

**Western Election Monitoring:
A Signaling Game between Pseudo-Democratic Host
Countries and the Democratized West**

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Abstract

International western election monitors have traveled to democratizing countries since the 1960s to ostensibly observe election procedures and publish reports baring incumbents' commitment to democratization. While one would therefore expect only those governments devoted to democratic ideals to invite election monitors, we have increasingly seen so-called "pseudo-democrats" allow observers to witness overt instances of electoral fraud and/or violence. Despite such clear evidence of democratic backsliding in the developing world, the west maintains strong relations with these countries. In this paper, I first outline a leading theory for why election monitoring has become popular amongst pseudo-democrats. I then analyze data from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset specific to Africa to investigate what role election monitoring plays in relations between democratizing African countries and the democratic west. The data suggest that the leading theory that election monitoring is a norm signaling democracy does not tell the full story. Rather, developing countries invite election monitors as a broader signal of respect for western ideals and willingness to engage in economic, military, and political relations despite clear differences in governing styles. I conclude with some implications of what this theory suggests about the future of democratization.

Introduction

Why do corrupt governments purposefully invite western monitors to overlook elections that are neither free nor fair? What do incumbents gain in drawing international attention to their fraudulent behavior? And why do western entities expend time and resources sending election monitors to these countries, when they almost certainly know that electoral fraud is bound to occur? I evaluate data from every national executive and legislative election held in Africa from 1945 to 2015, some with western election monitors present and others without, to attempt to resolve these enduring queries. I argue that neither developing pseudo-democratic countries nor the democratized west invite or disburse western election observers with the intent to relay democratic commitment. Rather, I theorize that the use of election observers serves as signals of mutual respect and willingness to overlook institutional differences between these regions, serving to maintain positive military, political, and economic relations.

My theory provides a new dimension to existing election monitoring literature, which up until this point has presumed that the fundamental goal of western observers is to uphold democratic values and encourage consolidation in democratizing countries. I take a completely different approach, asserting that election monitoring as an endeavor has little to do with promoting democracy itself. This is an admittedly contentious assertion given the rhetoric of democracy promulgated by the west and the intimate relationship between democracy and elections, yet it is what the data suggests.

The questions asked and findings outlined in this paper challenge our existing perceptions of the relationship between international aid and democracy. The west likes to declare itself a bastion of democracy and often asserts that it maintains relations, particularly through aid

provision, with developing countries contingent upon their own espousal of democratic ideals.¹ The fact that developing “democracies” openly engage in electoral fraud without repercussions by the west combats this idea. A closer investigation into western election monitoring provides fascinating insight into the factors that the west truly bases its aid provisions off of. It also provides evidence for the level of transparency western countries maintain with the developing world regarding this information. Understanding the basis of relationships between the democratizing and democratized worlds has lasting consequences on our understandings of foreign affairs. If western aid is not actually contingent upon democracy, certain leading theories in international relations could be found to be based on faulty assumptions. The conclusions of this paper may therefore play an influential role in the field going forward.

I analyze all national elections conducted from 1945-2015 in 53 countries in Africa, which is every country on the continent except Eritrea because it does not hold elections, to corroborate my argument. I derive the data from the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset put together by scholars Susan D. Hyde and Nikolay Marinov. This data is distinctive from most other election-based datasets because it encompasses all elections, including those overtly deemed not free or fair. This allows for an investigation into how the findings of election monitors affect the behavior of pseudo-democracies in subsequent elections. It also facilitates an examination into how western entities typically react to election monitors’ findings of fraudulent conduct in host countries.

¹ Sarantism Kalyvitis and Irene Vlachaki, “When does more aid imply less democracy? An empirical examination” (European Journal of Political Economy, 2012) 134.

Literature Review

A sizeable portion of international relations literature focuses on the role that election monitors play in either democratic consolidation or democratic backsliding. Almost every country in the world hosts elections in the present day, yet the employment of elections alone does not guarantee that a country is a democracy. Researcher Alberto Simpser highlights that the increasing use of elections has coincided with an increasing establishment of so-called “pseudo-democracies”, namely governments that on paper promote open choice through elections but in practice ensure voting is neither free nor fair. He estimates that approximately 25% of national elections worldwide are undemocratic.² The most common ways these governments manipulate elections are through vote buying, stuffing ballot boxes, and intimidating opposing candidates and their supporters.³ Much of this manipulation is not as covert as one might assume; incumbents engaging in electoral fraud often do so very blatantly. Manipulating elections therefore not only serves as a method for ensuring victory but also as a symbol of strength and power over potential dissidents. Parties that are perceived as more commanding tend to hold greater bargaining power, a larger scope of governance, increased levels of rents, and fewer challengers in subsequent elections.⁴ These are all emerging characteristics of democratic backsliding.

