

Survival Through Electoral Fraud?

When analyzing why hegemonic parties are so resilient, journalists and scholars normally focus on electoral fraud. The prevailing argument is that the incumbent party steals the elections in order to allow the regime to

⁴ One possible reason why party autocracies such as the Mexican PRI and the Communist Party autocracies in China and the USSR emerged out of civil war instead of democracy, as set forth by Wantchekon (2004), is that in these autocracies one faction was able to establish supremacy after the civil war, while in his story about the emergence of democracy out of civil war there are two factions that face a stalemate and turn to democratic elections to resolve the stalemate.

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sustain itself. There is no doubt that the Mexican PRI committed electoral fraud in the 1988 presidential elections, when the party declared that the new computer system had mysteriously collapsed the night of the elections, and it also committed fraud in many local elections.⁵ The 1988 elections were the first seriously contested presidential elections. The official results gave the victory to the PRI's presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas, with 50.7 percent of the vote over 32.5 percent given to a former PRI politician, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the National Democratic Front (FDN), which was eventually transformed into the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). As the recently published memoirs of then-president Miguel de la Madrid attest, there is no doubt that the PRI committed fraud against Cárdenas. What is impossible to establish with the available information is whether the PRI needed the fraud in order to retain the presidency, or if the fraud was rather employed to manufacture a 50 percent vote share for the PRI. The 50 percent vote threshold was decisive because with fewer votes, the PRI would not have obtained the cushioned majority it needed in the Electoral College, composed of newly elected congresspersons, to single-handedly ratify the presidential election (Castañeda, 2000: 86, 232).

Yet there are two problems with the view that electoral fraud alone can account for the survival of hegemonic-party regimes. The first is that these parties often rule by either running uncontested or, when the opposition effectively challenges them, winning by impressive margins of victory, manufactured only minimally by fraud. Before the onset of the debt crisis in 1982, which marked the beginning of more than twenty years of economic stagnation, the Mexican PRI was able to win most elections by impressive margins of victory. Electoral fraud played such a minor role during those years⁶ that some scholars regarded Mexico as a democracy,

⁵ The PRI committed fraud in many local elections, including the infamous case of Chihuahua in 1986, where the ruling party stole the governorship from the PAN. Lujambio (2001) presents an excellent historical overview of how the PAN in Mexico was affected by electoral fraud during its long history of opposing the PRI. Eisenstadt (2004) provides the most comprehensive account of how the opposition parties in Mexico dealt with electoral fraud in the decade of the 1990s.

⁶ Molinar (1991) explained this most clearly. He noted that electoral fraud was more prevalent in rural jurisdictions because the opposition normally did not have the reach to monitor the ballots there. In urban political jurisdictions the PRI's leeway to commit electoral fraud was more restricted, as the opposition was normally present to monitor the ballots. In the countryside, however, electoral fraud did not normally make the difference between the PRI winning or losing, because the opposition did not even field candidates in most of the rural jurisdictions. Fraud was mostly employed to boost the party's vote share.

albeit an unusual one – witness the title of one of the best studies of Mexican politics, Frank Brandenburg's (1955) dissertation, "Mexico: An Experiment in One-Party Democracy." In his classic study of democracy, Lipset (1959) also conceived Mexico as belonging to a small group of democracies in the developing world, together with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, on the grounds that these countries had shared "a history of more or less free elections for most of the post-World War I period" (74). Mexican elections at the time were no more questionable than, for instance, elections in India or Japan. After 1982, elections in Mexico became more competitive, and the practice of electoral fraud more common. Yet even during this more competitive era, the PRI effectively won in the overwhelming majority of political jurisdictions (e.g., single-member districts, municipalities, and gubernatorial races) largely because the opposition had only a meager presence in most of them.

