

A Dictator's Dilemma at the Ballot Box:
Electoral Manipulation, Economic Distribution, and Political Order in
Autocracy
A Book Proposal

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1 Overview of the book

This book explores the manner in which authoritarian leaders institutionalize elections and the impact of those elections on the economy and political order in autocracies.¹ After the end of the Cold War, many countries achieved democratization; however, many authoritarian countries still survive in this era of democratization. Observing these resilient authoritarian regimes, comparativists have focused on the roles of political institutions in autocracies (e.g., legislatures and political parties). They argued that these institutions may help dictators to stay in power (e.g. Lust-Okar 2004; Magaloni 2006; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Among political institutions in authoritarian regimes, modern autocracies hold elections; however, these are not truly free and fair in various ways. Puzzled by the proliferation of authoritarian regimes with multi-party elections, scholars began to explore the reasons for which autocrats hold elections, ways in which they manipulate elections to maintain authoritarian rule, and the impacts of these elections on the political economy of authoritarian regimes.

Recent studies have indicated two roles of autocratic elections in prolonging authoritarian rule. First, researchers have contended that elections help dictators demonstrate a regime's invincibility to potential opponents (Magaloni, 2006; Simpser, 2013). Dictators can demonstrate that the regime is unshakable by winning elections while obtaining an overwhelming majority. They can prevent potential opponents from launching coups, defecting from the regime, and leading popular uprisings by doing so. Second, elections may also provide dictators with accurate information regarding the distribution of political support among the population. Election results inform dictators regarding the local popularity of ruling elites, which becomes one of the criteria for recruiting competent and loyal politicians (Blaydes, 2011; Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Reuter and Robertson, 2011). Election results also provide information regarding the distribution of popular support for the regime and the popularity of opposition parties (Cox 2009; Miller, 2012), thereby improving the efficiency of governance.

Although these studies advance our understanding of autocratic elections, they fail to address the following four problems adequately. First, although semi-competitive elections enable autocrats

¹In this book proposal, I use authoritarianism, dictatorship, autocracies, and non-democracies interchangeably.

to reap these informational benefits, multi-party elections may generate opportunities for potential opponents to challenge the dictator. In other words, further research is needed to explore ways in which dictators institutionalize elections given the trade-off between political risks and the informational benefits of holding elections. Second, due to the literature's excessive emphasis on the benefits of autocratic elections, current scholarship does not necessarily identify the conditions under which authoritarian elections backfire on dictators in the form of popular protests, leadership turnover, and autocratic breakdown. In fact, another strand of research strongly suggests that election time also poses serious threats to dictators by provoking coups and mass collective action (Tucker 2007; Knutsen et al. 2016). Third, previous research has focused on the strategies adopted by dictators to manipulate election results and has not considered the relationship among different electoral strategies of dictators (e.g., blatant electoral fraud, electoral system reform, and the maneuvering of macroeconomic policy). Finally, extant research does not explore the roles of state resources in the form of money and organizations in institutionalizing elections and electoral systems under dictatorships. This book project advances our understanding of the origins and effects of autocratic elections by focusing on the distribution of power resources between dictators and other political elites.

The book proposes a new theory that illuminates the causes and consequences of autocratic elections by filling the gaps in the literature identified above. My theory of autocratic elections begins with the observation that dictators face a dilemma when institutionalizing elections: although electioneering through overt electoral fraud and changes to the electoral system enables autocrats to “artificially” score an overwhelming victory at the ballot box, those elections lose some of the important informational benefits that elections are expected to bring to dictators. I argue that under the constraint posed by this electoral dilemma, the extent to which a dictator is able to mobilize popular support determines the degree to which heavily dictators rely on manipulating electoral processes and election rules. Specifically, dictators with the ability to provide economic rent and convey credible threats to the citizenry can garner “voluntary” support from the masses without resorting to electoral chicanery such as election violence, electoral cheating techniques, and the manipulation of electoral institutions. Therefore, “strong” dictators with abundant state resources are willing to adopt election processes that are less fraudulent and adhere to electoral

systems with high proportionality. In other words, I suggest a trade-off between the political manipulation of elections and pre-electoral methods of deriving public support such as the manipulation of economic policy. Dictators who refrain from electoral manipulation maneuver economic policy to “win big” in elections. My theory also predicts that when autocrats fail to deal with the electoral dilemma, autocratic elections are more likely to destabilize their rule via coups, popular protests, and regime change. This provides a response to the puzzle of autocratic elections: when do they unseat dictators?

