

WHY BELIEVE INTERNATIONAL ELECTION MONITORS?

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Individuals, states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations work to encourage the development of democratic political institutions in other countries. The motivations of democracy promoters range from the moral to the self-interested, but they are united by an objective of facilitating the spread of democratic political institutions. Especially since 1990, the diffusion of democracy promotion has increased the amount of democracy-contingent benefits available to governments that are not already democracies. The combination of democracy-contingent benefits and imperfect information about which governments are actually democratizing gives a subset of governments the incentive to falsely claim to be moving toward democracy. In fact, as of 2009, there are few regimes that do not claim to be democratic or democratizing (McFaul 2004). Increasing motivations for some governments to “fake” democracy make it more difficult for democracy promoters to evaluate whether a state is truly democratizing, and also make it difficult for democracy promoters to accurately target their support. From the perspective of states that are in fact moving toward greater political liberalization and democratization, the existence of pseudo-democratic regimes makes it more difficult for them to demonstrate their commitment to democracy to international and domestic audiences.

This dilemma helps explain the growth of international election monitoring: Although competitive elections are one essential component of democracy, many politicians have the incentive to rig elections or otherwise bias them in their favor.¹ International election monitors are invited by the host government to observe and report on the quality of the electoral process, and are now present at more than 80% of elections for national office held in the developing world.² Since the mid-1990s, following an election, international news reports typically highlight

¹ This argument is developed by the author more extensively elsewhere (cite).

² Author's calculation.

the reports of foreign observers, usually without controversy or qualification, as credible sources of information about the quality of the electoral process.

Other sources of information on the quality of elections exist, including accounts of election quality from political parties, the central election commission, or non-partisan domestic observers, and these alternative sources are also sometimes viewed as credible by other international actors. Nevertheless, even though international election observers are voluntarily invited by the host government, they are frequently invited to fraudulent elections. When they document and condemn election fraud, they can discredit an election to the domestic population and to the broader international community. The goal of this article is to evaluate the conditions under which the reports of international observers are believed, by whom, and the conditions under which observers are viewed as credible sources of information about the quality of elections.

There are many reasons why one might expect that reports on elections from foreign election observers would not be credible. Measures of whether a given election is democratic are subjective and inherently difficult, particularly given the clandestine nature of many forms of election manipulation. A delegation of foreigners rarely has an understanding of politics in a given country that equals that of political parties or non-partisan domestic observers (Carothers 1997; Geisler 1993). Additionally, other actors often have a vested interest in whether the election is deemed credible or not, and work to bias the information available to international observers and their judgment of election quality.

Why are the reports of international election observers ever credible? Why do the international news media and many pro-democracy actors consider international observation missions sponsored by organizations like the Carter Center, the European Union, or the Asian

Network for Free Elections valid sources of information about election quality? Why have other election monitoring organizations not developed such reputations, and are instead viewed as “rubber stamp” groups whose reports are perceived as biased among many domestic and international audiences? How do pro-democracy actors ensure that elections are actually democratic given the difficulty in judging the quality of elections in sovereign states?

In the remainder of this article, I examine election monitoring as a case in which “virtuous” NGOs have successfully developed reputations as credible observers of election quality. I evaluate credibility of election monitoring organizations, derive hypotheses, and discuss these hypotheses in light of variation among international observers and the degree to which they are perceived as credible sources of information about the quality of elections.

Credible Monitors and Election Quality³

The central questions raised by this volume focus on the credibility of “virtuous” international actors, yet the various chapters focus on issue areas that vary in the types of actions that must be considered credible for the virtuous organization to be effective. In the field of election observation, the credibility of election monitors influences the degree to which other actors (the audiences) perceive observer reports on elections to be accurate. Accurate reports allow democracy promoters to target international benefits more accurately, and therefore should encourage democratization.

There are many organizations that sponsor international election monitoring missions. They vary in quality, professionalization, and credibility. Past international observation missions have included relatively informal missions like those from the Latin American Studies Association, as well as professionalized groups from intergovernmental organizations like the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the

³ This section is based on the framework provided in the introductory chapter.

European Union. A few organizations send international observers even when they are blatantly uninterested in democracy promotion, such as observation missions sponsored by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Still other organizations sponsor election observation missions that are harder to generalize in terms of their credibility, such as the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, or the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Even among the groups that are most respected in the field of election observation, detecting and criticizing election fraud is an imperfect science, and decisions to condemn elections are frequently influenced by political variables (Kelley 2009). Most of the time, international observers point out some problems in the electoral process and highlight areas for future improvement, but give their general endorsement to elections. When domestic groups concur, elections are viewed as democratic.⁴ When there is suspicion of election manipulation, international election monitors play a publicly visible role by either condemning the election outright, or by arguing that irregularities are not serious or widespread enough to influence the outcome of the election. International election monitoring became a globally accepted practice in the mid-1990s, and since that time, criticism by foreign observers is rarely questioned by international actors, and many domestic audiences such as opposition political parties cite observer reports as credible evaluations of the quality of elections.