A focus on electoral fraud as the sole reason for the PRI's survival would thus lead to two erroneous conclusions: first, that Mexico was more democratic in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s than in the 1980s and 1990s, an odd conclusion given that there was considerably more political competition during the latter period and that the electoral institutions were transformed in the 1990s; and second, that the PRI was not able to win elections cleanly, which for the most part it did. Similar electoral dynamics are observable in most hegemonic-party regimes, where the ruling party either runs uncontested in many races or, even when contested, wins by huge margins. This suggests that electoral fraud is only one of the instruments these autocracies have at their disposal to retain power, and that it is not always the most important one. Moreover, as Diamond (2002) points out, authoritarian rulers turn to their nastiest levels of repression, intimidation, and fraud when they are vulnerable, not when their political domination is secured at the ballot box.

The second fundamental problem with the perception that electoral fraud is the sole cause of authoritarian survival is that this viewpoint simply pushes the problem one step back. The Mexican PRI committed fraud in 1988, and twelve years later this same party stepped down from office, peacefully yielding the presidential seat to the PAN's candidate, Vicente Fox. If fraud was the only means by which the PRI had sustained itself in the past, why did this party not resort to stealing the election again in 2000? What allows hegemonic-party autocrats to get away with stealing elections? What prevents them from doing so? The key to understanding

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the resiliency of hegemonic parties, and how they democratize, lies in our answers to these questions.

This book provides a theory of the survival and demise of the Mexican PRI, and in doing so it also sheds new light on the politics of what some scholars call “electoral authoritarianism” and its democratization dynamics. Linz writes that “if I were to write a book on comparative democracies, it would have to include a section on . . . defective or pseudodemocracies, which I would rather characterize as “electoral authoritarian” regimes . . . where a façade covers authoritarian rule” (Linz, 2000: 34). Schedler (2002) calculates that the most common form of autocracy today is hidden behind the façade of elections: “Their dream is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty” (37). Diamond (2002) and Levitsky and Way (2002) also highlight the prevalence of electoral authoritarianism.

The Role of Elections in Autocratic Regimes

Most autocracies employ at least some repression to disarticulate the opposition – they murder or imprison its leaders (Arendt, 1968; Stepan, 1971; Dahl, 1973; O’Donnell, 1973; Wintrobe, 1998). Evidence suggests that this strategy often backfires: repression can push the opposition into insurgency, which eventually threatens to overthrow the dictator through civil war (see, for example, Wood, 2000). Hegemonic-party autocracies do not ban the opposition, but rather allow elites to organize into independent political parties and to have a place in the legislature.

The conventional argument regarding why autocratic regimes allow elections is that these elections create a democratic façade and thus enhance the regime’s legitimacy. For example, according to Crespo (2004), “a hegemonic party like the PRI, insofar as it tried to avoid becoming a one-party system in order to preserve a certain *democratic legitimacy*, had to honor democratic rituals. It was obliged to adopt institutions and procedures typical of a democracy, even though in reality these institutions and procedures lost their original function” (61, emphasis mine).

No doubt autocratic regimes often need to adopt the façade of elections in order to deceive other parties (e.g., international donors). This argument, as Joseph (1999) explains, might to a large extent account for why politicians in some of the poorest single-party autocracies in Africa chose to institute multiparty elections for the first time (although internal political struggles and the discrediting of authoritarian rulers also played a decisive role)

(Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Bates, 2001). But the PRI did not adopt elections in order to enhance its legitimacy. The PRI was designed with the explicit purpose of preventing personal dictatorship. The Mexican revolution was fought under the banners “*sufragio efectivo, no reelección*”⁷ and “*la tierra es de quien la trabaja*”⁸ against the dictator Porfirio Diaz, who had ruled Mexico for over thirty years. The political pact that symbolizes the end of the revolution – the 1917 constitution – forbade presidential reelection while establishing multiparty elections. After having modified the constitution to allow for his reelection, President Alvaro Obregón was murdered in 1928. After the murder of Obregón, politicians established the predecessor of the PRI with the explicit intent to transit from a system of “*caudillos*” to one of “institutions.” The assassination of Obregón established a powerful focal point that would serve to coordinate a rebellion among ruling party politicians against would-be dictators who aspire to get rid of the elections. The PRI was thus a collusive agreement that allowed ruling-party politicians to divide the rents of power among themselves while preventing any single individual from grabbing it all. To make this pact to share power effective, consecutive elections took place with clockwork precision and presidents stepped down from office every six years.

