

# **D-Minus Elections: The Politics and Norms of International Election Observation\***

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Revision: October 30, 2008

**Forthcoming in *International Organization***

## **Abstract**

*As international election monitors have grown active worldwide, their announcements have gained influence. Sometimes, however, they endorse highly flawed elections. Because their leverage rests largely on their credibility, this is puzzling. Understanding the behavior of election monitors is important because their assessments help the international community to assess the legitimacy of governments and because their assessments often inform the data used by scholars to study democracy. International election monitoring is also interesting because it is one of a few fields shared by both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and because the core mandate of election monitors essentially is to police norms. This study uses a new dataset of 591 international election monitoring missions from a mix of organizations to examine the role of organizational interests and norms in explaining monitors' assessments of elections. It finds that monitors do consider the elections' quality, but they also consider the interests of their member states or donors as well as other compelling organizational norms. Thus, even when accounting for the nature and level of irregularities in an election, monitors' concerns about democracy promotion, violent instability, and organizational politics and preferences are associated with election endorsement. The study also reveals differences in the behavior of various intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations and explains why neither can pursue their core objectives single-mindedly.*

\* For comments on earlier drafts, I thank the participants at the University of Minnesota International Relations colloquium, participants at the University of Chicago PIPES seminar, and participants at the Duke University Public Policy Fac-Doc Colloquium, as well as Karen Alter, Pablo Beramendi, Eric Bjornlund, Jørgen Elklit, Robert Keohane, Kathryn Sikkink, Arturo Santa-Cruz, Duncan Snidal and Felicity Vebulas. This paper would not be possible without the support of several research assistants, most notably Kiril Kolev. This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0550111. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

As international elections monitors have grown active worldwide, their announcements have gained influence (Kelley 2008a; Santa-Cruz 2005).<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, however, their assessments are puzzling. For example, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) accepted the outcome of Bosnia's 1996 election, although others called it fraudulent and accused the OSCE of spin (International Crisis Group 1996; Riley 1997). Cambodia's 1998 election was fraught with problems (Bjornlund 2004; International Republican Institute 1999, 4; National Democratic Institute 1999) but the Joint International Observer Group approved it even before counting was complete (Joint International Observer Group 1998, 1-2). Furthermore, according to the Data on International Election Monitoring (DIEM) which codes information on nearly 600 observation missions to 385 elections,<sup>2</sup> observer assessments contradict each other in 22 percent of elections. Many scholars have also criticized international monitors for endorsing flawed elections and failing to condemn flagrant fraud (Abbink 2000; Geisler 1993) such as in Kenya's 1997 election (Brown 2001; Foeken and Dietz 2000), and Cambodia's 1993 UN-supervised post-conflict election (Downie 2000, 44).<sup>3</sup>

What factors influence election monitors' assessments and why do they sometimes endorse highly flawed elections? Scholars rightly note that the moral authority and influence of transnational actors rests partly on their veracity (Sikkink 2002, 314).<sup>4</sup> If their objective is to report on the quality of elections and if this is what gives them influence, why would monitors ever compromise? Doing so may harm the effectiveness of future election monitoring, legitimize undemocratic regimes, enable government manipulation (Kelley 2008b) and stifle viable opposition movements (Elklit and Svensson 1997; Geisler 1993). These unintended effects only

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<sup>1</sup> Consistent with Bjornlund 2004 I use the terms monitoring and observation interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> For documentation on the *Data on International Election Monitoring* (DIEM) see (Author 2007) as well as discussion under the data section of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> However, international election monitors have many salutary effects (Hyde 2006; McCoy et al. 1991).

<sup>4</sup> In this analysis I label both non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations as transnational actors.

compound the broader criticisms of the international community's narrow focus on elections (Zakaria 1997). Nonetheless, the factors influencing monitors' assessments have received little attention.

This study argues that election monitors sometimes endorse elections to protect the interests of their member states or donors or to accommodate other compelling organizational norms. At times these factors align with the monitors' core objective to assess the election quality; at other times, however, monitors face a dilemma between accommodating these factors and assessing the election honestly. Organizations may avoid some of these dilemmas by refusing to monitor certain elections (Kelley 2008c). Given their mission, however, monitors attend many problematic elections. Organizations with different norms and interests may assess these elections differently, and even the same organization may assess elections of similar quality differently depending on their contexts.

### **The Politics and Norms of International Election Observers**

Scholars have long argued that transnational actors are both normative and strategic (Cooley and Ron 2002; Finnemore and Sikkink 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Although some studies still treat transnational actors as neutral and trustworthy (Clark 2001, ch.1), scholars have begun to study how the politics and preferences of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) influence their behavior (Bob 2002; Carpenter 2007; Sell and Prakash 2004; Stone 2008). Given the great variety of international organizations, however, much remains unknown. The politics and preferences of international election observers are particularly interesting because both IGOs and INGOs observe elections, and because they help the international community to assess the legitimacy of governments.

This study uses original data to examine the role of organizational interests and norms in monitors' assessments of elections. The next section first discusses monitors' core electoral norms. It then presents hypotheses about the effects of organizational structures, preferences and politics, as well as norms of democracy promotion and violence prevention. It argues that these factors make monitors more likely to endorse elections, although most of them in and of themselves should not lead to cleaner elections.