While originally only developing countries dedicated to democratization invited monitors, nearly every country that hosts elections – including clearly established democracies that were not encompassed in monitors’ original target demographics and pseudo-democracies

² Alberto Simpser. *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 1.

³ Ibid 1.

⁴ Ibid 5.

whose elections are arguably not free and fair – invite election monitors in the present-day.⁵ A prominent international relations theory put forth by political scientist Susan D. Hyde suggests that this increasing prevalence of western election monitoring since the 1990s is because election monitoring has transformed into an international norm.⁶ According to Hyde, countries committed to the values of democratization will invite election observers for all national elections to receive validation and prove the government’s pledge to uphold democracy. This is especially the case for countries whose commitment to democracy is under question on the international stage.⁷

With the invitation of observers serving as a signal of democracy, and this signal helping governments receive monetary and prestige-based benefits, Hyde asserts that the presence of western election monitors has become an international standard. The democratized west supposedly delivers certain aid and resources contingent upon democracy; as these remunerations have increased, so have the incentives for developing countries to signal their commitment to democracy.⁸ Because it is difficult for democracy promoters in the west to inspect a government’s commitment to democracy directly, election monitors serve as informative intermediaries. Notably, not every country that invites election observers is automatically deemed democratic.⁹ Monitors are tasked with closely analyzing election proceedings and determining for themselves whether fraudulent behavior has occurred. However, as the popularity of monitoring has grown, the implication to the international community is that any country that does not invite observers is likely to be a non-democracy. For this reason, even if incumbent state leaders do not actually abide by democratic principles, they

⁵ Susan D. Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011) 2-3.

⁶ Ibid 28-55.

⁷ Ibid 56-88.

⁸ Ibid 89-125.

⁹ Ibid 158-184.

feel compelled to invite election observers for, if they do not, they will automatically be deemed non-democratic and removed from consideration for benefits.¹⁰ Hyde argues that pseudo-democrats essentially gamble by inviting observers in hopes that their fraudulent behavior will not be detected. This has particularly been the case since the end of the Cold War, as the range of countries that are eligible for democracy-contingent benefits has expanded from countries that were allied with the US and NATO to any countries that satisfied the requirements of being a democracy.¹¹

There are many theories regarding how the presence of election monitors in pseudo-democracies impacts the fraud conducted by incumbent governments. At the most basic level, if observers are dispersed at random locations throughout the country rather than at every polling site, their presence may just displace rather than dissuade fraud. A two-level randomized field experiment conducted in Ghana in anticipation of the 2008 elections found that irregularities in voter registration, namely over-registration of voters on the incumbent party's register, still occurred even though monitors had been sent to the country.¹² The registration sites that monitors observed experienced relatively fewer irregularities on the voting list, but nearby sites with no monitors had an increase in such irregularities, highlighting the transfer of fraudulent behavior from one electoral area to another. This insinuates that the activities observed by election monitors may indicate a stronger commitment to democratic principles than what actually occurs in the country's elections.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid 28-55.

¹² Nahomi Ichino and Matthias Schundeln, "Deterring or Displacing Electoral Irregularities? Spillover Effects of Observers in a Randomized Field Experiment in Ghana" (Southern Political Science Association, 2012) 292-307.

¹³ Ibid 306.

Not only do observers displace where electoral fraud occurs, but they may also incentivize governments to replace direct electoral fraud with other forms of fraudulent behavior. An analysis of the election behavior of 94 developing countries from 1990 to 2004 indicates that pre-electoral fiscal manipulation is one particularly common way through which incumbent governments improve their re-election chances when the presence of election monitors makes voting manipulation difficult.¹⁴ Fiscal manipulation, comprised of increased spending and/or decreased taxation prior to an election, is an arguably legal way to make the incumbent government more popular. For this reason, western election observers often do not criticize this form of behavior, and leaders turn to it in the presence of observers. The problem is that citizens of the country face stronger economic repercussions after the election because the depletion of the government budget can lead to the underfunding of critical policy programs.¹⁵

The literature suggests that international election monitoring can incentivize even stronger forms of democratic backsliding in pseudo-democracies. In an original-panel dataset of 342 executive and 602 legislative elections in 144 countries from 1990-2007, scholars Alberto Simpser and Daniela Donno found that the presence of high-quality election monitors was correlated with worsening rule of law, administrative performance, and media freedom in the host country.¹⁶ These covert forms of pre-election corruption are arguably much worse than overt electoral manipulation because they involve shifting government attention away from institutions that benefit the citizenry and instead towards sectors that are easiest to manipulate. Reductions in the strength of courts, administrative bodies, and free speech rights are not easily resolvable,

¹⁴ 2. Susan D. Hyde and Angela O'Mahony, "International Scrutiny and Pre-Electoral Fiscal Manipulation in Developing Countries" (Southern Political Science Association, 2010) 690-704.

