Voting for autocracy:  
How governments steal elections

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October, 2005
Draft

1 Prepared for deliver at the conference STRUCTURE AND EVOLUTION OF INSTITUTIONS, Stanford University, Nov 4-6, 2005. I thank David Latin, James Fearon, Barbara Geddes, and Alberto Diaz for comments.
Why do autocratic governments hold and steal elections? Under what conditions would an autocratic ruling party be willing to peacefully yield power when it loses elections? What explains why an autocratic ruling party might choose to credibly tie its hands and not commit fraud, delegating the organization and monitoring of elections to an independent electoral commission? This paper answers these questions by developing a theory of electoral fraud. I then employ this theory to understand crucial aspects of electoral politics in Mexico, Kenya and Senegal.

The paper sheds light on the politics of what some scholars call “electoral authoritarianism”, where a democratic façade covers authoritarian rule (Linz, 2000: 34). Schedler (2002) calculates that the most common form of autocracy today is hidden behind elections: “The dream [of these regimes] is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty.” (p. 37) Diamond (2002) and Levitsky and Way (2002) also highlight the prevalence of electoral authoritarianism. Przeworski et al (2000) identify a common form of autocracy where multi-party elections take place and there has never been alternation of political power in office. Despite their commonality, there has not been much theorizing about the dynamics of electoral politics in autocratic regimes.

I built on Weingast (1997), who stresses that dictators transgress upon citizens’ rights profiting from coordination dilemmas among opponents. In his account, citizens will be able to coordinate against dictators only when they share a common understanding of the appropriate limits of the state. I move beyond Weingast (1997) in two main respects. First, I add parties, voters, elections and electoral rules into the story of strategic interaction. In playing the “game of electoral fraud,” opposition parties
possess mixed incentives: they want to rebel against ruling party transgressions, which produces the value of the gamble of a rebellion. Yet opposition parties also seek to preserve their votes, seats and government spoils they are entitled to under the current autocratic institutions. These allow autocrats to selectively buy opponents off into acquiescence, preventing the opposition to stand united against electoral transgressions. Institutional details are also important because they determine the pay-offs to the parties of following different courses of action. Winner-take all presidential elections make opposition coordination against transgressions easier that legislative elections that are held under some form of proportionality, yet elections are more violence-prone.

Voters also enter the story of strategic interaction. Electoral incentives are not well aligned to fight authoritarianism. Since moderate voters are adverse to violence and post-electoral battles, opposition parties face the paradoxical result that allegations of electoral fraud end up discouraging support for them.\(^2\) If the opposition electorate is disproportionately moderate, at least one of the opponents will be better off acting as “loyal opposition” and acquiescing to the electoral fraud. To deter an autocratic ruling party from committing electoral fraud, the opposition must be endowed with a high enough number of radical voters that develop an intransigent commitment to defeat the autocrat above the disagreements they might have on other issues.

Second, I provide a theory of endogenous institutional design or why an autocrat might sign a “political pact”\(^3\) with the opposition to willingly restrain not to transgress their electoral rights by delegating the power to control the organization of elections to an

\(^2\) In their study of Mexican public opinion, Domínguez and McCann were the first to highlight this paradox. They noticed that fraud discouraged turnout in detriment of the opposition.

\(^3\) I draw the term from Karl (1990). The meaning of pact in my approach is different. A pact entails the redesign of the electoral institutions as opposed to an agreement to not politicize certain issues such as the redistribution of income.
independent electoral commission. In Weingast (1997) these forms of political pacts, which can play a powerful role in enabling society to coordinate against a dictator, are exogenous to his model and left unexplained. Two conditions must hold for a pact creating an independent electoral commission to be signed: the ruling party believes it can go on winning elections cleanly; and the opposition, under some particular circumstances, credibly threatens it will rebel against the election results, regardless of whether there is fraud or not, unless the ruling party finds a way to \textit{ex ante} guarantee the transparency of the elections.

The role of an independent electoral commission is thus threefold: first, to prevent the ruling party to negotiate the vote behind closed doors; second, to provide clear information about the actual election results to facilitate opposition coordination against ruling party transgressions. Third, the independent electoral commission also serves to commit an intransigent opposition to the electoral process. In creating an independent electoral commission, a form of rule of law in the electoral realm can emerge, even if the ruling party continues to win the elections. My results are consistent with Maravall and Przeworski (2003), who offer the following, highly persuasive view of how the rule of law emerges: “Rule of law emerges when, following Machiavelli’s advice, self-interested rulers willingly restrain themselves and make their behavior predictable in order to obtain a sustained, voluntary cooperation of well-organized groups commanding valuable resources.” (p. 3)

The paper is organized as follows. Section one discusses the functional role of elections in autocratic regimes. Section two develops the theory of electoral fraud
through the use of a game theory model. The following sections after that discuss the Mexican, Senegalese, and Kenyan cases. I end up with a conclusion.

1. 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; O’Donnell, 1973; Stepan, 1971; Dahl, 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). Electoral autocracies do not ban the opposition, but allow elites to organize into independent political parties. Mexico, Senegal, Kenya, Gabon, Cote-d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Gambia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore, to name a few examples, have been governed by electoral autocracies for prolonged years.

The conventional argument regarding why autocratic regimes allow elections is that these elections create a democratic façade and thus enhance the regime’s legitimacy. No doubt autocratic regimes often need to adopt the façade of elections so as to deceive other parties, i.e. 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 multi-party elections for the first time.\(^4\)

My approach underscores three other functional roles of multi-party elections in autocratic regimes. The first functional role of elections in an autocratic regime is to

\(^4\) Internal political struggles and the discredit of authoritarian rulers also played a decisive role in triggering the liberalization of these regimes (Bates, 2001 and Bratton and van de Walle, 1997).
disseminate public information about the regime’s strength so as to discourage potential challengers, most fundamentally those coming from within the party (Magaloni, forthcoming). Electoral autocracies invest a great deal in mobilizing voters to the polls, buying-off electoral support and expensive campaigning. Why would they engage in such behaviors if, during most of their histories, the opposition can’t even dream of winning? They do so to deter elite divisions, the most fundamental weakness of an autocratic regime (Geddes, 1999).

Because disaffected ruling party politician can always exit the ruling party and challenge the regime on their own as members of the opposition, these autocracies are vulnerable to elite divisions. For instance, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in Mexico split in 1940, 1946, 1952 and 1988. These splits came because prominent politicians within the party objected the presidential nominee and decided to challenge the PRI as members of candidate-centered organizations or opposition electoral fronts. Ruling party splits also took place in Kenya, Senegal, and Taiwan, to name a few. Electoral autocracies aspire to generate a public image of invincibility 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. Supermajorities signal to elites that millions of citizens support the autocratic regime, making the ruling party’s electoral machine unbeatable. The message to disaffected party politicians is that the only road to political success is the ruling party, and that outside of it there is nothing but political defeat.

5 The PNR (National Revolutionary Party) was created in 1929, was re-named the PRM (Party of the Mexican Revolution) in 1938, and subsequently was renamed the PRI in 1946.
The second role of elections in electoral 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; but 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 employed competition among subordinates for scarce resources to their advantage (Wintrobe, 1998; Olson, 2000). Electoral autocracies employ elections as a key instrument for obtaining information about the extent of the party’s mass support and its geographic distribution. The ruling party employs this information to screen voters according to their political loyalty, rewarding supporters with access to government funds and punishing defectors by withdrawing them from the party’s spoils system. In doing so, the autocrat creates a market for political loyalty and makes voters vest their interest in the survival of the regime (Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2002; Magaloni, forthcoming).