### Upholding electoral norms

Monitoring organizations exist first and foremost to report on the quality of elections. Their core mission is to uphold a shared set of electoral norms enshrined in a vast collection of international laws and organizational documents (Elklit and Reynolds 2005; Elklit and Svensson 1997; European Commission 2007; Padilla and Houppert 1993). Although organizations may differ on the finer details of restrictions on the media or unfair use of government resources, declarations signed by the major monitoring organizations (United Nations 2005) suggest that they largely agree on the characteristics of acceptable elections and that they are aware of the "menu of manipulation (Schedler 2002)." Even the legal documents of less-critical organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States or the African Union align with the norms of other observer groups. In their election reports the organizations also discuss similar issues such as media, electoral laws, voter registration and the like. Most organizations thus describe their tasks and organize their findings around a core set of electoral norms.

Because monitoring organizations exist to uphold these electoral norms, the most basic expectation is that their assessments should reflect the level of election irregularities. Not reporting irregularities fully or truthfully demotes the very standards they seek to uphold and

weakens their own moral authority. Organizations that are widely perceived as biased forfeit serious recognition (Fawn 2006; Sikkink 2002, 314). Their election monitoring activities may be jeopardized; indeed, their entire spectrum of democracy promotion activities and funding may suffer (Carothers 2006). To avoid such a fate, monitors may be extra keen to report very obvious types of fraud such as legal shortcomings, media restrictions, unfair use of state resources, campaigning bans, tabulation irregularities, ballot stuffing and intimidation. Although administrative irregularities such as problems in voter lists are critical to legitimacy (Elklit and Reynolds 2002), these are less publicized and monitors may perceive them as unintentional. Research and Case studies of elections in Kenya, Russia, Cambodia, Bosnia Herzegovina and elsewhere also suggest that monitors pay greater attention to the events on the polling day than to pre-election irregularities (Carothers 1997; Elklit and Svensson 1997). In sum, monitors' core mission of upholding electoral norms leads to the baseline expectation that *monitors are less likely to endorse an election the greater the level of irregularities in general and that they are especially unlikely to endorse very obvious forms of cheating* (Irregularities Hypothesis).

#### Weighing other norms and interests

Although monitors seek to report irregularities, these alone do not account fully for monitors' assessment; several other factors, such as organizational politics and other norms also matter. First, research on International Monetary Fund lending suggests that IGO member states sometimes prevent consistent application of standards (Stone 2004, 577). Although some IGO staff has flexibility to implement their agendas (Barnett and Finnemore 2001; Nielson and Tierney 2003), most monitoring mission staff have little flexibility in drafting official assessments. Indeed, organizational documents and discussions with officials reveal that to

ensure institutional approval most IGOs have strict procedures for finalizing official statements. Both European Union (EU) and Organization of American States observer missions, for example, have strict supervisory mechanisms for the drafting of statements (Commission of the European Union Undated, Section E).<sup>5</sup> INGOs must also worry about their sponsors' or donors' preferences (Bob 2002; Carpenter 2007). However, many INGOs have multiple and diverse stakeholders, which counters the dominance of donor preferences (Brown and Moore 2001, 572). Furthermore, because INGOs do not speak directly for any governments or donors they have greater freedom; certainly they do not face formal institutional procedures that allow governments to veto the wording of the election assessments.

Because international monitors seek to uphold electoral norms, the degree of constraint imposed by donors and member states should depend on the level of democracy in the member states or in the organization's environment. Less-democratic IGO members may constrain monitors to protect their own regime from future criticisms or to prevent democratic transitions in their neighborhood. Indeed, after the OSCE's active role in the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has sought institutional reforms to curtail the independence of OSCE observers (Fawn 2006). By imposing restrictions on OSCE operations within Russia, the government has shown other countries how to circumvent their obligation to invite OSCE monitors. INGOs and nonprofit institutes may also be influenced by the level of democracy in the countries their headquarters are in. Given the strong Western leadership role in cultivating the norms of international election monitoring (Kelley 2008a), Western organizations, which conduct about 80 percent of all INGO monitoring missions, may be more vested in upholding electoral norms. In sum, this leads to the second hypothesis that *INGOs are more likely than*

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<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with Betilde Munuz-Pogossian, Coordinator, Unit for Electoral Studies, OAS, Washington, DC, April 10, 2008.

*INGOs to endorse elections, but this tendency decreases for IGO's with more democratic member states. Furthermore, INGOs are less likely to endorse elections when their national context is more democratic (Organizational Hypothesis).*

Donor states and member states are also likely to impose other political constraints on monitors' assessments. Reflecting this reality, Human Rights Watch, for example, has accused established democracies of accepting flawed elections for political expediency (Roth 2008). If monitors are concerned about upsetting trade patterns or destabilizing large populous countries, they may also be less apt to criticize large countries or trading partners. Research also suggests that foreign aid recipient countries tend to be strategically and politically favored (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Meernik et al. 1998). For example, United States aid recipients have fewer conditions on their IMF aid programs (Stone 2008). Case studies suggest that these findings also are true in election monitoring. The pressures on monitoring organizations stood out strongly in Cambodia's 1998 election, for example, when powerful countries and donors wanted to resume aid and normal relations. As noted above, IGOs were much less critical than Western INGOs, but the political pressures were obvious to all (Bjornlund 2004). Therefore, the third hypothesis is that *monitoring organizations are more likely to endorse elections in countries that are significant global trading partners, are populous, or receive foreign aid (Political Hypothesis).* Both this and the Organizational Hypothesis thus suggest that monitors may have to temper their criticism of violations of election norms to protect the interests of their donors or member states.

