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# Competing Verdicts: Multiple Election Monitors and Post-Election Contention

Kelly Morrison, Burcu Savun, Daniela Donno, Perisa Davutoglu

## Abstract

By influencing beliefs about electoral quality, international election observation missions (EOMs) play an important role in shaping post-election contention. As the number and variety of international organizations (IOs) involved in election monitoring has grown, many elections host multiple missions, and disagreement among them is common. This phenomenon of competing judgments is particularly prevalent in electoral authoritarian regimes, as leaders seek to invite "friendly" IOs to counteract possible criticism from more established EOMs. Drawing from research about the varying domestic credibility of EOMs and the demobilizing effects of disinformation, we argue that competing judgments increase uncertainty about electoral quality, which in turn dampens post-election contention. Using newly available data on EOM statements as reported in the international media, we show that competing judgments reduce post-election contention in a sample of 115 non-liberal democracies from 1990–2012. A survey experiment in Turkey solidifies the micro-foundations of our argument: Individuals exposed to competing judgments have more positive perceptions of election quality and less support for post-election mobilization, compared to those receiving information only about EOM criticism. Our findings provide systematic evidence that governments holding flawed elections have incentives to invite multiple election observation missions to hedge against the political risks of criticism.

**Keywords:** Election monitoring, election observation missions (EOMs), international organizations, post-election contention, authoritarian governments

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Electoral fraud is a powerful catalyst for contentious political mobilization. Particularly in close contests, perceptions of malpractice can bring people into the streets in massive numbers, sometimes even leading to the government's downfall (Thompson and Kuntz, 2004; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Tucker, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Norris, 2014; Brancati, 2016; Daxecker et al., 2019). For contemporary authoritarian regimes, this prospect poses an urgent threat that has motivated major policy reorientations and encouraged tighter cooperation with other autocrats (Koesel and Bunce, 2013; Libman and Obydenkova, 2018; Cottiero and Haggard, 2021; Debre, 2021).

One element of autocrats' defense against electoral revolutions has been an effort to neutralize the risks posed by international election observation missions (EOMs). When EOMs issue a negative judgment, this validates the losers' claims and serves as a focal point for post-election mobilization (Daxecker, 2012; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019). Several noteworthy examples of large electoral protests—including in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2020), Kenya (2007), and Bolivia (2019)—were spurred by condemnation from international observers. In response, a growing "shadow market" of election monitors has emerged (Kelley, 2012). Some of these new players are affiliated with autocratic regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) with an overt anti-democratic mission (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Cooley, 2015; Walker, 2016; Merloe, 2015). Others are affiliated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or mixed-membership regional IGOs that lack the capacity and expertise to catch stealthy forms of manipulation (Simpser and Donno, 2012). The result is an increase in the number of EOMs that reliably issue positive judgments on problematic elections.

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes provide a steady source of demand for these groups (Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Kelley, 2009*b*). Recent data from Donno and Gray (2021) show that 40 percent of elections in non-OECD countries have hosted multiple EOMs since the first wave of electoral revolutions began in 2000. As the number and diversity of EOMs has grown, so has the prevalence of disagreement among them (Kelley, 2012). By our estimates, since 1990, in cases where at least one EOM criticized the election, a competing assessment occurred 46 percent of the time (rising to 55 percent since 2000).[1] Such disagreements almost always occur in autocratic regimes.

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[1] Kelley (2012, Chs. 3–4) documents a slightly lower rate of divergent assessments in a more limited sample of IOs that ends in 2004.

Azerbaijan illustrates this trend. Reflecting standard practice among post-Soviet countries in the 1990s, Azerbaijan hosted a small number of Western IGOs in its 1998 and 2000 elections, including from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Council of Europe, and the International Republican Institute. As concerns about electoral revolutions grew, and as Russia took a more assertive role in countering perceived Western meddling, Azerbaijan began inviting new groups, including from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), starting in 2003. In 2013, a dizzying array of more than 20 Western-, non-Western-, NGO-, and IGO-backed groups were present, a move interpreted as an attempt to muddy the informational waters and dilute criticism from the ODIHR mission (European Stability Initiative, 2013).

Similar dynamics can be observed in African countries, such as Zimbabwe and Tanzania, which typically host a combination of international, European, and regional African IGOs, whose judgments often differ in tone. Following the 2018 election in Zimbabwe, for example, the National Democratic Institute mission issued a mixed statement that included both criticism and praise (National Democratic Institute, 2018). In contrast, the statement from the South African Development Community (SADC) was far more positive, praising the "remarkable improvement in the exercise and protection of civil and political rights" (Domingos Augusto, 2018).

The causes and implications of these changes in the international election monitoring regime are only beginning to be explored.[2] We focus on the phenomenon of *competing judgments* among international EOMs and its consequences for domestic politics. Building from Bush and Prather's (2018) findings about the varying local credibility of EOMs, as well as research on the demobilizing effects of election disinformation (Stukal et al., 2022), we posit that competing judgments allow the winning side to construct an alternative, more favorable public narrative that influences perceptions of electoral legitimacy among the domestic public. This, in turn, reduces the mobilizing effect of EOM criticism. We therefore expect competing judgments to *dampen post-election contention*, relative to elections marked by unanimous EOM criticism.

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[2]    For instance, see Bush et al. (2023).

We explore this argument using data from Donno and Gray (2021) on the number and judgments of international election observation missions, as reported in the international media. These data cover an expanded range of groups (26 IGOs and 17 NGOs) and years compared to other widely used datasets on election monitoring.[3] Further, the data's basis in media reports allows us to better capture how domestic audiences acquire information about elections. Combined with information from the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) dataset (Daxecker et al., 2019*a*), we find support for the claim that monitor criticism increases post-election contention, but that *disagreement among EOMs dampens contention*. On average, the predicted number of contentious events following an election with unanimous EOM criticism is about 12. When there are competing judgments among EOMs, the predicted number of contentious events falls to under two. These results are robust to a number of methods and model specifications, which address the non-random distribution of monitors and their judgments. To complement the observational analysis, we present additional evidence from a survey experiment in Turkey. This research design allows us to evaluate the micro-foundations of our argument while randomizing EOM statements. Consistent with our theoretical framework, the results show that *competing judgments* among election observers are associated with significantly higher perceptions of electoral quality and lower levels of support for post-election mobilization, compared to a scenario of uncontested EOM criticism.

In short, our findings indicate that for governments seeking to hedge against the risk of election observer criticism, inviting multiple groups works as intended. While EOM disagreement does not eliminate electoral contention, it does limit its scope—an important point for autocratic leaders seeking to prevent massive societal mobilization on a scale that would threaten their grip on power. This therefore represents one particular pathway through which illiberal international organizations (IOs) impact domestic politics. From a normative standpoint, our findings bring bad news for proponents of democracy. By taking the low-cost step of inviting multiple EOMs, autocrats can blunt the impact of the most widely used tool of international democracy promotion. On the other hand, considering the human toll of electoral violence, the fact that competing judgments reduce post-election contention may be interpreted in a positive light, at least in the short term. In the longer term, competing EOM judgments may contribute to authoritarian survival and deepen societal polarization.

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[3] For instance, the National Elections Across Democracies and Autocracies (Nelda) dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012) and the Dataset on International Election Monitoring (DIEM) (Kelley and Kolev, 2010).

# 1. International Election Observers and Domestic Beliefs about Election Quality

Elections are public events that serve as focal points for how domestic audiences, including citizens, bureaucrats, and political elites, evaluate the legitimacy of the regime. Violations of electoral integrity can therefore be a powerful motivator for *post-election contention*, or "public acts of mobilization, contestation, or coercion by state or nonstate actors that are used to affect the electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition" (Daxecker et al., 2019*a*). Such contentious events reflect fundamental disagreement about the legitimacy of the contest (Norris et al., 2015). Research shows that elections marred by outcome-changing fraud—or the widespread belief that such fraud occurred—are especially likely to generate contention (Daxecker et al., 2019; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Thompson and Kuntz, 2004; Tucker, 2007; Rod, 2019; Brancati, 2016, Ch. 5). Further, non-violent mobilization can easily spill over into violence as politicians and nonstate groups make strategic use of election-related grievances (Beaulieu, 2014; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014; Daxecker and Prasad, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Fjelde and Höglund, 2022).