2 Contributions and outstanding features

This book offers three major contributions to the studies on authoritarian politics, regime change, and elections in developing countries. In the contemporary world, holding elections has increasingly become an international norm. Advanced democracies and international society take various measures to help developing countries improve their electoral integrity under the banner of promoting free and fair elections (Norris 2014, 2017). However, burgeoning research on elections in autocratic or mixed regimes provides two different perspectives about the phenomenon. Comparative political scientists of authoritarianism have largely emphasized the dark side of semi-competitive elections in autocracy, arguing that such processes might help autocrats stay in power (Magaloni 2006; Blaydes 2010). Contrastingly, scholars of regime change and international relations (IR) have contended that advancing electoral fairness is a necessary first step for a country to progress with democratization (Lindberg 2006, 2009) or lead to autocratic breakdown (Tucker 2007; Knutsen et al. 2016). IR scholars have argued that the likelihood of a change in leadership increases by strengthening international enforcements for holding free and fair elections (Kelley 2012; Donno 2013). While these studies are invaluable to understanding elections in authoritarian regimes, they do not explain why some elections stabilize autocracies yet others do not. By endogenizing how authoritarian leaders institutionalize elections in the face of electoral dilemma, my theory of autocratic elections reconciles these different views concerning elections in autocracy. In so doing, this book project contributes to the study of authoritarian political institutions – one of the most researched topics in comparative politics over the last decade.

Furthermore, scholars have revealed the various types of electoral strategies that autocrats rely on to extend their rule, such as blatant electoral fraud (Simpser 2013; Little 2012; Rozenas 2016), manipulation of electoral rules (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002), and pre-electoral distribution of economic favors (Shi and Svensson 2003; Magaloni 2006). However, few studies have considered the relationships among these different electoral strategies. It is reasonable to assume that autocrats should consider the costs and benefits of each electoral strategy and choose an optimal set of election techniques to maximize the prospect of holding onto power. Precisely predicting the electoral strategy that dictators are likely to rely on is invaluable for policymakers. This is because doing so makes it possible to effectively prepare for the likely electoral manipulations dictators use before monitoring elections. This book illuminates the strategies that authoritarian leaders are most likely to use to win in elections, thereby contributing to scholarly discussions on electioneering under autocracy, in addition to advancing methods for international election monitoring and foreign support for democratization in developing countries.

Finally, this book adopts mixed methods to explore the origins and effects of authoritarian elections. First, I conduct cross-national statistical analyses using original datasets of elections in authoritarian regimes, which demonstrate statistical associations among a dictator's power of mobilization, various electoral strategies, post-electoral political conflicts and regime transformation. Second, these cross-national comparisons using quantitative data are complemented by various case illustrations that are presented in each chapter of the cross-national analyses. Third, guided by eight months of fieldwork that I conducted in Central Asia between 2008 and 2014, this book presents structured in-depth case studies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These two similar countries institutionalized elections in distinct ways that resulted in different fates for their respective authoritarian regimes. Using both quantitative and qualitative resources that I collected during my fieldwork in both countries, the comparative case studies process-trace causal chains linking a dictator's power resources, electoral manipulation techniques, economic distribution, and political order during the aftermath of elections.

3 Chapter outline

The current chapter outline of this book is as follows:

Chapter 1 Introduction: Why Elections in Authoritarian Regimes?

Chapter 2 A Theory of Autocratic Elections

Chapter 3 Blatant Electoral Fraud Under Autocracy

Chapter 4 Electoral System Manipulation

Chapter 5 The Maneuvering of Macroeconomic Policy

Chapter 6 Backfiring at the Ballot Box: Protests, Turnover, and Regime Breakdown

Chapter 7 Kazakhstan: From Electoral Manipulation to Fiscal Maneuvering

Chapter 8 Kyrgyzstan: Electoral Chicanery and the Breakdown of an Authoritarian Regime

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Part I: Theory

Chapter 1 Introduction: Why Elections in Authoritarian Regimes?

