



Why Elections in Autocratic Countries Have Upsides as Well as Imperfections

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After a bitterly contested election campaign and two controversial postponements, Muhammadu Buhari engineered an upset of Nigeria's incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan in April of 2015. Remarkably, this was Nigeria's first-ever case of electoral turnover of government authority. Later in April, two other African countries, Sudan and Togo, staged elections that reconfirmed the sway of incumbent rulers.

Many Autocracies Hold Elections

Apart from the coincidence in electoral timing, these countries share another surprising link—all three are generally recognized as autocracies where, despite occasional elections, rulers wield state power without full regard for democratic rights or fair party competition. Some might be surprised that such autocracies hold elections at all. But nowadays, in fact, many autocratic countries do so. All but five of the world's autocracies have held a national election since 2000, with close to three-fourths of them involving multiparty competition. These regimes – I call them electoral autocracies – continue to be defined as autocratic because their elections fail to meet democratic standards, especially when state power is used to favor the ruling party. Prominent examples include Singapore, Russia, Jordan, and Venezuela. Although today it is more common for autocratic regimes to hold imperfect elections, there is nothing entirely new about this phenomenon. As far back as the 1880s, most autocracies allowed contested elections in some form.

What should we think about electoral autocracies? This is more than a theoretical question. As a result of international pressure, norms, and conditions on foreign aid, regimes across the globe have strong incentives to hold multiparty elections of some sort. As many authors have pointed out, the end product of "democracy promotion" – on which the United States annually spends around a billion dollars – is more often electoral autocracy than real democracy. Many observers fear that the United States and other international promoters of democracy are, in practice, encouraging elections that are either pointless window-dressing or actually conducive to autocratic stability. But is this the whole story? My own research offers a more nuanced view.

Positive Sides to Autocratic Elections

Autocracies that hold skewed elections may be less desirable than true democracies, but I have discovered that they still exhibit a range of positive tendencies.

- **Improved long-term chances for democracy.** Although scholars continue to debate whether elections improve a country's likelihood of moving to democracy, a different issue is whether autocratic elections improve chances for stability after a country democratizes. My earlier research suggests they do, and this should not surprise us because today's strongest democracies, including the United States, all passed through a prolonged period of unfair elections or limited suffrage. Over time, even highly imperfect elections tend to improve a country's political institutions, allow strong political parties to develop, and give citizens a taste for voting and political activism.
- **Improved health and education outcomes.** A wealth of political science research shows that democracy improves human development by encouraging responsive leaders. Along these lines, my research using state of the art techniques of causal inference shows that multiparty autocracy, compared to non-electoral autocracy, has a similarly strong, positive effect on outcomes like infant mortality, literacy, and gender equality in education. How large is the effect? A long-term electoral autocracy should expect roughly one-third fewer infant deaths and an additional 10-25% of its population to be literate compared to autocracies that do not have elections. This finding complements work by other scholars showing that autocratic legislatures promote more favorable government spending, civil liberties, and economic growth.

- **Enhanced policy responsiveness.** Even skewed elections in autocracies can prompt rulers to respond to citizens, because when ruling parties' vote totals decline, they often take this as a signal of falling support and increase their social and education spending following the elections. Responsiveness is not as great in electoral autocracies as in true democracies that hold fair elections. And not all electoral autocracies make adjustments. Rulers in oil-rich autocracies tend to ignore even worrisome electoral outcomes, because they know they can rely on individual payoffs from regime-controlled resources to defuse any popular pressures.

Lessons for Policymakers

To be clear, none of my research questions the ideal of full-fledged democracy. If anything, my findings about varieties of autocracy – some electoral, others without elections – further support the scholarly conclusion that political competition and liberalization carry important benefits.

But my research does suggest that half-way steps can have value. In many countries, instantly installing full and fair democracy may not be a realistic option, but it may be possible to persuade autocrats to allow some form of elections, which they and their political allies often can control at first. It is much harder to convince autocratic rulers to accept a level of free competition that threatens their political survival. ***The bottom line from my work is that it is wise for policymakers to promote authentic democracy wherever possible, but to also recognize that the introduction of elections in autocracies is a step forward from old-fashioned full-fledged dictatorship.***

This is a distasteful conclusion for many observers who sense that the world's autocrats are playing a cynical con game by embracing formal but skewed elections and then using the presence of such contests to sustain and magnify their own power. But perhaps we should realize that democracy promoters are perhaps playing a longer game, by getting dictators to accept the very institutions that, over time, might make their countries inhospitable to dictatorship.

This tension should be familiar to the newly elected Mohammadu Buhari in Nigeria, who years ago in 1983 took power in a military coup, only to see his fellow generals oust him two years later. Even the most powerful weapons betray their master. In that case, it was the military coup that turned on an earlier coup-master. In today's world, we may see the same turnabouts over time for autocratically managed elections. Such contests may usually reconfirm rulers and their supporters, but at times they may also usher old autocrats off the stage of history.