International election observers are one important source of information that shapes public beliefs about electoral conduct. Scholars have documented the role of international election observer criticism in fomenting protests (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2008; Kelley, 2012; Donno, 2013; Beaulieu, 2014; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Sedziaka and Rose, 2015). Others have considered how the presence and judgments of EOMs influence violence in particular, with the core insight that negative judgments increase the risk of violence (Smidt, 2016; Kavakli and Kuhn, 2020; Laakso, 2002; Daxecker, 2012; Luo and Rozenas, 2018; von Borzyskowski, 2019). However, existing research is limited in its focus on the activities of a subset of established, predominantly Western election monitors, advancing the idea that "criticism by one internationally reputable group is usually sufficient to cast doubt on the quality of the process and potentially arm postelection protesters with greater legitimacy" (Hyde and Marinov, 2014, 334). We know little about whether countervailing judgments from other groups have an effect on post-election contention.

Among first-generation studies of election monitoring, which assumed a positive view of monitors' democracy-promoting potential, "shadow" EOMs were sometimes downplayed as having less credibility and impact. Yet this idea is at odds with more recent contributions from the study of authoritarianism, which argue that an important source of demand for additional EOMs is precisely leaders' desires to "neutralize the statements of professional observers" (Bader, 2018, 33). In other words, incumbents bet that if some observers are critical, others will be more positive, and that a diversity of judgments will mitigate threats to the regime (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Merloe,

2015; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Lansberg-Rodriguez, 2015). As Kelley (2009*b*, 62) summarizes, "anticipation of criticism by some organizations may lead governments to forum shop," and the range of possible EOMs includes many with "different biases, political agendas, capabilities, methodologies, and standards."

Consider first EOMs that are *biased*. IOs like the CIS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are examples of organizations that reliably issued favorable reports about deeply flawed elections. Analysts have characterized these groups variably as "zombie" monitors (Bush et al., 2023; Cooley, 2015) or as members of a "shadow" market (Kelley, 2012). From one perspective, their existence could be interpreted as consistent with liberal democratic norms, in that autocratic governments are choosing to "influence the content of election observer reports...rather than reject the norm" (Hyde, 2011, 195–196). Such a benign interpretation may have been warranted in the 1990s and early 2000s, when Western actors still enjoyed a global soft power advantage, but it is less warranted today as democracy faces a global crisis of legitimacy (Boese et al., 2022) and autocratic powers are increasingly assertive on the world stage.[4]

An alternative perspective on these shadow groups is that their activities are consequential and can reduce public outcry in response to electoral misconduct. Debre and Morgenbesser (2017) argue that the creation and subsequent use of these zombie election monitors is deeply intertwined with the domestic politics of authoritarian regimes and that their core goal is to "build a generalised perception *amongst citizens* about the integrity of the election and the right to rule held by autocratic regimes" (329, emphasis added). In line with this perspective, Bush et al. (2023) find that zombie monitors are especially likely to observe elections in countries with ties to Russia and membership in authoritarian IGOs.

In addition to bias, non-traditional observer organizations may suffer from principal agent problems and limited *capacity*. It is a complex task to comprehensively assess an election's quality. Monitors must observe the entire electoral cycle, including the legal framework, campaign conditions, counting of ballots and the adjudication of post-election disputes. In their qualitative study of divergent EOM reports, Arceneaux and Leithner (2017, 43) note that "approaches to the electoral cycle vary a great deal among organizations, as well as from case to case." Missions that deploy a small number of observers on and around election day are unable to engage in a thorough assessment. EOMs from regional organizations like the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the SADC, or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

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4   For examples, see research on autocratic influence in the EU (Winzen, 2023), the Council of Europe (Lipps and Jacob, 2023), the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023), and on Russia's attempts to gain influence across a range of IOs through the creation of new norms (Baturo, 2023).

may fall into this category. Non-Western regional IOs are often composed of a mix of weakly democratic and autocratic regimes, whose lack of expertise and resources limit their capacity (Gray, 2018).

As a result of this variation in preferences and capacity, the presence of multiple EOMs opens up the possibility for competing judgments and varied public narratives about electoral quality. These alternative perspectives—even from groups conventionally understood to be less credible—have the potential to shape domestic beliefs about elections and willingness to mobilize. There are a few reasons why seemingly unprofessional (or outright authoritarian) missions may nevertheless matter to domestic audiences. First, the public often lacks detailed knowledge about EOMs. Although democracy experts are aware of the varying capacity of different organizations, citizens and even domestic elites are unlikely to possess such expertise. Moreover, low-quality observer groups may be associated with otherwise well-known regional organizations that can lend them credibility (Bush and Prather, 2018). Some groups may possess benign names that mask the identity of anti-democratic sponsors (Merloe, 2015). In a study of local perceptions of election observers in Africa, for instance, Molony and Macdonald (2023) find that few citizens know the names of particular EOMs and that many tend to conflate observers with other actors, like election management bodies.

Second, domestic audiences in developing countries may view non-Western observers as more trustworthy than their Western counterparts. Although many professional EOMs—those present for the whole electoral cycle, employing democratic standards of evaluation, and willing to criticize flaws when they see them—are from Western IOs, this is by no means always the case. For example, the Asian Network for Free Elections has developed a strong record of issuing detailed judgments that do not shy away from criticism when it is warranted. Nor do all Western groups have a perfect track record. European Parliament observation missions have issued superficial and friendly evaluations of some post-Soviet elections, putting them at odds with missions from other European IOs (Retmann, 2021; Merloe, 2015, 88). The Organization of American States (OAS) has been criticized for its hasty negative judgment in Bolivia's 2019 election, based on problematic data analysis and apparent bias against incumbent president Evo Morales (Johnston and Rosnick, 2020). Beyond this anecdotal evidence, research has documented biases among even well-known Western election monitors (Geisler, 1993), such as the tendency to gloss over electoral malpractice in countries with an Islamist opposition (Kavakli and Kuhn, 2020) or in countries at risk of civil war (Kelley, 2009*a*).

Finally, domestic audiences may prefer regional or non-Western EOMs for ideological reasons. The purpose of many such EOMs is often precisely to serve as a counterweight against Western "meddling" (Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Laakso, 2002; Merloe, 2015) or to correct for perceived neocolonial intervention (Ngaje and Nganje, 2019).[5] As a result, these organizations may have greater legitimacy among the local public. For instance, following Zimbabwe's 2013 election, President Robert Mugabe hailed the supportive assessment of the SADC, which contradicted the judgments of Western groups, stating: "we abide by the judgment of Africa. [...] Today it is these Anglo-Saxons who dare contradict Africa's verdict" (quoted in Debre and Morgenbesser (2017, 339)).

In sum, if we move beyond the idea that EOM influence is limited to a subset of Western groups, then the connection between international EOMs and post-election contention becomes more complex. In what follows, we theorize the effect of competing EOM judgments on public perceptions of election legitimacy and the likelihood of post-election contention.

## 2. Theory: Competing Monitor Judgments and Post-Election Contention

Common to studies of contentious elections is the idea that negative EOM judgments serve as a focal point for mobilization by the losing side. Hyde and Marinov (2014) view this as contributing to a self-enforcing democratic equilibrium, in that the information provided by observers helps citizens overcome collective action problems and encourages them to defend democratic norms when they are violated. Still, it is important to note that empirical evidence of the link between criticism and post-election contention is somewhat limited, much of it being restricted to African countries (Daxecker, 2012; von Borzyskowski, 2019; Smidt, 2016) and to judgments from a subset of well-known Western EOMs (Hyde and Marinov, 2014). Thus, we begin by (re)evaluating the effect of EOM criticism in a global sample of countries and for a wider swathe of election observers. Our baseline hypothesis stems from prior research:

> *H₁ EOM Criticism*: Criticism by international election observers increases post-election contention.

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5    On the broader question of the creation of non-Western IOs or autocratic IOs to counter Western influence, see Daugirdas and Ginsburg (2023); Hallerberg (2023); and Kaya et al. (2023).

The reality on the ground is often more complex than a uniformly negative EOM verdict. As discussed, international election observation is a heterogeneous regime populated by organizations with different biases, capacity, and professionalism (Kelley, 2009*b*; Fawn, 2006; Kelley, 2012; Walker, 2016; Arceneaux and Leithner, 2017). It is now common for governments to host multiple groups, introducing the prospect for competing judgments among them. In the 2001 presidential election in Belarus, for example, observers from the OSCE sharply criticized the contest, noting that the government "did everything in its power to block the opposition" and concluding that it "did not meet international standards of free and fair elections" (Baker, 2001). In contrast, the judgment of the CIS observers—which received more publicity in the Belarussian state-controlled media—ruled that the election was "free, open and in keeping with universal democratic institutions" (Belapan News Agency, 2001).