Third, multi-party elections are designed to trap and to divide the opposition, so that it invests in the existing autocratic institutions rather than challenging them through 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. In doing so, dictators institutionalize the opposition, making these groups “vest their interests in the survival of the dictatorship” (3).
These arguments imply that autocratic elections are not simply mass rituals devoid of significance, but play an active role in the survival of these regimes. Why then, do autocratic ruling parties resort to electoral fraud? When would an autocratic ruling party uphold clean elections and peacefully yield power if defeated? The theory I develop spells out the set of strategic variables that influence the possibility that, once an *apertura* has occurred - with the socioeconomic, international, and structural preconditions fulfilled such that voters are ready to defect to the opposition – an autocratic ruling party might choose to commit fraud or peacefully step down from office. This takes the opposition’s electoral strength as exogenous.  

2. The game of electoral fraud 

In the game, parties are viewed as unitary actors that seek to maximize votes and elective office. The game presupposes that the opposition is divided such that there are two opposition political parties that field candidates. The divisiveness of the opposition is taken as exogenous –shaped by preexisting ideological, regional, or ethnic differences and by the preexisting electoral rules, which autocracies manipulate to their advantage to divide their opponents (Cox, 1997; Lust-Okar, 2005).

The parties in the model are strategic actors which first define an electoral strategy to maximize votes, and then define a post-electoral strategy for whether they will abide by the election results or contest them through various legal, illegal, violent or peaceful means. The strategies available differ according to whether the party in question is the ruling party or one of the two challengers in the opposition camp.

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6 Elsewhere I have focused on the factors that explain how electoral autocracies are able to monopolize electoral support (Magaloni, forthcoming). 
7 The game draws from Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni (1995).
The ruling party controls the electoral process, which means that it might carry out electoral fraud using its power in government, or if need be use the army, to reverse the results. At this stage of the game, the model does not make a distinction between the incumbent party, the army and the government, because empirically in all of these contexts, the ruling party is the government and the armed forces most often remain under civilian control. However, the model does not presuppose that the support of the armed forces is always guaranteed. The armed forces will cooperate with the ruling party to enforce the electoral fraud when only one opposition party challenges the results, engaging in a “failed” rebellion. If the opposition threatens to challenge the results in unison and there is a real risk that social peace will be completely destroyed as a consequence of the parties’ post-electoral feuds, the armed forces might choose to back the ruling party to repress the opposition, but they might also decide to back the opposition or to oust the ruling party through a military coup so as impose order themselves.\(^8\)

The challengers, on the other hand, can contest the electoral result through legal processes, massive mobilizations, and in the most extreme cases, outright rebellion. In that case, a military coup could ensue, with the likely outcome of the incumbent keeping power; but the situation could get out of hand. With civil strife even the incumbent could lose.

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8 An example is the 1999 military coup in Cote d’Ivoire. President Henry Konan Bedie sought to manipulate the 2000 vote by excluding his primary opponent, Allesane Ouattara, arguing that he did not to meet the requisite citizenship criteria for candidacy. This decision produced massive demonstrations and violent street protests that triggered the military to intervene for the first time in the history of this country against the long-standing Democratic Party of Cote d’Ivoire (PDCI), (Polity VI Country Report 2001).
A “transition outcome”  occurs when the ruling party refrains from using its power to manipulate the election and both of the challengers accept the result as legal and legitimate - even if they lose. If a challenger wins, a transition has obviously occurred. But defining the model in this way allows for the possibility that a transition can come about even without an alternation in power. These outcomes are regarded as “democratic outcomes” because they fulfill the requirement that no player prevents some political outcomes from occurring by exercising ex post (not only ex ante) control over society (see Przeworski, 1987: 60).

Figure 1 presents the extensive form representation of the game. The outcomes are numbered from 1 to 8. The first four outcomes entail different forms of clean elections, where the ruling party refrains from committing electoral fraud, regardless of whether it wins or loses. If it wins, the election must be clean, but if it loses, the ruling party must also step down from office. The real challenge consists in bringing about a transition when the incumbent loses. The first of these outcomes is a “pure transition,” where alternation in power is not necessary, but the elections must be clean and accepted by everyone. The second and third outcomes are “tainted transitions” -- the ruling party enforces clean elections, one of the opposition parties challenges these results, and the other accepts them. The fourth outcome is “Conflictual transition”: regardless of the ruling party’s impeccable democratic behavior, both opposition parties protest the results of clean elections through massive street demonstrations that may get out of hand.

The last four outcomes all involve the ruling party committing fraud. When there is electoral fraud, but both challengers consent to it, I call it a "pure tutelary autocracy." A

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9 I refer to a transition outcome rather than democratization because alternation of political power does not necessarily lead to democracy. It is possible that the autocratic ruling party steps down from office, yet a new autocratic regime is installed, or that democracy results.
“conflictual tutelary autocracy,” on the other hand, entails that the incumbent commits fraud, and opposition parties fail to coordinate in challenging the results. Here one of the opposition parties becomes an accomplice of the regime, while the other is left to challenge the results alone. The ruling party will be able to get away with electoral fraud more effectively when the opposition fails to act in unison to challenge the regime. The intuition here is that if at least one of the opposition parties cooperates with the ruling party, social peace is maintained and the armed forces cooperate in enforcing the fraud. The last outcome involves Conflict, where both opposition parties coordinate in contesting the electoral fraud through massive street demonstrations that may get out of hand. Because no opposition party cooperates with the regime, social peace is destroyed and the armed forces may choose to back the ruling party, but may also oust it through a military coup or choose to back the opposition to dislodge the ruling party by force.

10 This might not be a reasonable structure depending on the levels of electoral support. If one challenger has, say 60% of the votes, it might have enough strength to, by itself, bring the conflict outcome about. Hence this payoff makes sense if all three parties are relatively strong.
Figure 1
The game of electoral fraud with a divided opposition

Voters react to the parties’ behavior until the second period. This means that in playing the game of electoral fraud, parties must anticipate the electoral consequences at time $t + 1$ of following different courses of action. I distinguish two types of opposition voters’ according to their standing in what I call a regime dimension, where parties and voters divide with respect to their evaluations about the existing political institutions and the scope and pace of political reform.\(^\text{11}\) Pro-regime players support order and stability within the existing autocratic institutions and anti-regime players oppose these institutions and favor democratization, which requires challenging the existing political order often through violent means. Moderate opposition voters do not regard the existing institutions as terribly authoritarian. These voters are skeptical of allegations of electoral fraud and dislike parties that engage in post-electoral violence. Radical opposition voters

\(^{11}\) Comparative empirical evidence that the regime cleavage is highly salient in democratizing settings can be found in Moreno (1999).
regard the existing political regime as terribly authoritarian and will believe any allegation of electoral fraud. These votes are more committed to defeating the ruling party, even if this entails post-electoral struggle and violence.

The electoral punishment varies depending on the information voters possess about the actual election results. When the actual election results are common knowledge, *moderate voters* will defect from an opposition party that challenges clean elections in favor of either another opposition party that did not slander the elections or the ruling party, whichever is closest. *Radial opposition voters* will punish an opposition party that acquiesces to the electoral fraud by switching their support to the other party that challenged the fraud. If both opposition parties acquiesced to the fraud, these voters are presumed to abstain from voting in the next elections.

When the electoral fraud is not common knowledge to voters12, opposition voters are presumed to learn about whether there was fraud or not by listening to what opposition elites of both parties declare. They will then filter this information through their own preconceptions about the nature of the political regime. These simple assumptions about how voters construct their beliefs imply that if only one opposition party acquiesces and the other challenges the results, *radical opposition voters* will infer that there was fraud, even if the elections were clean, and they will punish a party that acquiesces to the elections by switching support to the challenging party in the next elections. When only one opposition party claims fraud and the other acquiesces, *moderate opposition voters* will punish the opposition party that claimed fraud, even when the elections were actually rigged, by switching support to the acquiescing party or to the ruling party, whichever is closest. The formal development and solution to the

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12 The game assumes that party elites know the actual election results.
game is provided in Magaloni (2005). Here I discuss some of the intuitions derived from the model.