In this chapter, I define the subject matter explored in this book, and identify the gaps in knowledge regarding the causes and consequences of autocratic elections. I then explain why it is important to improve our understanding of elections in authoritarian regimes. My intension is to emphasize the importance of this project from a normative, historical, and practical perspective. In addition to explaining the motivation for the book, this chapter reviews how the comparative politics literatures have discussed autocratic politics and its political institutions by focusing on the study of autocratic elections. I then identify the research questions and research agendas explored in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 A Theory of Autocratic Elections: The Electoral Dilemma and Distribution of Power Resources

This chapter presents a theory of authoritarian elections, detailing the electoral dilemma faced by autocrats when holding elections. Under the constraints of electoral dilemma and strategic

interactions with other political elites (both ruling and opposition elites), I theorize the conditions under which autocrats manipulate electoral processes and electoral institutions favorable to them. I focus on the distribution of power resources between the dictator and other political elites as the key determinants impacting the designs of authoritarian elections, which is associated with the dictator's ability to mobilize popular support via patronage and coercion. Although it is difficult to directly observe power resource distribution among the political actors, I argue that the distribution of power resources can be empirically captured by drawing our attention to the following three aspects: (1) the financial resources available to the dictator, (2) disciplinary political organizations that prevent ruling elites from opportunistically exploiting state resources, and (3) the opposition elites' capacity to mobilize mass collective action. I then briefly explain how this theory enables us to explain variations in the four most important outcomes of authoritarian elections: blatant electoral fraud, electoral system change, pre-electoral manipulation of macroeconomic policy, and post-electoral political conflicts such as protests and leadership turnover. Finally, this chapter concludes with a cross-national investigation demonstrating that the measures of power resource distribution are highly correlated with the dictator's electoral performance during presidential and parliamentary elections.

Part II: Cross-National Comparisons

Chapter 3 Blatant Electoral Fraud

In this chapter, I explore the conditions under which autocrats resort to blatant electoral fraud. First, I briefly review the literature on electoral fraud and define blatant electoral fraud. Based on my theory of autocratic elections, I restate several hypotheses on the relation between the distribution of power resources and blatant electoral manipulation and test these hypotheses using a cross-national dataset of electoral fraud. Specifically, my cross-national statistical analyses indicate that dictators with abundant natural resources and a weak opposition permit elections to be more free and fair by relying less on blatant electoral manipulation such as election violence, electoral cheating, and illiberal restrictions of electoral law. Furthermore, the negative impact of natural resources on electoral fraud increases when dictators have strong disciplinary organizations such as

dominant parties and large, coherent dominant ethnic groups that enable them to discipline ruling elites and thus streamline economic distribution and to convey a credible threat to the masses. This cross-national evidence is further corroborated by brief case illustrations from the globe, including Mexico, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, and Russia.

Chapter 4 Electoral System Manipulation

In addition to blatant electoral fraud, autocrats are also able to manipulate electoral systems according to their political needs. This chapter investigates the determinants of electoral system manipulation in authoritarian regimes. First, I review the literature on electoral system choice, suggesting that existing studies exclusively focus on electoral system choice in democracies and thus are unable to apply their theories to authoritarian contexts. Second, I use the theory of autocratic elections to argue that “strong” dictators with abundant natural resources or those facing a weak opposition adopt proportional representation (PR) systems, whereas “weak” dictators rely on small member district (SMD) systems to maintain an overwhelming electoral victory. Using newly collected cross-national data on electoral systems in electoral authoritarian regimes, I demonstrate that both natural resource wealth and a weak opposition increase the likelihood that dictators choose PR systems. Short case illustrations (Russia, Malaysia, and Zimbabwe) are presented to validate the causal arguments made throughout the book.