As outlined in Gourevitch and Lake's introductory chapter, the **principals** in election observation are democracy promoters. Representing a diverse set of actors, democracy promoters include individuals, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and states. The **targets** of democracy promoters are states that are not already widely perceived to be

⁴ It is possible that fraud still exists even when both domestic groups and international observers endorse the election, but losing political parties should have a strong incentive not to accept the results of an election they perceive to be rigged.

consolidated democracies. Democracy promoters wish to encourage democratization in target states by supporting them, both financially and with technical assistance. Yet because genuine democratization is difficult to observe directly, and most governments claim to be democratic or moving toward democracy, a government's actual commitment to democratization cannot be inferred from its rhetoric. Further complicating the issue of democracy promotion is that when democracy-contingent benefits exist and judging democracy is difficult, some states have the incentive to introduce hollow forms of political liberalization and attempt to imitate the behavior of democratizing states without risking their hold on power through genuine democratization.

Just as consumers promise to pay more for organic produce or fair trade coffee, or refuse to buy soccer balls produced with child labor (Gourevitch; Nooruddin), democracy promoters promise rewards or punishments in part based on whether target governments hold passably democratic elections. Some international organizations (IGOs) have made democracy or periodic democratic elections a condition of membership. However, there is no supranational government able to enforce compliance with such agreements. IGO pressure on governments to hold democratic elections may exist, and may influence the behavior of member states. However, the difficulties of international enforcement make such standards analogous to the private standards outlined in the introduction (Gourevitch and Lake). By offering democracy-contingent benefits to target states, and by withdrawing international benefits from states that fail to democratize or that experience democratic reversals, democracy promoting states have created a diffuse private standard for governments to hold democratic elections, and to engage in other behaviors that are perceived as democratic.

If democracy promoters were to use the strictest observable standards for democratic elections, they should reward only those governments that experience consecutive peaceful

transitions in power. Although this standard is observable and credible, it should not be preferred by democratizing states, especially parties or leaders who wish to have some chance of remaining in power. Although the turnover test makes sense as a restrictive standard, observers of democratic politics are well aware that it is possible for democratically elected leaders to be reelected without resorting to fraud. Therefore, the “turnover test” is an extreme signal of democratization, as many democratic elections do not result in turnover in power.

Despite the difficulty in judging a government’s commitment to democracy and democratic elections, all else held equally, democracy promoters prefer to withhold support from targets that are holding rigged elections. As a subtype of “virtuous” or goal-driven actors, democracy promoters wish to accurately target their support because if they do not, their efforts will arguably encourage less democratization. In general, democracy promoters prefer to avoid supporting target governments when they hold fraudulent elections.

Yet when the possibility exists that pseudo-democrats can fool democracy promoters by holding multi-party elections, the incentives change for “true democrat” target states. In this scenario, states cannot credibly self-report their regime type, even if they are genuinely committed to democratization. In order to maximize their share of international benefits, democratizing regimes must identify a credible (costly) signal of the quality of their elections. In theory, if election monitors are not costly for pseudo-democratic governments, they should not be credible, and they should not lead to any change in the rewards or punishments allocated by democracy promoters. Credible election monitors should be more costly for governments holding fraudulent elections than for governments holding democratic elections. If monitors are credible, inviting them causes (pseudo-democratic) governments to risk a negative report and a subsequent reduction in international support. Receiving a positive report from a credible

election monitor leads to increased rewards or decreased punishment from democracy promoting states (Author).

Monitoring the Monitors and the Diverse Audience Problem

Explaining the credibility of monitors first requires attention to the relevant audiences. To whom might election monitors be credible? What are the likely audiences for international observers? This question is difficult to answer with precision because the reports of international election observers are public and widely reported. Numerous domestic and international audiences cite them, and the specific composition of the audience varies by election. The public nature of the reports means that there are multiple audiences for every report, creating important variation in whether all audiences view a monitor's report as credible, as well as which actions observers can take to increase their credibility.

Gourevitch and Lake highlight a variety of potential audiences, including the targets of monitoring, the principals behind the monitoring effort, the public, other NGOs, and external verifiers. This generalized list applies relatively well to the case of election monitoring: audiences for election monitors include the governments that invite observers to monitor their elections (the targets); other governments holding elections (potential targets); donors or sponsors of election observation missions (the principals); citizens within the target state or the sponsor states (the public); domestic election observers and other international observers (other NGOs); the international media, the domestic media, and parties and election officials within the target state (external verifiers). I return to the multiple audiences question below. For now, it is sufficient to highlight that the existence of multiple audiences for election monitoring creates numerous problems for the credibility of election observation groups. Actions that might increase credibility to one audience may decrease credibility to another audience. The next

section discusses the conditions under which an audience is more likely to believe that an election observation missions report is credible.