¹⁵ Ibid 702.

¹⁶ Alberto Simpser and Daniela Donno, "Can Election Monitoring Harm Governance?" (Southern Political Science Association, 2012) 501-513.

leading to long-term declines in the democratic commitment of these nations.¹⁷ While causality is difficult to prove, existing literature clearly suggests that democratic backsliding is occurring in conjunction with election monitoring.

Background

International election monitoring began to enter mainstream conduct in the 1960s to combat forms of electoral manipulation and preserve election integrity.¹⁸ International monitors often supplement the work of national monitors, who conduct parallel observations and compose their own field reports. Electoral observers cannot interfere with the sovereignty of the host country or remedy instances of fraud as they occur.¹⁹ Rather, monitors are tasked with simply witnessing what transpires on election day and reporting these findings to the international community. Monitors are expected to be objective, non-partisan, accurate, detailed, and without conflicts of interest in the countries they visit.²⁰ Because monitors cannot easily document whether the underlying motives for fraudulent behavior are purposeful top-down orders from the government or bottom-up errors accidentally conducted by people on the ground, it can be difficult to assign culpability and denote fraud for random irregularities. However, when there is a consistent trend of manipulation over multiple polling sites or over subsequent elections, monitors are expected to convey in their observer reports that some form of deception is taking place.²¹ The hope is that the presence of observers detects and deters electoral irregularities, with any findings of fraud being addressed and resolved by incumbent governments in subsequent

¹⁷ Ibid 511.

¹⁸ The Electoral Knowledge Network, "International Observers: Roles and Rules."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

elections. In theory, this process gives election monitors significant influence over the perception of credibility that a host country receives amongst the international community.

This paper focuses specifically on the role that western election monitors play in the relationship between pseudo-democratic host countries and the democratized west. The literature review above strongly suggests that pseudo-democrats attempt to conceal their fraudulent behavior in front of election monitors, choosing instead to engage in pre-electoral manipulation that is harder to detect and deem undemocratic. Hyde's democracy signaling and international norm argument drives this field of thought. However, the democracy signaling and international norm argument, along with its resulting implications, is only as true as its core assumptions. This field of literature asserts that pseudo-democrats consciously highlight their democratically inclined behavior in order to receive positive reviews from election monitors and therefore increased benefits from the west.²² Within this assertion are two key assumptions. Hyde first assumes that western international actors prefer to support democratic countries and therefore determine the benefits that they provide based on information they receive regarding the strength of each country's democracy. While she does recognize that governments may overlook democratic ideals and provide non-democracies with benefits if those countries play some other strategically important role in international relations, there is still a clear relationship between democracy and western-provided benefits. Second, Hyde assumes that election monitors are impartial observers who provide information to international actors about the democratic strength of each country's government. Within this assumption is the belief that election monitors provide this information as truthfully as they possibly can.

²² Hyde 158-184.

I argue that both of the core assumptions of Hyde's democracy signaling argument are flawed. Despite detecting fraud when observing elections, monitors frequently downplay these findings in their official reports and denote elections as free and fair. This lack of accuracy in monitor reports counters Hyde's second assumption that monitors consistently convey their most accurate information. Furthermore, even when monitors suggest that fraud has occurred in elections, international actors often overlook this intelligence and provide benefits to pseudo-democrats anyway. Although Hyde mentions that special circumstances may allow non-democracies to receive similar benefits as democracies, the high prevalence with which these supposedly special circumstances occur in the real-world calls into question whether benefits provided by the west are truly contingent upon democracy in the first place. This weakens Hyde's first assumption. These discrepancies between theory and practice are arguably well-known by the non-western community; pseudo-democrats in the international developing world have often engaged in open fraud even after their actions have been detected by election monitors in prior cycles, indicating that they do not fear that the west may impose repercussions on them for undemocratic behavior.

The question then becomes: why do developing nations and the western world engage in election monitoring when both sides are aware that the other is not particularly concerned with democracy? I argue that the use of election monitors *does* represent a signaling game, just not the game that Hyde outlines. Rather than signaling democracy, the use of election monitors signals a commitment on behalf of pseudo-democrats to coexist with the west and respect its ideals even if not actually abiding by them. Such signaling is particularly important for developing countries, as they need to maintain positive relations with the west in order to receive development-focused aid and other benefits.

This paper uses the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy dataset, collaboratively built by Susan D. Hyde and Nikolay Marinov, to investigate the role that election monitors play in democratizing nations. I focus specifically on elections in Africa, as only one country on the entire continent – Mauritius – has been deemed fully democratic according to The Democracy Index.²³ The other countries – except for Eritrea, which openly does not hold elections – all claim to be democracies yet engage in various levels of undemocratic behavior.²⁴ This makes Africa an ideal region to investigate the role that international western monitors play in relations between pseudo-democracies and the democratized world.

