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Electoral manipulation and postelectoral protests in Latin America

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Abstract

What is the relationship between electoral manipulation and postelection protests in Latin America? The political science literature has traditionally expected that election manipulation can lead to postelection demonstrations, but the research has not dealt much with how the elections were manipulated. This study aims to fill this gap. An analysis of 221 elections in Latin America between 1980 and 2020 shows that the relationship between electoral manipulation and postelection protests is far more complex than conventional explanations suggest. The results show that pre-election manipulation does not increase the likelihood of postelection protests. Regarding manipulation during elections, it appears that citizens of Latin American countries are susceptible to administrative fraud. Contrary to previous studies, intimidation and vote buying also have no effect.

KEYWORDS
democratic backsliding, elections, Latin America, menu of manipulation, postelectoral protest

INTRODUCTION

What is the relationship between electoral manipulation and postelection protests in Latin America? The political science literature has traditionally expected that election manipulation can lead to postelection protests (Fearon, 2011; Lankina & Skovoroda, 2017; Little, 2012; Magaloni, 2010). In recent years, many studies have shown that not all types of electoral manipulation equally increase the risk of postelection protests (Hafner-Burton et al., 2018; Harvey & Mukherjee, 2020; Luo & Rozenas, 2018). Therefore, both the timing and type of electoral manipulation are believed to affect the likelihood of postelection protests, but individual studies vary widely in their conclusions. Some studies suggest that pre-election manipulation increases the likelihood of postelection protests (Chernykh, 2014; Hauser, 2019; Zavadskaya, 2018). However, Luo and Rozenas (2018) argue the opposite in their study—that

pre-election manipulation rarely leads to postelection protests. Moreover, there is no greater certainty about the repercussions of manipulation during elections. There is a debate, for example, about whether administrative fraud alone (Harvey & Mukherjee, 2020) or electoral violence as well (Hafner-Burton et al., 2018) increases the chances of postelection protests.

Answering this research question is very important in the contemporary debate on democratic backsliding and current political developments in Latin America. Indeed, the experience of democratic backsliding in the current world shows that understanding the causes and consequences of electoral manipulation is crucial. In countries where democracy is being subverted, incumbents mainly use pre-electoral manipulation (Svolik, 2020). It does not mean that elections would be freer and fairer. The issue is simply that manipulation takes place earlier, and "traditional" manipulation during elections is an imaginary safety brake when other options fail (Bermeo, 2016; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

Latin America is an ideal laboratory to explore the relationship between electoral manipulation and postelection protests. Between 1980 and 2020, there were 40 cases of postelection protests, almost half of which took place after 2010. Although there are fewer dictatorships in Latin America today than during the Cold War, it must be acknowledged that most countries are stuck in a gray zone (Carothers, 2002) between full democracy and classical authoritarianism (Bílek, 2023; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2023). Thus, the quality and fairness of the electoral process are often problematic and raise several questions (Carreras & İrepoğlu, 2013), as was well demonstrated, for example, in the Bolivian 2019 elections, which were characterized by several irregularities (Wolff, 2020).

This article aims to fill the gap in comprehending the relationship between electoral manipulation and electoral protests in Latin America. Using empirical tests and combining the data about postelectoral protests from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) database (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) with the data on different forms of pre-electoral and electoral manipulation from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Alizada, et al., 2022), I found that for the incumbents in Latin America, pre-electoral manipulation is a safer option.

The results show that pre-election manipulation does not increase the likelihood of postelection protests. In this respect, the expectations formulated by Hauser (2019), for example, are not confirmed. On the contrary, the results support the theoretical assumptions developed by Luo and Rozenas (2018). Regarding manipulation during elections, it appears that citizens in Latin American countries are susceptible to administrative fraud. In situations where there was ex-post manipulation of election results, the probability of protest increased several times.

The finding that incumbents in Latin America are not at greater risk of postelection protests for using pre-electoral manipulation is terrible news for supporters of democracy in this part of the world. Indeed, it again proves that Levitsky and Way (2010) were right more than a decade ago when they pointed out how dangerous these forms of electoral manipulation can be for political competition. The positive news is that political polarization does not affect the incidence of postelection protests. Thus, situations such as the postelection protests in Brazil in 2022, where many supporters of President Bolsonaro refused to accept his defeat in a competitive election, are so far the exception.

