Does Information Generate Self-Enforcing Democracy? The Role of International Election Monitoring

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Abstract:

What motivates leaders to hold democratic elections? Can international actors help facilitate self-enforcing democracy? We argue that when democracy is not yet institutionalized, leaders have little incentive to push for clean elections, in part because they are likely to face accusations of fraud from domestic opposition groups regardless of their true behavior. We argue that international election observers can facilitate self-enforcing democracy by providing credible information about the quality of elections, thus increasing the ability of citizens to coordinate against the regime when election fraud occurs, and discrediting “sore loser” protests. We show that patterns of post-election protests are consistent with our argument, and that post-election protests are more likely, last longer, and attract more supporters following negative reports from international observers. The implication is that international election observers help promote democracy by making post-election protest more accurate in the short term, thereby increasing incentives for leaders to hold democratic elections in the long term.