1) Authoritarian equilibria with electoral fraud

   In the game, the ruling party is able to get away with electoral fraud because opposition parties possess incentives to act as “loyal opposition” and acquiesce to the electoral fraud. Suppose that the ruling party steals votes from party A. If both opposition parties choose to challenge the electoral fraud, the autocratic party could more easily be dissuaded to abide by the results of clean elections because it risks Conflict. Yet if party A chooses to rebel against the electoral fraud, party B will face the following strategic dilemma: acquiesce to the electoral fraud and capture legislative seats and government spoils or get the expected value of Conflict. Further, if the electoral fraud is no common knowledge to voters, allegations of electoral fraud can turn against the opposition. By choosing not to challenge the elections, party B will retain the support of the moderate opposing electorate, although it will lose its radical voters. If the opposition’s electoral base I mostly moderate and the official results allow this party to acquire enough legislative seats and possibly policy influence, party B will be better off institutionalizing itself as a “loyal opposition,” with the result that the opposition fails to rebel in tandem, which in turn helps the autocrat get away with various sorts of electoral malpractice.

   The game allows for the possibility that the ruling party commits electoral fraud even if it wins. One reason autocratic party regimes might choose to inflate their vote margins, as argued above, is that they are interested in creating an image of invincibility that would serve to discourage potential challengers. Another reason to inflate vote margins is that more votes might also translate into more seats, which the ruling party
might need to retain the supermajority necessary to modify the constitution single-handedly. Autocratic regimes aspire to control constitutional change to design electoral and other institutions to their advantage. Fraud can also be carried out in a local and decentralized manner, since there may be some local bosses that for their own sake or for the territorial distribution of votes want to inflate the electoral result.

Whether the ruling party commits fraud when it is winning depends, on the one hand, on the likelihood that the electoral fraud will produce a major social rebellion, and on the other, on the costs of governing under fraud. If the ruling party anticipates that the opposition will not coordinate to rebel against the fraud (or if the opposition is incapable of rebelling because it is too weak), it will choose to inflate its vote margin as long as the gain—in seats, votes or both— it obtains from stealing the elections compensates the legitimacy deficit for governing under fraud. This legitimacy deficit can result, for example, in a loss of foreign aid or capital flight. This explains why autocratic equilibria where the ruling party resorts to stealing the elections so as to boost its vote margins can be long-lasting.

Obviously, the ruling party’s temptation to commit fraud is even larger when the electoral fraud is decisive to win. In this case, the ruling party will be more willing to risk Conflict so as to stay in office. The ruling party’s calculation depends, first, on its expected pay-off after Conflict erupts. The end results of the Conflict crucially depend on what the armed forces do. If the ruling party believes it has the unconditional backing of the army, it will probably not hesitate to steal the elections. But if the ruling party anticipates major social unrest, it might be better off peacefully stepping down from office.
Second, the ruling party’s decision to risk Conflict so as to retain office also depends on the pay-off of losing. The value of losing is partly shaped by the existing electoral institutions for the translation of votes into seats. The ruling party will be more willing to risk Conflict to stay in office if electoral rules are winner-take-all, as in presidential elections. Winner-take all electoral rules and presidential elections increase the ruling party’s incentive to risk Conflict so as to retain office, making autocratic elections more violence-prone. However, winner-take-all electoral rules also increase the incentives for opposition parties to challenge the electoral fraud and deter the ruling party from committing fraud.

By contrast, when legislative elections are at stake, the ruling party can better co-opt one of its opponents into acquiescing with the electoral fraud by offering legislative seats and possibly some policy influence. Thus, electoral malpractice will be more prevalent in legislative elections that take place under some form of proportional representation rule and in presidential elections that take place concurrently with assembly elections.

One key quandary in the game is that the autocrat is capable of stealing the elections because it profits from coordination dilemmas among the opposition camp. If both opposition parties coordinated in challenging the electoral fraud, the ruling party could be deterred more effectively from stealing the elections, due to the threat of Conflict. However, if only one opposition party challenges the fraud while the other party acquiesces, the ruling party will be able to steal the elections at low cost (only a legitimacy deficit), without putting its own political survival at stake. The fundamental problem is that opposition forces generally divide too early – long before they are able to
defeat authoritarianism, they divide to compete among themselves, seeking to maximize their individual chances under the existing system.

2) The role of public information about the electoral fraud

If there is voter information about the actual elections results, in Magaloni (2005) I show that under very simply payoff assumptions outcomes 2, 3 and 4 are never equilibria in the game. When voters know the actual election results and the ruling party holds clean elections, opposition parties have a dominant strategy, acquiesce to the results, because otherwise there would be a decisive electoral punishment by moderate opposition voters against an opposition party that Slanders (contests the results of clean elections). However, if voters do not know the actual election results, these outcomes can become equilibria of the game provided that for either opposition party, the size of the radical electorate is larger than its moderate base. Opposition party elites might choose to contest clean elections for various reasons. One is to destabilize the regime and harm its legitimacy. Another is to attract the support of radical voters.

This means that in the absence of public information about the electoral fraud, elections will invariably involve allegations of electoral fraud, post-electoral clashes, and even violence as long as the electoral base of at least one of the opposition parties is disproportionately radical. This provides an explanation of why allegations of electoral fraud need not always be credible.

Another implication of relaxing the assumption of perfect voter information about the actual election results is that the ruling party is not rewarded for holding clean elections. Suppose that the ruling party knows it can win the elections cleanly and that Party C will challenge the elections and party B will acquiesce. If fraud produces some extra pay-off for the ruling party, even if marginal, it will steal votes from the opposition because regardless of what it does, its legitimacy will be harmed by party C’s allegations
of electoral fraud. Thus, although allegations of electoral fraud are not always credible, it is also the case that the ruling party’s claims of electoral transparency are equally not credible. Unless there is some form of credible commitment from the ruling party not to steal the elections, the structure of the game is such that it can get away with fraud at low costs.

A final implication of imperfect voter information about the actual election results is that the coordination dilemma among the opposition camp becomes even more acute. Suppose that the ruling party can successfully buy off party B into acquiescing to fraud. If voters do not know the actual election results, party B will be able to deceive moderate opposition voters into believing that the elections were clean, even when there was fraud. The implication of this is striking: the acquiescing opposition party not only receives a pay-off in the form of seats, but it further receives an electoral payoff for acquiescing to the fraud -- namely the moderate opposition voters who desert the more militant opposition party. Obviously, this electoral payoff increases if moderate opposition voters all choose to desert to party B and none to the incumbent.

Thus, coordination among opponents is more difficult when electoral fraud is not common knowledge because the ruling party will deceive moderate voters into believing the elections were clean, even if there was fraud. This result underscores why dictators abhor information dissemination and an independent mass media: the publicity of the rulers’ abuses makes coordination against these abuses more likely, although not necessary. Even when the electoral fraud is common knowledge, the ruling party can selectively buy the opposition off by threatening to repress provided that for the acquiescing opposition party the expected value of Conflict is lower than the pay-off it obtains for acting as “loyal opposition”.

3) Endogenous institutional change and delegation to an independent electoral commission
Why, then, would an autocratic ruling party accede to the creation of independent electoral institutions that can control the organization of the elections and publicize the actual election results? To provide an answer, one must consider endogenous institutional change -- why an autocrat might sign a “political pact” with the opposition to willingly refrain from committing fraud.

When perfect voter information about the election results exists, opposition parties never challenge the results of clean elections. The same is not true when the electoral fraud is not common knowledge because here at least one of the opposition parties is likely to contest the elections. The dilemma for autocratic party is that even if it can win elections cleanly, the opposition will not be willing to endorse the electoral process as long as its supporters are disproportionately radical. This provides a rationale as to why autocratic elections almost invariably are contested at the risk of producing a violent conflict.

