on the possibility of mass mobilisation against fraud providing a *deterrent* to electoral abuse.

The argument sketched here thus cuts across the recent debates as to whether elections are functional or detrimental to electoral authoritarian regimes (Blaydes, 2011; Howard and Roessler, 2009; Lindberg, 2009a; 2009b; Lust-Okar, 2009; Pop-Eleches and Robertson, 2010; Schedler, 2013; Teorell and Hadenius, 2009). It could well be that elections – and electoral manipulation in particular – are for a time functional in propping up authoritarian regimes that would otherwise find it difficult to insulate themselves from the threats posed by rival elites and discontented publics, but that ultimately worsening electoral manipulation brought about by regime weakness sparks protest movements that undermine regime stability.

The following sections unpack this proposition.

## **II From Regime Weakness to Worsening Election Quality**

A number of previous studies have pointed to the fact that political weakness – which may be due to failure to manage the economy, intra-elite divisions, incumbent turnover, military defeat, the declining attraction of clientelism in more developed economies, or other factors – leads elites to intensify electoral fraud and other forms of electoral malpractice in order to stay in power.

Larry Diamond has noted that leaders will engage in the greatest amounts of fraud and repression when they are vulnerable:

When longtime authoritarian rulers face serious challenges (as in Malaysia and Zimbabwe recently), they may turn to their nastiest levels of repression, deploying levels of violence and intimidation that are unnecessary when political domination can be more subtly secured at the ballot box. (2002: 33)

Other scholars have pointed to a link between regime weakness and the use of increasing fraud in states such as Nicaragua (McCoy and Hartlyn, 2009: 66), Peru (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 161-9), and Zambia (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 288-91), as well as several states in Central and Eastern Europe (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011: 217-18). Mini case-studies from the Philippines, Mexico and Serbia will serve to illustrate this argument more fully.

*The Philippines under Marcos*: Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines for 21 years. There had been a long tradition of clientelism, intimidation and other forms of electoral abuse in the Philippines (referred to as the use of 'guns, goons and gold'), but a relatively independent electoral commission had kept a check on whole-scale vote-rigging (Thompson, 1998: 2010). Several years after Marcos came to power, he declared martial law and suspended democratic elections until the late 1970s.

But by the early 1980s, Marcos was beginning to lose his grip on power, which was weakened by extreme personalism and intense elite rivalries (Brownlee, 2007: 182-201; Thompson, 1998). Significant elements of the military had lost confidence in the dictator, who was himself suffering from a terminal form of lupus. At the same time, the communist party was gaining strength in rural areas and the economy was faltering. To address his political weakness, Marcos increased the use of electoral fraud, and the 1978, 1980 and 1981 elections were all marred by significant abuse (Thompson, 1998: 226).

The unceremonious murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino upon his return from exile in 1983 helped to galvanise popular opposition to the Marcos regime; significantly, the opposition

movement had the support of the Catholic Church, including vocal Cardinal Jaime Sin. The opposition eventually managed to unite around Aquino's widow Corazon, who contested the snap 1986 presidential elections. An effective and well-organised domestic election observer group, the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), had also been established prior to the 1984 parliamentary elections with the help of a US NGO. The use of fraud was further ramped up in the 1986 polls as it became obvious that Marcos had in fact lost the election (Brownlee, 2007: 194-5; Case, 2006: 109-10; Hartmann, Hassall and Santos, 2001: 187), provoking the 'People Power' protest movement that sparked one of the first 'electoral revolutions' of the modern era.

*Mexico under the PRI:* Another good example of the 'one-step-back-two-steps-forward' phenomenon is Mexico, where the PRI maintained its hegemonic position in Mexican politics for 67 years through a combination of tactics, including moderate amounts of electoral malpractice (Knight, 1996; Magaloni, 2006). However, the main basis of the party's support was an extensive system of electoral clientelism which was particularly strong in rural areas (Camp, 1993: 155-60; Knight, 1996; Magaloni, 2006; Maglioni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estévez, 2007; Middlebrook, 1986: 142).