HOW MANIPULATION AFFECTS THE PROBABILITY OF POSTELECTORAL PROTESTS

The conventional assumption expects that electoral manipulation can lead to postelection protests. Indeed, rigging elections and thus disregarding the will of a significant part of the electorate can easily trigger a wave of discontent that leads to postelection demonstrations. Still, more factors than just the accumulated anger of voters determine whether protests erupt

after elections. In particular, the existing literature points out that most major postelection demonstrations are not spontaneous but are often organized by the opposition or civil society (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010). Luis Fernando Camacho's name can be mentioned in the context of the 2019 Bolivia elections. In late 2022, this right-wing politician was also imprisoned for his role in preparing postelectoral protests, but the strength of the government is certainly a factor in Camacho's and other opposition and civil society leaders' decision to speak out against the government that rigged the elections.

A government that enjoys public support and has sufficient resources to quell any potential unrest is undoubtedly harder to protest than a government that is unpopular and has not already secured the loyalty of crucial state actors (Simpser, 2013). In this sense, such well-executed electoral manipulation is undoubtedly a sign of strength. Indeed, suppose you manage to influence the rules of the electoral contest in advance and perhaps even get rid of most of the relevant opposition before the election campaign begins. In this case, you send an unmistakable signal about your position (Svolik, 2020). In Nicaragua in 2022, the government resorted to an unprecedented wave of repression a few months before the elections out of fear of the growing strength of the opposition. The government prevented a strong wave of postelection protests by demonstrating its strength and continued loyalty to the country's repressive forces (Thaler & Mosinger, 2022). Another great advantage of pre-election manipulation is that it involves activities that may not be obvious or recognizable. For example, the opposition sometimes does not pay enough attention to changes to the electoral system (Schedler, 2002, p. 107).

Eliminating or at least appreciably weakening the relevant opposition before the election by modifying electoral rules is also advantageous for politicians in power because it can be done with relatively little cost and a limited number of subordinates (Rundlett & Svolik, 2016). Thus, the implementation of pre-election manipulation is more in the hands of the government, which can better control it (Luo & Rozenas, 2018). There are several ways to influence a political contest long before the elections occur, to name a few, modifying electoral rules to make it difficult for the opposition to participate, controlling the media, eliminating inconvenient candidates, and modifying re-election rules through the Supreme Court. A typical example is the situation in Venezuela, where candidates of parties that did not participate in the last local elections were not allowed to compete in the 2018 presidential elections (Semana, 2017).

It is clear from these examples that pre-election manipulation should be advantageous for governments and that it cannot automatically be expected that it must necessarily lead to postelection protests. Yet, as already noted, there is no consensus on this assumption in the academic literature. Moreover, studies that expect pre-election manipulation to increase the likelihood of postelection protest often focus only on a specific type of pre-election manipulation (Chernykh, 2014) or do not test these assumptions (Hauser, 2019). Meanwhile, Zavadskaya (2018) finds that some pre-election manipulation increases the likelihood of postelection protests. For this reason, it is more plausible to formulate a more conventional hypothesis.

H1. Pre-electoral manipulation will increase the probability of post-electoral protest.

In the case of manipulation during elections, Harvey and Mukherjee (2020) demonstrate that even between electoral manipulation and postelection protest, a link is not as simple as previously assumed. Again, the key to their explanation is the multitude of sources and the government's position. In their view, administrative fraud increases the likelihood of post-election protests because it is a sign of weakness. A government that resorts to it clarifies that it does not have the situation firmly in its hands (Harvey & Mukherjee, 2020). Indeed, if it did, it would probably prefer to manipulate the pre-election (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). In any case, administrative fraud is one of the relatively cheap forms of electoral manipulation, and a relatively small number of loyal civil servants are sufficient to carry it out. By comparison, vote buying or intimidation requires disproportionately more financial and organizational resources

(Harvey, 2016, p. 108). Still, deploying the latter two strategies again signals to the public and the opposition that the government's position is relatively strong despite electoral manipulation, which should reduce the likelihood of an outbreak of postelection protests (Harvey & Mukherjee, 2020). Yet, Hafner-Burton et al. (2018) conclude that government-sponsored electoral violence and intimidation increase the probability of postelectoral protest. Their study confirms the assumption created by Tucker (2007), which expects electoral violence to solve the collective action problem by lowering the cost of participating in postelectoral protests.