The NELDA dataset has only two requirements: first, that voters directly elect the people on the ballot (rather than using committees, for example) and second, that the people on the ballot are directly placed to the national post at hand. This separates NELDA from most other accessible election datasets, as Hyde and Marinov impose no requirement for elections to be free and/or fair.²⁵ This flexibility in the definition of elections is what allows for a thorough investigation of the effects of election monitoring on relations with the west. I focus on three main questions. First, were western election monitors present at the election? Second, if western election monitors were present, were there allegations by western monitors of significant vote fraud? And third, was there a positive or negative change in the country's economic, military, or political relationship with a western country or IGO after the election? Note that positive relationships between host countries and the west frequently correlate with benefits provided by the west to the host countries in the case of Africa. Each of these questions correspond to yes-or-no variables in the NELDA dataset, and occasionally are accompanied by notes providing more

²³ The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and In Health?" (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2021) 47-50.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Susan D. Hyde and Nikolay Marinov, "Which Elections Can Be Lost?" (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 192.

detailed information on the yes or no response. There are two plausible scenarios that could play out.

Scenario 1:

Positive findings from election monitors maintain or increase the host country's economic, military, or political relationship with the west. Negative findings from election monitors decrease the host country's economic, military, or political relationship with the west.

This first scenario indicates that the western world pays attention to election observers' findings and alters its relations with host countries accordingly. This reinforces Hyde's argument because it delineates a clear relationship between democracy in the host country and relations with the west. It also relies upon comprehensive, trustworthy monitor reports being articulated by western observers to western leaders. A crucial implication of this scenario is that pseudo-democrats likely invite observers but then attempt to hide their non-democratic behavior in order to create a façade of democracy and remain on good terms with the western world.

Scenario 2:

The presence of western election monitors alone maintains or increases the host country's economic, military, or political relationship with the west.

This scenario differs from the first because it asserts that election observers' findings do not matter; so long as western monitors are present on election day, positive relations continue

between the host country and the west. Two deductions arise from this scenario: first, that election monitors do not necessarily have to provide impartial, accurate information to western leaders, as they are not basing decisions primarily off this information; and second, that pseudo-democrats can fairly openly engage in electoral fraud without consequences. This indicates that host countries' invitation of election observers serves a purpose outside of signaling democracy, as the west is not centering decisions based on whether or not democratic behavior occurs.

Data Analysis

Western Election Monitoring in Africa

Zimbabwe's 1980 national legislature elections marked a historic moment not only for the host country, holding its first proper elections post-independence, but also the host continent, as this was the first time that western election observers were invited to Africa.²⁶ Any semblance of exemplary democracy upheld by Zimbabwe for spearheading such election monitoring was soon tarnished, as Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party essentially turned the nation into a one-party state.²⁷ Nevertheless, the unprecedented action of inviting the west into Africa set a model for other nations to emulate.

Election monitoring reasonably gained traction in the 1980s in Africa, with Liberia, Nigeria, Malawi, and Egypt joining Zimbabwe in inviting western observers for their national elections.²⁸ However, the tipping point came in 1991, with more than twice as many elections hosting observers in 1991 and 1992 than in the entire decade prior.²⁹ Table 1 below delineates the number of elections in Africa with western monitors over 5-year ranges, clearly portraying a

²⁶ Susan D. Hyde and Nikolay Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

²⁷ Farai Sevenzo, "Robert Mugabe Colonized his Own Country" (Foreign Policy, 2019).

²⁸ Hyde and Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

²⁹ Ibid.

rapid spike in monitoring in 1991. Given the various African countries were at significantly different stages in the democratization process in the late 20th century, the sudden and simultaneous increase in election monitoring likely speaks to the existence of an alternative rationale for inviting monitors.

Table 1 – Use of Western Monitors in African Elections Over Time

5-Year Range	1976-1980	1981-1985	1986-1990	1991-1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015
Number of Elections with Western Monitors	2 *both in 1980*	4	5	68	68	70	65	81

Data Source: NELDA Data

An analysis of these trends exhibits a correlation between a significant spike in western election monitoring and the end of the Cold War in 1991. Hyde speculates that this relationship exists because the range of countries eligible for democracy-contingent benefits skyrocketed in 1991, with the west expanding from almost exclusively supporting Allied countries to supporting any nations that promoted democratic ideals.³⁰ In this sense, the invitation of election monitors served more as a signal to the western world than as concrete evidence of attempts at democratization. The question that this paper now attempts to answer is: in inviting election observers, what exactly is the host pseudo-democracy signaling to the western democratic world?

³⁰ Hyde 28-55.

