Third-Party Institutions and the Success of Democracy

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Abstract:

When and how do third-party institutions -- most prominently electoral commissions, courts, and observers -- contribute to the integrity of the electoral process? We approach these questions by studying how third-party actors shape politicians' incentives to comply with the outcomes of elections. We show that third-parties are most beneficial in close elections, when the threat of a post-election confrontation alone fails to ensure self-enforcing compliance with election outcomes. Our analysis highlights that third-parties do not need to be impartial to be politically consequential, that it is third-parties with a moderate pro-incumbent bias that will be in the interest of not only the opposition but also the incumbent, and that incumbents adopt politically consequential third-party institutions when they fear that an election that they expect to narrowly win might be incorrectly perceived as the opposition's victory and followed by a costly post-election confrontation. Extensions of our analysis consider the interaction between protest, repression, and third-party institutions and clarify not only the potential but also the limits to institutional solutions to the problem of electoral compliance in new and transitioning democracies.