The ruling party’s dilemma cannot be solved simply by promising to uphold clean elections because this promise is not necessarily credible. In the game of imperfect voter information, the ruling party will commit fraud as long as it produces a marginal pay-off that will compensate the legitimacy deficit because, regardless of what this party does, at least one of the opposition parties will challenge the results. The only way to commit the opposition to the electoral process is if the ruling party credibly ties its hands ex ante to not commit fraud.

One way of committing the opposition to the elections is to transform the existing institutions. If the ruling party delegates the organization of the elections to an
independent electoral commission that is trusted by all major political players, it can then
commit the opposition to the elections. The incentives to delegate the organization of the
elections to an independent electoral commission arise only when the ruling party can
reasonably expect to win clean elections and the opposition credibly threatens that it will
challenge the elections and play Conflict, even if there is no fraud, unless the ruling party
finds a way to guarantee that the elections will be clean. In addition, the ruling party must
not be willing to risk Conflict so as to retain its control of the electoral process. If the
ruling party cannot win clean elections, then it will always be better off if it retains its
ability to commit fraud.

The independent electoral commission removes the ruling party’s ability to
commit fraud and negotiate the vote behind closed doors. If the ruling party were to lose,
it would need to blatantly refuse to step down from office. Because this transgression is
public and unambiguous, opposition parties would more easily coordinate to rebel against
it. The independent electoral commission also serves to commit an intransigent
opposition to the electoral process. Who will follow the opposition into the streets to
protest the elections when it is unambiguous to all voters that the ruling party did not
control the electoral process and that elections were clean? Of course, this argument only
works if the electoral commission is truly credible and independent, such that no single
party possesses unilateral control over it and that the commission has enough power to
control the elections.

3. Case studies
To illustrate the model’s intuitions, I have chosen Mexico, Kenya and Senegal. The Mexican case clearly illustrates the model’s intuitions about how autocrats can selectively buy the opposition off to get away with electoral fraud. The PRI was able to divide the opposition and get away with electoral fraud by buying the PAN (National Action Party) off into acquiescence. The PAN’s decision to act as “loyal opposition” paid dividends: this party was able to become a veto player in the constitution-making game and to use its power in government to extract further concessions from the PRI, including electoral victory at the local level and electoral reform. Mexico also permits me to illustrate the rationale for delegation to a truly independent electoral commission that took place with the 1994 electoral reform. The Mexican alternation of political power in office in 2000, I argue, was possible despite the fact that the opposition remained divided precisely because the institutions had been transformed in fundamental ways.

For a long time the opposition remained divided in Kenya and Senegal, confronting similar dilemmas as those faced by opposition parties in Mexico. However, in both of these countries all-encompassing multi-ethnic electoral fronts eventually forged to dislodge their long-standing hegemonic parties. As my model makes explicit, when the opposition is unified into a single electoral front, the coordination dilemma making transitions so difficult is largely mitigated. If the ruling party chooses to steal the elections, the opposition is likely to stand united to defend its victory, in which case the ruling party must choose between a violent conflict and stepping down from office peacefully. Unlike what occurred in Mexico, the 2000 and 2002 elections that put an end to the long-lasting rule of the PS (Socialist Party) and KANU (Kenya African National Union), respectively, still took place under autocratic institutional settings where the
existing electoral commissions were not truly independent from the government. The key reason why alternation was possible, I argue, was because the opposition would have rebelled in unison against any attempt by the ruling parties to reverse the outcome of the elections.

Opposition coordination in Senegal was facilitated by the fact that the presidential election takes place under a run-off system and the second round is not concurrent with the assembly election. Opposition parties in Senegal stood divided in the first round of these elections. For the first time in its history, the PS failed to obtain an absolute majority and in the second round all the opposition rallied behind Abdoulaye Wade.

The reasons why the opposition in Kenya succeeded in forming an electoral front in 2002 and not before are not that clear. One possibility is that there was an important learning process on the part of opposition leaders. Twice before KANU had been able to win with 36 and 40 percent of the vote, making it evident that the opposition had no chance unless it stood united. In Mexico and in Senegal, by contrast, ruling parties had always been able to win the presidential elections with an absolute majority of the vote, if not by huge margins, and this worked at discouraging opposition party elites from forming electoral fronts prior to the elections. If only the ruling party can win, why bother to sacrifice ideology and the internal party dynamics in creating an opposition coalition?

Another factor that might help explain why the opposition succeeded in forming an electoral front in Kenya in 2002 and not before is the 1997 constitutional reform, which finally permitted the formation of coalition governments among different parties. A third possibility explaining why the opposition formed an electoral front in 2002 in
Kenya and not before, as Kasara (2005) explains, is that with the impending constitutional reform politicians expected a significant reduction in presidential power after the elections, making pre-electoral power sharing agreements more credible. Below I employ the model’s main intuitions to understand crucial aspects of electoral politics in Mexico, Kenya and Senegal.

3.1. Mexico

The Mexican PRI governed for more than 70 years while holding regular multi-party elections. Before the onset of the debt crisis in 1982, the PRI was able to win most elections by impressive margins of victory. During its golden years, the PRI resorted to electoral fraud and ballot stuffing mostly to boost its vote margins, but fraud rarely made the difference between the PRI winning or losing. After 1982, elections became more competitive, and the practice of electoral fraud far more common.

The opposition in Mexico was divided, mostly along ideological lines. The PAN was the oldest opposition party. It was created in 1939 and stood to the right of the PRI. The left-wing opposition was traditionally fractionalized, and divided among the proscribed communists, the collaborationist PARM (Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution) and PPS (Popular Socialist Party), and the independent left. In the late 1980s, most of the left finally unified behind the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution),

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13 Molinar (1991) explained this 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. However, in the countryside, 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 shares.
which came as a result of a split within the PRI that was headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.

The Mexican PRI drafted electoral rules for the translation of votes into seats to simultaneously accomplish three goals: 1) to reward itself disproportionately; 2) to reduce the entry cost to the legislature for the smaller opposition parties so as to co-opt them into acquiescing with the existing institutions rather than challenging them through violent means; and 3) to divide its opponents. The PRI accomplished these goals by, among other measures, creating the mixed electoral system for the Lower Chamber of Deputies. The mixed electoral system, originally established in 1978, disproportionately rewarded the ruling party, which was the only party that could win a majority of the vote in the single-member districts; but at the same time, allowed opposition parties to win seats from the multimember districts, mitigating Duvergerian incentives to coordinate (Díaz-Cayeros and Magaloni, 2001). Voters could only cast one straight vote, preventing them from strategically dividing their votes in such way that they would support the stronger opposition contender in the single-member races and vote sincerely for their preferred choice in the multimember races. In the short-run, seats from the multimember districts benefited opposition parties by significantly reducing entry costs to the legislature. In the long-run, however, these seats helped sustain the PRI’s dominance, by discouraging coordination among opposition parties and voters.

Presidential elections take place concurrently with elections for the Lower Chamber and the Senate.

14 There are 500 seats elected under a mixed electoral formula. 300 seats are elected from single-member districts and 200 come from multimember districts. The electoral formula for distributing the multi-member seats is not compensatory and is thus far from proportional.
a) The 1988 electoral fraud

The 1988 elections were the first seriously contested presidential elections. The official results of the 1988 elections gave the victory to the PRI’s presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas, with 50.7% of the vote over 32.5% given to former PRI politician, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, of the FDN (National Democratic Front), which eventually transformed into the 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 to retain the presidency or if the fraud was rather employed to manufacture a 50% vote share for the PRI. The 50% vote threshold was decisive because with fewer votes, the PRI would not obtain the cushioned majority it needed in the Electoral College, composed of newly elected congresspersons, to ratify the presidential election single-handedly (Castañeda, 2000: 86 and 232).