Over time, economic development and social change eroded the PRI's clientelist support base; at the same time, there was less pork to distribute to voters because of the government's decision to adopt neoliberal economic policies following the 1982 debt crisis (Eisenstadt, 2006; Greene, 2008; Magaloni, 2006: 84). During the 1980s, the party therefore relied increasingly on electoral fraud to win elections (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 153; Magaloni, 2006: 5-6). This shift from relatively 'safe' clientelism to riskier fraud was thus driven by a decline in the true popularity of the party. Moreover, Mexico's economy had suffered considerably in the 1980s, such that by 1988 the inflation rate was 52 per cent and the minimum salary in real terms in Mexico city was 46 per cent lower than it had been in 1980 (Domínguez and McCann, 1995: 36). The PRI clearly had grounds to be concerned for its electoral fortunes.

The 1988 elections pitted PRI stalwart Salinas against renegade Cárdenas, who had broken from the PRI the previous year. It remains unclear what the PRI's level of genuine support was in this election, but commentators agree that fraud was used to push Salinas's vote over the 50 per cent mark required for a majority in the Electoral College (Magaloni, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010: 153). The fraud included the traditional tactics of multiple voting and ballot-box stuffing, but these proved insufficient in the face of the unexpectedly strong showing of Cárdenas. Though the party had been divided on whether to falsify the results, those in favour of the move ultimately won the debate (Magaloni, 2006: 239-40). On the night of the election, an announcement was made that the electronic counting system designed to tally the votes had stopped working; at this point the true results were altered to the benefit of the PRI (as admitted by outgoing president Miguel de la Madrid in his memoirs (Thompson, 2004)).

The 1988 presidential election stands out for the blatant electoral malpractice that led to 50.4 per cent of the vote being declared for Carlos Salinas (Nohlen, 2005). The level of fraud committed by the dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the widespread perception that challenger Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas had been robbed of victory sparked a protracted series of post-electoral demonstrations which eventually resulted in electoral reforms (Eisenstadt, 2004; Magaloni, 2006; Nohlen, 2005).

*Serbia under Milosevic:* Another example is Serbia in the 1990s. Slobodan Milosevic had been at the helm of both Serbia and Yugoslavia since the late 1980s. Though his formal title had changed several times over the years, he and his wife Mira Markovic had led the dwindling Balkan state as if by right (Thompson and Kuntz, 2006: 125). Milosevic maintained power through a variety of means, including the effective division of the opposition, restrictions on the media and varying degrees of electoral malpractice (Birch, 2002; OSCE, 2000; Thomson and Kuntz, 2004).

At the same time, Milosevic's power exhibited a gradual decline over the 1990s as his margin of electoral victory fell and he failed in his not inconsiderable efforts to stand up to international condemnation of his political tactics. The Serbian economy had suffered considerably from Western trade sanctions; by one report, half the population was wearing shoes over ten years old at the time of the 2000 elections (Bujosevic and Radovanovic, 2003: 4). Meanwhile, the NATO-led invasion of Kosovo in 1999 and Milosevic's indictment for war crimes had made it clear that his powers on the

larger political stage were limited. There is also evidence of tensions at the time within the regime forces, which consisted largely of Milosevic's own Socialist Party and the United Left party led by his wife (International Crisis Group, 2000: 11-12), as well as doubts on the part of some members of the armed forces over the war crimes they had committed in Kosovo (International Crisis Group, 2000; RFE/RL *Balkan Report* 3.27, 29 September 2000). To add to his problems, Milosevic had to contend with a decision by the federal republic of Montenegro to boycott the election following Milosevic's introduction of a constitutional change to allow the direct election of the Yugoslav federal president.

It is thus clear that Milosevic's legitimacy was in decline and that he risked considerable losses in the 2000 elections. Although electoral fraud and manipulation had been a feature of Serbian/Yugoslav elections for many years (Thomson and Kuntz, 2004), there is considerable evidence of increased electoral malpractice at the time of the 2000 election (OSCE, 2000). When even these measures yielded Milosevic only 39 per cent of the popular vote to opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica's officially-reported 49 per cent, the Federal Election Commission declared that a run-off would be held. But Kostunica, convinced that he had won an absolute majority, refused to accept a runoff, and eventually Milosevic stepped down when it became clear that he had lost the support of the military.

This section has drawn together evidence to support the first stage in the argument: when electoral authoritarian regimes become weak, they tend to resort to electoral fraud and other forms of malpractice in order to shore up their positions. The next section considers the consequences of more blatant and extensive electoral abuse for regime legitimacy.