As a point of departure, I focus on comparing other observer organizations to the Carter Center. The Carter Center is an international NGO based in Atlanta, GA, and founded by former US president Jimmy Carter with his wife, Rosalynn Carter. The organization works in a number of issue areas including the eradication of diseases like guinea worm and river blindness, conflict resolution, the promotion of human rights, and strengthening of democracy. Election observation is one of many activities conducted by the Carter Center, although it attracts a disproportionate amount of media attention, both in the US and in the countries where the organization works. By their own count, as of the end of 2008, the Carter Center had observed 73 elections in 28 countries, many of which have been high profile elections in countries transitioning to democracy.

The Carter Center is particularly interesting as a case of election monitoring because it is an independent international NGO that has monitored a number of controversial elections. Governments which invite the Carter Center to monitor their elections are under no obligation to do so, not even the weak legal obligations that are now conditions of membership in some international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the Organization of American States. It would be reasonable to expect that election monitoring NGOs are only invited to elections that are already likely to be democratic. Counter to this expectation, however, the Carter Center has criticized a number of elections for being fraudulent, as shown in Figure 1. Along with other similar organizations, the organization has also maintained a relatively good reputation as an impartial third party observer whose judgments of elections are generally cited by international and domestic news media without qualification. For

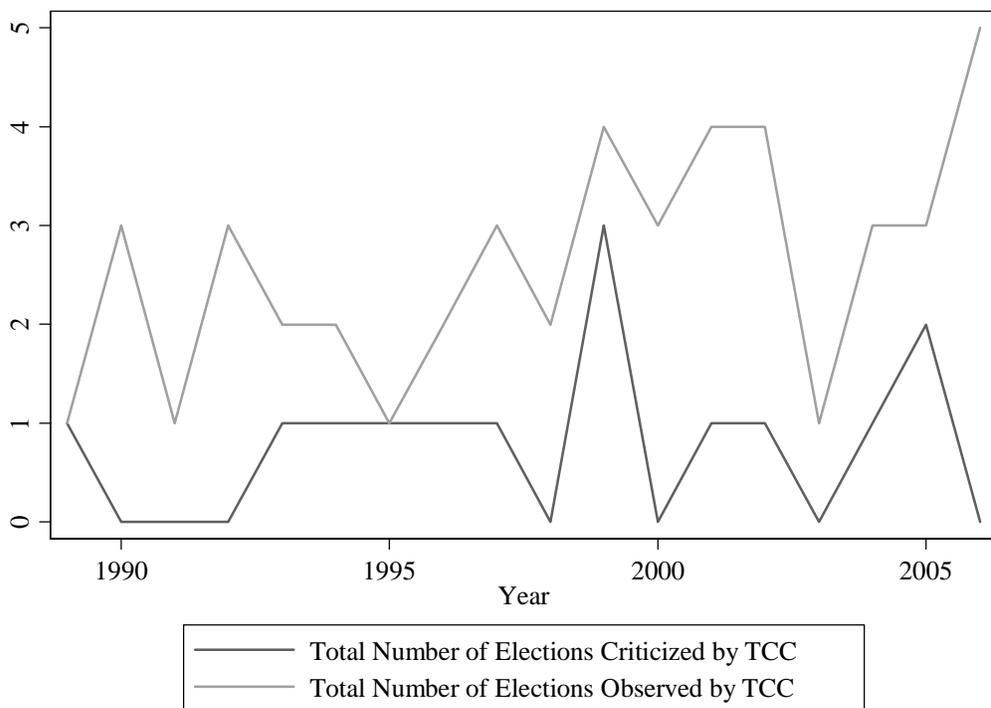
example, following the 2006 elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Herald Tribune reported that “The Carter Center has given the presidential runoff in Congo its stamp of approval, saying that despite sporadic violence and isolated reports of voter fraud, the election had been disciplined, peaceful, free and fair.”⁵ Similarly, an international news wire report following the 2000 elections in Zimbabwe make the Carter Center’s credibility clear in relaying the content of their report:

The Carter Center, the internationally renowned elections monitor, Friday condemned Zimbabwe's elections two weeks ago, concluding that "by no means could they be called free and fair." ...The Carter Center was...one of a long series of respected observer groups, including those from the European Union and the Commonwealth, to denounce the violence in the run-up to the election...⁶

Figure 1: Carter Center Election Observation and Criticism

⁵ Jeffrey Gettleman. “Congo vote called success.” *International Herald Tribune*. November 3, 2006.

⁶ “Carter Center says Zimbabwe elections were not free or fair.” *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, July 7, 2000.