Monitoring organizations may also limit their criticism to accommodate a broader set of compelling organizational norms. Specifically, although promoting democracy and upholding election standards are complementary norms and often go hand in hand, a conflict may arise when there has been progress, but the election still falls short of absolute standards. Research on

political conditionality, for example, shows that international organizations sometimes face a dilemma between rewarding relative progress and criticizing performances that are still inadequate based on an absolute standard (Kelley 2004; Stone 2002). Studies of elections in Russia, Kenya, Cambodia and elsewhere in the 1990s suggest that international monitors may be similarly torn between praising progress – a step in the right direction towards democracy -- and denouncing election flaws and possibly causing democratic gains to unravel. Thus the OSCE prematurely hailed the 1999 elections in Russia as “the conclusion of a transitional period forged by President Yeltsin since 1991” (OSCE 2000, 1). Monitoring organizations may thus be particularly inclined to temper their criticism of an election in countries where they fear disrupting their own long-standing programs and where they seek to build positive long-term momentum towards democracy. Subsequently, monitors may endorse an election if it showed progress, although they would have denounced an election of similar quality in a country that had not displayed progress or was expected to do better. The fourth hypothesis therefore is that *monitors are more likely to endorse transitional or first multiparty elections or elections showing improvement relative to the prior election* (Progress Hypothesis).

Fear of violent instability may also temper monitors’ criticism. Historically, concerns about stability have motivated monitoring efforts (Kumar 1998; Laakso 2002, 459) and monitors have sometimes offered mediation or sought to minimize violence (Anglin 1992; Carter Center 1997; McCoy 1993; McCoy et al. 1991). Sometimes, however, fear of violence has entirely paralyzed the truth (van Kessel 2000). This can happen if monitors worry that their statements may fuel conflict. In the most common fraud scenario,<sup>6</sup> when an incumbent wins through fraud or simply invalidates returns showing an opposition victory, monitors therefore want to know

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<sup>6</sup> Other fraud scenarios are certainly possible. For example, the incumbent might cheat and still lose. Or opposition parties may cheat their way to victory. However, these scenarios are less common and their ramifications for monitors cannot be fully explored here.

whether denouncing the official version of events will fuel opposition outrage and post-election conflict. Will, as in Zimbabwe's 2008 general election, the cheating incumbent be unwilling to leave office and resort to violence to squash opposition supporters? Or, if monitors endorse the flawed elections, will the opposition revolt against what it believes is a rubber stamp by election monitors?

The presence of pre-election violence may help monitors assess whether denouncing or endorsing the fraud is more likely to fuel post-election violence. Most commonly, as in the 2000 Zimbabwean election, or the 1992 and 1997 elections in Kenya (Commonwealth Secretariat 1993, 62; International Republican Institute 1993), the incumbent dominates the pre-election violence. Monitors may therefore infer that the incumbent is stronger than the opposition and that the risk of post-election conflict may increase if they denounce the incumbent, whereas if they endorse the election or are ambiguous, the incumbent may be able to maintain calm because the opposition cannot use the observer criticism as a rallying cry. Thus, incumbent-dominated pre-election violence may dissuade monitors from denouncing the elections. The effects of violence on the polling day itself are less clear, however. If violence spirals out of control on the polling day, monitors may abandon hope of dampening violence. In the 2007 elections in Kenya, for example, EU monitors initially made positive statements, but denounced the elections after violence escalated (Reuters 2007). Thus, the final hypothesis is that monitors treat pre-election violence as a signal of increased risk of post-election violence, and therefore *monitors are more likely to endorse an election the greater the level of pre-election violence* (Pre-election violence Hypothesis). Because higher levels of violence are associated with more irregularities, support for this hypothesis would be an interesting illustration of how election monitors may sometimes experience a conflict between upholding electoral norms and violence-prevention norms.

## Data

To examine the above propositions this study relies on the Data on International Election Monitoring (DIEM), which codes election monitoring reports and related documents for 591 election monitoring missions from 1984 and 2004 by the 19 most common election monitoring organizations as listed in Table 1. Detailed information about the coding procedures, inter-coder reliability scores and sources can be found on the data web page.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 about here

The dependent variable is the overall summary assessment of an election by an individual monitoring organization. This variable captures an individual monitoring organization's summary assessment of whether a given election represented the will of the voters. Monitors most often issue immediate post-election statements or press releases followed by a longer report which may come out months later. The latter reports are quite detailed and their contents often differ from their own executive summary or conclusion. However, by the time the longer report comes out the media and world attention has moved on. The world primarily heard the statements made shortly after the polling. Indeed, the EU stresses that in the early statements, "Considerable care should be taken to drafting [the 'headline conclusion'] so that it is clearly describes the overall view of the Mission. This is the phrase likely to be used by the media when reporting the findings of the Preliminary Statement" (Commission of the European Union Undated, Section G). Therefore, the dependent variable is based on press statements,

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<sup>7</sup> All reports were coded by a PhD student and an undergraduate student and then reconciled under the author's supervision. The inter-coder reliability scores before reconciliation ranged from 86.2 to 92.8 percent. [For more information, see web page...](#)

preliminary statements, the introduction/executive summary or conclusion of the report only, not on the content of the body of the report.<sup>8</sup> The variable is ordered. It is “1” if the organization states that the election represents the will of the voters, is free and fair, or in other ways frankly endorses the outcome. It is “0.5” if the organization is entirely ambiguous, outright states that it has no opinion, or is simply silent. It is “0” if the organization explicitly states that the election does not represent the will of the voters, is not free or fair, or otherwise delegitimizes the outcome of the election.