Monitor Reports

Out of the 925 elections held in Africa since 1945, 363 invited western election monitors to observe the process. 58 of these elections were deemed fraudulent while the other 305 elections were assessed as comparatively free and fair; however, the criteria for distinguishing between these two categories remains ambiguous. Take the case study of Nigeria's 2011 elections, for example. The country has a lengthy history of violent disputes, ethno-religious disagreements, elite corruption, and lack of internal party cohesion.³¹ These problems frequently play out in the form of widespread electoral irregularities denoting fraud. As per the Human Rights Watch, election-related communal violence in Nigeria linked to party primaries, campaigns, and election day conflict left at least 165 people dead in the 2011 elections.³² This was at least in part because the election was delayed two separate times by the national electoral commission. The HRW also found fairly significant evidence of vote-buying, ballot-box stuffing, and inflation of results, which the incumbent president arguably did not try too hard to hide; some areas officially reported nearly 100% turnout, an incredibly suspect level of participation by citizens.³³ Despite such blatant evidence of electoral fraud, these elections were deemed non-fraudulent by official western election observers.³⁴ In comparison to Nigeria's previous elections, the conduct on election day was surprisingly respectable; in comparison to democratic standards and the average free and fair election, however, this conduct was clearly inexcusable. Nigerians themselves did not agree with the way voting was conducted, as indicated by post-electoral violence that took the toll of nearly 800 lives in the three days after election results

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800" (2011).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

were announced.³⁵ Western election reports, however, significantly downplayed these electoral irregularities to conclude that the improved conduct of elections made the polls successful enough to be declared not fraudulent.³⁶ This is one of many instances in which western observers acknowledge the existence of electoral irregularities in their reports but then conclude that the elections were free and fair enough to be deemed non-fraudulent. Western monitors' hesitancy to use the term "fraudulent" creates a false pretense of democracy and can reduce the generalizability and trustworthiness of election monitor reports.

In a seemingly complete 180 from their usual disinclination to declare elections as fraudulent, there are also instances in which western election organizations denote elections fraudulent without even having physical observers in the host country. Equatorial Guinea's 1993 and 1996 elections, Zimbabwe's 2005 elections, and Sudan's 2000 elections serve as prime examples of votes in which widespread fraud was so evident that monitors did not deem it worthwhile to expend precious time and resources working in the host countries.³⁷ Take the case of Sudan in 2000, for example. The abusive and authoritarian Sudanese government hosted national "elections" in the midst of a civil war marked with repression of political opponents. El Bashir had a history of torturing the Sudanese people, including through the enlistment of child soldiers and imprisonment of women, and particularly targeted his partisan adversaries in such persecution.³⁸ Candidates openly expressed concern participating in elections because of these substantial human rights abuses, making it evident that elections would not be competitive.³⁹ In

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hyde and Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2001: Sudan" (2001).

³⁹ Ibid.

extreme cases such as this one, western leaders have historically made evaluative judgments without actually sending monitors on the ground.

Similar cost-benefit analysis undertaken by democracy-promoting organizations like the United Nations has been clearly documented in technical election assistance. In “Resisting Democracy Assistance”, political science expert Inken von Borzyskowski statistically analyzes UN aid to 130 countries spanning from 1990 to 2003 and finds that the intentions of the host country reliably predicted whether or not aid organizations provided them with technical election assistance.⁴⁰ Notably, increased demand for technical assistance did not decrease the chances that any one country would receive help. This insinuates that financial and personnel resources are not a significantly limiting factor for democratic-election-promoting establishments, but these resources will also not be wasted in countries that do not care to abide by basic standards.⁴¹ This complexifies the dynamic between host countries and the west, as it proves that the west is only willing to be lenient up until a certain threshold. Pseudo-democracies can fairly easily get away with reduced commitment to election ideals, as more than 84% of all monitored elections in Africa up until 2015 have been deemed non-fraudulent by western observers, fairly clearly not aligning with on-the-ground experiences.⁴² For this relationship to work, though, host countries must maintain some baseline level of respect for democratic norms. So long as pseudo-democracies do so, election observers are often willing to overlook irregularities and arguably do not serve the role of impartial sources of information that Hyde assumes they perform.

⁴⁰ Inken von Borzyskowski, “Who Seeks and Receives Technical Election Assistance?” (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2016) 247-282.

⁴¹ Ibid 276.

⁴² Hyde and Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

Reports' Impact on Relations with the West

The western world does not react particularly strongly to the official findings detailed in western election observer reports. Table 2 below shows the change in the west's political, economic, and military relations with African host countries in response to monitor reports.