Monitors also disagreed about the quality of Uganda's 2016 presidential election. Many African regional organizations, including the African Union (AU), COMESA, and the East African Community, supported the election. They judged that in spite of some logistical shortcomings, the polls were peaceful and "met the minimum standards for free and fair elections" (BBC Monitoring Africa, 2016). This evaluation contrasted with those from EU monitors, who criticized the intimidating atmosphere surrounding the contest and said that it "fell short of meeting some key democratic benchmarks" (Honan and Biryabarema, 2016). Media reports picked up on these divergent reports with headlines in local websites such as "Poll Observers Give Mixed Verdict" (Musisi, 2016).

How do domestic audiences process such competing judgments? Our basic claim is that the mobilizing potential of a negative EOM verdict is strongest when it is a clear and undiluted signal. Viewed in terms of theories of collective action, the clarity of the message from election observers influences its effectiveness as a focal point. An unambiguously negative message can shape not only individuals' own beliefs about electoral quality but also their second-order beliefs about others' beliefs and, hence, the likelihood that mobilization will reach a tipping point (Kuran, 1991). In contrast, if criticism from some groups is countered by a positive verdict from others, the public receives a noisier signal about election quality.

**Competing Judgments Influence Beliefs.** While this "noise" may not have an effect on the minority of hard-core partisans on either side, it can influence the sizable group of people with less-fixed prior beliefs. These less ideologically committed and/or less politically active individuals matter tremendously for the strength and momentum of post-election mobilization. Successful electoral revolutions involve many large protests that indicate the regime has lost the support of the people as a whole—not only of opposition supporters, but also of the "median" or otherwise uncommitted voter (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010). When there are fewer protests, the government can more

easily put them down and dismiss them as the complaints of sore losers. In contrast, a large number of contentious acts encompass a broader swathe of the population, posing a greater danger to the regime (Brancati, 2016, 23–25). Thus, from an autocrats' perspective, any strategy that can prevent mobilization from spreading beyond a limited number of contentious events by opposition supporters is highly desirable.

As outlined above, EOMs that counter the negative judgments of other groups can hold sway over public perceptions. This is, in part, because negative judgments typically come from *Western* EOMs, and domestic audiences do not always consider these groups to be the most trustworthy, preferring instead regional or local sources of information. In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, EOMs from the United States and Europe may be perceived as outsiders that parachute in to pass judgment or, worse, to advance their own political agendas (Kavakli and Kuhn, 2020). Such claims are central to Russia's pushback against the so-called partisan (pro-Western) bias of OSCE election observation in the post-Soviet republics (Ghebali, 2005; Bader, 2018; Zellner, 2005; Kropatcheva, 2015). In a survey experiment in Tunisia, Bush and Prather (2018) find that most citizens viewed an EOM from the Arab League—whose members are uniformly autocratic—as more trustworthy and credible than observers from European IOs.[6] These findings suggest that disagreement among international observers may indeed influence public perceptions of electoral legitimacy and counteract the mobilizing effect of EOM criticism.

**Competing Judgments Increase Uncertainty.** Competing judgments can matter even if they do not change minds. The winning side can seize upon positive EOM reports to promote alternative narratives about the election with the goal of simply confusing the public. Cambodia's 2018 election, for example, was entirely autocratic, as the government had prevented the main opposition party from competing. While experienced international election observers like the United Nations and the EU refused to monitor the contest, the regime hosted a number of parliamentarians from right-wing populist parties in Europe. The government trotted out these dubious observers to the international press, hailing their supportive statements as evidence that "EU observers" approved of the election (Sassoon, 2018). Commenting on the lack of opposition in the election, one such observer from the UK Independence Party said, "The opposition, I know nothing about it, my only job was to come here, see the election and report on the process, and that's what I've done" (quoted in Sassoon (2018)). It is now common practice for autocratic regimes to bring in such friendly observers to serve as cogs in the state's propaganda machine.

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[6]    Beyond elections, research in the Middle East similarly documents public backlash against political reforms perceived to be initiated by Western actors (Bush and Jamal, 2015). Donno (2013) finds that democracy promotion efforts by regional organizations are effective due to their greater legitimacy in target countries, compared to more conventionally powerful actors like the United States.

An analogy to the strategy behind disinformation campaigns is instructive, where the goal is not necessarily to convince people that an election was free and fair, but rather to *sow confusion* that leads to demobilization and apathy (Arceneaux and Leithner, 2017; Grimes, 2022, 33). Indeed, Cooley (2015, 55–56) argues that the purpose of shadow election monitoring groups is to "confuse and distract, to sow uncertainty by promoting pro-government narratives, and to boost the plausibility of government complaints that critical foreign observers are biased." A goal of Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, for example, was to demobilize minority constituencies and reduce democratic turnout (Kim, 2020). When a significant portion of the public believes that nothing is true, there is little basis for collective action (Pomerantsev, 2015).

We sum up these insights with the following hypothesis:

> $H_2$ *Competing Judgments Reduce Contention*: Competing judgments among EOMs dampen post-election contention, compared to a scenario of unanimous EOM criticism.

An alternative perspective, based on the idea that people filter information through a partisan lens, is that competing EOM judgments should not influence beliefs about electoral quality one way or the other. When individuals engage in motivated reasoning, they discount information that does not conform to their prior beliefs (Kraft et al., 2015). If citizens evaluate competing EOM judgments in this way, supporters of the losing candidate would not be discouraged from mobilizing by information that contradicts their view that the election was illegitimate.

Research on micro-level perceptions of election quality has found support for motivated reasoning (Corstange and Marinov, 2012; Daxecker and Fjelde, 2022; Bush and Prather, 2017; Robertson, 2019; Kerr, 2013). However, this evidence is not monolithic and may be confined to individuals that are committed partisans (Sedziaka and Rose, 2015; Broockman and Kalla, 2022). For instance, in an experimental study with Russian citizens, Robertson (2019) finds that regime supporters do discount critical information from election monitors, but that opposition supporters are "less coherent in their responses" (604). Bush and Prather (2017) similarly find an imbalance in the (partisan) effects of positive and negative EOM judgments in Tunisia. Studying Nigeria's 2007 election, Daxecker et al. (2019) do not find that perceptions of fraud are correlated with partisan orientation. In short, evidence indicates that motivated reasoning surrounding elections is not uniformly present across individuals, political parties, or country contexts. We surmise that in most countries EOM judgments can influence a meaningful share of citizens without strong partisan attachments. It is the "masses"—distinct from core party activists and supporters—whose choices determine the frequency and depth of post-election contention.

# 3. Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we analyze the relationship between election monitor disagreement and post-election contention in a cross-national time-series framework. Later, we present evidence from a survey experiment in Turkey that supports the micro-foundations of our argument. The observational analysis begins with a sample of executive elections from the Nelda dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). These elections include presidential contests as well as legislative elections in parliamentary systems. The sample covers countries that were not liberal democracies at the time of the election, according to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Regimes of the World Index.[7] The temporal coverage ranges from 1990 to 2012, during which time data are available for the variables of interest. In total, the sample contains 504 elections and 328 elections that hosted international election observers. The main models utilize negative binomial regressions, given that the dependent variable is a count of the number of contentious events following each election, as is the norm in this literature (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016). In all models, standard errors are clustered by country.

The primary models focus on elections that hosted at least one international election monitoring group. We recognize that monitored elections may be systematically different from non-monitored elections, both because governments decide whether to invite international groups and because EOMs may decline or accept their invitations based on the expected risk of post-election contention.[8] To sidestep potential threats to inference due to this heterogeneity, we limit the sample to monitored elections, and we emphasize that our inferences primarily apply to the set of elections that hosted international observers.[9] Below, we outline in more detail additional measures taken to address confounding factors that simultaneously influence the presence of monitors, monitor judgments, and the likelihood of contention. These strategies include adding control variables, matching analysis, fixed effects, and alternative specifications of the dependent variable. Our experimental survey design is intended to further increase confidence that competing EOM judgments exert a causal effect that is not the result of confounders.

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[7]  We exclude liberal democracies because such cases have relatively higher certainty that elections will be free and fair, lower rates of attendance and criticism by EOMs, and lower baseline probability that there will be post-election contention. Our results are robust in alternative samples, including electoral regimes, electoral autocracies, and non-OECD countries.