As discussed above, several factors may influence the monitors’ overall summary assessment, but the baseline expectation is that it reflects the level of election irregularities, especially obvious cheating and fundamental legal shortcomings. To examine this hypothesis it is necessary to consider the spectrum of irregularities observed during an election, rather than a broad measure that may distort through excessive oversimplification. Furthermore, because organizations seeking to render a mild overall assessment may downplay details inside the report, the analysis took advantage of the fact that more than one organization was present in 80 percent of the elections and that the documentation per election averaged 74 pages. Thus, for each election new variables were generated that used the maximum level of each type of irregularity reported in the body of the report by any organization present.<sup>9</sup> Based on this information, the following variables were created on a scale from 0-3, with “0” indicating the absence of problems and “3” indicating the highest level of problems. A variable called **STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS** captures the degree of problems in the legal framework for elections.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, coders were not allowed to read the body of the report until they had already coded the summary assessment based only on the introduction, press statements and summary conclusions.

<sup>9</sup> The maximum level of irregularities reported was used because, although monitors may be keener to criticize some elections, as in Ukraine (Lowenhardt 2005) or Venezuela (McCoy 2004), they generally do not fabricate irregularities and, as a DIEM coding rule, allegations were coded only as “low,” so that any unsubstantiated claims were discounted. Using the maximum level of fraud reported therefore produces less bias than would be produced by coding inconsistencies at the lowest or the mean level.

This includes restrictions on the scope of the elected office, restrictions on who can vote and stand for office, and rules and regulations guiding the supervision, funding, and conduct of the election. PRE-ELECTION CAPACITY PROBLEMS includes assessment of four administrative areas: problems in voter lists or registration, complaints about electoral commission conduct, voter information problems and procedural problems, and technical difficulties. PRE-ELECTION CHEATING includes assessment of four categories: intimidation, media, freedom to campaign, and improper use of public funds. ELECTION-DAY CAPACITY PROBLEMS captures the degree of irregularities in four categories: informational insufficiencies, administrative insufficiencies, problems in voter lists, and complaints about electoral commission conduct. Finally, ELECTION-DAY CHEATING assesses three categories: vote processing, voter fraud, and intimidation. More coding details are on the data web page.<sup>10</sup> If indeed the monitors were guided only by observed irregularities during the election, then the contents of the monitoring reports, as captured in the variables above, should account for their overall assessments. Thus if other factors are statistically significant even when considering these variables, this suggests that the monitors are not guided solely by the quality of the elections.

The Organizational Hypothesis is tested with an indicator variable for IGOs and by creating a DEMOCRACY SCORE for each intergovernmental organization, based on the Polity2 variable from the Polity IV dataset (Marshall et al. 2006). The score is the average level of democracy in all the member states of the organization in the year before the election. The score is zero for INGOs, and an indicator variable is created for WESTERN INGOs.

The Political Hypothesis is tested with several measures. Political importance naturally varies depending on which countries are affiliated with the observer group, and more specific measures could be developed to capture this. This study, however, simplifies by using standard

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<sup>10</sup> [web page address](#)

log transformation of the each country's POPULATION (U.S. Census Bureau Total Midyear Population Data), TRADE (total outflows and inflows of commercial goods and services, millions of US dollars, WTO time series data on merchandise and commercial services, lagged by one year) and FOREIGN AID (World Development Indicators, Official development assistance and official aid in current US\$, lagged by one year.)

The Progress Hypothesis is tested by creating variables that measure the overall level of problems of the previous election and the overall level of problems of the current election. The variable ELECTION QUALITY ranges from 0 to 3, with three being the worst, such that when the measure for the current election was subtracted from the measure of the previous election, the resulting variable, IMPROVEMENT, is positive for improvements and negative for deteriorations. To have consistent measures of past elections, which may not have been monitored, the variables are drawn from a new election quality dataset based on "US State Department Reports on Human Rights Practices." This dataset was created using the same types of irregularities and coding guidelines used in the DIEM dataset.<sup>11</sup> Next, an indicator variable captures whether the organization itself described the election as TRANSITIONAL in its report. A final indicator, based either on DIEM or multiple LexisNexis sources, captures whether the election was a FIRST MULTIPARTY ELECTION.

Finally, to examine the Pre-election violence Hypothesis this study coded PRE-ELECTION VIOLENCE and ELECTION DAY VIOLENCE separately. Scores range from 0 to 3 and are based on the levels of violence reported by election monitors in their reports. If the election took place in a general condition of war, the variable was coded as level "3." If a subpart of the country was at war, the variable may have received a lower score depending on the effect the organization reported the conflict had on the election. It was not possible for this study to differentiate

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on this dataset, see the website.....

between who perpetrates the violence, although that may be desirable for a study focused more specifically on the dynamics of violence in elections. Note that violence is different from intimidation, which is coded as a type of irregularity above. Examples of behaviors that would qualify as violence and unrest are: Grenades and other weapons use, murders, physical assaults, and protests that turned violent. The score for this variable is based on the maximum level of violence reported by any organization present.<sup>12</sup> An indicator variable, POST-CONFLICT, was also created to capture whether an election followed a conflict. It is based either on the content of the election monitoring report or on the election description in the “US State Department Reports on Human Rights Practices.” Table 2 summarizes all the variables.