Credibility-Enhancing Variables

How have election monitors like the Carter Center, the European Union, and Organization for American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Commonwealth developed reputations as credible observers of election quality? Why have organizations like *La Francophonie*, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the African Union, and other less established groups failed to do so? I now turn to an evaluation of how the reputations of election monitoring organizations are influenced by the credibility-enhancing variables discussed by Gourevitch and Lake, including a perception of common interests between the audience and the monitor, observable costly effort by the monitor or the target, penalties on the monitor for misrepresentation, and external verification of the monitor's reports. I discuss NGOs like the Carter Center as well intergovernmental organizations.

Common Interests

First, as Gourevitch and Lake argue, perception of common interests between the monitor and a given audience should make the monitor more credible to that audience. When the principals of election observation promote democracy above all other objectives, this argument is straightforward. Democracy promoting states should be more likely to view the reports of monitors as credible when they view the monitoring organization as one that shares its interests. However, a perception of common interest between the target of election monitoring and the monitoring organization should undermine the credibility of election monitors. If the principals supporting election observation missions have goals that conflict with support for democracy, a perception of common interests between the monitor and the audience should make those observers less credible to democracy promoters. Similarly, if the an election observation missions is closely aligned with the target of monitoring, the monitor report should not be credible to democracy promoters. At the extreme, if a state is both the target of the monitoring and the principal of the election monitor effort, the reports of the monitor should not be credible. Although they are harder to document because they are less professionalized, there have been instances of target-funded election monitoring, including the 2004 elections in Cameroon and the 2008 elections in Pakistan.⁷

In general, groups are more credible when they are more independent from the target of the monitoring, when they do not have motives that can conflict with promoting democracy, and when they are more closely aligned with a variety of democracy promoting principals. The dozens of organizations that have sponsored or deployed election monitoring missions vary widely in the degree to which election monitors are effective agents of democracy promoters, or

⁷ Ken Silverstein. "Democracy, or an Exercise in Fraud?; Some criticize the '04 Cameroon vote. Several on a regime-funded U.S. team call it free and fair." *The Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2005.

the degree to which democracy promoters and election monitors have common interests. When election monitors are partially funded or governed by states that are the targets of election monitoring, they should be less credible. Additionally, if they are funded by organizations or states with policy priorities that may conflict with or override democracy promotion, they should also be less credible. Evaluating the independence of election monitors and the degree to which their motivations are primarily to promote democracy requires greater transparency in their governance structure and funding sources, which are two of the strategies for increasing credibility discussed in the next section.

For example, the US funds several democracy-promoting NGOs, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). In countries in which the US's objectives are believed to be focused on democracy promotion, the reports of IRI and NDI are more credible. In countries in which US efforts to promote democracy are questioned as illegitimate, however, such as post-2003 Iraq, Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, and the 2006 elections in the Palestinian Territories, reports from the US funded organizations are more likely to be questioned as credible sources of information.

Perhaps not coincidentally, and raising significant controversy, the Carter Center has consistently endorsed elections in Venezuela despite opposition claims of election fraud and intimidation. During the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Committee, the Carter Center also created some controversy by endorsing the elections even though Hamas won a majority of seats. As the Carter Center is an organization that continually tries to undermine the perception that it is affiliated with the US government, issuing reports that are explicitly contrary to US policy have the effect of distancing the organization from the US.

Observable Costly Effort

Costly effort on the part of international election monitoring groups should also increase the credibility of monitors' reports on election quality. More comprehensive election observation missions signal to domestic and international audiences that observers are more likely to detect manipulation in various parts of the electoral process. These more comprehensive delegations now include media monitoring, voter registration audits, numerous long-term election observers deployed months in advance of an election, and coordination with and support for non-partisan domestic election observers.

These increases in observable costly effort can be initiated by election observers or by the targets of monitoring. One initiated, other monitors and other target governments have the incentive to invite such similar forms of observable costly effort, generating a dynamic that might be called a "race to the top." Election monitors can send more extensive delegations and improve their methods in order to improve the credibility of the signal. The targets of monitoring can also invite increasingly costly signals—such as a larger number of election observers, extending the invitation well in advance of the election, allowing observers to access all aspects of the electoral process, and inviting groups that are more likely to criticize election fraud. Monitors that engage in more costly or more comprehensive monitoring should be more credible than those that engage in less costly or less comprehensive monitoring.⁸ For targets seeking a credible signal of their commitment to democracy, inviting the all of the best election monitors available is a common strategy.

