

# National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy: Which Elections Can Be Lost?\*

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## Abstract

In some authoritarian regimes, election outcomes are determined with certainty. In others, established autocrats allow limited electoral competition, and a non-trivial number of incumbents have been surprised by election results, including the defeat of their own parties. Existing research makes clear that democracy does not necessarily precede contested elections, nor does democracy inevitably follow the introduction of electoral competition. The increase in “hybrid regimes” has produced a growing body of research on the determinants of electoral competition and its consequences in political, economic, and military affairs. Given that opposition parties can sometimes overcome election fraud, violence, and otherwise autocratic political institutions in order to win biased elections, how can researchers determine, *ex ante*, which elections can be lost? Which institutional characteristics divide non-competitive elections from those in which an opposition upset is possible? We argue that if opposition is allowed, multiple parties are permitted, and more than one candidate appears on the ballot, the minimal structural conditions for competition are present. We formalize this argument and introduce a new dataset that distinguishes elections that can be lost from those that cannot. We then outline the pitfalls of other methods used by scholars to define the potential for electoral competition, and show why such methods are likely to lead to biased findings regarding the causes and consequences of electoral competition.

# 1 Introduction

Democracy is, according to a widely cited definition, “a system in which parties lose elections” (Przeworski, 1991, p.10). Yet it is clear that non-democracy includes a number of regimes in which parties can and do lose elections, but fail to qualify as democratic on other grounds. Which characteristics of elections make it impossible for the incumbent to lose? What observable conditions must be present for an election to pose a threat to the incumbent government? Which elections allow for the possibility of opposition victory?

As elections have spread across regime types, many countries now “inhabit the wide and foggy zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism” (Schedler, 2002, p. 37). Out of all countries in the world, less than a dozen have not recently held direct elections for national office.<sup>1</sup> The practice of combining aspects of democratic and authoritarian rule is not new (Hermet, Rose and Rouquie, 1978), but, as Jason Brownlee (2009) summarizes, “in the 1990s rulers were fusing plebiscitarianism and authoritarianism at an astounding rate” (p. 515).

Although many scholars recognize the fact that not all electoral regimes are democratic, much of the cross-national empirical research on elections does not accurately reflect important variation in the threat that elections pose to the ruling government. Even growing theoretical interest in the causes and consequences of electoral accountability, scholars have not yet debated which observable characteristics of elections make competition possible, and have instead induced the existence of competition using methods that are likely to produce biased inferences.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we propose a solution to this problem by defining and operationalizing the concept of *competition* in a manner that is distinct from competitiveness. Motivated by Giovanni Sartori’s seminal work on political parties, we define and measure the “structure or rule” of competition such that it can be applied across regime types, and is determined separately from election outcomes (Sartori, 1976). Although the definitional emphasis is structural, we are also motivated by agent-oriented theories of political change. As Dankwart Rustow (1970) argues, the behavior of political agents is only minimally con-

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<sup>1</sup>For example, between 2000-2006, excluding micro-states, states that did not hold national elections are: Angola, Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Libya, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and the United Arab Emirates. Of these, Angola, Bhutan, and Nepal held elections in 2007 or 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Exceptions include several studies of elections in Africa, including Ferree and Singh (2002); Block, Ferree and Singh (2003); Lindberg (2006b).

strained by social structures. Elections are one potential structure through which political change can take place, but some elections are structured such that competition impossible. By defining the minimum conditions necessary for electoral competition, we also define the minimal conditions necessary for elections to be lost.<sup>3</sup>

The criteria we propose are intended to be conservative. In addition to the minimal conditions necessary for electoral competition, as we define them, many other factors influence the probability that a government will lose an election. Elections that meet the minimal conditions for competition may still be biased, and include elections in which, for example, regimes harass the opposition, control the media, or use elections as a modern method of hereditary succession. We argue that our competition criteria include all elections in which an incumbent loss is structurally possible, and exclude only elections in which the opposition has no chance of winning.

Why is such a concept and measure needed? Simply put, elections are a focal point for collective action. Although elections are often biased in favor of the incumbent, and some governments use elections as a method of “managing and manipulating” the opposition (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Lust-Okar, 2005, 2007) theories of collective action suggest that even in electoral authoritarian regimes, elections can serve as a focal point at which political actors can coordinate in order to overcome political structures that are biased against them (Tucker, 2007). As Bunce and Wolchik (2010) have recently shown in their discussion of electoral revolutions, elections provide an opportunity for agency to overcome structure in surprising ways. If the incumbent government allows elections to occur, the ingenuity and organizational prowess of a determined political opposition *can* make the result of an election unpredictable, even in cases of extreme election fraud. We argue that such upsets are only possible if the potential for competition exists.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, elections in which competition is allowed may still produce highly biased results. Some incumbents go to extraordinary measures to steal elections, or behave in a manner that minimizes the opposition’s chance of victory. When competition exists, however, the prob-

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<sup>3</sup>Our minimalist conditions implicitly endorse the view of Rustow and others that super-structures, like economic development and its covariates, are not pre-requisites for elections to play a role as catalysts of social change and political transformation.

<sup>4</sup>Additionally, research by Staffan Lindberg suggests that in Africa, multiple elections in which competition is allowed can lead to democratization, even when those elections are fraudulent (Lindberg, 2006*a*).

ability that the government will lose is greater than zero. The central point of this article is that all elections that allow competition can, with some positive probability, fire incumbents from office. If scholars wish to understand which tactics, strategies, and incentives are most likely to produce political change, they must not make the mistake of excluding those elections in which the opposition could have caused an electoral upset, but did not. We provide data on the minimum conditions necessary for competition in elections throughout the world, and show that unlike other existing methods, our competition criteria do not exclude any elections in which the incumbent party loses. We also compare our criteria to common rules for defining the potential for electoral competition, and discuss the theoretical and methodological problems of each.

Further underscoring the importance of this measure is the growing interest in comparative politics and international relations on the evolution of authoritarian governments that allow some electoral accountability.<sup>5</sup> Existing scholarship includes questions like: Do repeated elections lead to democratization (Lindberg, 2006*a*)? Does even minimal electoral competition in African countries induce fiscal manipulation (Block, Ferree and Singh, 2003)? Do democratic institutions, including potentially competitive elections, increase foreign direct investment or deter it (Jensen, 2003)? Does electoral competition (and more generally, democracy) lead governments to be more transparent (Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2009)? Do election boycotts help or hinder the opposition’s chances of being in power (Lindberg, 2006*a*) or help to bring about political reform (Beaulieu, 2006)? Does linkage to the West improve an opposition party’s prospects (Levitsky and Way, 2010)? What factors, such as opposition unity, can help break the dominance of an incumbent (Howard and Roessler, 2006)? How does political competition in early elections influence democratic stability (Wright, 2008)? Which institutional factors, such as elections, are “pathways from authoritarianism” (Hadenius and Teorell, 2007) or “portents of pluralism” (Brownlee, 2009)? More generally, scholars have hypothesized that electoral competition influences the overall size of government, the provision of public goods, citizen participation, tax compliance, policy stability, ethnic violence, the probability of regime change, and more. Such studies define a universe of cases on which to test the specific causal claims they advance, and in doing so, assume the existence of a border beyond which elections cease to be a meaningful arena for contestation. How this

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<sup>5</sup>See, for example Linz (2000); Linz and Stepan (1996); Karl (1995); Geddes (1999); Ottaway (2003); Brownlee (2007); Lust-Okar (2007); Greene (2007); Magaloni (2006); Svobik (2009).

border is delineated matters, even more so when some governments attempt to “reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty” (Schedler, 2002). Accurate tests of hypotheses about the effects of competition and the determinants of electoral competitiveness require accurate definition and measurement of this border. Failing to do so can easily lead to biased samples and inaccurate inferences about the determinants of electoral outcomes and the consequences of elections.