Chapter 5 The Maneuvering of Macroeconomic Policy

This chapter presents cross-national evidence of dictators’ pre-electoral manipulation of fiscal and monetary policies, namely, the political business cycles (PBC) in autocracies. The theory of autocratic elections predicts a trade-off between electoral manipulation and the maneuvering of macroeconomic policy: autocrats who can mobilize public support via the provision of local public goods rely less on manipulating elections. I first survey the literature while introducing various single case studies on PBC in autocracy demonstrated by extant research exploring Mexico, Russia, Egypt, Malaysia. Second, I suggest that previous studies have often focused on a single country or a region and have not offered a convincing theory that enables us to understand how the pre-electoral manipulation of policy instruments is more likely to occur in autocracies. Thereafter, I conduct

cross-national statistical analyses using original datasets of fiscal balance and autocratic elections to test whether those elections that are relatively free from electoral manipulation are positively correlated with fiscal deficits in authoritarian regimes. The findings are as follows: autocratic elections that (1) allow opposition and multiple candidates, (2) involve higher political competitiveness, (3) involve less blatant electoral fraud, and (4) include PR systems are positively associated with fiscal overspending.

Chapter 6 Backfiring at the Ballot Box: Protests, Turnover, and Autocratic Breakdown

In this chapter, I empirically investigate the consequences of autocratic elections. Autocratic elections backfire on the autocrat when they fail to deal with the electoral dilemma. First, I present various cases of authoritarian regimes illustrating that dictators often misperceive the extent to which they are able to mobilize popular support vis-à-vis opposition parties during elections. I argue that there are two post-electoral scenarios when autocratic elections backfire on the dictator. On the one hand, when autocrats “underuse” electoral manipulation, elections reveal *de facto* the low “popularity” of the dictator, paving the way for ruling elites to launch a coup or for opposition parties to unexpectedly win elections. On the other hand, when autocrats “overuse” electoral fraud relative to their power resources, the quality of elections deteriorates and thus cannot work as a credible tool to demonstrate a regime’s strength, which encourages post-electoral protest movements. In contrast, when the autocrat successfully gauges the extent of electoral manipulation according to the amount of power resources he possesses, autocratic elections deter those political conflicts in the short run as well as autocratic breakdown risks in the long run. A cross-national statistical analysis of autocratic elections tests these theoretical expectations. Furthermore, a cross-national survey data analysis reveals that well-balanced autocratic elections increase the dictator’s political legitimacy among the citizenry.

Part III: Comparative Case Studies

In Part III (Chapters 7 and 8), I conduct comparative case studies of two Central Asian Republics, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Both countries share similar histories, being former republics of the

Soviet Union, and are similar multi-ethnic, clientelism-ridden societies, in addition to sharing similar political institutions that comprise presidential systems with similar center-local relationships. However, the development of autocratic regimes in the two countries has followed distinct paths. Autocratic elections helped the dictator to consolidate his rule in Kazakhstan, whereas elections sparked popular protests and led to the breakdown of the autocratic regime in Kyrgyzstan. How can we explain the different impact of elections in such similar countries?

Chapter 7 Kazakhstan: From Electoral Manipulation to Fiscal Maneuvering

This chapter investigates the case of post-Soviet Kazakhstan wherein the dictator successfully consolidated his authoritarian regime by strengthening pre-electoral economic distribution and coercion but with less fraudulent elections and more proportional electoral systems. The country suffered an economic crisis throughout the 1990s shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and President Nazarbaev had to rely on serious electoral fraud as well as SMD systems to maintain his political dominance. In contrast, increasing natural resource rents and centralized political organizations helped the dictator to engineer a large number of PBC and increase his coercive power during the 2000s. Such pre-electoral methods of garnering public support enabled the president to rely less on blatant electoral fraud and adopt a PR system, thus stabilizing his authoritarian rule.

Chapter 8 Kyrgyzstan: Electoral Chicanery and the Breakdown of an Authoritarian Regime

In this chapter, I present the case of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan wherein the dictator suffered shrinking power resources and was forced to rely on electoral fraud and SMD systems. President Akaev held relatively free and fair elections during the 1990s but from the 2000 elections, he began resorting to relentless electoral malpractice. Furthermore, prior to the 2005 elections that triggered the so-called “Tulip Revolution,” he decided to revert the electoral system to a pure SMD system. This case study illustrates that such changes in electoral institutions were mainly caused by shrinking financial resources, a failure to build robust political organizations, and an emerging opposition. The 2005 parliamentary elections provoked post-electoral popular protests due to these excessive measures of electoral manipulation, which then led to the breakdown of the Akaev regime.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