Table 2 about here

## **Empirical results**

Because the monitors’ summary assessment is an ordered three-level variable, the models are standard ordered logistic regressions, which estimate the probability of observing the different levels of assessments. The models are clustered on countries to control for lack of within-country independence of observations.<sup>13</sup> The coefficients are rendered as odds ratios, such that numbers above one indicate increased odds of an endorsement of the election.

Table 3 about here

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<sup>12</sup> See footnote 9 for an explanation for the use of the maximum level.

<sup>13</sup> Clustering instead on individual organizations does not change the findings. Including lagged variables of the dependent variable artificially limits the data to the elections in countries that have been repeatedly monitored by the same organizations, making inferences difficult due to the reduced number of observations and also introducing a strange sample selection effect. Omitting elections that were repeatedly monitored by the same organizations has the same downsides. That said, even these techniques show statistical effects in line with the analysis rendered below.

The hypotheses generally find strong support. The first model in Table 3 examines the significance of the different irregularity measures alone. As expected, the odds that an organization will endorse an election decrease as regularities increase and the odds decrease most when the bulk of the problems take obvious forms. Structural legal problems, cheating in the pre-election period and cheating on the election-day are highly statistically significant and robust. Capacity-related problems are not statistically significant, although they do have the expected direction of effect. These findings are robust across all the models. As expected, monitors clearly do consider the irregularities that they observe on the ground.

However, models 2-5 show that even when considering the election irregularities other factors are also associated with election endorsements. All the model specifications corroborate the hypothesis about IGOs and their member states. For example, Model 2 shows that IGOs are more likely to endorse elections, but that this tendency is lower for IGOs with more democratic member states. The difference between Western INGOs and other INGOs (the omitted category) is not statistically significant, but the IGO finding is very robust.<sup>14</sup> This finding also has descriptive support. Figure 1 shows how different organizations assessed all the elections they observed. This comparison is biased because organizations monitor elections of different quality, but that said, INGOs and nonprofit institutes clearly criticize elections more often and the most critical organizations are Western. In contrast, the most critical organizations are IGOs with less-democratic member states such as the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the South African Development Community. It is also interesting to note that as noted below Table 1 two of the least critical IGOs, the Economic Community of West

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<sup>14</sup> If the models are run without WESTERN NGO the findings about IGOs remain and can be interpreted in comparison with NGOs generally.

African States and the African Union, were excluded from the analysis due to missing data. Had they been included, however, given their less-democratic membership profile, the findings about IGOs and their member states would likely have been even stronger.

Population, trade, and foreign aid were tested in separate models to avoid multicollinearity problems. More trade was not statistically significant, perhaps because it needs to be measured in a more dyadic manner. Larger populations also were not significant. However, models 4, and 5 do show that monitors were statistically more likely to endorse elections in countries that receive more foreign aid. This corroborates other research (2008), and supports the argument that IGO member states and INGO donors and sponsors may attach particular importance to countries that receive foreign aid and treat these more leniently.

The Progress Hypothesis also finds some support. The odds an election being endorsed more than doubles for elections that monitoring organizations described as transitional. Furthermore, Model 5 shows that the improvement in election quality is highly statistically significant and increases the odds of endorsement. However, this variable is difficult to interpret because it assumes that different stages of improvements are equivalent, but this may not be true. Lastly, although monitors appear more likely to endorse first multiparty elections, this effect is not statistically significant, likely due to correlation with the other measures.

Finally, the measures of post-conflict elections and election-day violence are not significant. Consistent with expectations, however, violence in the pre-election period is statistically associated with greater odds of endorsement. This relationship is highly robust across all the models. This is remarkable, because pre-election violence and irregularities are also highly positively correlated and it would therefore be logical if pre-election violence was associated with lower -- not greater -- odds of endorsement.

Tables 4 and 5 about here

The magnitude of the statistically significant coefficients of Model 4 are illustrated through Clarify simulations (King et al. 2000).<sup>15</sup> Table 4 shows that, holding all other variables at their means, an increase from no legal problems to the maximum level decreases the probability of an endorsement by 19.8 percent. Similar increases in pre-election cheating and election-day cheating are associated with even greater decreases of 36.8 and 45.8, respectively. Furthermore, a change from minimum to maximum in foreign aid is associated with an increase of 27.7 percent in the probability of an endorsement. On average an organization is 15.3 percent more likely to endorse elections it perceives as transitional. Finally, when the level of pre-election violence rises from minimum to maximum, the average organization is 16.7 percent more likely to endorse an election. Table 5 shows that INGOs are about 30 percent less likely to endorse elections than IGOs with low democracy scores, but that this difference decreases to only about 5 percent compared to IGOs with high democracy scores.

#### *Robustness checks*

The findings are robust to several checks such as including the level of democracy in the previous year, a year variable to control for trends, or an indicator for the presence of domestic monitors. None were significant or changed the results much. The study also considered whether monitors were more likely to endorse the election if the incumbent party left power. An indicator variable, described on the data web page,<sup>16</sup> was indeed significant: monitors were more likely to

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<sup>15</sup> Simulation results for the effect of an improvement in election quality in model 5 are not shown because there are questions about the linearity assumption of what constitutes a step improvement in elections.

<sup>16</sup> See information file on the “Keep Power” variable on the webpage: [web page address](#)

endorse elections if the incumbent party left power. Importantly, however, with the exception of the variable capturing whether monitors perceived an election as transitional, all the other results remained robust.