Table 2 – Impact of Reported Monitor Findings on Relations between Africa and the West

Monitor Report	Improved Relations	Deteriorated Relations	No Change
Free and Fair Total = 305	58 (19.02%)	5 (1.64%)	241 (79.02%)
Fraudulent Total = 58	2 (3.45%)	6 (10.34%)	50 (86.21%)

Data Source: NELDA Data

As the table indicates, an overwhelming majority of economic, political, and military interactions between the host country and the west remained the same pre- and post-election, regardless of what election monitors' findings were. While free and fair elections were more likely to improve than deteriorate relations, and vice-versa for fraudulent elections, these alterations in behavior towards host countries only occurred around 20% of the time. It is understandable for relations to not improve every time free and fair elections are realized, as benefits can only be provided up to a certain extent and connections can only develop so quickly. For this reason, both of my hypotheses predicted that positive findings from western election monitors would not always improve but would at least maintain existing relations. However, it is surprising that relations did not deteriorate at a much larger scope when fraudulent elections occurred.

The fact that negative findings from election monitors did not consistently decrease the host country's relationship with the west implies that the western world may not base its actions primarily on signals of democracy. This directly contradicts my first hypothesis, based on Hyde's emphasis on democracy-contingent benefits, as clearly undemocratic actions have consistently gone unpunished. Prime examples of the western world overlooking undemocratic behavior for alternative purposes are the two scenarios in which findings of election fraud in the host country correlated with not just sustained but actually improved relations with the west: Egypt in 2005 and Nigeria in 1999. Egypt's 2005 elections marked the first time in their history that a national election occurred between multiple candidates.⁴³ Accompanying this historic transition, however, came a laundry list of constitutional amendments ensuring that the elections would not truly be competitive. USAID election monitors picked up on this fraudulent conduct, highlighting explicit intimidation, low voter turnout, vote-buying, and violence leading to at least 12 deaths as evidence of electoral fraud.⁴⁴ The Egyptian government attempted to obscure these activities to such an extent that they would not even provide international monitors direct access to polling stations.⁴⁵ Despite all of this, the west – particularly the US – improved relations with Egypt post-election.⁴⁶

Nigeria's 1999 election monitor reports were similarly overlooked. Evidence of widespread irregularities at all stages of the election, including late and party-run delivery of voting materials, ballot-box stuffing, inflated voter turnout numbers, and bribery and intimidation of voters and election officials was conveyed in monitor reports.⁴⁷ Interestingly, not

⁴³ Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The 2005 Egyptian Elections: How Free? How Important?" (Brookings, 2005).

⁴⁴ International Republican Institute, "2005 Parliamentary Election Assessment in Egypt" (USAID, 2005).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hyde and Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Elections in the Delta" (1999).

just the incumbent party but also the main opposing party engaged in fraudulent behavior.⁴⁸ This hefty evidence was seemingly completely overlooked by the west – this time the main culprit being the British government – who decided to normalize relations with Nigeria and reinstate the host country into the British Commonwealth post-elections.⁴⁹ These examples suggest that the presence of western election monitors must represent some significant symbol outside of democratic intent that inspires the west to not only maintain but also improve relations with pseudo-democracies.

To better comprehend the role that western monitors play in relations with the west, the table on the following page analyzes all 925 elections held in Africa from 1945 – 2015. The table distinguishes between elections based on whether or not western observers were present and, if they were, what the observers concluded.

Table 3 – Change in Relations between Africa and the West Postelection based on Monitor Engagement

Change in Relations	No Monitors Present	Monitor Report – Free and Fair	Monitor Report – Fraudulent
Improvement (Total = 98)	38 (38.78%)	58 (59.18%)	2 (2.04%)
Deterioration (Total = 42)	31 (73.81%)	5 (11.90%)	6 (14.29%)
No Change (Total = 785)	494 (62.92%)	241 (30.70%)	50 (6.37%)

Data Source: NELDA Data

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Hyde and Marinov, *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset*.

The first column, which delineates the west's response to elections with no western monitors present, is particularly illuminating. In total, 562 of the 925 elections held in Africa from 1945 – 2015, or 60.76% of all elections in the dataset, had no western monitors present. This absence of monitors correlates with a pointedly lower probability of improved relations with the west, as only 38.78% of all improved relations in the dataset occurred when no monitors were present. Nearly all of these instances of improved relations occurred when the first elections were held in different African countries, indicating that a temporary boost in relations with the west can transpire when ostensibly democratic features are first implemented in a nation, but this alone will not improve relations in the long run. The lack of improved relations within this subset of the data proves that the presence of western election monitors holds some unique value to the west. This premise is further underscored by the higher-than-chance level of deteriorated relations when no western monitors were present; data with no monitors encompassed 73.81% of all deteriorated relations but only 60.76% of all elections. The onus for such deterioration could be on either party: the host country may have chosen not to invite monitors, signaling a lack of respect for western ideals and determination to engage in undemocratic behavior, or the west may have chosen not to send monitors, citing that the host country so obviously disregarded democratic practices that it would be a waste of resources to send personnel. Regardless of the root cause, absence of western monitors encompasses a larger proportion of deteriorated or unchanged relationships than it does improved relationships.