The post-electoral bargains after the 1988 Mexican presidential elections clearly illustrate the model’s understanding of the opposition’s coordination dilemma in the transition game. On election night, the candidates for the FDN, PAN and PRT (Workers’ Revolutionary Party) signed a joint petition, the Call to Legality, which denounced the fraud. The violations to the electoral laws, they argued, warranted annulling the elections and they warned the Interior Minister that “we will not accept the results nor recognize the authorities that come out of fraud” (cited in Bruhn, 1997: 145). Three days later, Cárdenas proclaimed victory and confirmed his commitment that he would not recognize the illegitimate authorities selected out of fraud. The PAN soon backed away and decided
not to join the Cardenistas in calling for the annulment of the elections. Instead, the PAN and the other minor opposition parties that had cross-endorsed the Cárdenas candidacy chose to ratify the Congressional elections. The outcome of the 1988 elections might have been quite different had the opposition parties opted to challenge the PRI in unison. The PRI might have been forced to accede to hold an extraordinary election, or widespread conflict and violence might have resulted.

In light of the model, I highlight the following reasons why the PAN chose not to coordinate with the Cardenistas in challenging the results. First, the PAN concluded that the dangers of confronting the government were too great, and it was not willing to risk political violence (Castañeda, 2000: 88). Second, by choosing to acquiesce to the fraud, the PAN opted to defend its own legislative victories, seizing the opportunity to acquire policy-making power for the first time since its creation in 1939. Indeed, the distribution of legislative seats, according to the official results, implied that the PRI would keep control of the majority in the Lower Chamber, but that it no longer would control the super-majority needed to modify the constitution single-handedly. PAN support was essential for president Carlos Salinas because his economic agenda required the modification of the constitution in fundamental ways (e.g., the privatization of the banking system and the restructuring of property rights in the countryside, which were part of the PAN’s legislative agenda, required constitutional changes). Thus, the costs for the PAN of siding with the Cardenistas in challenging the results of the elections would have led it to forego the unique opportunity to have policy influence for the first time in its long history of opposing the PRI.
The PAN would use its new power in government strategically. It traded approval of the numerous constitutional reforms proposed by Salinas during his administration for two major electoral reforms that took place in 1990 and 1993. Their major achievement was the establishment of a Federal Electoral Tribunal and the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), which was in charge of organizing and monitoring elections. The 1993 electoral reforms finally eliminated the "self-certification" by the Electoral College, granting the IFE authority to certify electoral results. In addition, within the Electoral Tribunal, a second legal entity was created (Sala de Segunda Instancia), whose decisions could not be appealed or reversed by any other authority.

The effectiveness of these electoral reforms in limiting the PRI’s control of the electoral process was limited, however. On the one hand, neither of these electoral reforms eliminated the key impediment to the establishment of more transparent federal electoral processes. The IFE’s board continued to be controlled by the government and the PRI. On the one hand, the newly established electoral courts were not very successful at adjudicating electoral disputes. According to Eisenstadt’s (2004) careful analysis of post-electoral conflicts in Mexico’s local elections during the period, “fewer than a third of the country’s first institutional arbiters of electoral fraud successfully adjudicated postelectoral disputes by preventing disagreements from spilling out of the courtrooms and onto the streets” (270).

As his term progressed, Salinas offered additional pay-offs to the PAN for its continuous cooperation with the regime. The PAN obtained official recognition for many of its electoral victories at the local level – it secured three governorships, Chihuahua, Baja California, and Guanajuato, and won many municipal races. The gubernatorial seat
in Guanajuato was the result of what came to be known as the *concertaciones* – post-electoral bargains through which the president transferred the election from the PRI to the PAN, regardless of the actual vote count, when uncertain results emerged from local elections.

Although there was no doubt that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas had been the victim of fraud in the 1988 elections, nobody could know with certainty whether the fraud was decisive for the PRI to win the presidency. The PRI and the PAN employed this uncertainty to their advantage. On the one hand, this uncertainty would help to discourage ordinary citizens, the business community, the Church, and many civic associations from mobilizing more forcefully against the fraud. On the other hand, this ambiguity about the extent of the 1988 electoral fraud reduced the electoral punishment to the PAN for playing as “loyal opposition” during the Salinas presidency. Indeed, PAN’s supporters remained loyal to this party under the conviction that Cárdenas had falsely accused the government of preventing him from assuming the presidency through massive fraud.

Elites from the PAN made sure that voters remained ignorant about the extent of the electoral fraud by voting in a legislative coalition with the PRI to burn the ballots of those elections in 1991. The then-leader of the PAN’s legislative fraction, Diego Fernández de Cevallos, justified its party’s decision to support the PRI’s proposal to burn the ballots of the 1988 presidential elections that had been stored in the basement of the Mexican Congress with the following words:

“after three years those ballots mean and represent nothing; they have been guarded by the government, without a purpose. They might or might not contain the results [of the 1988 elections]. The electoral process of 1988 is now history that nobody can change. Furthermore, National Action [the PAN] has as one of its most distinctive
traits that of always looking forward, searching for the unity of all Mexicans. Nobody will benefit from revising papers that tell and mean nothing. The PAN’s legislative fraction accepts that those mythical documents be destroyed” (Diario de Debates de la Cámara de Diputados, December 20, 1991: 3276).15

The PRD voted against the 1990 and 1993 electoral reforms negotiated between the PRI and the PAN and became increasingly anti-institutional. In most of the local elections that took place since 1988, violent confrontations between PRI local elites and PRD contenders occurred. By the PRD count, during the Salinas presidency close to 500 of its activists were murdered in these electoral confrontations (Trejo, 2004). Moderate voters distrustful of these allegations of electoral fraud and adverse to post-electoral violence ended up abandoning the PRD for either the PAN or the PRI under the perception, in part fostered by the regime, that this party was violence-prone. The PRD was thus trapped in a game where it was victim of fraud and moderate voters abandoned this party as it chose to confront the government.

This game is based on the assumption that voters’ choices are influenced by their beliefs about the political regime. Is there evidence of such divisions among the members of the opposition electorate? Table 1 presents some evidence supporting these arguments based on survey data collected by Belden-Rusonello one month before the 1994 presidential elections (N= 1,500).

Mexican voters were strongly divided with respect to their evaluations of the political regime. Although the majority expected elections to be “clean” or “reasonably clean,” there was a sizable minority who expected a “great deal of fraud” (22%) or a “huge fraud” (8%). The majority of voters (55%) saw a real possibility that the PRI could be defeated in the 1994 elections. However, Mexicans were sharply divided on their

15 I thank Jeffrey Weldon for sending me this transcript of the Diario de debates.
assessments of the most crucial test of electoral democracy, namely whether the PRI would allow an opposition party to take office if it lost. For every Mexican who reported that the PRI would yield power if it lost, there was almost another individual who believed that the party would not allow the opposition to take office. Although very few voters expected generalized violence, 51% believed that after the elections, violence would erupt “in some parts of the country”.

Table 1: The transition game as perceived by the electorate and the vote in the 1994 presidential elections (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution of Responses</th>
<th>Voted PRI</th>
<th>Voted PAN</th>
<th>Voted PRD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Election will be:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonably Clean</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great deal of fraud</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can an opposition party obtain more votes than the PRI?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an opposition party wins?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will officially take power</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government won’t permit it</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the election will there be:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in the whole country</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in many parts of the country</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in only some parts</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There will be no violence</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Undecided and “Other” are not reported. Percentages are weighted.
It can be seen that PRD supporters disproportionately believe that there was going to be fraud, that the PRI would not allow an opposition to assume office if it lost and that there would be post-electoral violence. These voters, that is, regarded the electoral regime as clearly authoritarian. PAN voters, on the other hand, were distributed more evenly across the spectrum. To a large extent, those who supported the PAN moderated their opposition to the regime because, on the one hand, their party had negotiated with the PRI two major electoral reforms, and on the other, because the PAN was able to access office at the local level with Salinas’ tacit support.