## 2 A Simple Model of Electoral Competition and Bias

Many (if not all) elections are biased contests (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2009), and the level of bias varies along a continuum. This section provides a simple model of how bias influences election results in order to emphasize what we mean by the potential for competition. For simplicity, this illustration focuses on elections in which the incumbent leader (or incumbent political party) is running, the opposition is challenging the incumbent, and if the incumbent loses, the opposition assumes power. For every candidate or political party, there is some vote share that the incumbent party would receive if elections were entirely free and fair and voters were able to translate their preferences accurately into representation. Let  $x$  be the share of the vote that the incumbent would receive in a bias-free election, where  $0 \leq x \leq 1$ . Let  $\beta \in \mathbb{R}_{\geq 0}$  measure the election’s bias in favor of the incumbent. Assume that this bias influences the results of the election according to the following function:

$$f(x) = x^{\frac{1}{1+\beta}}$$

Here  $0 \leq x \leq 1$  is the vote share the incumbent would get if elections were free and fair and  $\beta \in \mathbb{R}_{\geq 0}$  is a measure of the bias in favor of the incumbent. When  $\beta = \beta_0 = 0$ , the official vote share equals the free and fair election vote share, as it would in an ideal democracy. Larger values of  $\beta$  ( $\beta_2 > \beta_1 > 0$ ) distort the playing field progressively more in favor of an incumbent victory. The true incumbent support  $x$  is unobserved, but may be imagined as an indicator of the incumbent’s true support absent any bias. Voters and scholars observe only  $f(x)$  and whether the incumbent wins or loses. The required number of votes necessary to win varies by electoral system and the type of election. Nevertheless, for illustrative

purposes, we simplify the model of the electoral system such that the incumbent wins if and only if  $f(x) > .5$ .

As we discuss in greater detail below, existing decision rules used to define the universe of potentially competitive elections rely directly or indirectly on the outcome of elections, such as the vote share received by opposition parties or whether the incumbent was defeated. For questions pertaining to the causes or consequences of elections, such decision rules are problematic. As Figure 1 illustrates, any outcome-based cutoff point for excluding “uncompetitive” elections, such as 80 % of the vote, potentially includes or excludes elections conducted under different values of the the distortion parameter  $\beta$ , leading to a biased sample for any questions related to the causes or consequences of electoral competition. Excluding elections in which competition is allowed but the election is otherwise biased, or including elections in which competition is impossible, are both potentially problematic.

For example, assume that a researcher wishing to test how the opposition’s chance of winning is affected when the government controls the media. On Figure 1, state-run media produces a level of bias defined as  $\beta = \beta_2$ . If the government does not control the media, the level of bias is represented as  $\beta = \beta_1$ . In an econometric test of the conjecture that state-run media produces elections that are more biased than those in which media is not state-run, empirical data would be used to evaluate the hypothesis that  $\beta_2 > \beta_1$ . Testing this proposition requires that the relevant universe of elections be identified. If an outcome-based measure is used, or the researcher relies on a typology of regimes to infer the existence of competition, the sample of elections included in the study would be more likely to exclude a specific type of elections in which state-run media is more likely, and in which competition is in fact possible but the opposition has historically performed less well. Outcome-based measures may also lead to the inclusion of elections in which competition is impossible even without any bias introduced by state-run media, thereby potentially biasing the test in the opposition direction.

### 3 Potential for Competition as a Criterion for Which Elections Can Be Lost

The potential for competition exists for a given election when (a) opposition is allowed; (b) multiple parties are legal; and (c) more than one candidate is allowed on the ballot. Together, we argue that these criteria can be used to draw the line between elections that can be lost and those that cannot. These criteria do not indicate that a country meets the Schumpeterian ideal of democracy, and fall well short Dahl's contestation and participation criteria of a democratic polity (Dahl, 1971; Schumpeter, 1962). This distinction between democracy and minimal electoral competition is intentional, and carries several advantages. First, these competition criteria are measurable on an ex-ante basis in a manner clearly distinguishable from potential variables of scholarly interest (such as opposition victory, regime change, or democratization). Ex-post measures of the potential for competition run the risk of selecting on the dependent variable. Second, the criteria we propose are clear, transparent, and relatively simple, which should reduce coding errors as well as make it easier to engage in constructive and critical debate about the measure. Finally, the criteria we propose are institutional, and therefore provide a clear link between this study and existing literature on democracy and democratization. Whereas existing data allow scholars to separate democracies from non-democracies, our data allow regimes to be separated simply by whether the possibility for electoral competition exists. Przeworski et al. (2000) define democracy with respect to the procedure of filling public offices through contested elections, the outcome of which is uncertain. Although this definition of procedural democracy is perhaps the closest to our definition, our criteria for competition are distinct in that they are not based on electoral outcomes in any way. Przeworski et al. (2000) procedural democracies represent only a subset of countries that have potentially competitive elections. The benefit of our method is that by excluding elections in which there is no uncertainty over the outcome ex ante, scholars can then study the correlates of various levels of competitiveness, turning competitiveness into a dependent variable in its own right.<sup>6</sup> Our measure follows Sartori's idea of competition as a structure of the game, and the degree of competitiveness as an outcome to be measured:

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<sup>6</sup>Democratic elections, as Przeworski et al. define them, would be a subset of the electoral events our competition criterion identifies. This is also true if other measures of regime type, such as the POLITY and Freedom House datasets, are used to measure democracy.

Since competition includes competitiveness as a potential outcome, *competition* is equal to, and can be defined as, *potential competitiveness*. Conversely, competitiveness presupposes competition (as a structure) and is something to be measured in outcome, on the basis of its effectiveness. Thus competitiveness is one of the properties or attributes of competition. (Sartori, 1976, p. 218, emphasis in original)

Most relevant extant theories deal with democracy and democratization and operate at the level of structures, institutions, beliefs and agents. At the risk of gross oversimplification, one way to summarize the progress made over the past three to four decades in the study of democratization is to say that researchers have grown increasingly skeptical of the decisive importance of structures (such as an economically modern society with middle class and educated public) and more engaged with theories focused on how agents enact change within varying structures, such as different political institutions, levels of economic development, or prevailing beliefs in society.<sup>7</sup> Existing work continues to explore the relationship between structure and agency, and this is precisely where this dataset can contribute, and where biased sample selection could be most problematic. For example, Bunce and Wolchik (2010), in one of the most comprehensive treatments of the “color” revolutions, phrased the theoretical import of their research question as follows:

This study is well positioned to speak to a core debate in studies of the origins of political change. Is the key issue opportunity (which suggests the importance of structural conditions, institutional contexts, and long-term trends) or is it action (which highlights the role of agency and shorter-term influences on political outcomes)? (p. 76)

Bunce and Wolchik conclude that opposition strategies and agencies played a decisive role in successfully challenging otherwise strong and authoritarian incumbents.<sup>8</sup> Their study is

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<sup>7</sup>Some seminal works in a long, vibrant and rich conversation include Lipset (1959), Rustow (1970), Huntington (1991), Linz and Stepan (1996), Przeworski and Limongi (1997), Weingast (1997), McFaul (2002), Boix and Stokes (2003).