The second and third columns highlight what has already been discussed previously, namely that on occasion positive monitor reports improve relations and negative monitor reports deteriorate relations, but not consistently enough for overarching conclusions to be drawn. Adding on the prior findings – (1) western election observers have a history of de-emphasizing

deceitful conduct in their official monitor reports, thereby declaring fraudulent elections as “free and fair” and (2) western leaders have occasionally overlooked fraudulent judgments in monitor reports, choosing to improve relations with these host countries despite strong reasons not to do so – it becomes apparent that the presence of western monitors has a tendency to downplay undemocratic behavior and therefore improve or at least maintain relations with pseudo-democracies. These discoveries diverge from both of the core assumptions made in Hyde’s argument – namely that (1) western election observers serve as impartial and trustworthy sources of information and (2) the democratized world offer benefits based on commitment to democracy – and, in doing so, support the second explanatory scenario I posit over the first.

A New Signaling Theory

Of the two plausible relationships between democratizing or pseudo-democratic host countries and the democratized west that are posited at the start of this paper, the evidence distinctly supports the second scenario over the first. The first scenario, based off of Hyde’s democracy signaling theory, predicts that the west reacts uniquely adversely to findings of fraudulent conduct in host countries’ elections. Embedded within this expectation is the assumption that western election monitors provide reliable information to western leaders for them to base international relations decisions off of. An anticipated consequence of this relationship is that pseudo-democratic incumbent leaders attempt to conceal their fraudulent behavior in order to obtain positive findings from election monitors. None of these decrees hold true. Pseudo-democrats make little attempt to hide their fraudulent behavior and western election monitors are often the ones who choose to conceal such conduct instead. Efforts to downplay this behavior may not even matter, because even when monitors convey overt corruption in host

countries, western leaders are frequently willing to engage in open relations with these nations. So long as western election observers are present, the west appears happy to maintain or improve its relationships with African nations. This evidence all points to the second scenario presented: something about the presence of western election monitors alone maintains or increases the west's economic, military, or political relationships with host countries.

I hypothesize that the signaling game of inviting and sending election observers does not signal commitment to democracy but rather serves a broader function; collaboration between the two realms signals respect for their individual principles and willingness to engage in open economic, military, and political relationships despite substantial differences in governing styles. Demonstrating respect does require a certain baseline level of democratic intent, without which the west has empirically refused to send election monitors, but beyond that the host country has significant flexibility with regard to its governing and voting conduct. The west signals its own respect for the freedom of African nations by offering election aid and other forms of benefits without requiring strict adherence to democratic norms in return.

This framing of the signaling game between democratizing and democratized countries best encapsulates the findings present in the NELDA data. The spike in western election monitoring post-Cold War correlated with increased ease in demonstrating signals of respect to the west, as African nations were no longer required to promote and defend strict anti-communist policies but rather could engage in a broader espousal of western customs. Of the various methods of demonstrating respect, hosting election monitors is arguably one of the cleverest ways to do so, as it is a highly publicized, noticeable adjustment in regime practice that still allows for incumbent manipulation behind-the-scenes.⁵⁰ Unlike engaging in technical election

⁵⁰ Von Borzyskowski 250.

development or other structural assistance that encompasses strong aims to appreciably improve the democratic strength of a nation, inviting western election monitors who cannot even stop fraudulent conduct when they witness it is a simple remedy for pseudo-democracies.⁵¹ The repeated invitation of western monitors despite knowing that electoral manipulation has been detected previously and can be detected again arguably proves that host countries are cognizant that the west does not hinge its benefits upon democratic intent. Rather, the west seeks mutual deference.

Upon establishing that this signaling game is not grounded in democracy, the inescapable question becomes: what are the implications of this reformed signaling theory with regard to democratization in the developing world? If economic, military, and political benefits provided by the west are not contingent upon democracy, does this mean that democratic backsliding is inevitable in developing countries? Latin American nations have experienced multiple phases of widespread democratization followed by reversion to autocracy⁵²; arguably, the same could be the case for countries in Africa and other parts of the developing world if incentives for democratization are not robust. In fact, the past 20 years have seen democratic trends reverse; there are fewer strong democracies in Africa now than in 2000. Stifling of political opposition, detainment of activists and journalists, and eroding of constitutional protections all serve to shrink the reliable political sphere.⁵³ This affects corruption in elections specifically, indicated by the fact that the three longest-serving presidents in the world all come from Central Africa (Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and Congo-Brazzaville), but also harms other areas of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² John A. Booth and Leticia Heras-Gomez, "Democracy in Latin America: Status and Prospects" (Convergencia 2015).