b) The PRI ties its hands: an independent electoral commission

The major achievement of the 1990 and 1993 electoral reforms was the elimination of the "self-certification" of the elections by the Electoral College. The IFE was created to organize and monitor the elections, and to certify electoral results. However, the PAN did not have enough leverage to push for the full independence of the IFE’s board, which continued to be controlled by the president and hence to act as puppet of the regime. Through the 1994 electoral reform the PRI finally tied its hands from committing fraud by granting true independence to the board of the IFE. Six Citizen Councilmen were to be elected to the IFE's board by a two-thirds vote in the Lower Chamber. This time each of the major parties, PRI, PAN and PRD, had the right to propose two Councilmen. With this new arrangement, the government lost control of the IFE's board. The 1994 electoral process was transparent enough that the three parties accepted the results with almost no complaints of electoral fraud.
What led the PRI to grant independence to the IFE? The 1994 electoral reform was triggered by the Zapatista guerilla uprising in the Southern state of Chiapas. Just after the war erupted, the government invited the PRD and the PAN to negotiate the electoral reform as a way to commit the major players to “peaceful means for attaining power.” The government granted independence to the IFE under the perception that the war in Chiapas could expand – bombings in Mexico City and at various electrical facilities contributed to magnify the impact of the uprising (Castañeda, 1995). Among the first demands of the Zapatistas were clean elections. Salinas felt the need to neutralize the guerrillas with a nationwide political opening, one that particularly included the PRD. The creation of the independent IFE was a way to bring the PRDistas into the electoral contest, give them a real chance, and above all, commit them to the electoral process so as to avoid violence after the elections.

The PRI chose to create an independent electoral commission to prevent the 1994 electoral process to burst into violent conflict. However, it acceded to tie its hands ex ante to not commit fraud only because it knew it would easily win the 1994 elections. The combination of Salinas’ economic reforms, his high approval rates, and the PRI’s outstanding performance in the 1991 mid-term elections had created such high expectations about the party’s lasting strength that politicians thought they would be in office for years to come. At the time, politicians could not anticipate the rapid electoral demise of the PRI that came as a result of the 1994 Peso Crisis, which struck four months after the presidential elections and struck all parties by surprise, including the international financial community.
An alternative theory of delegation would suggest that the PRI granted independence to the IFE’s board so as to prevent the next winner from taking advantage of its new role in the opposition. This kind of approach has been persuasively employed to account for why political parties in democratic regimes create institutions such as independent bureaucracies (Geddes, 1994). The PRI, however, did not create an independent IFE to protect itself when it became the opposition. In 1994 the PRIísstas never thought they would lose power in the foreseeable future. Witness the declaration made in 1994 to a group of Japanese investors by the then-Foreign Minister, José Angel Gurría, that there would be at least “eighteen more years of continuity with the same political party, the PRI, in power”. By 1994, the PRI continued to hold around 90% of the country’s municipalities and had only lost three states to the PAN. Furthermore, the 1994 electoral reform was adopted under a sense of true emergency because at that time Salinas, his advisors and major elements of the armed forces believed that the war in Chiapas could easily explode. The PRI’s debacle that began after the 1994 Peso Crisis, which erupted almost a year after the independence of the IFE was established, was unexpected. Not even experts and investors, let alone the PRI, predicted the 1994 Peso Crisis.

c) The PRI’s peaceful defeat in the 2000 elections

In the 2000 presidential elections, the PRI lost to the PAN’s candidate, Vicente Fox, and the ruling party yielded power peacefully. The key difference between the 2000 and the 1988 presidential elections was that the institutional and informational settings had been transformed in fundamental ways. In the 2000 elections, the IFE was highly autonomous and professional and opposition parties had access to a vast pool of public
funds to disseminate their campaign messages through the mass media, also significantly more independent (Lawson, 2002).

Although the IFE significantly reduced the PRI’s institutional capacity to commit electoral fraud, the party’s acceptance of an electoral defeat was not guaranteed. The IFE could prevent the PRI from committing fraud, but had this party refused to yield power peacefully to the winning opposition candidate, Vicente Fox, the IFE could not have forced it to step down from office. The transition game still needed to be played, but unlike in the 1988 presidential election, this time the PRI’s options were more restricted.

In the 2000 presidential election, the PRI could no longer manufacture the results and negotiate the vote distribution with the opposition behind closed doors, as it had done in 1988. The new institutional setting implied that the PRI’s options were more limited. Had the PRI attempted to reverse the outcome of the elections, it would have had to openly reject the electoral results presented by the IFE and probably close all democratic institutions, the IFE included. Thus, in the 2000 elections, the PRI’s only options in the game of fraud were to accept a losing outcome and yield power peacefully or to reject a losing outcome, defy the IFE and close all democratic institutions. Why did the PRI choose to accept the losing outcome instead of rejecting it?

The model developed in this paper argues that a successful alternation of political power in office requires, first, that the opposition can credibly threaten a Conflict if the ruling party attempts to steal the elections, and second, that the ruling party sees low prospects of retaining office after Conflict. I argue that both of these conditions were present in 2000. As occurred in 1988, the left and the right chose not to present a unified opposition front against the PRI. In 1999 opposition leaders from the PAN and the PRD
considered forging an all-encompassing opposition alliance for the 2000 presidential race. Although both Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Vicente Fox expressed interest in the idea, each wanted to be the candidate to lead the alliance. Eventually, both Fox and Cárdenas entered alliances with other minor parties, making it clear that a coalition of the left and right was not going to be the means to defeat the PRI.

Despite the fact that the opposition parties did not coordinate in their pre-electoral strategies in either of these elections, the institutional setting of the transition game in 2000 – with clear and unambiguous information about the PRI’s defeat and no leeway to negotiate the elections behind closed doors -- made post-electoral opposition coordination more credible in the 2000 elections.

In the 1988 elections, the PRI managed to discourage opposition parties from coordinating in their post-electoral strategies because it was able to offer significant side-payments to the PAN to acquiesce to the fraud, including this party’s legislative victories and their consequent policy influence. Because the results of elections were unknown to voters, the PAN possessed more leeway to acquiesce to the electoral fraud without fearing significant electoral punishment from its supporters. In addition, the PRI’s threat that it would employ force if the opposition contested the results was highly credible in 1988 -- as reported by president Miguel de la Madrid in his memoirs, elements of the armed forces had gathered in the basements of several buildings in downtown Mexico City in the event the opposition decided to take the National Palace by force (de la Madrid, 2004: 819).

In the 2000 elections, the PRI had no such elements at its disposal to discourage the opposition from coordinating against an authoritarian imposition. This time the PRI’s
electoral defeat was common knowledge, which implied that the PRI could not have misled anyone --segments of the mass public, the mass media, the Church, the armed forces, or the business and international communities — into believing that it had won. All the exit polls, which received wide media coverage, had Vicente Fox winning – indeed, by 4 o’clock in the afternoon, news about Fox’s victory was widespread. Moreover, the IFE possessed an impressive central information system that gathered immediate results as the vote counts emerged in each of the precincts, and the mass media was given ample access to this information. By the time the IFE declared that Vicente Fox had won, there could be no doubt of the PRI’s defeat. Had this party refused to accept the official results, the authoritarian imposition would have been far too obvious.

In the 2000 elections, the PRI lacked the leeway to offer side-payments in the form of legislative seats and policy influence to buy off one of the opposition parties. As noted above, reversing the outcome of the 2000 election would have required defying the IFE and closing the existing institutions, Congress included. None of the opposition parties would have acquiesced to this outcome -- unless, of course, the PRI offered to make them partners in a new autocratic government. For any opposition party this would have been impossible to justify to its supporters.

President Zedillo also played a key role. Various sources indicate that the day of the elections by 2 o’clock in the afternoon, just after the President’s own exit poll had shown Vicente Fox as the clear winner, Zedillo decided to tape an announcement to the public that conceded the election. President Zedillo sent this tape with various members of his presidential guard to the main transmission tower, instructing them to broadcast the
message at 7 o’clock. President Zedillo called Francisco Labastida, the PRI’s losing candidate, and urged him to concede his defeat before the President’s announcement was shown. With these actions, Zedillo sent a clear message that he would abide by the results and refrain from using the armed forces to defend the PRI. The behavior of Ernesto Zedillo drastically differed from Miguel de la Madrid’s, who was willing to employ the armed forces to repress the opposition after the 1988 electoral fraud.