# 4. Independent Variables: International Election Monitoring

We make use of new data, from Donno and Gray (2021), to measure the presence and judgments of international election observers. This dataset expands upon existing sources in that it identifies a larger range of international observer groups, covers more recent years, and captures greater nuance in terms of EOM judgments.[10] The source material for these data are international newspaper and newswire reports for a period covering one month prior to one month after the election date. Importantly, the data include reports from the BBC World Monitoring newswire, which covers *domestic* news sources. This typically includes, for example, one or two national news agencies as well as transcripts from national television and radio broadcasts.

As with any events data, it is possible that newswires do not report on every election observer group or report. Indeed, research suggests systematic differences between media coverage of monitor statements and the reports themselves (Molony and Macdonald, 2023, 4). However, this data generation process works to our advantage. Our expectation is that people rarely seek out official reports on EOM websites. Instead, they tend to learn about what election observers say through the media, whose coverage is more accessible and typically available immediately following the election. By basing the coding on news sources, the data capture information that domestic audiences are likely to access.

Donno and Gray (2021) code each monitor's judgment, for each election, in three categories: (1) no criticism of the election (approval) (2) a "mixed" verdict that combines praise and criticism, or (3) outright disapproval of the election. We code our main independent variable, *Monitor Disagreement*, as "1" when at least one EOM approved of the election and at least one EOM issued outright disapproval of the election. These are the cases where disagreement is clearest to domestic audiences. In our sample, disagreement occurs in 44 percent of cases where at least one EOM issued an outright disapproval of the election and 9 percent of cases with multiple monitors.[11]

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8     For example, Hyde (2011, 77) finds that elections where the incumbent's commitment to democracy is questionable, and the risk of contention is likely higher, are especially likely to be observed.

9     Nevertheless, Model 4 in Table 2 shows that the results are robust in the full sample of elections.

10    For instance, the DIEM data from Kelley and Kolev (2010) ends in 2004, while the Nelda data (Hyde and Marinov, 2012) lacks information about the identity, number, and judgments of EOMs.

11    Disagreement occurred across a wide range of cases: in Africa, Europe, and Latin America; in countries where both Western and non-Western monitors were present as well as cases with EOMs from only Western or non-Western IOs; and across a range of regime types (ranging from -9 to 7 on the polity scale).

To test our hypotheses, we include the dummy variable for disagreement as well as two additional variables. The first measures the *Number of EOMs* in a particular election. This variable controls for the baseline probability that disagreement will occur, given that there is no potential for disagreement when there are fewer than two EOMs present. This may also be a confounder, if more monitors observe contests with a high likelihood of post-election contention. We also measure whether there was any *Monitor Criticism*, a dummy coded "1" if at least one EOM issued an outright disapproval of the election. Due to the nested nature of these variables (there can only be disagreement if there was first criticism), the coefficient for *Monitor Disagreement* can be interpreted as the effect of monitor disagreement on contention *in comparison to* the effect of monitor criticism on contention, aligning with the second hypothesis.

# 5. Dependent Variable: Post-Election Contention

Our dependent variable is election-related contention. We take this variable from the ECAV dataset, an events data source that counts a broad range of contentious events that can be tied (both temporally and substantively) to elections.[12] The ECAV data defines *electoral contention* as "public acts of mobilization, contestation, or coercion by state or nonstate actors that are used to affect the electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition" (Daxecker et al., 2019*b*, 3). This definition includes both violent and non-violent events but requires that the event involve at least two opposing sides. One-sided mobilization, protest, or celebration—such as a pro-incumbent rally—is not included. The ECAV definition fits well with our theory, which anticipates that EOM disagreement will have a chilling effect on various kinds of post-election mobilization and contention. Because our unit of analysis is executive election, we aggregate the dependent variable to count the total number of contentious events committed in the month following each election.[13]

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[12] ECAV's coding reflects our theoretical interests better than some other data sources on election violence and contention. For instance, election-specific data from V-Dem and Nelda does not specifically code whether contention occurred in the post-election period. The Deadly Electoral Conflict (DECO) dataset (Fjelde and Höglund, 2022), an events data source, counts only events involving at least one fatality. The Countries at Risk of Election Violence (CREV) data (Birch and Muchlinski, 2020) codes all violent events in the *temporal* proximity of the election.

[13] We start our window three days after the election and end the window 30 days after the election. This delayed start is to account for EOM judgments, which are typically released shortly after the election. We opt to count the events in a narrow window after the election to ensure a close relationship between the monitor judgments and post-election processes. However, we also demonstrate the robustness of our results to alternative dependent variables used in previous studies (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019). These include a count of violent events in the one-month post-election window (Table 2, Model 1), a count of violent events in the three-month post-election period (Table A2, Model 2), and whether there were any violent events in the three-month post-election period (Table A2, Model 3).

# 6. Control Variables

We control for confounders that are likely to influence both EOM disagreement and post-election contention. First, we include factors relating to the conduct of the election. Most importantly, *Election Quality* is essential to adjudicate between the effect of fraudulent elections *themselves* on post-election processes and the effect of monitor *judgments* (von Borzyskowski, 2019). We include the variable "v2elrfair" from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021), which is a broad measure of the quality of the election process and the degree to which it reflects the will of the people.[14]

Next, noting the path dependency of election contention and the (lower) likelihood that monitors will criticize elections that occur in already contentious contexts (Kelley, 2009*a*; Luo and Rozenas, 2018), we control for *Pre-Election Contention*. This variable measures the number of election-related contentious events in the ECAV data that occurred in the six months (180 days) preceding the election. These variables create a hard test for our measure of EOM disagreement.

In addition to these election-related variables, we account for domestic structures that would influence leaders' propensity both to invite friendly monitors and the likelihood of post-election contention. Specifically, we control for *Polity* (Marshall et al., 2017), since autocrats are freer both to court favorable monitors and to incite contentious events after elections (Kelley, 2012). Next, we control for basic structural factors, including *GDP per capita* and whether a *Civil Conflict* was ongoing.

As we discuss further below, our main results are robust to the inclusion of a number of additional variables capturing incumbents' performance, regime type and duration, structural conditions, foreign aid, levels of media censorship and repression, and monitor judgments and contention in the previous election (see Table A2, Model 1). Table A1 presents summary statistics for all the variables in our analysis.[15]

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[14] V-Dem consults country experts to provide their perceptions of each election's quality. Experts code on a 0–4 ordinal scale, with "0" meaning "the elections were fundamentally flawed and the official results had little if anything to do with the 'will of the people'" and "4" meaning "there was some amount of human error and logistical restrictions but these were largely unintentional and without significant consequences." V-Dem then uses a Bayesian item response theory measurement model to construct a continuous measure of quality for each election.

[15] We use multiple imputation to fill control variables that are missing in the dataset.

# 7. Analysis

Table 1 presents our main results. We first consider the coefficient on the variable *Monitor Criticism*. H1, following past research, hypothesized that monitor criticism would increase post-election contention. Across our main analyses, we find evidence of a positive effect of monitor criticism on post-election contention. Similarly, the coefficients for *Number of EOMs* are consistently positive and statistically significant, indicating that a greater number of EOMs observe contentious elections.

**Table 1:** Monitor Disagreement and Post-Election Contention

|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Main Model | Matching | Region FE | Country FE |
| Number of EOMs | 0.16*** | 0.37*** | 0.17*** | 0.22*** |
|  | (0.05) | (0.09) | (0.05) | (0.07) |
| Monitor Criticism | 1.81*** | 1.96*** | 1.84*** | 1.45*** |
|  | (0.53) | (0.74) | (0.55) | (0.52) |
| Monitor Disagreement | -2.26*** | -4.65*** | -2.08*** | -1.59*** |
|  | (0.65) | (1.10) | (0.63) | (0.56) |
| Election Quality | -0.40*** | -1.12*** | -0.38*** | -0.56** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.39) | (0.12) | (0.25) |
| Pre-Election Contention | 0.02*** | 0.08* | 0.01** | 0.01** |
|  | (0.01) | (0.04) | (0.01) | (0.00) |
| Polity | -0.01 | 0.06 | -0.01 | -0.04 |
|  | (0.03) | (0.06) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| GDP per Capita | -0.01 | -0.04 | -0.02 | -0.07 |
|  | (0.03) | (0.06) | (0.04) | (0.06) |
| Civil Conflict | 0.61** | -1.35** | 0.21 | 0.24 |
|  | (0.31) | (0.65) | (0.30) | (0.47) |
| Observations | 328 | 119 | 328 | 328 |

*Notes*: Dependent variable is the count of post-election contentious events.
The samples are monitored executive elections (presidential and parliamentary)
in non-liberal democracies, 1990–2012. *** significant at .01, ** significant at .05,
* significant at .10.