Another consideration was that monitors endorse election due to lack of capacity to cover the election fully (Bjornlund 2004, chapter 7). The budgets of missions are not available, but neither measures of the length of stay of the longest staying delegation from an organization nor the numbers of observers from an organization present on election-day were significantly associated with endorsements, even if these measures were weighted by the population size. Most importantly, these measures do not change the already established findings.

Finally, the study also applied a drastically different statistical approach by using several criteria to isolate a sample of elections that were highly problematic and then analyzing only these elections. This approach is weak, however, because the criteria used to isolate the sample cannot be objective. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the central findings were remarkably similar to the present approach.

## **Conclusion**

International election monitors are essentially in the business of policing norms. Because their influence rests on their veracity, the fact that they sometimes endorse flawed elections presents a puzzle. This study has shown that the answer lies in the often recognized but seldom explored fact that transnational actors are both normative and strategic. Election monitors do seek to uphold electoral norms; their assessments are informed greatly by the irregularities that they observe on the ground and particularly so by the more obvious types of fraud. Nevertheless,

even when controlling for the level and types of the irregularities that monitors observe, other factors correlate significantly with whether monitors will endorse a given election.

Specifically, monitors consider the political interests of member states or donors. The analysis shows that IGOs are more likely to endorse elections and that this is particularly true for organizations with less democratic member states. Thus IGOs may temper their criticism of election violations to appease member states that fear future criticism could be directed at them or that want to prevent democratic transitions in their region.<sup>17</sup> The analysis also shows that foreign aid receipts are associated with greater odds of endorsement. This is likely because member states or INGO funders discourage denunciations of elections in foreign aid recipients such as Cambodia or Kenya, whose aid status may signify the interests their donors take in them (Alesina and Dollar 2000). This finding also aligns well with research which has found the IMF to be lenient towards United States foreign aid recipients (Stone 2008). Dealing with these political interests may thus constrain monitors from basing their assessments exclusively on electoral norms. Monitors may want to denounce an election to uphold the electoral norms and to retain their own credibility, but they may also realize that this could undermine member state and donor support for their activities.

Monitors also face normative pressures. Statistically, they are more likely to endorse elections when the electoral process improved from the previous election or when they perceive the election to be transitional. This could, of course, be because improvements are associated with cleaner elections. However, because this is significant even when accounting for the nature and level of irregularities in the observed election, it suggests that monitors sometimes praise

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as explored in greater depth elsewhere (Kelley 2008c), a few organizations appear to be entirely captured by their member states or donors, possibly even created specially to dispense false legitimacy to counter the criticisms of other monitors.

improvements in election quality and endorse the outcome, even if still substandard, to support a country's trajectory towards more democratic elections in the long term. This interpretation also concurs with careful readings of many election monitoring reports that chronicle serious irregularities, but then praise the progress and endorse the outcome. Russia in the mid- to late 1990s is a prime example.

The analysis also finds that pre-election violence is associated with greater levels of endorsements. Pre-election violence signals a greater risk of post-election violence, which monitors do not want to fuel. Thus, when pre-election violence has been particularly high, monitors may dampen their criticisms of incumbent fraud in the hope that even if the incumbent did not run a clean election, he will at least be able to maintain calm and therefore lessen the chances of serious post-election conflict. This was the case in the Kenyan elections of the 1990s. In Zimbabwe's 2000 election monitors also stopped short of questioning the final results and praised the well-organized and calm voting day (Commonwealth Secretariat 2000, 32; European Union Observation Unit 2000); As one scholar noted, it had become clear to all foreigners that "changing the government in Zimbabwe would not necessarily have been easy or peaceful (Laakso 2002, 458)." Because higher levels of violence are associated with more irregularities, monitors may therefore experience a conflict between upholding electoral norms and endorsing an election as a means to quell potential violence after a violent election campaign.

That these factors above are significantly associated with endorsements is remarkable, because at least three of them should not be expected to correlate with cleaner elections. As noted, transitional elections or election with greater improvements could by their nature be cleaner than others. However, no reasons exist to believe that monitors from less democratic IGOs, which mostly operate exclusively in their own member states, observe cleaner elections,

or that foreign aid recipients hold cleaner elections. Certainly no logic would suggest that elections with more violence are cleaner.

This analysis has thus made considerable progress in explaining the behaviors of international election monitors, which is essential to interpret their pronouncements. Of course the findings do not themselves reveal how often observer missions are too lenient or grossly mischaracterize elections. However, about 16 percent of elections score very high on a cumulative index of irregularities,<sup>18</sup> yet only 42 percent of missions to these problem-ridden elections stated forthrightly that results did not represent the will of the people. A conservative estimate may be that monitors mischaracterize elections about 10 percent of the time, but the incidence could well be greater. Thus caution is clearly needed when interpreting the assessments of monitors and this analysis suggests when such caution is most warranted.