Is it really costly for governments to invite observers, and can inviting international election monitors be viewed as observable costly effort by target governments? I have treated

⁸ Similar issues have been discussed by other scholars with respect to establishing a credibility monitoring regime in applying global environmental standards to forestry (Auld, Gulbrandsen, and McDermott 2008; Cashore et al. 2007).

this issue in greater detail in other research, and have shown that election observers can reduce election fraud, lead governments to choose less direct and more costly forms of election manipulation, and increase the risk that their elections will be discredited. In order to make election monitoring more credible, both the supply side of election monitoring (the monitors) and the demand side (the target regimes which invite them) must engage in observable costly effort. Jointly, regimes seeking a credible signal of their commitment to democratization and democracy promoters attempting to evaluate the quality of elections have made election monitoring more effective and more costly. The cost of inviting election monitors is not uniform across countries. From the perspective of target governments, the cost should be based on a government holding fraudulent elections, and the cost should be much lower for governments holding democratic elections.

Individual observer missions engage in observable costly effort by launching more comprehensive election monitoring missions, by devoting effort to consistent, public, and thorough reporting on the quality of the elections, and by deploying large numbers of long and short-term observers. Particularly for governments that are likely to orchestrate widespread election manipulation, a clear tension exists between the fact that governments must invite monitors in order for them to come, and the possibility that these monitors will criticize their election. Since at least the mid-1990s, the perception is widespread that in order to effectively monitor an election, observers must be officially credentialed by the host government, and must be allowed access to all components of the electoral process. In some countries (such as the United States) government invitations to international observers and official credentials do not mean that individual polling station officials respect the credentials of observers and allowed them to enter polling stations. This makes it much more difficult for observers to obtain their

objectives and should make their reports less informative. The evolving standards surrounding monitored elections, however, mean that government efforts to limit observer access are usually interpreted as a sign that the government is hiding something, and are usually criticized.

Observer organizations also take a number of steps to enhance their credibility, which can be interpreted as observable costly action. Nearly all delegations of reputable international observers are multi-national, and frequently delegations include pairs of short-term observers that are composed of individuals from two different countries. Thus, in part to demonstrate their impartiality even at the local level, voters who encounter international observers on election day are likely to encounter representatives from multiple countries, rather than, for example, a team of observers who are both from the UK.

In terms of their findings, organizations like the Carter Center, the OSCE/ODIHR, the European Union, and the Organization of American States also release detailed information about how they reached their judgment in the form of a final report. These reports typically include an overview of the electoral process, information about who served on the delegation, what elements of the pre-election process were observed, the techniques used to monitor the election, etc., in addition to detailed information about the quality of the electoral process across a number of dimensions. Organizations like the African Union or the Arab League make such reports difficult to access or unavailable, if they are released at all. Their reports are widely viewed as less credible by Western democracy promoting audiences.

Regimes seeking a credible signal of their commitment to democratic elections help boost the quality of election monitors by inviting them well in advance of elections, facilitating their access to all parts of the electoral process, responding to their concerns, and allowing local government officials to cooperate with long and short term observers. Although such actions are

observable across all types of governments, they should be more costly for governments engaging in election manipulation.

Not all regimes are interested in increasing the credibility of monitors through observable costly effort. Governments sometimes invite observers and then challenge their credibility, working to limit their access or expel them from the country. Eric Bjornlund cites the 1989 Panamanian election as crucial in establishing the Carter Center's independence, and President Carter successfully protested against Manuel Noriega's efforts to clamp down on the Carter Center's work after he had invited them to monitor the election (2004). By threatening to refuse to monitor an election—and condemning the election before it happens—election monitors have some ability to negotiate with a government, even after they have accepted an invitation to monitor and are deployed within the country.

Implicitly, one long-term effect of the existence of international election monitoring is that it gives a subset of governments the incentive to manipulate elections in different ways. Some forms of election manipulation are easy to spot: when there is only one candidate on the ballot for a given national office; when pre-marked and bundled ballots are visible inside ballot boxes; when ballot boxes are abducted from polling stations; when vote buying takes place out in the open; when opposition party supporters or candidates are unjustifiably attacked by the police; or when vote totals are mathematically impossible (more votes cast for a particular candidate than registered voters, more than 100% turnout, etc.).

Nevertheless, by inviting professionalized election observers, target governments open their regimes to the risk that their elections will be criticized, potentially allow observers to deter fraud directly, or must pay the cost of increasingly sophisticated methods of manipulation, all of which make it riskier for cheating governments to invite international election monitoring

(Gandhi and Przeworski 2009). Inviting or deploying observer missions that have previously criticized elections in other countries, and who are permitted to observe well in advance of the election, with both long and short term observers, represents observable costly effort.

Penalties for Misrepresentation

Another source of credibility for international election monitors stems from the penalties for misrepresentation that an organization would suffer if it inaccurately judged the quality of an election. In general, election observers should be less credible if they misrepresent the quality of an election. Misrepresenting the quality of an election involves criticizing an election that was actually democratic, or more commonly, failing to condemn an election that was actually fraudulent. Therefore, an organization that criticizes elections should be more credible than one that does not. Conversely (and much more rarely), an organization that criticizes elections that are known to be democratic should also be less credible. This dynamic is amplified if the organization monitoring the election would suffer larger reputational costs for engaging in misrepresentation.