Model 1 also tests H2, which predicts that disagreement among EOMs will dampen post-election contention compared to elections in which EOMs offered unanimous criticism. The results show support for this idea: There are significantly fewer contentious events following elections in which monitors disagree, compared to cases with unanimous criticism. This effect is also substantively meaningful. Consider a case where there were two monitor groups present and all other variables are held at their means. When both monitors criticize such an election, the predicted number of contentious events is about 12. This figure falls to about two events when one monitor accepts the election and another issues an outright rejection.

Using a restrictive sample of "monitored elections" in our main models allows us to avoid potential selection issues related to EOMs' decisions to observe a particular election. Still, there may be additional layers of selection effects. For one, elections are not randomly assigned a single or multiple EOMs. It is possible that elections hosting multiple groups are different, perhaps because conditions on the ground lead these governments to expect opposition challenges or because regime vulnerability leads them to seek greater external validation. Given these factors, there may be an imbalance in values of key observed covariates between elections that host multiple EOMs and those with only one.

We use matching analysis, a commonly used method to reduce threats to causal inference in observational data (Ho et al., 2007), as one strategy to address such selection effects. By pruning and re-weighting observations in treatment and control groups, matching limits the influence of "extreme" counterfactuals that are not well-supported by the data. We specify the treatment condition as whether or not there were multiple EOMs present in a particular election, and we employ the following as covariates: polity (lagged 1 year), conflict (lagged 1 year), election quality, and pre-election contention. The control group is elections with one monitor group. We employ a coarsened exact matching technique and confirm that balance was improved on each covariate (King and Nielsen, 2019). The results of the matching analysis, shown in Model 2 of Table 1, further support our hypotheses: Monitor criticism has a positive and statistically significant effect on post-election contention (supporting H1) and monitor disagreement has a negative and statistically significant effect on post-election contention (supporting H2).

There may be region- and country-specific factors, correlated with post-election contention, that influence the number of EOMs and the likelihood of monitor disagreement. For instance, the supply of monitors is higher in some regions than others (Simpser and Donno, 2012). Further, some regions may have a greater density of "shadow market" monitors, which would be more willing to support an incumbent's claims of a free and fair election. For instance, Bush et al. (2023) find that low-quality monitors are especially prevalent in elections in the Russian sphere of influence. Similar

processes could occur at the country level, if specific countries have alliance ties that give them greater access to favorable monitor organizations, for example. Because these strategic processes are often unobservable, we utilize models with both region-level (Model 3) and country-level (Model 4) fixed effects to account for time-invariant characteristics that make some regions and countries particularly likely to host multiple and/or disagreeing monitors. Our results for H1 and H2 are robust in both of these specifications: Criticism alone *increases* post-election contention and, in comparison, monitor disagreement *decreases* post-election contention.

We ran a number of additional analyses to test the robustness of our findings to alternative model specifications. Table 2 shows these results. Models 1–3 test the effect of monitor presence, criticism, and disagreement on different types of post-election processes. Specifically, Model 1 restricts the dependent variable to only violent events in ECAV, Model 2 replaces the dependent variable with a Nelda dummy measuring whether there were election-related protests and riots after the election, and Model 3 uses a dummy dependent variable for whether there were *any* contentious events in the post-election period. Model 4 evaluates the effect of criticism and disagreement in the sample of *all* executive elections. Across these models, we find support for the hypotheses.

We include additional robustness checks in the Supplementary Appendix. First, Model 1 in Table A2 shows the robustness of our results to the inclusion of additional control variables. We first control for features of the election that may increase the likelihood of disagreement and reduce the likelihood of contention. These variables include *Incumbent Vote Share*, election type (*Presidential* versus parliamentary), and whether there were both *Western and non-Western Monitors* present.[16] Next we control for features of the regime that may make leaders especially likely to invite monitors that would disagree and be more capable of reducing contention. These are *Executive Constraints*, *Media Censorship*, *Civil Society Repression*, and *Regime Duration*.[17] In particular, we highlight the variable measuring media censorship. Access to media could be a confounder if leaders who invite disagreeing monitors also restrict access to information. In such a selection process, contention could be less likely following disagreement because individuals have restricted access to media coverage and are therefore less likely to mobilize. The control for censorship helps rule out this alternative explanation. We also control for additional structural conditions (*Population*, *Ethnic Fractionalization*, and *Foreign Aid*) and conditions in the previous election (lagged *Monitor Criticism* and *Contentious Events*). Finally, Models 2 and 3 of Table A2 show the

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[16]   The election type we adapt from Nelda and the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (Cruz et al., 2020). The incumbent vote share is a combination of the DPI variables *percent1* in presidential elections and the variable *numvote* in parliamentary/assembly-elected presidential elections. We lead this variable by one year to correspond with the election of interest. The variable for Western and non-Western monitors is from Donno and Gray (2021).

[17]   The variable for executive constraints is from Polity. The other variables are from V-Dem.

robustness of the results to alternative model specifications, including longer post-election windows (three months), restriction of the dependent variable to only violent events, and a dichotomous dependent variable. The results across these models continue to support the hypotheses.

**Table 2:** Monitor Disagreement and Post-Election Contention: Robustness Checks

|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Violent Events | Protests/Riots | Any Events | All Elections |
| Number of EOMs | 0.15** | 0.15** | 0.17** | 0.02 |
|  | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.06) |
| Monitor Criticism | 1.21*** | 1.14** | 1.45** | 1.31*** |
|  | (0.44) | (0.48) | (0.64) | (0.28) |
| Monitor Disagreement | -1.79*** | -1.25* | -1.64* | -1.30* |
|  | (0.59) | (0.69) | (0.90) | (0.69) |
| Election Quality | -0.31** | -0.82*** | -0.32** | -0.14 |
|  | (0.12) | (0.20) | (0.15) | (0.15) |
| Pre-Election Contention | 0.02*** | 0.01* | 0.02 | 0.03*** |
|  | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.02) | (0.01) |
| Polity | 0.00 | 0.08** | 0.01 | -0.01 |
|  | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| GDP per Capita | -0.06 | -0.04 | -0.06* | -0.06* |
|  | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Civil Conflict | 0.82** | -0.13 | 0.07 | 0.88** |
|  | (0.35) | (0.40) | (0.39) | (0.44) |
| Observations | 328 | 327 | 328 | 504 |

*Notes*: Dependent variable is the number of post-election violent events (Model 1), whether there were post-election protests and riots (Model 2), whether there were any post-election contentious events (Model 3), and the count of post-election contentious events (Model 4). The samples are monitored executive elections (Models 1–3) and all executive elections (Model 4) in non-liberal democracies, 1990–2012. *** significant at .01, ** significant at .05, * significant at .10.

Taken together, the results of our cross-national analysis provide strong and consistent support for our primary hypothesis that monitor disagreement reduces the likelihood of post-election contention. The next section presents additional evidence to explore the individual-level mechanisms of our argument using a survey experiment. One advantage of this approach is that it allows us to manipulate processes that occur strategically in the real world. Specifically, the experiment randomly varies monitor disagreement, clearly identifying the treatment effect of disagreement (compared to unanimous criticism) on perceptions about elections and support for mobilization.

## 8. Additional Evidence: Survey Experiment

We field our survey in Turkey, an electoral autocracy in which the process and outcomes of elections are often contested (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; Gauthier-Villars, 2019; Topping, 2017). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as head of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP), has a track record of inviting a range of monitor groups, including European organizations, such as the OSCE, and regional groups, like the Organization of Turkic States (Donno and Gray, 2021). This context makes Turkey a good case to test our theory: Individuals may rightly be uncertain about the true quality of elections and look for information from international monitors to assess election integrity. At the same time, Turkey may be a difficult case to find support for the hypotheses. Turkish politics are highly polarized, so individuals may have strong priors about election quality (Laebens and Ozturk, 2021; Somer, 2019). Overall, the survey evidence provides an initial cut to assess whether cues from monitor organizations can shift perceptions about elections in an uncertain, polarized context.

The survey was conducted in December 2022 with 583 respondents who were recruited using targeted Facebook ads, an increasingly common online recruitment platform in countries outside the United States.[18] Facebook is widely accessible in Turkey with over 50 million users. One disadvantage of recruitment via Facebook ads, as with other convenience samples, is that it is difficult to build a nationally representative sample (Krupnikov et al., 2021). Still, a number of recent studies have shown that there is not a significant difference between treatment effects in convenience and population samples across a broad range of topics (Mullinix et al., 2015; Samuels and Zucco, 2013).[19]

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[18] For instance, recent studies have recruited respondents via Facebook ads in Turkey (Zarpli, 2023), Tunisia (Finkel et al., 2023), Egypt (Williamson and Malik, 2021), Indonesia (Ananda and Bol, 2021), Uruguay (Bentancur et al., 2019), Brazil (Samuels and Zucco, 2014) and Kenya and Tanzania (Rosenzweig and Zhou, 2021).