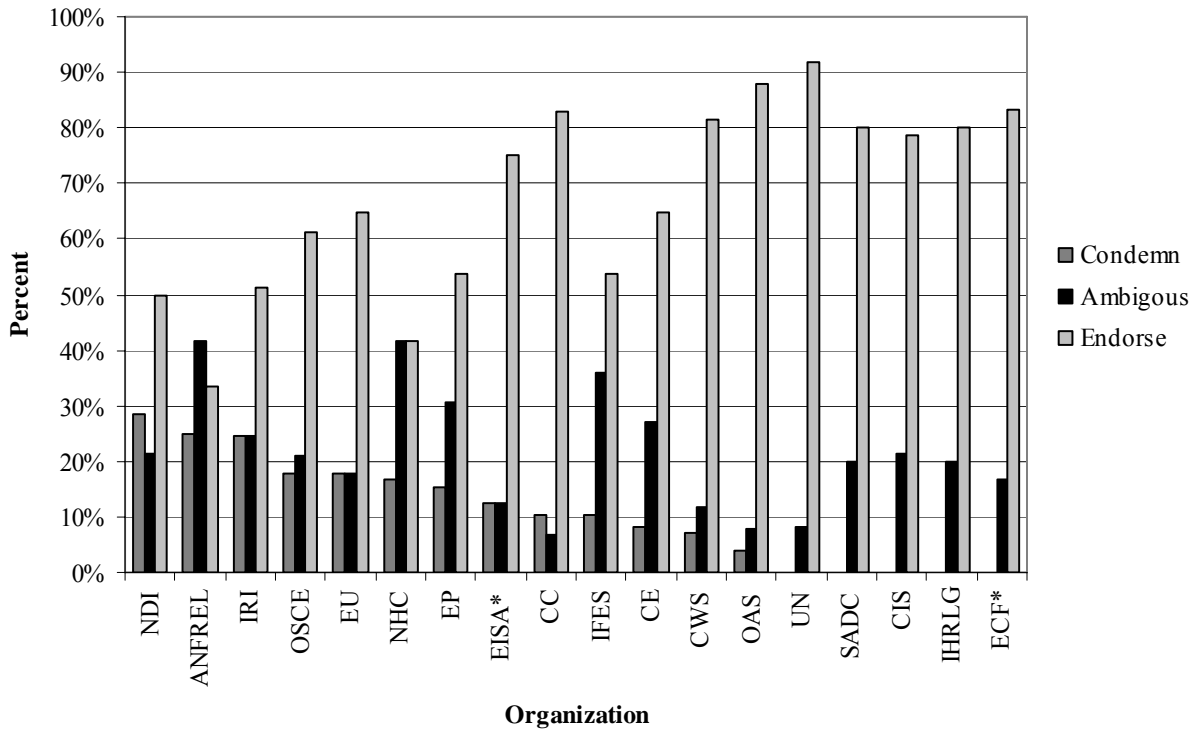
In addition to broadening the understanding of INGOs and IGOs behavior, the findings have implications for comparative and international relations scholarship, because election monitors' assessments often inform the data used in macro analysis. For example, nearly 30 percent of monitored elections are followed by positive changes in democracy scores in the Polity IV dataset. If factors other than the quality of the election influence the monitors' assessments, they might therefore misinform common democracy measures. To the extent that the biases introduced correlate with other variables of popular research questions, this can produce biased results. For example, if monitors assess elections in foreign aid recipients more leniently, correlations between foreign aid and democratic progress could be spurious.

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<sup>18</sup> The index, which ranges from 0-15, adds structural legal problems and pre-election and election-day capacity and cheating problems, the five categories of irregularities used in this analysis. Adding these to create an index raises issues of comparability and should therefore be interpreted cautiously. That noted, 48 of all the 305 monitored election, or about 16 percent, score 12 or above on the index)

The reasons monitors endorse elections are likely more complex than shown herein. Future research could advance this analysis by, for example, differentiating further between organizations and their dyadic relationships to the monitored state. The discussion of pre-election violence could also benefit from greater attention to who perpetrates the violence and why. Nevertheless, this article has illuminated monitors' choices considerably. The factors that influence the behavior of other INGOs and IGOs may be specific to their context. However, the general insight from this study is that multiple norms and interests likely prevent these actors from pursuing their objectives single-mindedly. This is not inherently bad; their choices may be justifiable on grounds of morality or efficiency. As these governmental and non-governmental international organizations grow more active and influential, however, understanding the factors that guide their behavior is useful for practitioners and analysts alike.

**Figure 1: Distribution of types of overall election assessments by organization**



Source: DIEM

\*Note: based on less than 10 observations.

**Table 1: Monitoring organizations\***

<b>Non-governmental Organizations</b>	<b>Intergovernmental organizations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Carter Center</li> <li>▪ National Democratic Institute</li> <li>▪ International Republican Institute</li> <li>▪ International Foundation for Electoral Systems</li> <li>▪ The Norwegian Helsinki Committee</li> <li>▪ The International Human Rights Law Group</li> <li>▪ The Asian Network For Free Elections,</li> <li>▪ The Elections Institute Of Southern Africa</li> <li>▪ The Electoral Commissions Forum of the SADC countries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The United Nations</li> <li>▪ The Organization For Security And Cooperation In Europe</li> <li>▪ The Council Of Europe</li> <li>▪ The European Union (Commission)</li> <li>▪ The European Parliament</li> <li>▪ The Organization Of American States</li> <li>▪ The Commonwealth Secretariat</li> <li>▪ The South African Development Community Parliamentary Forum</li> <li>▪ The Commonwealth of Independent States</li> </ul>

\*Note, the DIEM data includes the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well, but since no reports could be obtained from these organizations, they absent from the present analysis.