Measuring the degree to which a given election monitoring organization would suffer penalties for getting a report “wrong” are difficult to judge, as the consequences are likely to be reputational. However, if the organizations which sponsor election observation missions also engage in other programmatic activities in target countries, they should be more insulated from the reputational costs of getting a report wrong than those organizations that exist only to conduct election observation, and for whom lying would impose severe punishments if revealed.

Also influencing the penalties for misrepresentation is the commitment of the principals to democracy promotion. Election monitors that report to many democracy promoting principals, or very committed democracy promoters, should suffer greater reputational cost from

endorsing fraudulent elections or otherwise engaging in representation. Election monitors that report to fewer democracy promoters suffer less reputational cost from lying. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an extreme example. Although it has sponsored several election observation missions, the principals are not committed to democracy promotion. In fact, the opposite is probably true, and SCO election monitors may be rewarded for inaccurate reporting on elections so long as their reports are consistent with the foreign policy goals of member states.

If there are significant costs to observers of inaccurately judging an election may also increase their credibility. Being “wrong” in election monitoring involves misjudging election quality, either by endorsing a fraudulent election or falsely criticizing a democratic election. Professionalized election monitors tend to be somewhat reluctant to condemn elections unless they are certain that the elections were intentionally manipulated, and they are therefore much more likely to endorse a manipulated election than to falsely criticize a democratic election. All elections have some flaws, and there is no bright line between democratic elections and ones that are not.

Thus in general, the costs of being wrong are equal to the costs of endorsing an election that was actually stolen. Yet somewhat counter-intuitively, the chance that observers will endorse a fraudulent election is a central reason why they are invited to fraudulent elections at all. The fact that credible observers sometimes validate fraudulent elections means that governments holding problematic elections are more likely to invite them, and they are therefore invited to more lower-quality elections, more likely to observe elections that warrant international criticism. Together, this means that accounting for overtime dynamics, somewhat imperfect election monitoring is more likely to be useful to democracy promoters.

Another effect of observer reluctance to criticize is that when a group like the Carter Center does criticize an election, few dispute their criticism. When a credible observer organization does get it wrong, they may help an autocratic regime gain some undeserved democratic credentials, and they may also suffer some reputational cost to their own organization. Among the diverse audience of democracy promoters, those election monitoring groups that always endorse elections or that endorse elections based on who wins rather than the quality of the process, suffer reputational costs, and their reports receive less attention in the international news media and from democracy promoters.

External Verification

A final source of credibility for election monitoring organizations pertains to whether the reports of election observers are subject to external verification. Monitors that are based in a country with a free press which is able to verify their states should be more credible and more common than those that originate in a country without a free press.

Strategies for Increasing Credibility

The variables that influence credibility are distinct from strategies that both the targets of monitoring and the NGOs can employ to increase credibility. Gourevitch and Lake outline six strategies for increasing the credibility of NGOs. After outlining them, I evaluate them relative to the case of election observation. They are rephrased and reordered for the case of election observation. Three of the strategies outlined by Gourevitch and Lake are closely linked in election observation.

Strategy 1. To increase credibility, election observing organizations promote high quality election observation and a commitment to democracy promotion among other election observing organizations and among principals (*promoting bonds around shared values*).

Strategy 2. To increase credibility, election observing organizations increase professionalization of their organizations and adhere to recognized standards for election observation (*professionalization*).

Strategy 3. To increase credibility, election observing organizations should integrate into the community of NGOs and IGOs that conduct election observation (*integrating into the community of NGOs*).

In one of the biggest cooperative ventures in election observation to date, more than 20 organizations have signed onto two documents intended to standardize some practices within election observation. The documents, which included the *Declaration of Principals for International Election Observation* and a *Code of Conduct for International Election Observers*, were signed by many organizations at a 2005 meeting hosted by the United Nations. The UN, the Carter Center, and NDI convened the project, and the documents were introduced at a Ceremony of Endorsement presided over by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former US President Jimmy Carter, and former US Secretary of State and NDI Chairperson Madeline Albright (Carter Center 2006). The documents were produced over a series of four meetings between 2003-2006, which were attended by more than a dozen monitoring organizations. As of June 1, 2006, twenty five organizations had endorsed the *Declaration* and *Code of Conduct* (Carter Center 2006). The declaration included agreement on the scope and purpose of election observation activities, prohibiting conflicts of interest between monitors and the target of monitoring, guidelines for reporting on election quality, recommendations for cooperation with other international election observation missions, standards for when and when not to observe and election, prerequisites for organizing a mission to a country, how to train observers,

encouraging support for partisan and non-partisan domestic observers, and a recommendation for transparency in the methods employed to observe an election.