[19] We follow best practices for surveys with convenience samples by targeting a diverse range of participants, removing fraudulent responses, and removing responses from those who failed a pre-treatment attention check (Krupnikov et al., 2021; Neundorf and Ozturk, 2021).

Further, the demographic profiles of participants in our sample are not far off from national averages in terms of gender, education, and income, for instance.[20] Our sample is least representative in terms of party representation: Only 14 percent of survey participants were AKP supporters, while Erdogan won around 53 percent of the vote in the last presidential election in 2018. As such, our results are most applicable to attitudes within the opposition.[21]

The survey begins by showing respondents a vignette about a hypothetical election in which two monitor groups are present. We identify groups that may be perceived as reputable by different factions within Turkey: the OSCE and the Organization of Turkic States. Both groups have a recent history of observing elections in Turkey. The vignette next states the winner of the election, randomly varied between the AKP and the opposition. Subsequently, it randomizes the monitors' judgments. In the control condition, both EOMs criticize the election (unanimous criticism). In the treatment, one monitor group criticizes the election and the other group approves (disagreement). In the disagreement condition, we randomly vary which group issues the criticism and the approval, so that the identity of the group is not correlated with the verdict. The vignette reads as follows:

> **Baseline**: Think about a presidential election that will be held in Turkey 10 years from now. The government invites two international organizations to monitor the election. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is the main international organization in Europe that monitors elections. The Organization of Turkic States is an international organization designed to promote political cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries. Turkey is a member of both organizations.

> **Election Outcome**: The outcome of this election is very close. [The incumbent president, from the AK Party | An opposition candidate], wins by only 1 percent of the vote. After the election, [the opposition candidates allege | the incumbent candidate, from the AK Party, alleges] that the votes were not counted properly, and the election was not free and fair. [They say | He says] that the opposition is the rightful winner of the election. To summarize, in this

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[20] Fifty-two percent of our sample is female (compared to 49 percent of the population), 42 percent of our sample is college educated (compared to 33 percent of the population), and 40 percent of our sample earns at or below the minimum wage (the same as the population).

[21] We block randomize the treatments based on the respondent's party affiliation (AKP versus not AKP) and present sub-sample analysis by party in the Appendix (Tables A6 and A7 and Figure A1). These results show that the pooled results are driven primarily from respondents representing opposition parties. This is likely because the small sample of respondents from the AKP makes it difficult to detect significant effects.

election, [the AK Party wins but the opposition claims that fraud occurred | the opposition wins, but the AK Party claims that fraud occurred].

**Control (Unanimous Criticism)**: Both of the international election observation missions supported the loser's claims. Election observers from the Organization of Turkic States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe agreed that there were many problems in the casting and counting of the votes. They both concluded that the election could not be considered free and fair.

**Treatment (Disagreement)**: The international election observation missions disagreed about the quality of this election. Observers from the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe | Organization of Turkic States] supported the loser's claims. This mission said that there were many problems in the casting and counting of the votes. They concluded that the election could not be considered free and fair. However, observers from the [Organization of Turkic States | Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] disagreed. They said that the voting was managed well, that the votes were counted properly, and that the outcome reflected the will of the people. They concluded that the election was free and fair.

We assess the treatment effect of disagreement on two categories of outcome variables. First, respondents answer questions about their perceived level of election quality, including (a) whether the election was free and fair and (b) whether the candidate who won was the rightful winner. Second, we ask whether respondents support post-election mobilization led by the losing party, in the form of (a) protests, (b) threats, and (c) vandalism. The outcome variables are coded so that higher values indicate higher levels of agreement (question text is available in Appendix Section A1.2). Our expectation is that in the control condition (unanimous EOM criticism), respondents are likely to believe that the election was of relatively low quality and support mobilization. In comparison, in the treatment (EOM disagreement), respondents will have relatively more favorable perceptions of election quality and relatively lower levels of support for post-election mobilization and contention. Thus, the treatment coefficient should have a *positive* effect on the election quality outcomes and a *negative* effect on the mobilization outcomes.[22]

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[22] We use linear regressions that include independent variables for the winner of the election (AKP versus the opposition) and the main treatment (disagreement versus unanimous contention).

Figure 1 presents the results.[23] The coefficients represent the treatment effect of monitor disagreement compared to the control condition where both monitor groups criticized the election. All the coefficients fall in the expected directions. When different international observer groups disagree about the quality of the election, respondents are significantly more likely to believe the election was free and fair and significantly less likely to support post-election mobilization. The results for support for more intense forms of post-election contention, in the form of threats and vandalism by the losing side, fall in the expected direction but below conventional levels of significance. This is in part due to the small sample size for these questions, as only about 80 percent of respondents answered the outcome questions for these models. Moreover, we expected to find smaller treatment effects for the latter outcome questions, given the sensitive nature of the questions about post-election threats and vandalism.

Overall, these experimental results shed important light on the logic of our theory. When different IOs issue competing judgments on election quality, individuals are more likely to believe the election was free and fair and less likely to support post-election mobilization and contention.

**Figure 1:** Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections
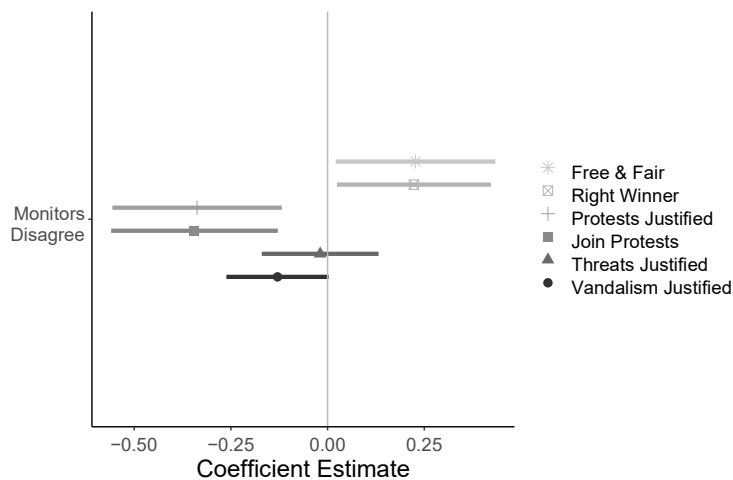


*Notes*: Selected coefficient estimates from Models 1–6 in Table A3. Coefficients show the effect of monitor disagreement on perceptions of election quality and support for mobilization, compared to the control condition when monitors offer unanimous criticism, with 90 percent confidence intervals. Sample is all respondents (*N* = 417–522).

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[23]  Table A3 shows the tabular results associated with the figure. Table A4 performs a balance check by evaluating whether any individual-level conditions were significantly correlated with the respondent's likelihood of being in the disagreement treatment. Since some of these conditions were imbalanced, Table A5 shows the results while including the imbalanced controls. These results are generally consistent with the main models, with increased uncertainty in some instances.

# Conclusion

International organizations play an important role in evaluating the quality of contemporary elections. By exposing fraud and enabling citizens to mobilize in defense of democratic norms, election observation missions can contribute to a self-enforcing democratic equilibrium (Hyde and Marinov, 2014). In support of this idea, the early 2000s saw a wave of electoral revolutions in which citizens, spurred on by EOM criticism, mobilized to push out illiberal incumbents. Autocrats have not taken this lying down. The norms and standards of the liberal international order are under attack from both inside and out, a point that prompts concern among democratic great powers.[24] For instance, illiberal leaders have sought to limit the independence of international EOMs by changing rules of oversight. Russia's repeated efforts to "reform" the OSCE's election observation capacity serve as one striking example (Fawn, 2006). Other research documents how similar challenges "from within" operate in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as a contingent of vocal illiberal parties opposes efforts to defend liberal norms (Lipps and Jacob, 2023).

In parallel, authoritarian regimes have sought to undermine the liberal order "from without," by establishing their own observation missions—often tied to autocratic IOs—whose express purpose is to challenge the judgments of more professional groups. Bush et al. (2023) document the sharp rise of "zombie" election monitoring organizations, tracing how their emergence is spurred by states that have strong ties to Russia and are members of autocratic IOs. The cast of election observation missions is increasingly diverse. Most elections now host multiple international observer groups that hail from different regions and exhibit different value commitments and capacity. Not surprisingly, disagreement among them is common.

