


BOOK REVIEW

The Dictator's Dilemma at the Ballot Box

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Most of the existing explanations for authoritarian elections suffer from two shortcomings. The first one is the generalization of their findings. Single-country cases inspire many of these theories, and it is hard to know whether their proposed predictions apply to other autocracies. The second problem is prevalent in social sciences: there is no cumulative learning. Many theories of authoritarian elections provide competing explanations to the conventional wisdom without delineating the conditions in which the proposed mechanism should appear over the alternatives. Masaaki Higashijima's recent publication, *The Dictator's Dilemma at the Ballot Box*, overcomes such limitations in a magistral way. The author proposes a solid argument about the incentives for dictators to hold and manipulate elections and provides a multi-methods approach using cross-national evidence to test his argument.

The book centers around the competing incentives for dictators when holding elections. On the one hand, honest election results provide information about the regime's popularity, the discontent areas, and local agents' competence. Authoritarian elections also allow the opposition to channel its demands through the institutional arena, mitigating the threats to the dictators. On the other, winning by large margins can transmit an aura of invincibility and strong popular support to the dictator inside and outside the ruling elites.

In the best of the worlds, authoritarian elections simultaneously bring both sets of incentives. Most of the time, however, these incentives compete with each other. While exerting overt manipulation increases the likelihood of an overwhelming victory, it dilutes the informative benefits of elections. The dictator ends up prioritizing between the informative benefits of the elections or enjoying the benefits of an overwhelming victory. This trade-off is what the author calls the 'electoral dilemma.'

Higashijima masterfully endogenizes the degree of electoral manipulation, which depends on the dictator's capability to strengthen his mass support via clientelism and pork barrel. Such possibility, which the author refers to as 'mobilization capabilities,' depends on the level of financial resources that autocrats have at hand, how the dictator can directly channel those financial resources, and the opposition's capabilities to counterbalance such capabilities. When the mobilization capabilities of dictators are high, they prefer to maneuver the economy than manipulate the electoral process. Dictators only rely on electoral manipulation when they face limited mobilization capabilities, which will increase the possibilities of an overwhelming electoral victory while diluting the other benefits that autocratic elections bring. The amount of electoral manipulation also depends on the expected consequences of fraud. Oversupplying fraud can ignite post-electoral protests from the opposition. Undersupplying fraud can signal weakness outside the regime, yielding to widespread protests supporting the opposition. It can also signal weakness to the members of the ruling elite, who can organize themselves to overthrow the dictator. Of course, whether fraud is undersupplied or oversupplied depends on what the election result would be had manipulation been absent.

The book carefully explains the argument and tests each of its main pieces in detail. Chapter 3 first shows that the mobilization capabilities of the dictator are negatively related to the amount of blatant

fraud in an election. The author operationalizes the extent of electoral fraud using the election reports published by the US Department of State. Similarly, the author operationalizes the mobilization capabilities considering the abundance of natural resources (using data on oil-gas value per capita) and its amplifying effect on strong party-based organizations and ethnicity-based networks, as well as a low number of revolutionary threats. Chapter 5 demonstrates the conditions for dictators to create political business cycles surrounding elections. While this policy resource has been extensively documented in democracies, the author discusses the conditions in which autocracies rely on it. Higashijima shows that autocrats are more likely to maneuver fiscal policies when they face opposition parties than when they do not. Moreover, political business cycles have a complementary role to blatant electoral manipulation, so they are more likely in contexts of relatively freer elections.

Chapter 6 talks about the consequences of electoral manipulation. Since autocrats face different threats – from widespread protests to coups or an electoral defeat – the author theorizes the conditions under which electoral manipulation triggers each of them. The premise here is that electoral results are composed of ‘honest’ and ‘dishonest’ numbers and that the distinction between them is the role of electoral manipulation. Citizens and ruling elites can distinguish both numbers, which signal the real strength of the incumbent. While undersupply is more likely to produce turnover, oversupply is more likely to produce protests.

The findings from the cross-national database are then corroborated and deepened in Chapters 7 and 8, which compare the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Both countries could not consolidate their democracies after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the last decade of the twentieth century. With the rise of the international oil price after 1999 and the centralization of the management of the energy resources, the Kazakh government enjoyed extensive resources for patronage and clientelism. Such an advantage reduced the dependence on electoral manipulation to continue in power. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan lacked abundant natural resources, leaving the government to depend on international aid and stabilization loans. However, these resources were more challenging to control in a discretionary way and went away as the country stepped back from democracy. As a response, the government not only manipulated the elections but designed a clear institutional bias in favor of the incumbent regime. The overt manipulation led to massive popular mobilization in 2005 that ended in the breakdown of the incumbent.

While this book significantly advances our understanding of the incentives for how dictators manipulate elections, its theoretical implications also apply to developing democracies. This explanation fits cases where a party has enough organizational capability and discretionary financial resources to remain in power without relying on electoral fraud. The theory proposed could illuminate the reasons behind the political dominance of Justicialist Party in Argentina or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, for example.

If anything, my only hesitation in the book concerns the argument about the changes in the electoral institutions. The crux of this argument is that dictators who want to manipulate elections are more likely to choose single-member district (SMD) over proportional representation (PR) systems because the former creates larger disproportionalities between seats and votes. This conclusion is inspired by the evidence that electoral manipulation is more prevalent in SMD systems than in PR systems. However, a better test of this argument would involve focusing on the changes in the electoral systems. That is, we should study under what conditions countries do not change their election rules or switch from an SMD to a PR system and vice versa. In addition, taking a binary view of electoral rules in the theory excludes many examples of multi-seat majoritarian systems. Consider, for example, single non-transferable vote systems in Jordan or Kuwait. While the book partially addresses this issue by using electoral thresholds, other institutional features of PR elections might be overlooked. Consider, for example, the gerrymandering and malapportionment in Venezuelan elections despite not changing the electoral rule or the number of districts. These are just initial thoughts anyone interested in the topic can take to continue the fascinating debate that the author proposes.

The Dictator's Dilemma at the Ballot Box is a captivating and welcome addition to the scholarly study of institutions in dictatorial regimes. It should be of interest not only to scholars on

authoritarian regimes but also to those studying political business cycles and electoral integrity. Higashijima's approach proposes several explanations that refine our understanding of electoral manipulation. I very much look forward to seeing the next steps on this topic and how this book will join others in the endeavor. This is a highly recommended book.