Like many other international agreements, there are few enforcement mechanisms, but several governments now request that all individual observers sign a code of conduct before they can be granted a visa to observe an election.

Strategy 4. To increase credibility, individual election observing organizations adopt governance structures that signal their independence from the targets of election monitoring and from the geopolitical biases of principals (*governance structures*).

For groups like the Carter Center, the separation between the governments subject to election monitoring and the governance of the NGO is quite clear. The Carter Center's twenty-one member board of trustees is fully transparent and composed primarily of business and community leaders. No leaders of countries being monitored serve on the board, nor does anyone who obviously represents them. Thus, in this sense, the targets of the monitoring are clearly separated from the governance of the organization.

Any perceived link between the international monitoring organization and the target government would likely be viewed as a sign of corruption. A sure way to discredit an election monitoring organization would be to accuse it of being funded by the government holding the election. As mentioned above, target-funded international monitoring has been attempted by some regimes in the past. For example, the Pakistani government funded an "international" observer organization at its own 2008 elections.⁹ Several electoral autocracies also fund or send election monitors. For example, the Russian government funds several election monitoring groups (an IGO and an NGO) that exist primarily to contradict the reports of the more reputable OSCE/ODIHR election monitoring missions. The Russian-dominated Commonwealth of

⁹ Find reference to this organization.

Independent States is an international organization composed of former Soviet states, and has deployed a number of election monitoring missions within member states. The CIS and the OSCE monitor many of the same elections in former Soviet states, and the CIS predictably reaches the opposite conclusion as the OSCE (Kupchinsky 2005). For example, if the OSCE criticizes elections in Belarus, the CIS endorses them as democratic.

The Organization of American States was the first international organization to accept an invitation to monitor elections in a sovereign state, and represents an intermediate case in terms of independence from the targets of monitoring. Democratic elections are a condition of membership in the organization, and states which are monitored by the OAS are also members of the international organization. More importantly, funding is allocated separately for each observer-mission by the OAS General Assembly. The funding sources are transparent in that they are detailed in the final election observation reports. Yet resources are scarce, and because the OAS must secure funding for election monitoring missions from other member states, geopolitics can play a large role in determining whether an election monitoring mission is funded or not. For example, the OAS has never monitored an election in Brazil. Perhaps more importantly, the OAS response to Alberto Fujimori's clearly fraudulent elections in 2000 was tempered (or hamstrung) by the fact that Peru was a member state of the organization, and some of its allies worked to stop the OAS from intervening more directly (Cooper and Legler 2006).

In contrast to the OAS, some intergovernmental organizations intentionally structure their election monitoring organizations such that they appear more independent from the organization. The OSCE, which monitors elections in many of its 55 member states, tasked a quasi-autonomous branch of the organization with election monitoring, and located the branch (the ODIHR) in Warsaw rather than in Vienna where the OSCE Secretariat is based. Additionally, its

funding sources are allocated annually rather than on a mission-by-mission basis, and individual member states have limited ability to influence which missions are funded. As an alternative structure that also decreases the influence of member states, the European Union is engaged in election monitoring throughout the developing world but does not observe elections within its own member states.

Strategy 5. To increase credibility, individual election observing organizations increase transparency in their governance, funding, and methods of election observation (*increasing transparency*).

Among NGOs, the donor and target funding also influence the credibility of monitors to both democracy promoters (principals) and within the population of the target state. The Carter Center receives funding transparently and from many sources, and maintains an endowment that helps fund missions to regimes that attract less donor interest. The Carter Center's funding sources for election monitoring include official development assistance from countries like the US, the UK, and Ireland, private donors, and money given to the Carter Center foundation that is later channeled to election monitoring. These funding sources are compiled in an annual report that is made available online and is mailed to all contributors and supporters of the Carter Center.¹⁰ In addition to its annual reports, the Carter Center also posts its IRS filings on its website. This transparency in funding applies across all areas of the Carter Center, but these efforts cover election monitoring. They are therefore more independent in deciding where to accept invitations to monitor, and this independence is intentionally made publicly available to all relevant audiences.

NGOs like NDI and IRI are primarily funded by the US government, and are somewhat less independent from their principals, and are therefore sometimes perceived as less credible by

¹⁰ http://www.cartercenter.org/news/publications/annual_reports.html

target states (or targets try to discredit them by alleging they are biased toward pro-Western candidates or pro-US interests). Although NDI and IRI are technically independent from the US government and receive funding separately from the National Endowment for Democracy (funded by the US Congress), USAID, and the State Department; they are more likely to be allocated funding for missions in countries that are important to the United States.¹¹

For specific election monitoring missions, international organizations like the EU and the OSCE, and NGOs like TCC are particularly proactive in working against potential claims of bias. In order to counter impressions among target-state audiences that they are biased, they take a number of actions to try to make it clear that they are independent from sponsor governments, and that their relevant interests favor democracy. Although the central offices of the Carter Center are based in the US (in Atlanta, not DC), each of its election monitoring mission accepts no more than one third of its funding from USAID, despite the fact that some missions could be entirely funded from US assistance.