Competing EOM judgments reach domestic audiences through a range of news sources, leaving individuals to formulate their perceptions about electoral legitimacy in the presence of conflicting information. We find clear evidence that competing judgments do shape beliefs and increase uncertainty about electoral misconduct, thereby diluting the mobilizing potential of EOM criticism. Our findings therefore provide the first systematic support for the idea that autocrats can reap domestic political benefits—or more precisely, mitigate political costs—by hosting multiple EOMs, thereby illuminating a particular domestic source of support for illiberal IOs. Notably, inviting multiple election monitors is a relatively low-cost strategy compared to other repressive and even violent means of defending against popular mobilization.

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[24] See Gray et al. (2023) in this proposed issue.

In sum, our research provides one entry point into the broader theme of the domestic consequences of illiberal IOs. Implications for the contemporary democracy promotion regime, and for norm-based international cooperation generally, are admittedly rather discouraging. Though experts understand which EOMs are more professional and credible than others, many domestic citizens in the host countries do not (Macdonald and Molony, 2023). Moreover, citizens' views about international election monitors, and about electoral legitimacy more generally, are shaped to a large extent by their media (and social media) environment. In the present global context of information bubbles and media silos, autocrats have ample opportunity to seize on the reports of friendly EOMs to publicize their own favorable narrative. Combating this problem will require professional EOMs—and the IOs that back them—to develop new ways to cut through the noise, increase awareness of their activities, and inform people of the contrasts between election observers of varying quality.

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# Appendix A1

## A1.1    Additional Observational Analysis

Table A1: Summary Statistics

| Variable | Obs | Mean | Std Dev | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Post-Election Contention | 504 | 5.155 | 17.168 | 0 | 170 |
| Number of EOMs | 504 | 1.496 | 1.845 | 0 | 10 |
| Monitor Criticism | 504 | .063 | .244 | 0 | 1 |
| Monitor Disagreement | 504 | .028 | .164 | 0 | 1 |
| Election Quality | 504 | -.065 | 1.186 | -3.034 | 2.742 |
| Pre-Election Contention | 504 | 14.722 | 33.694 | 0 | 323 |
| Polity | 504 | 2.44 | 5.603 | -9 | 10 |
| GDP per Capita | 504 | 6.213 | 5.978 | .309 | 57.69 |
| Civil Conflict | 504 | .19 | .393 | 0 | 1 |
| Post-Election Violence | 504 | 3.052 | 11.836 | 0 | 160 |
| Protests/Riots | 502 | .243 | .429 | 0 | 1 |
| Incumbent Vote Share | 504 | 49.718 | 27.111 | 0 | 100 |
| Presidential Election | 504 | .69 | .463 | 0 | 1 |
| Executive Constraints | 504 | 4.5 | 1.924 | 1 | 7 |
| Population | 504 | 16.147 | 1.514 | 12.707 | 20.906 |
| Ethnic Fractionalization | 504 | .532 | .241 | .004 | 1 |
| Western + Non-Western Monitors | 504 | .147 | .354 | 0 | 1 |
| Media Censorship | 504 | .388 | 1.132 | -2.959 | 2.741 |
| Civil Society Repression | 504 | .807 | 1.158 | -2.953 | 3.265 |
| Regime Duration | 504 | 4511.458 | 4668.843 | 0 | 23771 |

**Table A2:** Monitor Disagreement and Post-Election Contention: Additional Analysis

| | (1) Additional Controls | | (2) Violent Events 3 Months | | (3) Violent Events 3 Months Logit |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of EOMs | 0.02 | | 0.13** | | 0.12 |
| | (0.07) | | (0.06) | | (0.08) |
| Monitor Criticism | 1.14*** | | 1.00*** | | 1.74*** |
| | (0.34) | | (0.37) | | (0.64) |
| Monitor Disagreement | -1.45*** | | -1.25** | | -2.23** |
| | (0.48) | | (0.61) | | (0.96) |
| Election Quality | -0.69*** | | -0.30** | | -0.08 |
| | (0.15) | | (0.13) | | (0.17) |
| Pre-Election Contention | 0.01** | | 0.02*** | | 0.02 |
| | (0.00) | | (0.01) | | (0.02) |
| Polity | 0.12* | | 0.01 | | 0.01 |
| | (0.07) | | (0.03) | | (0.03) |
| GDP per Capita | 0.00 | | -0.09*** | | -0.11*** |
| | (0.03) | | (0.03) | | (0.04) |
| Civil Conflict | 0.26 | | 1.02*** | | 0.40 |
| | (0.37) | | (0.31) | | (0.37) |
| Incumbent Vote Share | -0.02*** | | | | |
| | (0.01) | | | | |
| Presidential Election | -0.67** | | | | |
| | (0.32) | | | | |
| Executive Constraints | -0.36* | | | | |
| | (0.20) | | | | |
| Population | 0.32*** | | | | |
| | (0.10) | | | | |
| Ethnic Fractionalization | 0.65 | | | | |
| | (0.49) | | | | |
| Foreign Aid | 0.00** (0.00) | | | | |
| Western + Non-Western Monitors | 0.43 | | | | |
| | (0.34) | | | | |
| Media Censorship | -0.51*** | | | | |
| | (0.19) | | | | |
| Civil Society Repression | 0.34** (0.14) | | | | |
| Regime Duration | -0.00 | | | | |
| | (0.00) | | | | |
| Monitor Criticism (lagged) | -1.46** | | | | |
| | (0.57) | | | | |
| Contentious Events (lagged) | 0.02** (0.01) | | | | |
| Constant | -3.00 | | 0.53* | | -0.31 |
| | (1.84) | (0.28) | (0.28) | | |
| Observations | 289 | 328 | 328 | | |

*Notes*: Dependent variable is the count of post-election contentious events (Model 1), count of post-election violent events (Model 2), and whether there were any post-election violent events (Model 3). The samples are monitored executive elections in non-liberal democracies countries, 1990–2012. ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.

## A1.2　Survey Outcomes

- **Free & Fair**: Please choose your level of agreement with the following statement: This election process was free and fair. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

- **Right Winner**: Please choose your level of agreement with the following statement: The candidate who won this election was the rightful winner. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

- **Protests Justified**: How much do you agree with this statement: The losing candidates would be right to organize protests after this election. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

- **Join Protests**: How much do you agree with this statement: I would consider joining protests by the losing candidates after this election. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

- **Threats Justified** How much do you agree with this statement: After this election, it would be justifiable for supporters of the losing candidates to threaten supporters of the other side. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

- **Vandalism Justified** How much do you agree with this statement: After this election, it would be justifiable for supporters of the losing candidates to use violent tactics such as breaking windows, setting fires, or destroying property. [strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree]

## A1.3   Additional Experimental Analysis

### Table A3: Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections

|  | (1)<br>Free & Fair | (2)<br>Right Winner | (3)<br>Protests Justified | (4)<br>Join Protests | (5)<br>Threats Justified | (6)<br>Vandalism Justified |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AKP Wins | −0.51*** | −0.67*** | 0.66*** | 0.93*** | 0.31*** | 0.24*** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Monitors Disagree | 0.23* | 0.22* | −0.34** | −0.34*** | −0.02 | −0.13 |
|  | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Constant | 2.68*** | 3.34*** | 2.93*** | 2.29*** | 1.55*** | 1.43*** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Observations | 522 | 480 | 440 | 439 | 417 | 418 |

*Notes*: ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.