### **III From Electoral Malpractice to Reform via Protest**

Analysis of the recent spate of 'electoral revolutions' suggests that popular mobilisation around demand for electoral reforms is becoming more common. There are several reasons for this conjecture: (a) the end of the Cold War led to an increase in pressure on states from the international community, which resulted in greater monitoring of elections and increased the legitimacy cost of manipulating electoral procedures; (b) technological change has made it easier for citizens to overcome the collective action problems and mobilise for reform; and (c) technological change has also made it more common for the citizens of one country to learn about reform movements in other countries, thereby altering their horizon of expectations and educating them about the benefits of clean elections. To this we can add the shift, noted above, in the frontier of struggle over electoral institutions, from basic electoral rights to the fairness of the procedures through which these rights are implemented.

High but stable levels of electoral malpractice can persist for long periods without bringing about significant protest movements, but when people enjoy relatively clean elections, only to see their rights trampled upon, they are more likely to be available for mobilisation.<sup>2</sup> Electoral institutions are in most states relatively technical and remote from most people's immediate concerns. In order to explain the formation of coalitions for electoral reform, we thus need to explain not only how coalitions manage successfully to reform, but why they select electoral reform as their major demand (or one of their major demands) rather than reforms to other institutions or policy change.

The answer offered here is that electoral malpractice is itself the coordinating device that enables oppositions both to come together around a common demand and to select electoral reforms as one of their main aims. When electoral authoritarian regimes are already weakened – as, it is argued above, they often are when they undertake enhanced electoral malpractice – they are particularly vulnerable to threats such as those posed by popular uprisings (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; McFaul, 2005). Moreover, mass mobilisation behind protest movements can further weaken regimes internally, as they may exacerbate divisions and encourage defections (Schedler, 2013: 354-5).

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<sup>2</sup> Meirowitz and Tucker (2013) note, however, that having successfully turned an authoritarian leader out of office via protests, mass public may be less willing to undertake large-scale protests in the same context a second time, as their post-reform experience may, if negative, have altered their understanding of the entire population of politicians in their state.

The demand for fair electoral institutions is a demand that transcends ideological positions; in this sense, it is a demand around which diverse groups can work together without ‘selling out’ or compromising their ideological principles. As several scholars have pointed out, elections are frequently critical political junctures, electoral fraud can serve as a ‘focal point’, providing a co-ordination mechanism to opposition elites (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; Thompson and Kuntz, 2006; Tucker, 2007). In Joshua Tucker’s words ‘When a regime commits electoral fraud, an individual’s calculus regarding whether to participate in a protest against the regime can be changed significantly’ (Tucker, 2007: 353), and this helps to solve the collective action problem normally faced by those with grievances against an electoral authoritarian regime. Protest also serves to communicate information to both regime elites and members of the public that the regime is weak and therefore vulnerable to downfall, which can further fuel protests (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; Howard and Roessler, 2006: 372; Schedler, 2013; Tucker, 2007).

Faced with large-scale protest movements, elites in weakened electoral authoritarian regimes have the choice of either engaging in proactive reforms in the hopes of retaining power democratically, or further intensifying malpractice and repressive measures in the hopes of retaining power through force and repression. Their decision is conditioned by a variety of factors including the strength and cohesiveness of the opposition (Howard and Roessler, 2006; 2009; Magaloni, 2010; Schedler, 2013), the strength of state and party institutions (Levitsky and Way, 2010), and relations with democratic neighbours and influential international actors (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009; Donno, 2013a; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012; Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Where formal institutions are weak and power is personalised, elections are more likely to be high-stakes affairs in which losers run a considerable risk to personal security, loss of wealth and status and permanent exclusion from the political system. Under these conditions, leaders frequently seek to retain their positions by repressing opposition elites and continuing to undertake electoral fraud and malpractice. In cases where large-scale electoral malpractice has been the norm for a considerable time and elites are not particularly weak, they are often able to repress calls for reform (as in Russia 2012 or Iran 2009). Under these circumstances they are often able to remain in power, despite widespread unrest. At this point they once again have the option of engaging in proactive reforms, as happened in Moldova in 2009 following the Communists’ successful repression of an attempted ‘electoral revolution’ (Pop-Eleches and Robertson, 2010), though they are generally unlikely to do so assuming the underlying strength of their institutions has not changed. If, on the other hand, key elite actors such as the military desert the elites, as happened in The Philippines in 1986, Serbia in 2000, Georgia 2003 or Ukraine 2004, then the elite will be forced to cede to popular demands and to undertake reforms.