The decision to allow multiparty elections has momentous implications for the dynamics of autocratic survival. Even if their outcome is totally predictable, elections are not simply mass rituals, devoid of significance. My approach underscores four functional roles of elections in autocratic regimes. First, autocratic elections are designed to establish a regularized method to share power among ruling party politicians. The Mexican autocracy was unique in that elections were employed to replace even the highest office, the presidency. In most other hegemonic-party autocracies, the same president is reelected for prolonged periods, while elections are employed as means to distribute power among lower-level politicians. Autocratic regimes reward with office those politicians who prove most capable in mobilizing citizens to the party’s rallies, getting voters to the polls, and preventing social turmoil in their districts. The autocracy thus forces politicians to work for the benefit of the party and to have a vested interest in the survival of the regime. Second, elections are meant to disseminate public

⁷ The English translation is “no reelection and the right to have votes effectively counted.”

⁸ The English translation is “land for the tiller.”

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information about the regime's strength that would serve to discourage potential divisions within the ruling party. By holding elections regularly, winning them by huge margins, painting the streets and towns all over the country in the party's colors, and mobilizing voters in great numbers to party rallies and the polls, the PRI sought to generate a public image of *invincibility*. This image would serve to discourage coordination among potential challengers – most fundamentally, those coming from within the party – and to diminish bandwagon effects in favor of the opposition parties among the mass public. High turnout and huge margins of victory signaled to elites that the ruling party's electoral machine was unbeatable because citizens supported the regime. The message to the disaffected party politicians was that the only road to political success was the ruling party, and that outside of it there was nothing but political defeat. To be sure, the PRI also resorted to ballot stuffing and electoral fraud. However, electoral victories obtained simply by stuffing the ballots were insufficient to convince powerful politicians within the ruling party of the regime's might.

The third functional role of elections in hegemonic-party autocracies is to provide information about supporters and opponents of the regime. Wintrobe (1998) proposes that dictators face a dilemma in that they cannot ever truly know what the population thinks of them. If the dictator is loved, his power is more secure; if the dictator is despised by his people, he is more vulnerable to challenges from potential opponents. Communist dictatorships relied on a combination of strategies to obtain information about their subjects, including the secret police and informants, and they also used competition among subordinates for scarce resources to their advantage (Wintrobe, 1998; Olson, 2000). Hegemonic-party regimes employ elections as a key instrument for obtaining information about the extent of the party's mass support and its geographic distribution. The hegemonic party uses this information to screen voters according to their political loyalties, rewarding supporters with access to government funds and punishing defectors by withdrawing them from the party's spoils system. In doing so, the hegemonic party creates a market for political loyalty and makes citizens vest their interests in the survival of the regime.

The fourth functional role of elections in an autocratic regime is to trap the opposition, so that it invests in the existing autocratic institutions rather than challenging them by violent means. Gandhi and Przeworski (2001) put this idea succinctly: "Under dictatorship, parties do not compete, elections do not elect, and legislatures do not legislate. What, then, is the role of

these institutions under dictatorship?” (1) They argue that dictators protect themselves by offering particular groups of the potential opposition a place in the legislature. Autocratic legislatures and elections also serve to divide the opposition. As my model in Chapter 8 makes explicit, the nature of the autocratic electoral game is such that some opposition players are invariably better off playing the “loyal opposition” while leaving others to rebel on their own. By selectively coopting the opposition, the autocracy prevents its opponents from forming a unified front to rebel against the regime.

⁹ Linz (2000) challenges the view that repression is an essential characteristic of autocracies.