<sup>8</sup>Bessinger (2010) agrees in his survey-based examination of the magic of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine: “An indeterminate though not insignificant portion of the participation was the product of endogenous processes - agency rather than structure.”

based on an indepth comparison of eleven elections, and its implications could be tested on a larger set of countries. If competition is allowed in a given election, and if the importance of human agency is taken to its logical conclusion, it is difficult to see why any set of strategies adopted by the incumbent necessarily eliminate the the opposition's chance to win. Elections with competition have the basic form of democracy, if not the content – and once the opposition is allowed to compete, as Bunce and Wolchik's studies demonstrate, they have the opportunity to marshal available resources in order to demand further changes from the government. The stakes are high since the opposition has an institutionally-clear shot at power, and the incumbent may go to extremes to prevent the opposition from succeeding.<sup>9</sup>

The opposition may not be strong enough to overcome the bias against them, they may fail to take advantage of opportunities, they may be genuinely unpopular, lack effective leadership, or may be thwarted by a clever incumbent. Our argument is simply that elections in which competition is allowed introduce some positive probability that the incumbent will lose, and therefore represent the appropriate universe of cases for many studies. Elections in which the incumbent successfully defeats opposition challenges to their hold on power may be structurally identical to those in which the opposition succeeds. If they are not, other structures should be defined and measured. The structure should not be inferred from the outcome of opposition success or victory. And simply allowing minimal competition may raise the costs to the incumbent of holding elections.

For example, in recent elections in Sudan (2010) and Belarus (2006), few observers believed the outcome would favor the opposition, and it would be a stretch to argue that the outcome of these elections was “uncertain.” What is interesting about these cases, however, is the effort that those authoritarian leaders put into biasing the election against the opposition.<sup>10</sup> The observed behavior of these and other electoral autocrats suggests that they often perceive elections in which competition is allowed as threatening, and they work to ensure their

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<sup>9</sup>Bunce and Wolchik (2010, p.59) put it in this way: “... the problem is not just the opportunities for electoral change such regimes provide; it is also the tensions they generate between real and ‘fake’ democracy, with the result that, ‘if leaders use the forms of democracy, publics come to expect the substance.’ ” We concede that, sometimes, an election that is won by the opposition will not be conceded by the incumbent or the military will step in and make sure the election results are never translated into governance. We do not deal with this important issue here, other than to say that such instances are rare historically and so it is probably justified to assume that domestic players expect that a victory of the opposition translates into a stint in power, at least in expected terms.

<sup>10</sup>See “Sudan’s Elections: Half Horrid, Half Hopeful” (*The Economist*, April 17th, 2010) and Silitskil (2010) on Belarus.

victory, undertaking costly and risky efforts. The behavior of these and other authoritarian incumbents suggests that they view elections as events that carry some positive probability that they could lose or otherwise be forced from power. Identifying and testing which strategies, institutions, or circumstances make an electoral upset more or less difficult is a research with important theoretical and policy-relevant implications, but one that is currently hamstrung by a lack of appropriate data.

## 4 Existing Approaches used to Define Which Elections Can Be Lost

In 2002, the the *Journal of Democracy* published a special issue on “Elections without Democracy,” including Larry Diamond’s discussion of hybrid regimes, Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way’s research of the rise of competitive authoritarianism, and Andreas Schedler’s theory of the “menu of manipulation” used by leaders in electoral authoritarian regimes. These scholars, building on existing research, influentially defined hybrid regime types, including electoral authoritarianism. They further divided electoral authoritarianism into hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regime types (Diamond also reserves a category for “ambiguous” regime types). Levitsky and Way (2002) define competitive authoritarian regimes as those in which elections are held and some measure of accountability exists for leaders running in them, yet failures of democratic norms are widespread and the regime does not qualify as a democracy. The early literature on competitive authoritarianism sought to define the phenomenon, paying most attention to the issue of what separates a democratic election from a less-than-democratic one. Scholars probed the varieties of electoral fraud (Elklit and Svensson, 1997; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002; Simpser, 2005) and the menu of manipulation available to leaders seeking to steal elections (Schedler, 2002, 2006), and explored the shades of repression and pluralism inherent to such regimes (Diamond, 2002).

What captured the imagination of many scholars, apart from the growing prevalence of hybrid regimes—and competitive authoritarian regimes in particular—is one of their enduring features: the possibility that an opposition party or candidate could win an election despite government harassment, intimidation, and even widespread election fraud. A second wave of

literature on authoritarian elections continues to explore different aspects of this profoundly interesting question: which elections can be lost?

Few scholars address this question directly. At a theoretical level, in addition to the existence of multiple political parties, many scholars focus on uncertainty about the outcome of the election as a defining feature of competitive authoritarian regimes. For example, as Lucan Way argues, “in contrast to elections in fully authoritarian regimes, elections in competitive authoritarian regimes -even if highly unfair - generate genuine uncertainty” (Way, 2004, p.147). We argue, however, that a focus on pre-election uncertainty over who will win is inappropriate when defining the universe of potentially competitive elections. If scholars are motivated in part by the possibility of what Samuel Huntington has called “stunning” electoral victories in countries that hold elections but that are not yet democracies (Huntington, 1991), then defining which election outcomes are ex ante uncertain is inherently problematic. If citizens, electoral autocrats, journalists, and scholars can be surprised by an opposition victory in a hybrid regime, it seems possible (even likely) that these same observers would not be particularly adept at defining the universe of cases in which such surprising outcomes are possible. Methods that measure competition in part based on electoral uncertainty, in our view, are highly likely to introduce unnecessary bias.

In the next section, we detail how three existing empirical strategies fall short, and then introduce our solution, which can be implemented easily by other scholars across this research agenda.

### **Rule 1: Outcome-based Measures of Competition**

Perhaps the best known statement of what we refer to as the outcome-based rule of electoral competition is contained in Diamond (2002, p.29): “In regimes where elections are largely an authoritarian façade, the ruling or dominant party wins almost all the seats: repeatedly over 95 percent in Singapore, about 80 percent in Egypt in 2000 and Mauritania in 2001, 89 percent in Tanzania in 2000, and repeatedly over 80 percent in Tunisia during the 1990s.” Making a similar point and echoing Diamond, Levitsky and Way (2002, p.55) wrote: “As a rule of thumb, regimes in which presidents are reelected with more than 70 percent of the vote can generally be considered noncompetitive.” Sometimes, an outcome-based rule is

not invoked alone but forms part of larger classification scheme: the Database of Political Institutions codes political systems in which multiple parties win legislative seats and the largest gets over 75 %, Magaloni (2006, p.35) uses a 65 % cutoff rule as part of a broader coding scheme to identify hegemonic systems (where elections cannot be lost).

Yet scholars using an outcome-based measure often conflate competitiveness with competition. There are three problems with using an outcome-based rule to define when the potential for competition exists. First, huge assumptions are required to specify the maximum vote share any incumbent can receive in a democratic election, as well as the lowest vote share an authoritarian incumbent will accept as the minimum threshold of winning. Any such threshold will be noisy, and will aggregate different ‘types’ of elections (and both democratic and autocratic incumbents) on either side of the threshold.<sup>11</sup> There is also no theoretical reason why a completely democratic leader could not win an overwhelmingly victory, nor why an authoritarian leader could not falsify a victory of less than any given threshold in order to appear more democratic. Popularity and fraud are sometimes combined, and sometimes indistinguishable.