To sum up the argument outlined here, regime weakness prompts authoritarian leaders to rely on electoral fraud, and this leads voters to mobilise around shared electoral grievances. When protests against electoral fraud take place in the context of a weakening regime, the leader falls under considerable pressure to clean up elections at the following election.

#### **IV Empirical analysis**

Evidence to test the relationship between protest, regime weakness and reform is drawn from Susan Hyde and Nikolai Marinov’s NELDA (National Elections Across Democracies and Autocracies) dataset,<sup>3</sup> together with other sources. The cases selected for analysis in this paper include national-level elections to the presidency and the lower chamber of parliament (first round only) held between 1990 and 2007. Figure 1 [see page 13] shows the number of post-electoral protests against electoral malpractice per year for the period in question, and the proportion of elections held each year which were followed by anti-fraud protests, using indicator Nelda 29, which is coded as a yes/no answer to the question ‘Were there riots and protests after the election?’. As is evident from this graph, both the total number of protests and the share of elections followed by protests have increased in recent years, as predicted by the theoretical expectations set out above.

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<sup>3</sup> Full details of the NELDA dataset can be found at <http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/>.

To test the hypothesis that protests under an incumbent losing strength should be effective in generating electoral reform, several other variables from the NELDA dataset are used. An indicator for electoral malpractice was derived by taking the mean of four relevant variables in the NELDA. These include the following:

Nelda11: 'Before elections, are there significant concerns that elections will not be free and fair?' (y/n)

Nelda13: 'Were opposition leaders prevented from running?' (y/n)

Nelda15: 'Is there evidence that the government harassed the opposition?' (y/n)

Nelda16: 'In the run-up to the election, were there allegations of media bias in favour of the incumbent?' (y/n)

As each of the original indicators is a dichotomous variable, this scale ranges for 0 to 1. The principal independent variables in this model are: (1) whether the *previous* election ( $t-1$ ) represented a gain for the opposition (an indication of regime weakness), coded using Nelda27 'Was the vote count a gain for the opposition?'; (2) the occurrence of fraud-related protests following the *previous* election, coded using Nelda 29 'Were there riots and protests after the election?'; and (3) the interaction term between these two variables. The dependent variable is electoral malpractice at  $t$ ; the lagged value of that variable for the previous election ( $t-1$ ) is also included on the right-hand side of the equation.

Controls relevant to this analysis include: the type of election (presidential, parliamentary or concurrent), fractionalisation of parliament, the number of years that the incumbent has been in office, the presence of electoral observers, the Democracy (Polity IV score), and change in per capita GDP (logged).<sup>4</sup>

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 [see page 12]. In order better to interpret the substantive impact of this interaction, Figure 2 [see page 14] displays the marginal effects of protest at the previous election on electoral malpractice when the opposition had or had not experienced a gain relative to the regime at the previous election.

The model indicates that protests alone are insufficient to curb electoral malpractice, but when protests take place in a context where the regime is weakening and the opposition is gaining, the subsequent election exhibits lower levels of electoral malpractice, as predicted. It is also noteworthy that with the exception of the indicators for lagged electoral malpractice and the country's overall level of democracy, none of the other coefficients in this model is significant. This suggests that one of the most important determinants of the integrity of an election is the recent electoral history of the state in question, and specifically whether the previous election suggested a weakening regime that was beginning to come under popular pressure to reform.

## Conclusion

This paper has synthesised a body of recent research on electoral authoritarianism and has in the process distilled a new understanding of the dynamics of electoral reform. One of the implications of this argument is that the intensification of fraud may often be a harbinger of impending improvement. If a deterioration in election quality is by no means a sufficient condition for a popular uprising to bring about democratic change, it appears to be a common condition. This finding is relevant for electoral assistance providers, in that it suggests that in contexts where electoral integrity worsens over a series of elections, the focus of electoral assistance may be most profitably targeted at the domestic proponents of electoral reform, including domestic observer groups and opposition actors.