**Table 2: Summary of variables**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
OVERALL ASSESSMENT	591	0.24	0.36	0.00	1.00
IGO	591	0.65	0.48	0.00	1.00
IGO DEMOCRACY SCORE*	383	6.81	2.51	-0.82	9.92
WESTERN INGO	591	0.29	0.45	0.00	1.00
PRE-ELECTION VIOLENCE	578	1.21	1.15	0.00	3.00
LEGAL PROBLEMS	576	1.55	0.90	0.00	3.00
PRE-ELECTION CHEATING	573	1.62	0.99	0.00	3.00
PRE-ELECTION CAPACITY	575	1.69	0.94	0.00	3.00
ELECTION DAY CHEATING	573	1.51	1.04	0.00	3.00
ELECTION DAY CAPACITY	576	1.72	0.80	0.00	3.00
ELECTION DAY VIOLENCE	576	0.74	0.96	0.00	3.00
FIRST MULTIPARTY ELECTION	591	0.12	0.33	0.00	1.00
TRANSITIONAL ELECTION	591	0.06	0.23	0.00	1.00
LOG OF POPULATION	590	16.19	1.42	11.40	19.50
POST-CONFLICT ELECTION	591	0.11	0.31	0.00	1.00
LOG OF TOTAL TRADE (LAGGED 1 YR)	520	22.70	1.66	18.52	27.40
LOG OF FOREIGN AID (LAGGED 1 YR)	560	19.24	1.29	12.25	21.46
ELECTION QUALITY (PREV. ELECTION)	542	1.79	0.87	0.00	3.00
IMPROVEMENT	540	0.14	0.89	-2.00	3.00

\* Calculated for IGOs only, set to zero for INGOs

**Table 3: Ordered logit of Monitors Overall Election Assessment***Odds ratio (st. errors)*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
IGO		4.403*** (2.292)	4.839*** (2.707)	4.868*** (2.557)	13.88*** (8.493)
IGO DEMOCRACY SCORE		0.871*** (0.0416)	0.865*** (0.0436)	0.868*** (0.0425)	0.824*** (0.0487)
WESTERN INGO		0.789 (0.380)	0.790 (0.419)	0.879 (0.421)	1.542 (0.741)
PRE-ELECTION VIOLENCE		1.323** (0.172)	1.385** (0.188)	1.326** (0.181)	1.332** (0.192)
ELECTION-DAY VIOLENCE		1.155 (0.143)	1.066 (0.140)	1.141 (0.149)	0.968 (0.144)
STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK	0.707** (0.101)	0.718** (0.104)	0.664** (0.106)	0.722** (0.117)	0.674** (0.109)
PRE-ELECTION CHEATING	0.670*** (0.0977)	0.554*** (0.0923)	0.567*** (0.107)	0.538*** (0.0888)	0.746** (0.103)
PRE-ELECTION CAPACITY	0.840 (0.131)	0.788 (0.119)	0.812 (0.131)	0.786 (0.130)	0.935 (0.163)
ELECTION-DAY CHEATING	0.468*** (0.0810)	0.448*** (0.0794)	0.443*** (0.0831)	0.457*** (0.0810)	0.548*** (0.0990)
ELECTION-DAY CAPACITY	0.849 (0.152)	0.704* (0.144)	0.793 (0.169)	0.711 (0.148)	0.762 (0.167)
FIRST MULTIPARTY ELECTION		1.129 (0.373)	1.925 (0.827)	1.206 (0.417)	1.399 (0.474)
TRANSITION		2.483* (1.267)	2.478* (1.243)	2.519* (1.295)	3.230*** (1.390)
LOG POPULATION		1.061 (0.108)			
POST CONFLICT		1.547 (0.745)			
LOG TRADE (LAGGED 1 YR)			1.086 (0.113)		
LOG FOREIGN AID (LAGGED 1 YR)				1.197* (0.128)	1.149 (0.127)
ELECTION QUALITY (PREV. ELECTION)					0.188*** (0.0539)
IMPROVEMENT					3.302*** (0.774)
CONSTANT					
N	559	557	495	531	495
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	58.48	105.31	109.60	123.33	205.37
Prob>chi <sup>2</sup>	0	0	0	0	0
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.1759	0.2089	0.245	0.204	0.282
Log Likelihood	-400.89	-382.88	-342.43	-372.39	-314.52

\*p≤0.1; \*\*p≤.05; \*\*\*p≤.01

*Clustered on countries*

**Table 4: Changes in probabilities of endorsement and probabilities of ambiguity\***

<b>Variable change (min to max)</b>	<b>Changes in probability of Endorsement (st. error)</b>	<b>Changes in probability of Ambiguity (st. error)</b>	<b>Changes in probability of Denouncement (st. error)</b>
PRE-ELECTION VIOLENCE	.167 (.073)	-.112 (.050)	-.054 (.024)
STRUCTURAL LEGAL PROBLEMS	-.198 (.099)	.130 (.065)	.067 (.035)
PRE-ELECTION CHEATING	-.368 (.092)	.236 (.059)	.132 (.038)
ELECTION-DAY CHEATING	-.458 (.096)	.278 (.053)	.180 (.050)
FOREIGN AID	.277 (.152)	-.156 (.074)	-.121 (.086)
TRANSITION	.153 (.080)	-.111 (.059)	-.042 (.022)

\*Clarify Simulations based on model 4.

**Table 5: Probabilities of endorsement and probabilities of ambiguity\***

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Probability of Endorsement (st. error)</b>	<b>Probability of Ambiguity (st. error)</b>	<b>Probability of Denouncement (st. error)</b>
Other INGO	.601 (.110)	.287 (.072)	.111 (.043)
Western INGO	.578 (.052)	.303 (.039)	.118 (.022)
High Democracy IGO	.646 (.061)	.262 (.045)	.091 (.021)
Low Democracy IGO	.887 (.042)	.089 (.034)	.022 (.009)

\*Clarify Simulations based on model 4.

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