Second, and related, although it is true that any outcome-based rule will, on average, select regimes with higher levels of anti-opposition bias, it does not define whether any given election allows for the possibility of opposition victory. Most regimes with high levels of bias will feature skewed returns. This fact does not mean that a single electoral event with skewed return is necessarily an example of an election with a high degree of bias. Using an outcome-based rule of thumb may open the door to post-hoc coding decisions: a regime that is, *ex ante* viewed as one with the potential for electoral accountability may be coded as noncompetitive if the election happens to lead to an 80 % victory for one party.

For comparison, consider the 2000 elections in Côte d’Ivoire. The coup leader and incumbent President Robert Guei attempted to steal the election by severely limiting competition, but without entirely banning it. Among other tactics, Guei ensured that fourteen of the nineteen prospective presidential candidates, including those from the two largest political parties,

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<sup>11</sup>Diamond (2002) implicitly recognizes that outcome-based measures will lead to this type of problem when discussing an example of hegemonic authoritarianism (regimes where elections pose no risk to the party in power): “[T]he hegemonic character of rule by Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) was not apparent in the bare majority of parliamentary seats it won in 1998, but it became more blatant in early 2002 when the CPP won control of about 99 percent of the 1,621 local communes with about 70 percent of the vote” (p.32).

were barred from running by the Supreme Court. These actions led the UN-coordinated election observer mission to withdrawal from the country and issue a strong condemnation of the elections. However, Guei's efforts were apparently not sufficient to guarantee electoral victory, and in a surprise outcome one of the four remaining opposition candidates won the presidency with 59 % of the vote. Because minimal competition was allowed, our theoretical concept applies to this case, and would have applied regardless of whether the incumbent won 20, 50 or 70 % of the vote.

However, the third and most serious issue is that if an outcome based rule uses election returns to classify regimes and tests propositions about the likelihood of particular electoral outcomes, it is a text-book case of coding on the dependent variable. Coding the dependent variable risks biased estimates and unreliable inferences about the validity of the hypotheses.

Consider the simple example where a researcher suspects that incumbent losses are more likely when the government controls the media, or when one or more candidates was prevented from running. In terms of the graphical representation of Figure 1, the hypothesis is that when there is some form of bias, such as state-run media, or the exclusion of one candidate, the value of the bias is  $\beta_2$ .  $\beta_1$  represents cases in which such bias is not present, and the hypothesis is that  $\beta_2 > \beta_1$ . If an outcome-based rule is adopted to define the universe of cases, all observations of a win of 80 % or more are excluded from an empirical test of the null hypothesis  $\beta_2 \leq \beta_1$ . If the underlying hypothesis is true, the researcher will systematically fail to observe outcomes induced by a particular value of  $\beta$  (i.e., strong bias,  $\beta = \beta_2$ ), thus biasing (in a downward direction) the test of the true effect of state-run media or the exclusion of some candidates on the probability that the incumbent will lose the election.

In short, if the newly emerging questions in the study of authoritarian elections attempt to estimate the effect of a particular incumbent or opposition strategy, or a particular institutional setup, on the likelihood of a specific electoral outcome (such as a regime change or a democratic breakthrough), excluding some observations based on their electoral outcomes is not an advisable strategy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Also problematic is the use of a "lagged" value of the electoral return to classify a regime or the state of electoral competition. Essentially, a lag may help alleviate the ex-ante/ex-post tension described above, but does not alleviate the issue of coding on the dependent variable, which comes with the attendant risk of biased hypothesis testing.

## Rule 2: Competition Defined by a More General Dataset

Some scholars infer the universe of countries that allow electoral competition from datasets that are not meant to study electoral competition, such as *Polity IV* or *Freedom House*. Usually justifying the use of these datasets by stating that better data do not exist, scholars have used such datasets to identify the set of elections that are potentially competitive or that can be lost.<sup>13</sup>

The main problems with using such aggregated datasets is that they were not designed to measure the potential for competition in elections, and it is not possible to infer the potential for competition accurately from such aggregate measures. In addition, their coding rules are sufficiently opaque that the researcher is making unknown assumptions, and may inadvertently produce a substantively biased sample. Below, we show that when scholars assume that a score greater or less than a given value of a regime type index is associated with competitive or non-competitive elections, they are likely to be defining the universe of elections inaccurately.

A simple version of this rule would be to use a range of values in the annual rankings of the *Polity* variable in the *Polity IV* dataset to proxy for an election's potential for competition. Yet, by rules hard-wired into the *Polity* dataset, the rankings cannot distinguish between countries based on characteristics associated with specific elections, such as whether opposition was allowed, more than one candidate was on the ballot, or whether the incumbent leader faced a risk to their office. For example, Argentina under Peron earns the same *Polity* score as the USSR under Stalin (-9), Germany and Denmark in 1895 (with elected legislature but with an executive not responsible to it) score in the same 'midrange' of values as do Sweden and the Netherlands in 1900 (with limited franchise but alternation of power between fairly elected leaders).<sup>14</sup> The democratic elections in Greece 1974 occur during a period in which the country receives a *Polity* score of -7, which is the same score received by many regimes holding one-party contests in the Middle East, and Koštunica's breakthrough against Milošević occurred when the country was coded as an inauspicious -6. The same score is assigned to Armenia on the eve of its presidential elections in 1996 and to the

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<sup>13</sup>Specific examples of such studies include Hegre (2001), Mansfield and Snyder (2002), Diamond (2002), Schedler (2002), Lindberg (2006*b*), Howard and Roessler (2006), Kenyon and Naoi (2010), Keefer (2007).

<sup>14</sup>See insightful discussion in Bilinski (2010). Also see Kenyon and Naoi (2008) for evidence of measurement error in that dataset.

solidly communist elections in 1980 Poland.<sup>15</sup> Other datasets such as Freedom House and the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) have also been used to define ‘hybrid’ regimes (Beck, 2001). DPI includes variables about elected legislatures and executives, along with variables indicating the nature of competition. Although it comes closer to measuring electoral competition with its indices of legislative and executive competitiveness, these indices still rely on outcome-based indicators. The countries receiving the most competitive scores hold elections in which there are multiple candidates running for office and no candidate obtains more than 75% of the vote. Some scholars assume that countries allow competition or not based on their score.<sup>16</sup> Conceptually, this measure is closest to what we propose. Yet of the elections excluded by this rule as elections with no competition, the results of the election represented a loss for the incumbent more than 20 % of the time. We do not know why this discrepancy exists, but it may be because such indices are not accurate proxies for the potential for electoral competition.

When researchers use more general datasets on political institutions to exclude some contests from consideration, this is bound to create, at a minimum, measurement error, and may lead to biased inferences. Whether both will happen is difficult to establish without further exploration of the causes of the poor fit between these datasets and electoral events. In our view, it is preferable to measure the potential for competition directly.