It is revealing that the PRI’s presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida, waited to concede the elections until after Ernesto Zedillo’s message was transmitted, hours after it was obvious that Vicente Fox had won. Nobody knows what exactly went through the minds of Labastida and his close allies in the PRI during those hours. What is clear is that president Zedillo chose to “burn the bridges” by pre-committing his support to the outcome of the elections, before members in the PRI could attempt to reverse them. The signal was clear: the President and the armed forces would defend the Constitution and the newly created electoral institutions, not the PRI.

3.2 Kenya and Senegal

The KANU established a facto one-party state soon after it obtained independence from Britain in 1963. This party remained in power through a combination of coercion, the systematic manipulation of the electoral process, and also due to the fractionalization of the opposition. KANU instituted multi-party elections in 1992. With only 36 and 40 percent of the vote, president Daniel arap Moi won the 1992 and 1997 presidential

16 Personal interviews with a close friend of Zedillo and a government official. Both chose to remain anonymous.
elections, respectively, because the opposition was severely divided, mostly along ethnic lines.\textsuperscript{17}

In the 1992 elections, the opposition divided into two main groups: the Democratic Party (DP) of the former vice-president Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) and the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) headed by Oginga Odinga (Luo) and by Kenneth Matiba (Kikuyu). FORD, in turn, fell apart a few months before the elections into a group lead by Matiba (FORD-Asili, which combined part of the Kikuyu and part of the Luhya communities) and a group led by Oginga Odinga (Ford-Kenya, a coalition of the Luo and part of the Luhya communities) (Foeken and Dietz, 2000: 126). In the 1997 elections, the opposition was even more divided along tribal lines. There were 14 opposition candidates for the presidency and 24 opposition parties took part in the general elections. The two FORD parties fell apart, FORD-Kenya splitting into two and FORD-Asili splitting into a Luhya faction (FORD-Asili) and a Kikuyu faction (Ford-People). The Kikuyu community was also severely divided, since there were five Kikuyu candidates, although only one of them, Mwai Kibaki (Democratic Party), was a serious one. Several other opposition parties took part in the elections, such as the Kamba-based SDP (Social Democratic Party) and Safina, the only party which claims not to have an ethnic base (Foeken and Dietz, 2000: 141). Before and after both elections, there was widespread politically motivated ethnic violence, mostly against opposition supporters that was instigated by powerful individuals within KANU, who took advantage of preexisting tribal hostilities.

\textsuperscript{17} Kenyan population was subdivided into some 40 ethnic groups.
Two constitutional provisions worked against the opposition. First, the qualified majority system -- the winning candidate was required to win the plurality of votes and to have obtained at least 25% of the valid votes in at least five of the eight provinces (besides being required to also be elected as a member of parliament for a constituency). In case none of the candidates achieved this, a run-off between the two leading candidates would be held. This provision was approved by a KANU dominated parliament in 1992 under the belief that only the KANU and Moi would be able to meet this requirement. Second, the bill required the president to form a government from among members of his own party only, even if the party would have no parliamentary majority. This clause directly discouraged opposition coordination by preventing opposition parties from forming a coalition government in case one of the opposition candidates won the presidency.

The government controlled the Electoral Commission, which had the responsibility for the organization and monitoring of elections, and it also possessed the power to determine the electoral boundaries of the constituencies and the number of inhabitants per constituency. The Electoral Commission created a highly malapportioned electoral system such that areas where the KANU was strong were over-represented in the parliament. Several electoral malpractices, including refusal to open on time polling stations were Moi was weak, omission of names of opposition candidates from the ballot papers, and ballot stuffing, were reported in the 1992 elections that were directly attributed to the Electoral Commission.

Responding to public anger surrounding the violence of the elections and also to pressures from international donors, KANU and opposition leaders came together to
reform the constitution. Parliament reached a compromise prior to the 1997 elections. The Electoral Commission was extended by 10 members suggested by opposition parties (but still forming a minority against the 11 members from KANU). The formation of coalition governments among different parties was permitted. The reforms included the allocation of more broadcasting time for all parties on TV and radio and political parties that had been denied registration would now be registered. However, unlike the Mexican 1994 reform, the Electoral Commission was not made fully independent. Thus, these reforms were not sufficient to ensure a transparent electoral process and most electoral observers in 1997 proclaimed that it was not possible to achieve free and fair elections under the existing institutional framework.

Under the guidelines of the Kenyan constitution, President Moi could not stand for re-election in the 2002 presidential contest. Moi decided not to re-write the constitution to allow for a third term in office, and instead he chose a successor, Uhuru Kenyatta. Disaffected KANU ministers who had hoped the party would select its candidate by secret ballot in a national convention formed a breakaway faction, the Rainbow Coalition, which finally abandoned KANU and joined an opposition political party known as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In the 2002 elections, KANU was defeated and despite attempts on the part of president Moi to subvert the democratic process, he and his party allowed the winners to assume office peacefully. Mwai Kibaki won a landslide victory in the run-off presidential election as candidate of the National Rainbow Alliance Coalition (NARC) with a pledge to fight widespread corruption and install a new constitution within 100 days. The NARC resulted from the alliance between the LDP, led by Raila Odinga, and the National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK), a super-
opposition alliance that included thirteen opposition parties, representing all of Kenya's major tribes.

The elections that led to the demise of the KANU still took place under an autocratic institutional setting. In light of this model, I argue that the KANU opted to cede power only because the threat of conflict had it attempted to reverse the outcome of the elections was credible given that the opposition had all united behind the Rainbow Coalition. This stands in sharp contrast to what occurred in the 1992 and 1997 elections, where the opposition split and the KANU was able to get away with significant electoral malpractice. In the 2002 elections all the major opposition forces and even some former members of the KANU would have stood united to challenge an authoritarian imposition.

The transition that put an end to the PS\textsuperscript{18} rule in Senegal was very similar to the Kenyan. The PS governed for 40 years, since the nation’s independence in 1960. Headed by Léopold Senghor, Senegal was a one-party state from 1966 until 1976, when the government mandated a three party system based on official ideological categories. A fourth party was legalized in 1979. A full multi-party system was introduced in 1981 by the new socialist president, Abdou Diouf. From the time that Senegal became a multi-party state in 1976, the PS won all elections by large margins until it lost the 2000 presidential elections in a second round to the long-standing opposition leader, Abdoulaye Wade, of the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS).

Economic downturn since the early 1980s made the opposition stronger and elections became increasingly more violent and marred by accusations of electoral fraud. Diouf won the 1983, 1988, and 1993 presidential elections with 83%, 73% and 58% of

\textsuperscript{18} Its original name was the Senegalese Progressive Union (UPS), which later changed its name to PS.
the vote respectively. In most of these elections there were allegations of electoral fraud and violent clashes with the opposition. Six of the thirteen opposition parties challenged the 1983 elections and organized rallies against Diouf’s election. Wade claimed to have won the 1988 elections. Although there were allegations of election rigging, the victory of the PS in these elections can’t be attributed to electoral fraud. The PS skillfully employed government patronage to buy-off electoral support and to undermine opposition party-building. Further, Diouf had the unanimous support of the *marabouts* and that meant that the Muslin population was on his side (Ingham, 1990). Most voters in Senegal were *moderate* in that they were willing to sell their support in exchange for patronage and government services. *Radical voters* came mostly from the student population, the urban youth and disgruntled members of the better educated sections of the population.