Further research could usefully examine in greater detail the conditions under which protests against electoral malpractice lead to lasting improvements in electoral quality. There was research on this topic in the wake of the 'coloured revolutions' in Eastern Europe (e.g. Beissinger, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; McFaul, 2005; Tucker, 2007), but more work remains to be done in other parts of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Control variables were taken from the NELDA dataset (<http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/>) and Democracy Cross-national Data dataset (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>).

Another topic to be explored in future research is differential rates of change in electoral quality across aspects of the electoral process. Reforms to electoral institutions may be expected to come about most rapidly as the direct result of popular mobilisation. Behavioural change to vote-buying, illicit campaign strategies and the use of intimidation to achieve electoral goals may well occur more gradually as norms and strategies adapt to new institutional contexts.

The quality of elections is a core element of democracy, and the struggle to bolster electoral integrity is one of the principal frontiers of political conflict in many contemporary regimes. Recent scholarship has gone a considerable way toward enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of electoral reform, but much also remains to be done.

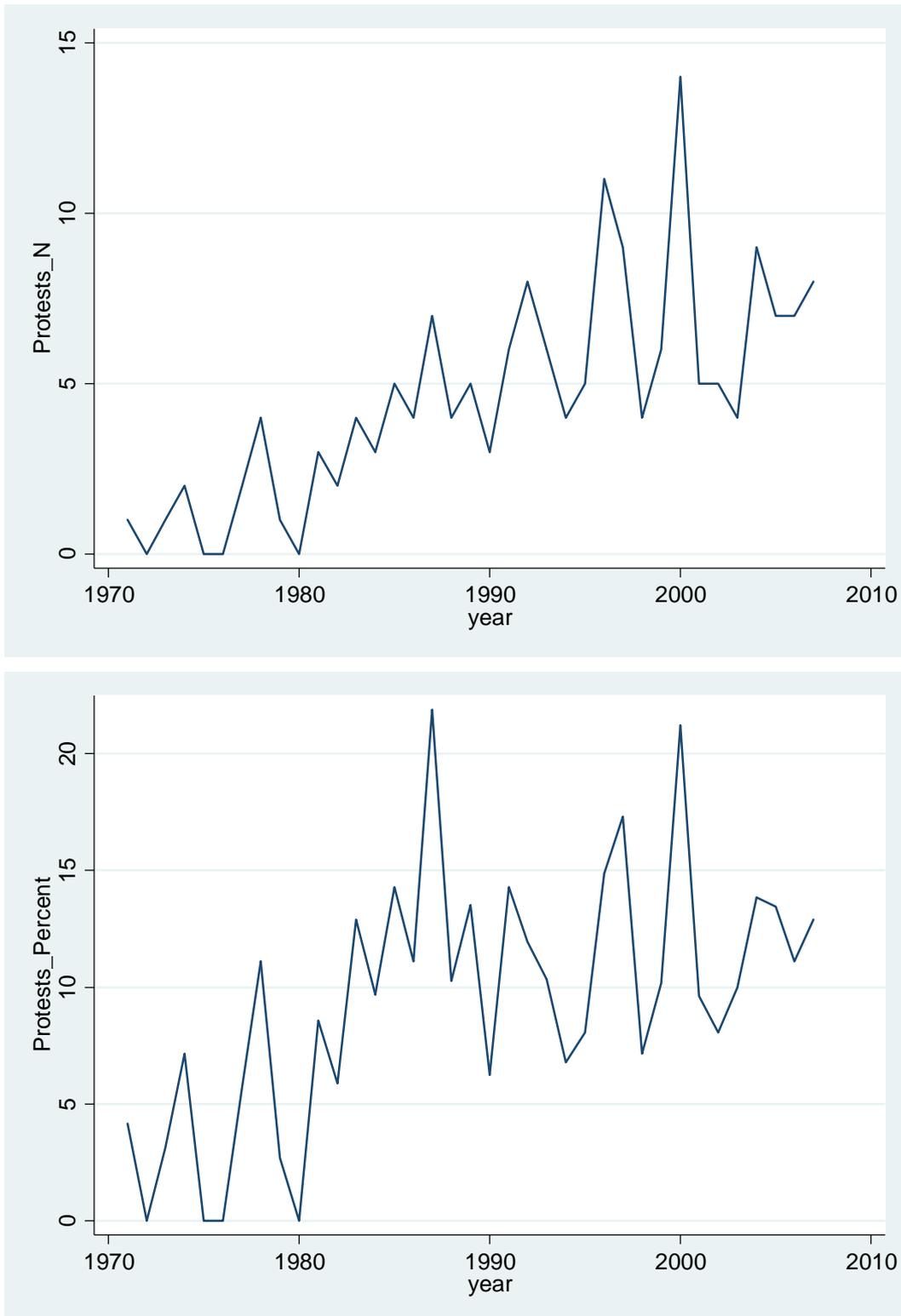
**Table 1: Random effects tobit model of electoral misconduct**