### **Rule 3: Competition Defined by Taxonomy**

Finally, a number of scholars define which elections can be lost using typologies of regimes, which can lead to the combined problems of rules 1 and 2, and is particularly problematic

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<sup>15</sup>This issue cannot be resolved by turning to Polity’s subcomponent scores (see Vreeland (2008); Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland (2010) on the problem of aggregation). The subcomponent variables *XRCOMP*, *XROPEN*, and *PARCOMP* are the three components in Polity IV that appear to be the most theoretically relevant to electoral conditions. Yet they all have the same rankings for the Polish and Armenian cases: *XRCOMP* = 1 (chief executive determined through hereditary succession or rigged or unopposed elections); *XROPEN* = 4 (chief executive determined through elite designation or competitive election); *PARCOMP* = 2 (regime sharply limits political competition)

<sup>16</sup>For example, among non-democratic regimes, Brownlee (2009) defines regimes with a EIEC or LIEC score of 5 or greater as electoral authoritarian, and then defines the subtypes of hegemonic authoritarian regimes as having scores of 5 or 6, and competitive authoritarian regimes as non-democracies that score a 7. Countries receiving a score of five have multiple parties that are legal but they did not win seats. Similarly, in examining the effects of electoral accountability, Keefer (2007) dichotomizes the EIEC scale such a country is defined as allowing electoral competitiveness if its score is 6 or 7.

for a smaller subset of research questions pertaining to the durability of regimes. Using this rule, scholars assume that all countries that are defined as having a specific regime type (or types) represent the universe of elections that are potentially competitive. Or, they assume that some regime types, by definition, never hold potentially competitive elections.

For example, some scholars assume that they are excluding non-competitive elections when they exclude regimes that are defined as *hegemonic* electoral authoritarian regimes. The conceptual inspiration for hegemonic regimes is related to Sartori's early intuition that some regimes hold elections where competition is tolerated but "not only does alternation not occur in fact, it *cannot* occur since the possibility of a rotation in power is not even envisaged."<sup>17</sup> As others note (Magaloni, 2006, p.33), if Sartori's words are taken literally, how do we know when rotation in power is "not even envisaged"? What characteristics define a hegemonic regime? Which characteristics truly make a regime hegemonic (and so impregnate it against the forces of political change at the polls) and which ones are secondary or perhaps not essential at all? From the perspective of a government intent on staying in power, is it enough to own all the media, or must the government also repress the opposition? Is it even better to control the central electoral commission? Or is a combination of the first and the third enough to deprive the opposition of viable channels to reach power?<sup>18</sup>

There are two potential problems with this approach. First, many definitions of electoral authoritarian regimes rely in part on outcome-based rule of competition. Thus, regimes qualify as hegemonic where incumbents win by some (large) margin, and where a particular party or movement is in power for a long time. But when the opposition wins in a surprising victory, as in elections detailed by Bunce and Wolchik (2010), someone in the country must have believed that there was some positive probability in unseating the incumbent.

Other strategies, instead, use a characteristic of the regime or its political institutions to separate cases where elections are potentially consequential versus cases where elections function, in Levitsky and Way's apt phrase, as a "façade." For example, Magaloni (2006) and Greene (2007) invoke the degree of control of the ruling party over the rules of the game (parliaments, electoral commissions) and the resulting residual control over all aspects of

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<sup>17</sup>Sartori (1976, p.230).

<sup>18</sup>Scholars have recognized the importance of separating out the effects of different forms of manipulation. Schedler (2006, p.46) asks: "Is it the same to shut out competitors as to buy off opposition voters? Is it the same to manipulate the mass media as to rob an election?"

political life in a country as one of the key markers of a hegemonic political order. Sometimes, researchers identify a large set of characteristics as collective markers of hegemonic orders. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that “full authoritarianism refers to regimes in which no viable channels exist through which opposition forces may contest legally for power. This category includes closed regimes in which national-level democratic institutions do not exist (e.g., China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia), as well as hegemonic regimes, in which formal democratic institutions exist on paper but are reduced to façade status in practice. In hegemonic regimes, elections are so marred by repression, candidate restrictions, and/or fraud that there is no uncertainty about their outcome. Much of the opposition is forced underground, and leading critics are often imprisoned or exiled.”<sup>19</sup> But introducing any indicator that measures whether an election was sufficiently “marred by repression” necessarily introduces subjectivity and risks pos-hoc coding decisions. The opposition can and does win, even in elections marred by repression, so how much repression is too much?

The second problem with defining electoral competition based on taxonomy relates to the fact that typologies of regimes are justified in part because they capture qualitative differences between regimes in a way that other indicators cannot. Mexico under PRI dominance (an often cited example of a hegemonic regime),<sup>20</sup> is characterized by a ruling party that was skilled at using clientelism to stay in power. The PRI ostensibly used clientelism to guarantee its longevity at the polls. We do not dispute the overall utility of defining regimes as hegemonic, competitive authoritarian, or semi-democracies. The way in which regime types are defined qualitatively, however, are not necessarily suitable for defining the universe of cases relevant to potentially competitive elections, and may undermine some research questions. For example, to evaluate whether clientelism consistently helps parties to win potentially competitive elections and stay in power for long periods of time, it is necessary to define the universe of relevant cases without attention to whether the party has stayed in power for many years. Without dismissing the claim that PRI-dominant Mexico is completely unlike contemporary Belarus or Kyrgyzstan, scholars can supplement existing approaches by using our data to evaluate how such qualitative differences in regime type influence election outcomes and regime durability.

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<sup>19</sup>See (Schedler, 2006, p. 3) for a broadly similar definition.

<sup>20</sup>Though not an undisputed one: Greene (2007, p.4) explains how Mexico has been thought of as democracy or autocracy by different people during the long rein of the PRI.

If the notion is that clientelist networks ensure the survival of hegemonic regimes, scholars can first test this claim within the set of hegemonic regimes (e.g. does a decline in the clientelist network weaken the regime; is it true that, as defined, elections in those regimes never produce surprising victories for the opposition), and, second, scholars can test whether clientelism has a different effect when it comes to the survival of other (electoral authoritarian) regimes. After all, this is what the intuition of a ‘different regime’ is based on: certain economic and political forces sustain the electoral dominance of hegemonic parties in ways that presumably differ from the way these same forces would operate in a different (non-hegemonic) regime.<sup>21</sup> In the process, such research can reveal something valuable about the relative importance of the distinction between hegemonic and other regimes, and, by implication, whether there is a class of electoral authoritarian regimes where “rotation in power is not even envisaged.”

If the potential for electoral competition is a concept relevant to a given study, scholars are better measuring it directly rather than inferring the existence of competition from more general datasets, typologies, or by using outcome-based measures. This leads us to our main point about criteria for electoral competition that are both theoretically justified and represent a valuable way to make further progress in the study of political accountability under shades of autocracy and democracy.

## 5 The National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Measure of Competition

Given the enormous amount of literature that already pertains to elections and electoral accountability, one might be skeptical that this problem has not yet already been solved. As surprising as it may seem, we have not identified any existing data that accurately define the universe of elections that allow competition without using outcome-based indicators, risking post-hoc coding decisions, or relying on data that are not intended to measure electoral competition. Existing datasets on regime type do not provide accurate measures of the

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<sup>21</sup>If these forces are simply not present in other regimes (i.e., no clientelism outside of hegemonic regimes), that, too, is worth noting as it constitutes a type of evidence in favor of the hypothesis that a regime is fundamentally different.

potential for competition or other basic attributes of elections. Other datasets focused on political institutions, including elections, are more limited in scope, inaccurate, or not intended to measure such election-specific characteristics in autocratic regimes. Rather than including a comprehensive comparison here, this information is summarized on the dataset's website.