The opposition in Senegal was traditionally fractionalized, although the PDS was the only opposition party with national presence. The opposition in Senegal was highly personalized. None of the opposition parties had any ethnic affiliation and most of the opposition parties were to the left of the PS (Ingham, 1990: 131), making opposition coordination potentially easier than in Kenya. The PS actively encouraged the fragmentation of the opposition and recurred to the selective co-optation of its opponents. Despite the fact that Wade was one of the strongest opposition personalities in Senegal, on two occasions he aided Diouf in coalition governments –as senior minister from April 1991 until October 1992 and then from March 1995 until March 1998 in a similar position.19

19 Wade had also been arrested on two occasions.
Under constant pressures for how elections were manipulated, the government created a new National Election Observatory (ONEL) before the 1998 legislative elections to oversee the elections. The ONEL’s independence, however, was seriously questioned and the elections continued to be organized by the Interior Minister. Most international observers were not allowed to monitor the elections, again marred by violence. The PS won 50% of the vote and 93 out of the 140 seats.

Prior to the 2000 presidential elections, twenty opposition parties came together under the Front for the Regularity and Transparency of the Election (RTE). They organized several thousands of supporters, mainly youth, to demand clean elections. Despite the RTE, the opposition divided again, seven candidates competing against Diouf in the first round of the 2000 presidential elections. For the first time in Senegal’s history, the PS did not obtain an absolute majority of the vote in the first round of the 2000 presidential elections -- Diouf got 41%, Wade 30% and Moustapha Niasse 17%. A member of the PS since its creation, Niasse had left the PS in June to stand against Diouf. In the second round, all seven opposition candidates, including Niasse, swung behind Wade in a coalition, “Alternance 2000”, in order to oust Diouf. The main campaign issue was change (“Sopi”). In the second round, Wade obtained 60% of the vote and Diouf 41% and the PS chose to yield power peacefully.

The PS ultimate demise was made possible because the opposition parties succeeded in forming a unified electoral front in the second round of the presidential election. When the opposition is unified, the coordination dilemma making “transitions” so difficult is largely mitigated. If the ruling party chooses to steal the elections, the opposition is likely to stand united to defend its victory, in which case the ruling party
must choose between Conflict and stepping down from office peacefully. Had Diouf attempted to steal the elections from Wade, it would have risked major social unrest, and possibly a civil war, because all the opposition parties were part of the Alternance coalition. Opposition coordination in Senegal was facilitated first, by the fact that opposition parties in Senegal stood together on the ideological dimension and were not divided along ethnic lines. Second, the opposition’s electoral alliance was facilitated by the fact that presidential elections in Senegal take place under a runoff majority system, which allowed opposition parties to run as separate players on the first round and coalesce on the second round against the ruling party. Coordination in the second round was further facilitated by the fact that the National Assembly is not elected concurrently with the presidential race and thus there were no legislative seats in dispute that the PS could use to selectively coopt opponents.

The threat of social unrest had Diouf attempted to steal the elections was credible not only because opposition parties stood united. This time the leadership of the influential Muslim Mouride Brotherhood, based in the religious capital of Touba, had transferred support to Wade. The Mouride is backed by a social network containing over 30% of the population. This brotherhood had traditionally supported the PS and endorsed Diouf. With the support of the Mouride and all major opposition parties, the threat of social upheaval had Diouf attempted to steal the elections was highly credible.

4. Conclusion
My approach provides three main lessons as to why authoritarian equilibria where there is significant electoral corruption can be long-lasting. First, my findings are in line with Gandhi and Przeworski (2001) in stressing that autocratic elections have the perverse effect of making opponents vest their interests in the survival of the regime. I move beyond their approach, however, in stressing that autocratic elections fundamentally work at dividing the opposition camp. The nature of the electoral game is such that some opposition players will be individually better off playing as “loyal opponents,” while leaving others to engage in violent battles on their own.

The game presented in this paper takes the divisiveness of the opposition as *exogenous*. We know from previous research that the number of opposition parties is shaped by ethic cleavages (Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Cox, 1997); the opposition might also divide as a result of fundamental policy differences among opponents (Riker, 1976; Sartori, 1976; Laver and Schofield 1991; Pempel, 1990; and Magaloni, 1996); or the opposition might divide because of personal rivalries among its leaders. Electoral rules also play a powerful role in shaping the number of players and incentives to coordinate (Cox, 1997). Because authoritarian regimes possess ample leeway to manipulate electoral rules, the divisiveness of the opposition is, however, partly *endogenous*, a direct consequence of the ruling party’s institutional manipulation. In highlighting the connection between opposition division and autocratic survival, this paper provides a rationale as to why autocracies possess incentives to craft electoral rules so as to divide opponents even when they pose no fundamental threat (Lust-Okar, 2004).

My approach also underscores how voters play an active role in the maintenance of the autocratic equilibria. Opposition parties in autocratic regimes constantly complain
about electoral fraud. Voters react to these accusations according to their own preconceptions about the political regime. Radical voters regard the autocratic regime as excessively authoritarian and readily believed these accusations, even if the elections are clean. Others more moderate voters are highly suspicious about allegations of electoral fraud, even if the elections are rigged, and stay away from parties that engage in post-electoral protests. Under this poor informational environment, whichever opposition party chooses to engage in post-electoral battles risks losing electoral support. Opposition parties thus confront the paradoxical result that allegations of electoral fraud can turn against them. To deter the ruling party from committing fraud, the opposition must be endowed with a high enough number of radical voters. If the opposition’s electoral base is mostly moderate, the ruling party will find it easier to co-opt one of its opponents into acquiescing to the electoral fraud.

These suggest that to better survive in office, autocratic ruling parties need to encourage voter moderation. One way of doing this is by offering token institutional reforms to cover the autocratic regime behind a democratic façade. In contrast, when the autocratic nature of the regime is unambiguous, opposition voters will be more radical and willing to fight authoritarianism.

Furthermore, my approach underscores that limited information about the extent of the electoral fraud makes opposition coordination against autocratic transgressions much harder. Fearon (2000) argues that the convention of holding elections as such is valuable primarily as a device for coordinating rebellion against would-be dictators. “In a democratic equilibrium, if the ruling party cancels or blatantly rigs the elections, out of power factions infer that the terms of the bargain are about to be unilaterally changed to
their advantage. Because the signal is public, like a traffic light, they gain assurance that other out-of-power individuals or factions will also protest.”(p. 12) This vision of electoral democracy assumes that it is unambiguous when the ruling party rigs elections.20 It also assumes that all voters will mobilize against the fraud. However, in autocratic regimes, the extent of electoral fraud is often not common knowledge because autocrats normally control every aspect of the organization and monitoring of elections and the mass media.

My approach makes explicit why common information about the extent of the electoral fraud makes coordination against transgressions more likely. Only when there is public information about the electoral fraud are electoral incentives well-aligned to fight authoritarianism. When fraud is not common knowledge, moderate voters are easily bought up into acquiescence because they will tend to abandon opposition parties that challenge the fraud. Only when voters know that elections are rigged can party elites count on the support of their moderate electorate to engage in post-electoral battles.

Why, then, would an autocratic ruling party accede to the creation of independent electoral institutions that can publicize the actual election results? I argue that an autocratic ruling party possesses the incentives to enter into a political pact to create an independent electoral commission only when it knows it can go on winning elections cleanly; and the opposition, under some particular circumstances, credibly threats it will confront the results of the elections, regardless of whether there is fraud or not, unless the ruling party finds a way to ex ante guarantee the transparency of the elections. In creating a truly independent electoral commission, a form of rule of law in the electoral realm can

20 Fearon (2000) is aware of this problem when he talks about “partially rigged elections.”
emerge, even if the ruling party continues to win the elections. However, as this paper has explained, this type of institution is hard to achieve because it can only come about as a result of political bargain between the ruling party and the opposition when the former comes to realize that unbiased elections constitute the best means to pursue its goals and the latter can credibly threaten a rebellion unless the ruling party is able to give up its control of the electoral process.
References