H2a. Administrative fraud will increase the probability of postelectoral protest.

H2b. Vote buying and intimidation will not increase the probability of postelectoral protest.

H2c. Intimidation by the government will increase the probability of postelectoral protest.

DATA AND METHODS

To test these hypotheses, I have created a data set of elections in Latin America from 1980 to 2020, which includes 221 elections in 19 countries. The data set consists of all countries in Latin America except Cuba. The dependent variable for this study, postelection protest, comes from NELDA (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). This variable is binary and records if there was an occurrence of riots and demonstrations after the election. Based on the codebook, the protests must be somehow related to the elections or their outcome (Hyde & Marinov, 2021, p. 19). Because the dependent variable is binary, I employ logistic regression to test the presented hypotheses.

This study's leading independent variables of interest are different forms of electoral and pre-electoral manipulation[1] (Table 1 gives an overview). The data come from the V-Dem database[2] (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Alizada, et al., 2022). V-Dem data have several key advantages compared to other possible electoral manipulation datasets. Besides the broader range of variables, most V-dem indicators are measured on ordinary scales and not on a binary scale (Handlin, 2017).

TABLE 1 Overview of the manipulative strategies.

Type of manipulation	Name of the strategy	V-Dem source
Pre-electoral manipulation	Exclusion	Party ban
		Barriers to parties
	Censorship	Government censorship effort—Media
		Media bias
	Courts control	High court independence
Electoral manipulation	Administrative fraud	Election, other voting irregularities
	Vote buying	Election, vote buying
	Electoral Intimidation	Election, government intimidation

Abbreviation: V-Dem, Varieties of Democracy.

Source: Author's elaboration, based on Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Altman et al. (2022).

Regarding pre-electoral manipulation, V-Dem offers several variables to express institutional and media manipulation. *Party Ban* and *Barriers to Parties* were selected from the first category. The latter variable is suitable to capture cases such as the exclusion of the opposition in Venezuela mentioned earlier. Party bans are uncommon in Latin America but represent a possible exclusion of inconvenient opposition. Two variables represent media restriction. In addition to media censorship, there is media bias in favor of the government. In Latin America, we may encounter both. Honduras under President Hernandez is a good illustration. In 2016, Globo TV, a television station critical of the government, was shut down. As an example of media bias, since 2013, the debt-ridden media has managed to pay off its debt by broadcasting "pro-government advertising" (MOE, 2017, p. 7). The final form of pre-electoral manipulation is uneven access to the law, such as the circumvention of the ban on re-election. An example is the Nicaragua Supreme Court decision that allowed Daniel Ortega and the mayors from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to run again even though doing so contravened legislative rules (Confidencial, 2017). On manipulation during elections, the study works with the usual trio of manipulative techniques—administrative fraud, vote buying, and opposition intimidation. The V-Dem database contains an appropriate variable for each of these.

The chosen six manipulative strategies represent only a part of the possible forms of manipulation. Many incumbents have a far more diverse arsenal of manipulation (Morgenbesser, 2020), but we do not yet have available data for many other possible forms of manipulation. For instance, Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that another influence form of pre-electoral manipulation is uneven resource access between the government and its challengers. Unfortunately, the V-Dem database and other databases dedicated to elections do not have the sort of variables that would allow this phenomenon to be measured.