Many scholars who have used the alternative rules for defining the universality of potentially competitive elections cite the lack of available data as the reason why they use potentially biased proxies for electoral competition. Additionally, we agree with Munck and Snyder (2004), who argue that scholars should always offer empirical measures when arguing for a conceptual innovation in the study of political regimes. We introduce the empirical measure of our concept of competition, which is now publicly available as part of a larger dataset that we have compiled. The National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data have information on more than 2,000 election events in 139 countries, covering 1945-2006.<sup>22</sup> The dataset contains information on more than fifty additional attributes of electoral events that are not discussed here, including whether the incumbent contested the election, extended their term limit, or designated a chosen successor. The dataset uses binary variables to measure the political environment in a country just before, during, or immediately after each electoral contest. In its most disaggregated form, NELDA codes executive and legislative elections separately, even if they occur on the same day, so that measures of competition can be separated by office.

Following the criteria outlined above, NELDA measures the concept of competition as the joint product of three factors, rendered as binary-answers to three questions in the data for every election event: (1) was opposition allowed? (2) was more than one party legal? (3) was there a choice of candidates on the ballot?<sup>23</sup> Elections that meet all three conditions possess the necessary conditions for competition, and therefore represent the universe of elections that can be lost. These variables may also be used separately.

Some clarifications are in order. The first and second variables are closely related, and correlate highly. Both are used in order to capture cases in which multiple parties are legal, but all are under the control (or closely affiliated with) the governing party; and to

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<sup>22</sup>The full completion of the data, for 1945-1960, will be available by the end of 2010; but the 1960- version is available now.

<sup>23</sup>These are variables *nelda3*, *nelda4*, *nelda5* in the data.

capture cases in which opposition parties are not legalized, but are allowed to organize and campaign in practice. We also sought to distinguish between “real” opposition and regime-organized fronts. In the 2000 presidential election in Uzbekistan, President Karimov faced one opponent, but the opponent did not campaign, was from the governing party, and even admitted to supporting and voting for the incumbent president. In this election, the NELDA data do not consider opposition to have been allowed. For an election to allow competition, it is also necessary that more than one party must be legal. This does not mean that no party is banned from participating in the election, but it does require that a party exists, is legal, and that the non-government party is an independent political entity. For example, in the 1947 election in Poland, the Communist Party allowed the Polish Peasant Party of Stanislaus Mikołajczyk to campaign and run in the election. Despite murders and mass prosecutions of its activists, the Party managed to garner a 10 % of the (officially announced) popular vote for its political platform. Even this was perceived as a threat to Stalin, and he ordered that the party be dissolved following the 1947 election Staar (1958). Although the 1947 elections allow competition, per our definition, subsequent elections in Communist Poland did not. Thus, even though different parties were allowed to exist after 1947, they were controlled by the Communists. For the third criteria, elections must also allow multiple candidates on the ballot, or voters have no choice, even if opposition is allowed and more than one party exists. This is most often the case in countries in which multiple parties are allowed in the legislature, but voters are given no choice for the presidency. For example, in the 1993 election in Egypt, there was only one candidate for president, thus disqualifying the election as one in which competition was allowed.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 2 illustrates the global spread of elections and whether or not they were contested, as documented in the NELDA dataset. The figures are included to demonstrate variation overtime, within countries. The figures highlight a number of empirical puzzles relating to the diffusion of competition. For example, why do countries like Cuba, Laos, Albania before 1990, Kuwait and Vietnam hold regular elections without allowing even minimal electoral competition? Why have competitive elections spread so consistently across Latin America, but not in the rest of the world until the end of the Cold War? The NELDA data allow researchers these and other general questions.

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<sup>24</sup>An online codebook has detailed coding rules for the competition variables, as well as for the remaining 50+ indicators in the data. Intercoder-reliability summaries for the codings, and a list of sources is also available online.

One way to test the face validity of our concept is to examine whether it successfully includes all elections that have been lost by the incumbent government. Figure 3 builds on several other variables provided in the NELDA data. Given that the office of the incumbent was contested (e.g. parliamentary in parliamentary systems and presidential in presidential systems), Figure 3 compares the average probability of turnover in power by examining two different measures of change. Executive turnover may mean that the incumbent ran and lost. In some ways, incumbent losses speak more directly to political accountability, because it demonstrates that an attempt to retain power did not work. However, in some cases (such as many Latin American presidential systems), institutional rules bar the incumbent leader from running for a second consecutive term, which means a loss by an incumbent leader would never be observed. If an election brings a new political leader to office, it may be that the incumbent was not competing, perhaps because of term limits, or because the incumbent passes the office to a chosen member of the ruling party. Therefore, we also examine a broader set of elections in which the leadership changed as a result of the elections.

Figure 3 present rates of turnover in power along two dimensions of interest: (a) by whether the country allowed competition and, if so, whether the country was classified as a democracy by Przeworski et al. (2000); (b) by whether leading opposition figures were precluded from running for office. Information on barring political leaders comes from NELDA,<sup>25</sup> and represents method of manipulation that allows an election to remain technically competitive, but may successfully exclude the opposition candidate with the best chance of winning. As such, it is a form of bias, or  $\beta$ , outlined in the simple model presented in Figure 1. As Figure 3 shows, democracy is necessarily a subset of elections that allow electoral competition, as defined by NELDA. Although in this comparison the information on which country qualifies as a democracy is from the Cheibub and Gandhi (2004) dataset, other definitions of democracy exhibit the same pattern (not shown).

Figure 3 underscores the face validity of our measure of competition. From 1960-2006, there are exactly zero elections in the data with no competition in which the incumbent ran and lost. This is consistent with the concept that “rotation is power is not even envisaged.” For example, when Museveni defeated his challenger in the 1996 “no-party” contest in Uganda, or the one-candidate ticket used for the 1993 Presidential election in Egypt, and in all elections that do not qualify as potentially competitive, the incumbent cruised to victory.

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<sup>25</sup>Variable *nelda13*: full documentation online.

The difference between Figure 3a and 3b is that sometimes incumbent leaders anoint a successor, and use elections without competition to confirm them in power.

Note that countries that are democratic are the most likely to experience a turnover, even when the incumbent runs. Elections that allow competition but are not defined as democracies still have relatively high rates of incumbent turnover. Also in Figure 3, if leading opposition figures were prevented from running, the election is defined as biased. This form of bias is associated with consistently lower levels of change in leadership after elections, but even this strategy does not eliminate the possibility of incumbent turnover. Our data allow a test of the hypothesis that barring some opposition leaders from competing always delivers victory to the incumbent. This hypothesis can be tested without making strong assumptions about the type of regime or the outcome of the election.

The innovative aspect of our approach is best illustrated by the observation that barring opposition leaders makes incumbent losses in countries others consider democracies nearly as unlikely as incumbent losses in the broader category of regimes allowing some competition (see Figure 3b). This is a reminder of the potential cost of testing such a hypothesis within a subset of regime types, or artificially limiting the sample according to inappropriate criteria. When the incumbent runs, if barring opposition leaders from the competition tends to be associated with the same rate of incumbent turnover in both democracy and in electoral non-democracy, the added value of regime types as an explanatory variable is diminished.

We should point out that these descriptive patterns merely illustrate how our conceptual approach can be used to provide scholars with an appropriate universe of cases for analysis. Any attempt to estimate econometrically the effect of a certain factor on electoral outcomes would need to account for a number of issues beyond identifying the correct universe of cases. The step we propose is simple, but well overdue. Our aim is to provide a more defensible foundation for tests of causal claims about the causes and consequences of electoral accountability, and thus attempt to make empirical tests more accurate.