⁵³ Christopher Fomunyoh, "Facing Democratic Backsliding in Africa and Reversing the Trend" (NDI 2020).

governance through the erosion of checks and balances, dependence of the judiciary, and undercut of economic growth.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the mutual understanding that western aid is not contingent upon democracy may actually advance democratic progress in host countries. The Hyde & O'Mahony and Simpser & Donno studies discussed at the beginning of this paper highlight how attempts to conceal fraudulent electoral behavior may result in pseudo-democracies implementing arguably more enduring, detrimental policy changes than election tampering would have resulted in.⁵⁵ My theory suggests that, on the contrary, pseudo-democrats do not bother to conceal electoral fraud. This is because they understand that election monitors will downplay irregularities and the western world will maintain open relations regardless of what monitor reports convey. If severe democratic backsliding *is* actually caused by the unique desire to hide fraud in the presence of election monitors, then under my theory democratic backsliding may actually diminish in the long run. Whether this implication plays out is unclear considering the difficulties of analyzing the counter-factual, i.e., whether the fairly robust trends of backsliding detailed by the National Democratic Institute would have been even worse if incumbent leaders chose to conceal fraudulent behavior. It also raises the question of whether the two studies misjudge the causal relationship between presence of election monitors and occurrence of democratic backsliding in the first place. Rather than pre-electoral fraud being prompted by attempts to conceal undemocratic election behavior, perhaps pseudo-democrats feel emboldened to engage in pre-electoral fraud because they understand that relations with the west will remain robust as long as monitors are allowed into the country. Understanding the rationale behind engaging in these

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hyde and O'Mahony 690–704; Simpser and Donno 501-513.

other, more indirect forms of manipulation is crucial to being able to combat it. Further research must be conducted to better assess the arguments made in the Hyde & O'Mahony and Simpser & Donno pieces and determine whether their conclusions hold in light of this new signaling theory.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of all elections held in Africa from 1945 to 2015 provides compelling evidence for a new theory on why pseudo-democratic countries invite western election monitors and why the democratized west sends these monitors when behavior in host countries is clearly fraudulent. The leading existing theory until this point has been that the invitation of election observers has transformed into an international norm signaling democratic intent, which the west relies upon in its distribution of democracy-contingent benefits. A closer examination of the data, however, provides a different story. Western election monitors play a crucial role in maintaining and improving relations between democratizing countries and the democratized west, but the data suggest that this role has little to do with the sustention of democracy itself. Host countries openly engage in illiberal practices that election monitors frequently downplay and the west directly ignores.

This paper proposes a new theory: the invitation of western election observers by pseudo-democracies and provision of aid by the west despite undemocratic behavior in host countries signals respect for each nation's ideals and willingness to engage in economic, military, and political relations despite clear differences in governing styles. Basing signals on broad respect rather than strict democratic intent explains why so many host countries openly engage in undemocratic behavior in the presence of western election officials, and why this behavior goes unpunished by the west.

Because this study is specific to Africa, there may be concerns that regional factors explain the west's tolerance of undemocratic behavior rather than the signaling theory presented in this paper. Africa is a highly strategic region for the west, which is trying to assert its influence before China and Russia assert too much dominance in the continent.⁵⁶ This arguably may be enough of an incentive for the west to overlook unjust behavior and provide aid to African countries. Hyde herself provides this caveat to her theory, noting that other characteristics may outweigh democracy as the most important consideration for aid provision as the west's priorities change on a case-by-case basis.⁵⁷

While this explanation holds fairly strong merit from the western point-of-view, it fails to explain why African countries continue to invite western monitors into their countries in the first place. There is no unique benefit they receive from drawing international attention to fraudulent behavior, so incumbent governments have little incentive to invite monitors unless they serve as a requisite signal to the west. Along the same line of thought, if the west were to provide benefits to Africa regardless of how leaders behaved, there would be no reason for the west to refuse to send monitors when a certain threshold of democratic intent is not met. The fact that this occurs proves western election observers hold some unique significance that correlates with a continuation or improvement of relations between African nations and the west. The new signaling theory presented in this paper can therefore be applied to democratizing nations more broadly throughout the world.

By breaking down the signaling game between pseudo-democratic African host countries and the democratized west, this paper provides a new perspective on the role that western

⁵⁶ J. Peter Pham, "China's African Strategy and its Implications for US Interests" (NCAFP 2006) 239-253; John Arquilla, et al. "Russian Strategic Intentions" (DOD 2019) 62-76.

⁵⁷ Hyde 37.

election monitors play in international relations decisions. The theory presented in this paper may have significant implications for the future of democratization in the developing world. The undertaking of further studies detailing whether the trends described in Africa persist in other regions of the world and how they affect democratic backsliding would help bolster the respect signaling theory and generate strategies to sustain international democratic growth.

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