<b>Variable</b>	
Protest following the previous election	.034 (.027)
Leader weakened at previous election	-.107* (.046)
Protest*leader weakened	-.110* (.047)
<i>Controls</i>	
Lagged electoral malpractice	.511*** (.029)
Fractionalisation of the legislature	-.045 (.030)
Number of years the incumbent has been in power	.001 (.001)
Observers present (dummy)	.015 (.015)
Level of democracy (Freedom House Civil Liberties)	.047*** (.006)
Type of election - presidential <sup>a</sup>	-.009 (.016)
Type of election - concurrent <sup>a</sup>	-.022 (.022)
Cold War (dummy)	.008 (.015)
GDP growth	.020 (.049)
Constant	-.050 (.031)
Wald chi <sup>2</sup> (12 degrees of freedom)	1041.81
R <sup>2</sup>	.65
N	780

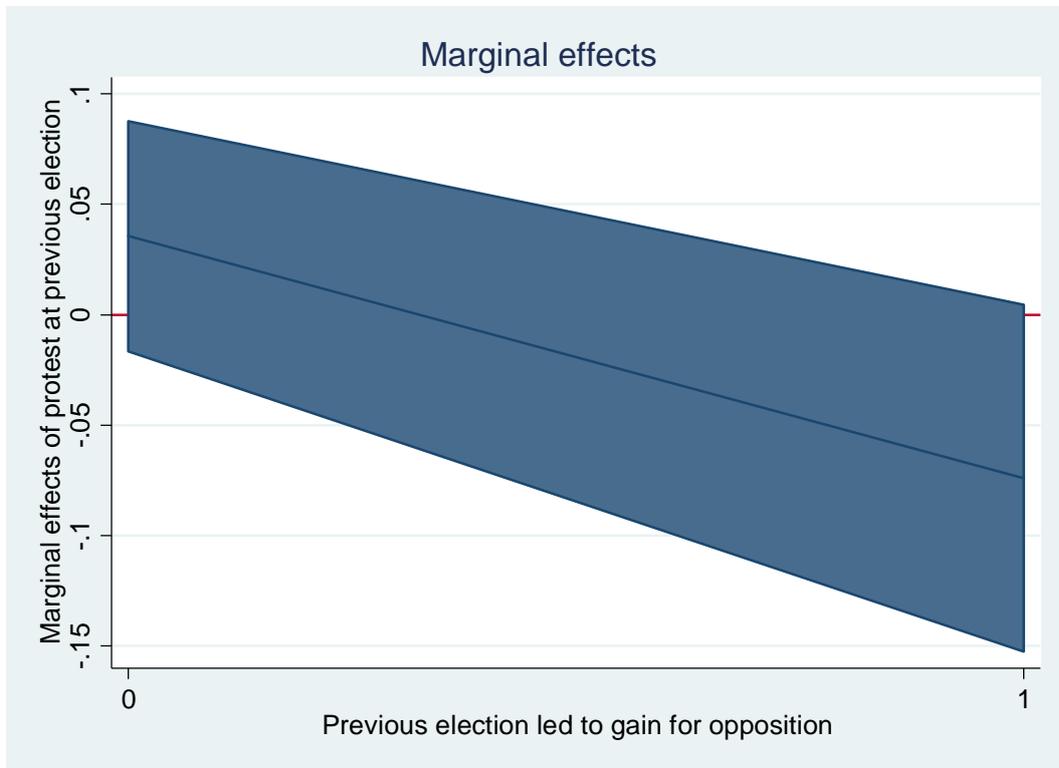
Cell entries are coefficients (standard errors); \* =  $p < .10$ ; \*\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> legislative elections make up the reference category.

Figure 1: The rise of post-electoral protests over time



**Figure 2: The impact of previous election characteristics on electoral malpractice**



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