## 6 Conclusion

The contribution of this article is best illustrated by five related observations: First, for scholars evaluating the causes and consequences of electoral competition, outcome-based measures of electoral competition, by excluding elections in which the opposition can compete but did not perform sufficiently well, introduce a serious form of bias into research on a wide-ranging set of questions. Second, existing regime type measures do not accurately define the universe of cases in which electoral competition is possible, and lead to the unintended inclusion of noncompetitive elections as well as the unintended exclusion of competitive elections. Third, no existing public dataset has comparable scope of coverage of elections as unique and identifiable events. Fourth, relative to existing datasets on elections, the data are more flexible outside of the country-year format and can be easily transformed into the structure that is most appropriate to a specific research question. Finally, the list of election events makes adding additional election-specific variables relatively straightforward, a feature that we hope will facilitate further research and collaboration. This final point is simple, but is arguably the most lasting contribution of the project. Overall, we hope that this study will facilitate further debate in comparative politics and international relations on the implications of the rapid increase in competitive but undemocratic forms of electoral processes throughout the world.

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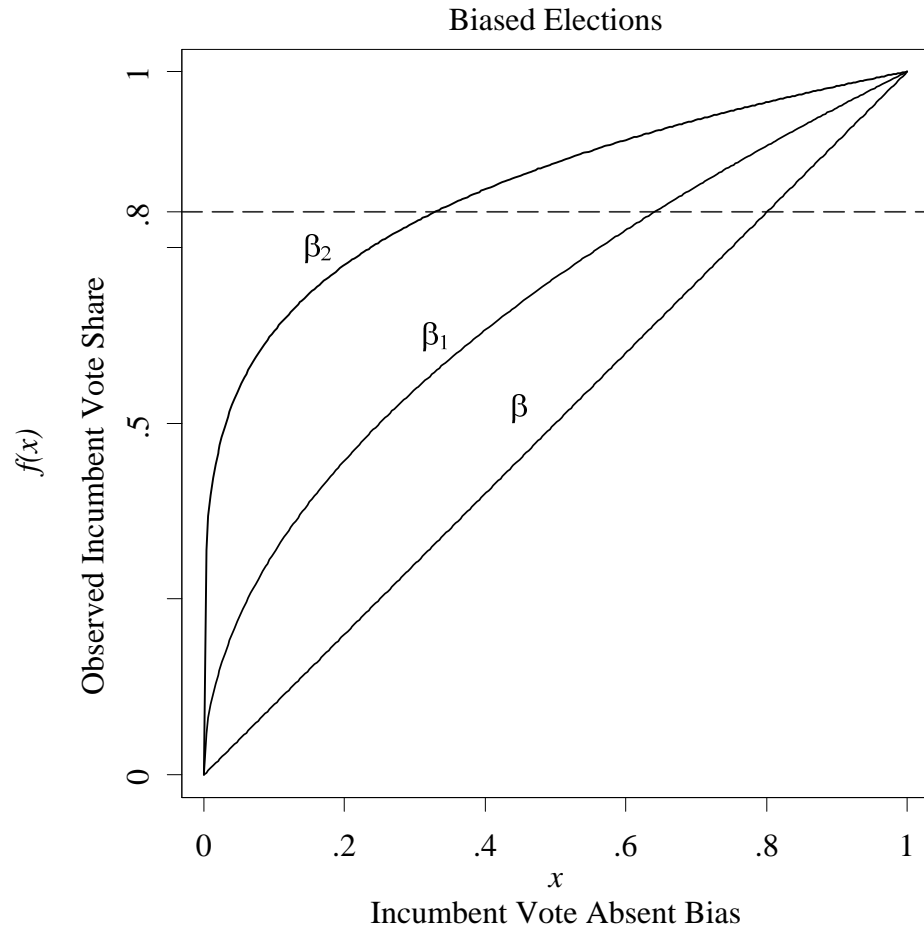
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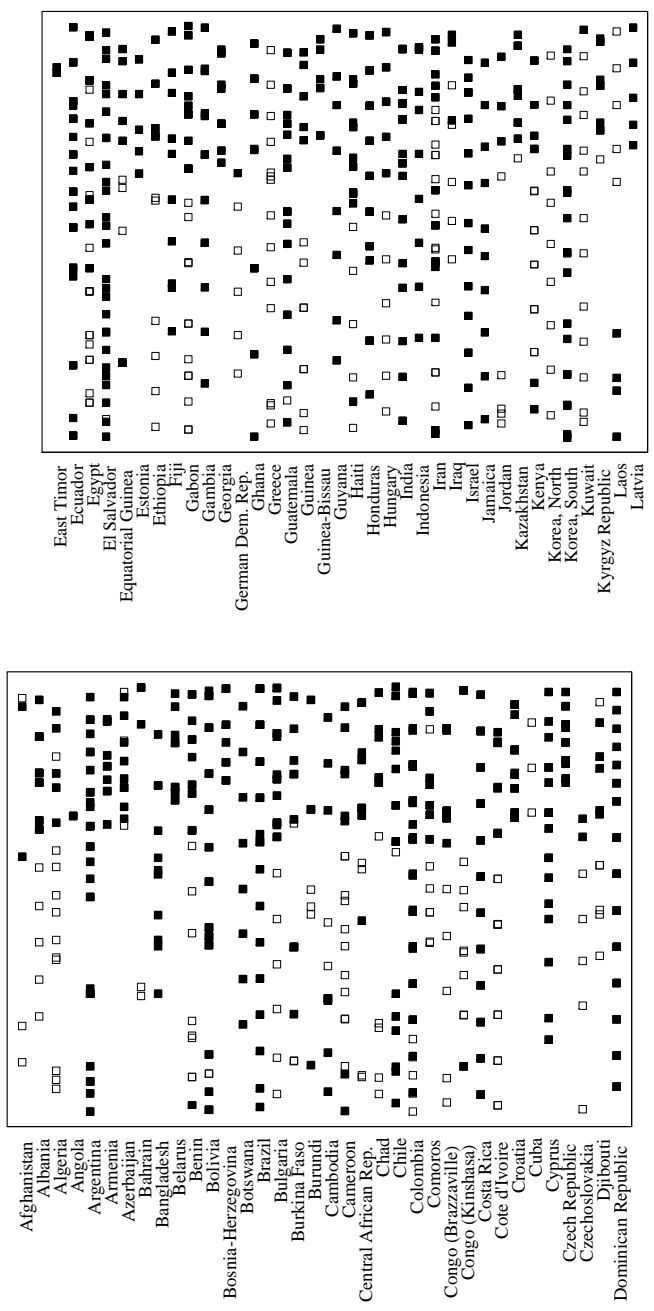
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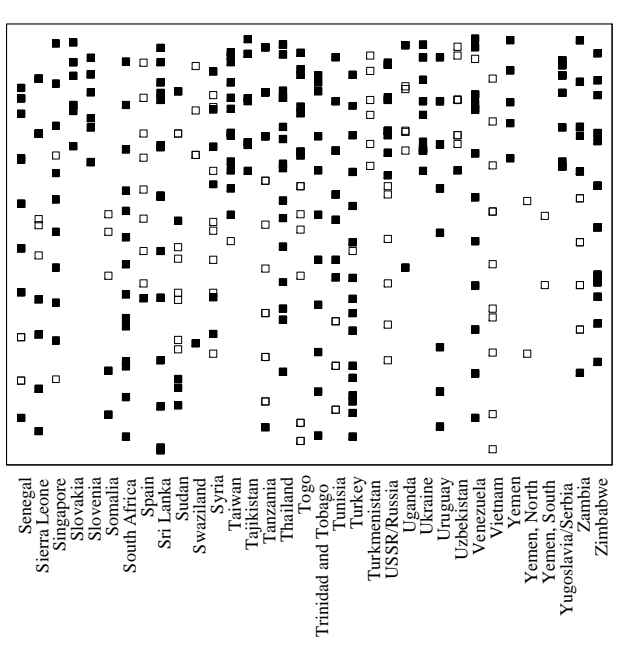
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Figure 1: Bias and Election Outcomes