While autocratic elections are not the only aspect of authoritarian politics, they are a useful tool that autocrats have at their disposal to consolidate their rule. Through cross-national statistical analyses, illustrative cases around the world, and in-depth comparative case studies of the two Central Asian countries, this book demonstrated how authoritarian regimes institutionalize elections differently. Furthermore, it explains the variations in electoral manipulation, pre-electoral economic distribution, and post-electoral conflict by focusing on the distribution of power resources between the dictator and other political elites. This final chapter outlines how this study contributes to scholarship on authoritarianism. It discusses how the findings from this study contribute to our understanding of the role of international society in improving electoral integrity and economic policy making in authoritarian regimes. Finally, this chapter explains the implications of autocratic elections for democratic transition.

4 Proposed length

The manuscript – in a standard format with double-spacing, Times Roman 12-point font, 1-inch margins – should be approximately 300 pages in length. The main analytical chapters – Chapters 2-8 – include tables and figures (on average, about two to three per chapter, tables and figures combined).

5 Intended completion date

I anticipate completing the manuscript revisions by January 2019. I have finished the substantive chapters except the cross-national analysis part of Chapter 2 and the survey data analysis part of Chapter 6. Some rearranging and editing and additional work on the conclusion are required.

Part of Chapter 6 has been published as a book chapter (Higashijima 2015) in the study by Pippa Norris et al. eds, *Contentious Elections: From Ballots to Barricades*, New York: Routledge. A paper based on the idea of Chapter 3 has received the inaugural EIP-International IDEA award, offered by the Electoral Integrity Project and International IDEA and published as a proceeding

paper in the EIP working paper series (Higashijima 2014). This book project began as my PhD dissertation submitted to Michigan State University in 2015, which had been funded by numerous grants such as those of the US National Science Foundation and the Fulbright Commission.

6 Market and competition

This book targets social scientists of elections and other political institutions, in addition to those interested in the study of political economy, democratization, authoritarianism, contentious politics, and developing countries. Few social scientists studying elections consider the origins and effects of authoritarian elections systematically. The book will be of interest to scholars in the fields of political science, economics, sociology, and international development, because the book unravels complicated features of institutions, economy and political order throughout the developing world. The book could be assigned to both undergraduate and graduate courses in each of these fields, including courses on comparative political economy, comparative political institutions, the political economy of development, democratization, authoritarianism, social movements, and post-communist politics.

This book may also appeal to a readership beyond academia, particularly in the areas of international election monitoring and democratization assistance. Policymakers are interested in electoral malpractice and electoral system design in authoritarian and mixed regimes and numerous NGOs devoted to documenting and addressing electoral manipulation throughout the developing world. Organizations such as the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe study, observe, and access elections and democratization in developing countries. Government entities, such as the U.S. State Department, publish the human rights reports annually, which track electoral malpractices around the world. Individuals involved in these and other programs will benefit from the insights offered by this book.

In addition, active communities of scholars are engaged in studying electoral manipulation and autocratic politics, such as the Electoral Integrity Project and several mini-conferences and workshop series on authoritarian politics and democratization within the field of political science.

I am involved in these organizations and have published and presented my work at these venues in the past. I plan to use these networks to promote this book. Finally, my involvement in political science associations in the U.S., Europe, and Japan allows me to present this work to more general audiences within the discipline. Many of these meetings are open to the general public, increasing the book's potential readership.

7 About the author

I am an associate professor of political science at the Graduate School of Information Sciences at Tohoku University, Japan. I was a Post-Doctoral Max Weber Fellow at European University Institute and an assistant professor at Waseda University in Tokyo. My research interests include comparative political economy, autocratic politics, democratization, civil war, and ethnic politics. My articles related to these topics appeared in *British Journal of Political Science*, *the Journal of Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, and *World Development*. I am the recipient of the inaugural EIP-IDEA Award, given by the Electoral Integrity Project and the International IDEA. My research was funded by numerous grants such as those of the US National Science Foundation, Fulbright Commission, and Suntory Foundation. My courses explore comparative politics, the political economy of developing countries, comparative democratization, and quantitative data analysis in social sciences. I hold a Ph.D. in political science from Michigan State University as well as a B.A. and a M.A. in political science from Waseda University in Tokyo.

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