**Table A4:** Balance Check

| | (1) |
|---|---|
| Completed Survey | 0.05 |
| | (0.24) |
| AKP | 0.06 |
| | (0.38) |
| No Education | 0.41 |
| | (0.66) |
| Some HS | 0.18 |
| | (0.47) |
| College | 0.25 |
| | (0.25) |
| Graduate School | 0.76* |
| | (0.46) |
| Urban | 0.02 |
| | (0.31) |
| 18–34 | −0.54 |
| | (0.42) |
| 35–44 | −0.30 |
| | (0.35) |
| 45–54 | −0.28 |
| | (0.29) |
| 65+ | −0.36 |
| | (0.33) |
| Below 5.501 TL | 0.04 |
| | (0.32) |
| Below 10k TL | −0.37 |
| | (0.29) |
| Below 15k TL | −0.22 |
| | (0.42) |
| Above 20k TL | −0.61 |
| | (0.42) |
| Male | 0.42* |
| | (0.24) |
| Karadeniz | 0.19 |
| | (0.44) |
| Guneydogu Anadolu | −1.02** |
| | (0.47) |
| Dogu Anadolu | 0.74 |
| | (0.81) |
| Akdeniz | −0.38 |
| | (0.35) |
| Ic Anadolu | −0.43 |
| | (0.33) |
| Ege | −0.57* |
| | (0.30) |
| Turkey Right Direction | 0.55 |
| | (0.37) |
| Confident in UN | −0.33* |
| | (0.20) |
| Support Joining EU | −0.32 |
| | (0.23) |
| Protested | −0.37* |
| | (0.22) |
| Secular | 0.12 |
| | (0.24) |
| Constant | 0.85*** |
| | (0.26) |
| Observations | 565 |

Notes: Dependent variable is monitor disagreement. ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.

**Table A5:** Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections, with Controls

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Free & Fair | Right Winner | Protests Justified | Join Protests | Threats Justified | Vandalism Justified |
| AKP Wins | −0.50*** | −0.63*** | 0.69*** | 0.95*** | 0.32*** | 0.25*** |
| | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Monitors Disagree | 0.17 | 0.20 | −0.31** | −0.33** | −0.04 | −0.14* |
| | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| No Education | −0.25 | 0.48 | −0.78** | −0.55 | −0.10 | −0.13 |
| | (0.39) | (0.36) | (0.37) | (0.37) | (0.26) | (0.23) |
| Some HS | 0.04 | 0.08 | −0.30 | −0.32 | 0.05 | −0.27 |
| | (0.29) | (0.27) | (0.28) | (0.27) | (0.20) | (0.17) |
| College | −0.00 | 0.04 | 0.31** | −0.02 | −0.07 | −0.02 |
| | (0.14) | (0.13) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.10) | (0.09) |
| Graduate School | −0.03 | 0.19 | 0.37 | −0.26 | −0.03 | −0.10 |
| | (0.25) | (0.23) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.17) | (0.15) |
| Male | 0.24* | 0.19 | −0.20 | −0.11 | −0.04 | 0.12 |
| | (0.14) | (0.13) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.10) | (0.09) |
| Karadeniz | 0.35 | 0.52** | −0.58** | −0.07 | 0.04 | −0.02 |
| | (0.25) | (0.23) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.17) | (0.15) |
| Guneydogu Anadolu | −0.00 | 0.06 | 0.16 | −0.24 | −0.01 | −0.11 |
| | (0.30) | (0.28) | (0.29) | (0.29) | (0.20) | (0.18) |
| Dogu Anadolu | −0.13 | −0.29 | −0.45 | −0.29 | −0.00 | −0.41* |
| | (0.39) | (0.37) | (0.37) | (0.37) | (0.26) | (0.23) |
| Akdeniz | −0.09 | −0.01 | −0.11 | −0.01 | −0.03 | −0.08 |
| | (0.21) | (0.20) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.15) | (0.13) |
| Ic Anadolu | −0.03 | 0.19 | −0.29 | −0.19 | −0.10 | −0.10 |
| | (0.20) | (0.19) | (0.19) | (0.19) | (0.14) | (0.12) |
| Ege | −0.17 | −0.01 | −0.00 | 0.01 | −0.00 | 0.06 |
| | (0.18) | (0.17) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.13) | (0.11) |
| Confident in UN | 0.20 | 0.07 | −0.40*** | −0.36*** | −0.18* | −0.17** |
| | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.10) | (0.08) |
| Protested | −0.59*** | −0.05 | 0.45*** | 0.51*** | −0.14 | 0.00 |
| | (0.14) | (0.13) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.10) | (0.09) |
| Constant | 2.69*** | 3.11*** | 3.02*** | 2.45*** | 1.75*** | 1.48*** |
| | (0.15) | (0.16) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.14) | (0.12) |
| Observations | 522 | 480 | 440 | 439 | 417 | 418 |

*Notes*: ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.

**Figure A1:** Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections by Party

AKP



Not AKP
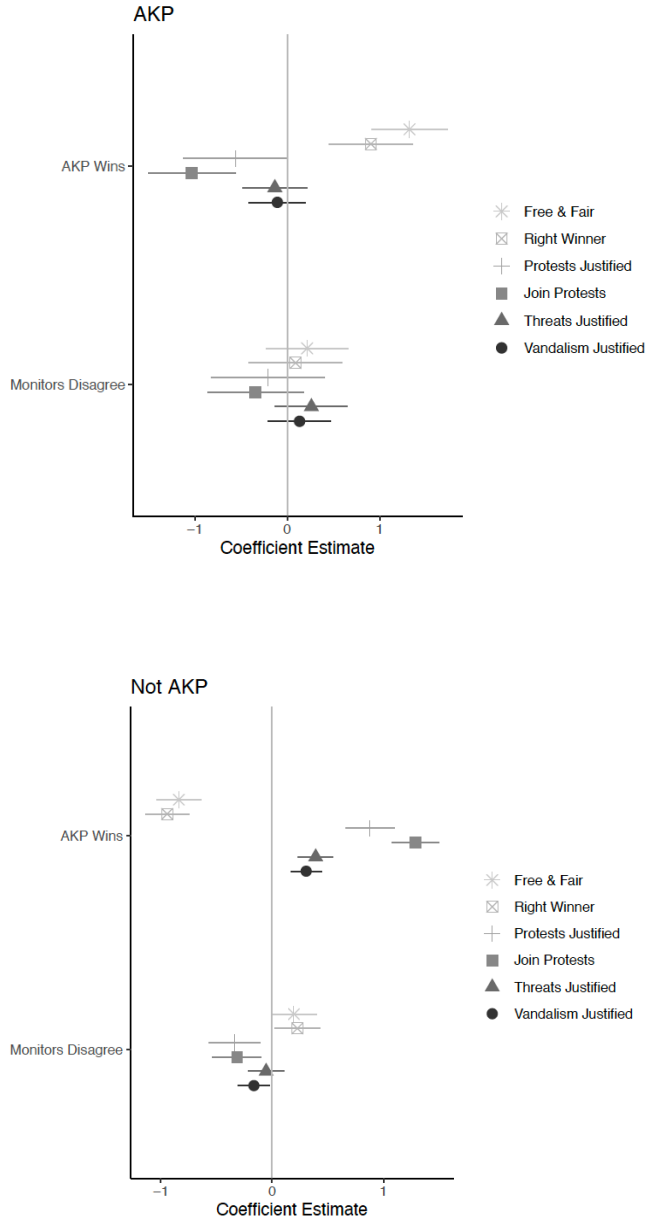


Notes: Coefficient estimates from Models 1–6 in Table A6 (left panel) and Table A7 (right panel).
90 percent confidence intervals.

**Table A6:** Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections, AKP

|  | (1) Free & Fair | (2) Right Winner | (3) Protests Justified | (4) Join Protests | (5) Threats Justified | (6) Vandalism Justified |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AKP Wins | 1.32*** | 0.91*** | −0.56* | −1.03*** | −0.13 | −0.11 |
|  | (0.24) | (0.27) | (0.33) | (0.28) | (0.21) | (0.18) |
| Monitors Disagree | 0.22 | 0.09 | −0.21 | −0.34 | 0.26 | 0.13 |
|  | (0.27) | (0.30) | (0.37) | (0.31) | (0.23) | (0.20) |
| Constant | 2.72*** | 3.11*** | 3.15*** | 2.80*** | 1.48*** | 1.35*** |
|  | (0.27) | (0.30) | (0.36) | (0.31) | (0.23) | (0.20) |
| Observations | 73 | 68 | 64 | 64 | 62 | 62 |

Notes: ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.


**Table A7:** Monitor Disagreement and Perceptions of Elections, Not AKP

|  | (1) Free & Fair | (2) Right Winner | (3) Protests Justified | (4) Join Protests | (5) Threats Justified | (6) Vandalism Justified |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AKP Wins | −0.84*** | −0.94*** | 0.88*** | 1.29*** | 0.39*** | 0.31*** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.10) | (0.08) |
| Monitors Disagree | 0.20 | 0.23* | −0.34** | −0.32** | −0.05 | −0.16* |
|  | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.14) | (0.13) | (0.10) | (0.09) |
| Constant | 2.70*** | 3.39*** | 2.89*** | 2.19*** | 1.56*** | 1.43*** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Observations | 449 | 412 | 376 | 375 | 355 | 356 |

Notes: ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.