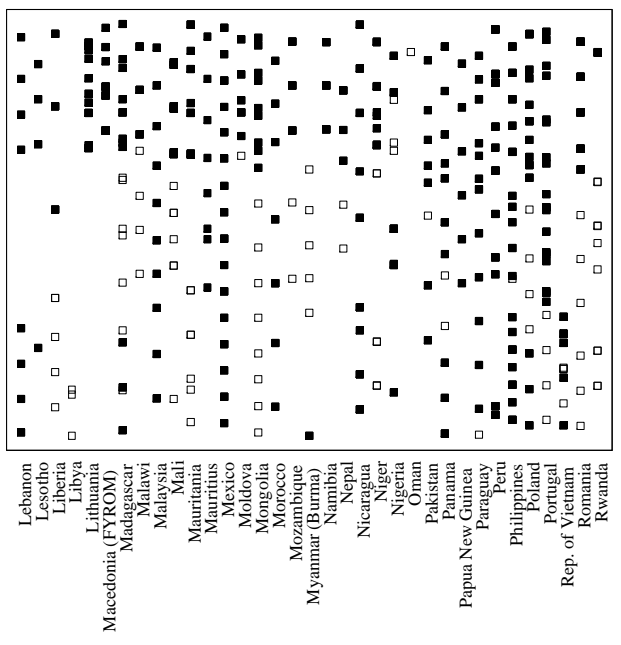




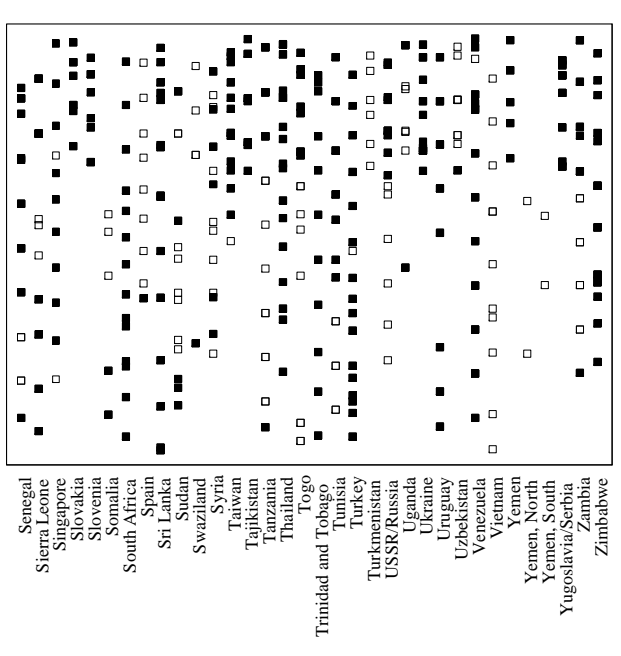
(a)



(b)

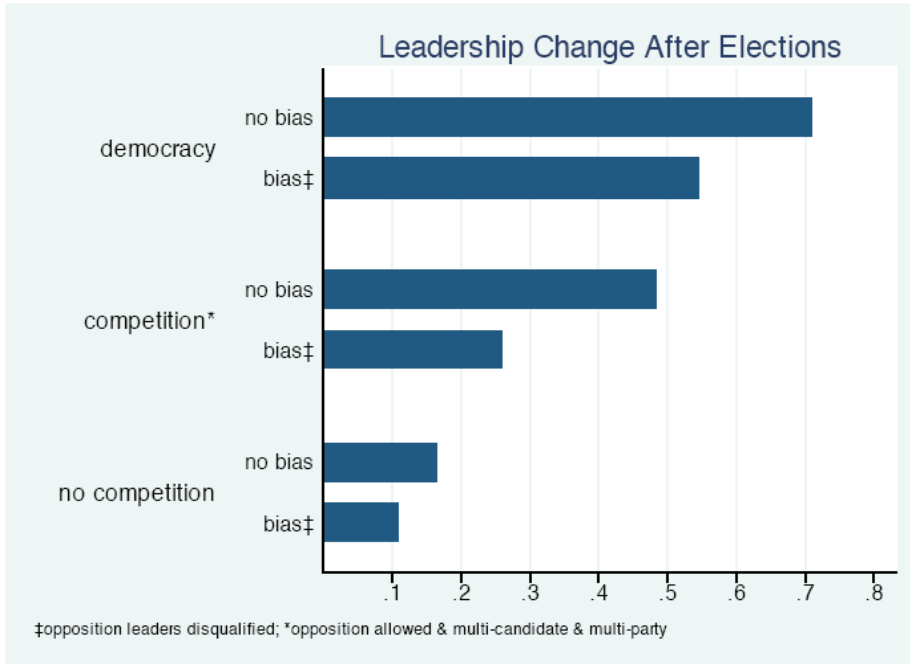


(c)

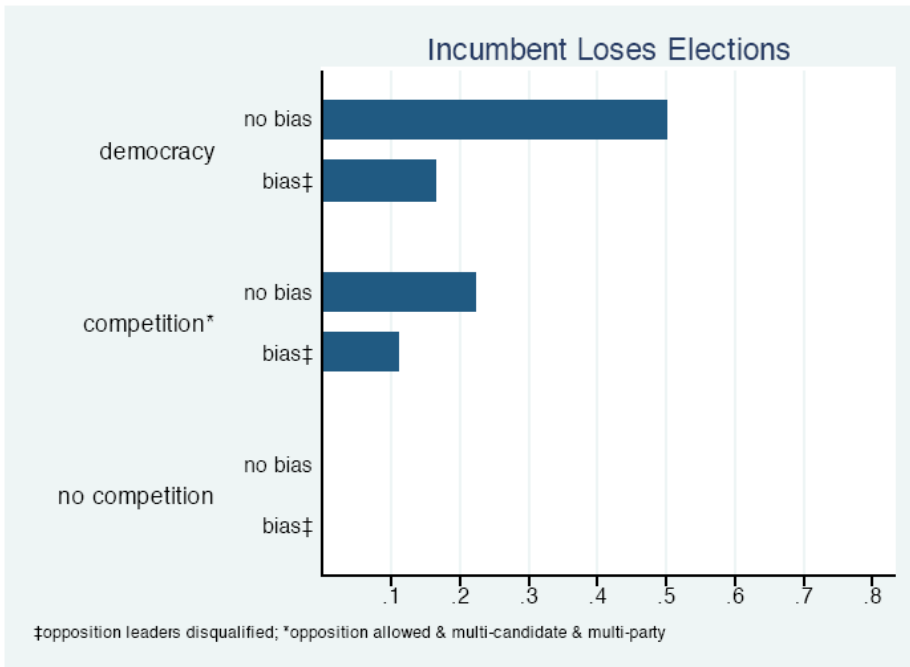


(d)

Figure 2: National-Level Elections in Selected Countries 1960-2006  
 Box: competition allowed; Empty box: no competition



(a) Leadership Change by Whether Any Opposition Leaders Were Prevented from Running



(b) Incumbent Loss by Whether Any Opposition Leaders Were Prevented from Running

Figure 3: Competition, Bias, and Electoral Turnover