Apart from different forms of pre-electoral and electoral manipulation, the probability of postelectoral protest is also likely to be influenced by other factors. To address this point, I include nine control variables. The first is a dichotomous variable that describes the election type (executive and concurrent or legislative). We may expect that post-electoral protests will be more common in executive and concurrent elections because these elections are more important. The second control variable gives the level of political polarization,[3] which could affect the occurrence of postelectoral protests because voters in highly polarized societies are willing to sacrifice the democratic game in favor of their interests (Svolik, 2020). Next, I control if the opposition candidates or parties boycott[4] the elections, which could also affect the postelectoral situation. Another factor that could influence the outcome of the elections is an economic crisis.[5] Excepting the occurrence of an economic crisis, I use gross domestic product per capita data to control the economic situation. Next, I include the variable that describes if the foreign electoral observation mission[6] was presented. A foreign observation mission could also increase the probability of postelectoral protests (Hyde, 2011). Furthermore, I control if the incumbent's party (or candidate) loses.[7] We can expect that postelectoral protests are more common when the opposition is unsuccessful in elections. Next, I control if the election loser accepts the results.[8] Postelectoral protests are more common when the losers do not accept the results. Finally, I include the variable margin of victory,[9] which describes the difference between the share of votes cast for the winning candidate or party and the second-place candidate or party. We can expect that close electoral results will increase the probability of postelectoral protests.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis. Four different models were created. The first model shows the effect of electoral manipulation. The second model is dedicated to pre-electoral manipulation. The last two models combine pre-electoral and electoral manipulation with control variables.[10] The first hypothesis deals with the influence of pre-election manipulations

TABLE 2 Logistic regression models of the determinants of postelectoral protest in Latin America, 1980–2020.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Explanatory variables				
Administrative fraud	**5.65***** (3.03)		**6.24***** (3.92)	**3.93**** (2.59)
Electoral intimidation	1.06 (0.398)		**1.75** (1.18)	1.15 (0.898)
Vote buying	**0.494*** (0.242)		0.527 (0.221)	0.698 (0.388)
Barriers to parties		0.751 (0.461)	0.407 (0.230)	**0.274*** (0.199)
Party ban		1.36 (0.658)	1.21 (0.461)	0.349 (0.278)
Media censorship		1.26 (0.490)	1.25 (0.562)	2.22 (0.139)
Media bias		1.15 (0.366)	0.962 (0.388)	1.49 (1.06)
High Court control		**1.53*** (0.042)	0.912 (0.296)	0.608 (0.242)
Control variables				
Main elections			1.30 (0.379)	1.34 (0.500)
Political polarization			0.869 (0.252)	0.572 (0.251)
Opposition boycott			1.43 (0.361)	1.34 (0.553)
Economic crisis			0.919 (0.296)	0.905 (0.360)
GDP capita			**2.26***** (0.395)	**2.47***** (0.665)
Electoral observation mission			**1.87*** (0.688)	**1.56*** (0.414)
Incumbent's party loss				1.28 (0.296)
Election losers accept results				**6.53***** (2.53)
Margin of victory				0.858 (0.231)
Constant	0.142*** (0.047)	0.193*** (0.062)	0.104*** (0.039)	0.061*** (0.026)
Number of observations	221	221	221	202
Number of groups: Country	19	19	19	19
Pseudo-R^2	0.218	0.071	0.309	0.458

Abbreviation: GDP, gross domestic product.

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

Source: Author's elaboration.

on postelection protests. As presented in the theoretical section, the literature is divided on the degree of influence. The results of the three models show that the analyzed forms of pre-electoral manipulation do not increase the likelihood of postelection protests. In the second model, control of the courts appears to increase the probability of postelection protests. However, this effect is not confirmed in the third and fourth models, where all variables are included. Other types of pre-election manipulation have no influence. Thus, hypothesis H1 can be discarded.

The last three hypotheses are dedicated to the effects of manipulation during elections. Based on our results, the arguments made by Harvey and Mukherjee (2020) are valid in the context of elections in Latin America. Administrative fraud increases the probability of post-electoral protests. On the other hand, vote buying and intimidation do not. Thus, H2a and H2b can be confirmed, and H2c must be discarded. Combined, this analysis confirms the voices

suggesting that the type of electoral manipulation matters. Opposition and voters are more sensitive to administrative fraud.

In other words, this analysis demonstrates that the theoretical model developed by Luo and Rozenas (2018) has explanatory power in Latin American politics. Pre-electoral manipulation is better for the incumbents because it usually does not provoke the voters. This mechanism could be well demonstrated in the 2019 Bolivia elections. Although the playing field between the government and the opposition was very uneven, the final blow was the administrative fraud that occurred after the polling stations were closed. Ironically, although there was a very unfair pre-electoral campaign, most of the postelectoral discussion was concentrated on manipulation during elections, which confirms that these strategies are better for politicians who do not believe in democracy (Lehoucq, 2020; Wolff, 2020).