This does not make TCC immune to charges that it is biased towards pro-US candidates. Particularly in very polarized countries or when the US has been heavily involved, it is difficult for NGOs to maintain credibility as non-partisan observer group. To illustrate, during the 2004 recall referendum in Venezuela, supporters of the opposition were convinced that if they did not win, the election must have been stolen by the incumbent president Hugo Chavez. Supporters of Chavez held the opposite position, and were convinced that if the Carter Center criticized the election, it must be because the organization is biased, a tool of US foreign policy, and determined to bring down the Chavez government. Either way, partisans within Venezuela tied the credibility of the Carter Center to the content of their report, and supporters of Chavez

¹¹ Map of monitoring missions? Correlation between US interests and the targets of monitoring by the organizations?

perceived that any report critical of the elections must be due to US influence rather than any actual problems with the election.

Overall, greater transparency in governance and funding help reveal the degree to which election monitors are aligned with pro-democracy actors, as well as the degree to which they may have ulterior motives.

Strategy 6. To increase credibility, election observing organizations should take observable costly action in other fields (*costly actions in other fields*).

Out of the six strategies outlined by Gourevitch and Lake, this is the most ambiguous in the case of election observation. It is true that most of the well established election-monitoring organizations discussed in this chapter also conduct other activities in the countries in which they operate. These activities most commonly include giving foreign aid, supporting economic development programs, or supporting other elements of democracy promotion programs. What is less clear is whether these activities—which might be labeled observable costly effort—also result in increased credibility for these organizations. Counterfactually, if these organizations were to not pursue other activities, they might be less well known or well established before beginning an election monitoring effort. Such development work may help monitoring NGOs establish a relationship with relevant stakeholders in the country, but it is not clear what evidence would support the hypotheses that this work increases their credibility.

Conclusion

Because most governments are now under pressure to invite election monitors, and those who do not are believed to be hiding something, election monitoring has become a widespread practice, and one that is likely to continue so long as international actors are interested in judging whether other regimes are committed to democratization. As Gourevitch and Lake argue, “in a

world of incomplete information and potential opportunism, targets that sincerely want to conform need monitors to certify that they are, in fact, adhering to accepted practice.” (10) The existence of a variety of monitoring groups means that the professionalized organizations coordinate on best practice, share information, and invest in efforts to improve election monitoring and make it more difficult that leaders will invite observers and get away with election manipulation. International election monitoring is a diverse field, and the competitive aspect of election monitoring (or the fact that multiple groups deploy election monitors to the same elections) can best be described as a “race to the top.”

However, there are also low-quality monitoring organizations which usually endorse elections if their favorite party wins. It is difficult to list the “greenwashing” election monitoring organizations comprehensively, because some organizations that began as low-quality election monitors have improved over time. Organizations like the Commonwealth Secretariat used to engage in very superficial election monitoring, and regularly announced their findings from the airport before election day was complete, and would depart the country before the counting of votes or the winner had been announced (Geisler 1993). Today, they engage in much more comprehensive election monitoring, and have criticized a number of elections (Sives 2001).

Competence and professionalization are important sources of variation among election monitoring groups, yet most election monitors have developed these reputations over time, and nearly all organizations have been criticized for failing to condemn problematic elections. The first election monitoring missions were composed of a few prominent individuals visiting the capital city on election day. It wasn’t until the 1980s that observers were invited to clearly fraudulent elections, and many advances in observation techniques can be linked to this period. Similarly, individual observers and organization staff gained experience overtime, which allowed

them to learn about which observing techniques were most effective, how both government and opposition parties manipulated elections and sometimes attempted to manipulate the monitors, and how to deal with governments which are intent on limiting their ability to engage in effective election observation.

Election monitoring illustrates that in the field of judging elections, as in other areas of NGO work, reputations as credible sources of information are enhanced by perceptions of common interest between “ethical” audiences and the NGO, observable costly effort, penalties for misrepresenting the quality of an election, and external verification of monitoring techniques. Conflicts of interest, when they exist, are a challenge to credible election monitoring. Both the targets of monitoring and NGOs can work to enhance the credibility of election monitors, and employ a variety of strategies to improve their credibility. Monitors can increase credibility by promoting shared values in election observation, integration into the community of election observers, and professionalization. Individual organizations can improve credibility through governance structures which demonstrate independence, increasing transparency, and potentially by taking costly actions in other fields. Overall, the case of election monitoring illustrates how NGOs can pursue successful strategies to become credible monitors, as well as some of the dynamics of the process of maintaining such a reputation.

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