One of the main reasons for this paradox is that pre-electoral manipulation is usually less visible, which means that less informed citizens and international audiences are not so sensitive to this type of misconduct against the democratic rules of the game. In relation to the possible audience, it is also worth mentioning that some forms of pre-electoral manipulation work well together. For instance, wisely conducted media control can hide institutional manipulation (Schedler, 2013). Moreover, electoral observation missions are rarely "willing to make stronger statements before the polls open" (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018, p. 59). Unfortunately, being less visible does not mean less dangerous, as Levitsky and Way (2010) mention in their influential work.

The analysis also suggests that the outcome of several control variables is different than the literature expected. The most surprising result is that political polarization did not increase the probability of postelectoral protest. This result is fascinating because the literature suggests that in a highly polarized society, the voters are willing to sacrifice the ideas of democracy in exchange for their partisan interests. If several studies point out that in this context the voters can tolerate the electoral manipulation of politicians who represent their interests (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Svolik, 2020), the results should be different. Moreover, the results suggest several usual suspects do not affect postelectoral protests. Finally, the results do not confirm that opposition boycotts can lead to postelectoral protests. These findings align with the literature about the current wave of democratic backsliding in Latin America, which sometimes stresses that electoral boycotts are not the best strategy for the opposition in the long term (Gamboa, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This article contributes to the debate on the causes of postelection protests in Latin America by testing assumptions about the influence of different forms of pre-election and electoral manipulation. The results show that electoral manipulation increases the likelihood that voters will contest the outcome of elections in the streets. Still, it cannot be argued that all forms of electoral manipulation affect postelection protests in the same way, as conventional wisdom in political science often claims. Instead, my research lends credence to more recent studies that argue that the type of manipulation matters and that some forms of manipulation during elections lead to more protests than others (Harvey & Mukherjee, 2020; Luo & Rozenas, 2018). Indeed, administrative fraud leads to postelection protests significantly more often than other forms of manipulation observed.

The finding that politicians often get away with pre-election manipulation is understandably not favorable in contemporary political developments in Latin America. Still, there is indisputable evidence that even nondemocratic governance constantly evolves, and the pathways to dictatorship look different than during the Cold War (Bermeo, 2016). In this respect, attempts at electoral manipulation should be evaluated far more closely and critically than has been the case to date. Indeed, if relevant actors do not detect them early and condemn them, preserving democracy in many countries is very difficult. This point is even more important

because the clever use of institutional manipulation usually has lasting effects, carrying over into subsequent electoral cycles (Corrales, 2020).

The natural limitation of this research is that it has only addressed some forms of manipulation. Another direction for future research could be to test the effects of strategies not discussed in this article. A promising direction for future research could be digital manipulation and other autocratic innovations (Morgenbesser, 2020). Another possible direction for future research is the relationship between different types of manipulation and postelectoral protests at a subnational level. Local elections, for example, are usually given less attention than national elections, and the wise use of manipulation therein can be even less dangerous for politicians in power.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All the data are reversed for an easier interpretation. In other words, a higher value of the chosen variable means a higher level of electoral manipulation.

[2] The database contains more than 450 variables for most nations since 1789. The V-Dem boasts the richest reservoir of data for researchers from the comparative democratization field, which is annually updated by more than 3500 experts (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Alizada, et al., 2022).

[3] To measure the political polarization, I use the V-Dem (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Alizada, et al., 2022) variable "political polarization."

[4] The data for this variable is from V-Dem (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, Teorell, Alizada, et al., 2022) (election boycotts).

[5] To measure the economic crisis, I use the NELDA (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) variable 18.

[6] In this situation, I use the NELDA (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) variable 45.

[7] To measure it, I use the NELDA (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) variable 24.

[8] To measure if the election loser accepts the results, I use the V-Dem variable "Election losers accept results." Again, this variable is reversed for an easier interpretation.

[9] In the case of two rounds of presidential elections, I use data from the second round.

[10] I opted for two separate models because of the limited data availability for some of the control variables.

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