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UN Electoral Assistance: Does it Matter for Election Management?*

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Abstract

Between 2007 and 2014 the United Nations (UN) provided technical, financial and logistical assistance to half of all elections held outside of established democracies. Does UN Electoral Assistance (UNEA) substantially contribute to the quality of election management? My analysis of original data on UNEA in combination with new indicators from the Varieties of Democracy- Project suggests that elections with UNEA are on average better managed than elections without it. Case studies illustrate that UNEA can effectively supplement and develop election management capacities – at least if the incumbent regime complies with the provided advice. Nevertheless, serious deficiencies in terms of electoral freedom and fairness remain in many UN-supported elections due to challenging political contexts.

Introduction

Electoral assistance is the backbone of international democracy promotion. It has become increasingly popular. Between August 2007 and December 2014, the United Nations alone assisted 37% of all elections worldwide and half of all elections outside of established democracies.¹ Contrary to mere election observation, electoral assistance includes active logistical, technical and financial support to electoral processes such as procuring ballot boxes, training polling station staff and educating voters. Particularly in countries with weak Election Management Bodies (EMB), international support seems critical for the proper conduct of elections.

Despite its practical relevance, academic literature on electoral assistance is scarce (Kelley 2012). Prior case studies and evaluation reports address specific experiences and methods of electoral assistance. However, a systematic empirical assessment of average effects of electoral assistance is lacking. This paper seeks to address this research gap by focusing on a central player in electoral assistance, the United Nations (UN).²

The first part of the paper outlines the practice of UN Electoral Assistance (UNEA) and identifies support to election management as its main component. Prior studies have shown average positive effects of democracy promotion activities (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson 2007; Dietrich and Wright 2015). International actors are particularly seen as useful for enhancing management capacities needed for credible elections (Kumar and Zeeuw 2006, 282; UNDP Evaluation Office 2012). Based on prior research on contentious elections (Pastor 1999, Schedler 2013, Kerr 2013, Hyde 2011), I argue that improving election management capacity entails many benefits and few risks for political regimes.³ Therefore, we expect on average positive effects of UNEA on the quality of election management.

In the second part of the paper I assess this hypothesis empirically based on an original dataset of all cases of UN Electoral Assistance in non-democracies between August 2007 and December 2014 and the new data from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem). In order to account for the non-random allocation of UNEA I use Heckman treatment effect models

¹ Author's calculations based on reports of the UN Secretary General (see below).

² The UN focal point for electoral assistance is the Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, but apart from the Department for Political Affairs also the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is largely involved in electoral assistance. Here, "UN Electoral Assistance" refers to the work of both entities. While the mandate of these two entities differs slightly and cooperation between them seems difficult at times (Flores, Morrice, and O'Shea 2012), it seems justifiable to address the efforts of both entities jointly in this paper given the ongoing efforts to better integrate UNDP and UN mission's electoral assistance work (see for example UNDP 2014, 31).

³ Regime – as understood in this paper - refers to both regime actors as well as "sets of formal and informal *rules* that structure the access to state power and its exercise" (Schedler 2013, 17).

and find a positive association between the presence of UNEA and improvements in election management capacity. This empirical finding supports the initial hypothesis. The underlying causal mechanisms are further illustrated based on the elections in Sudan 2010 and Libya 2012. However, serious deficiencies remain in many of the studied UN-supported elections due to challenging political conditions. In such contexts the UN has to be careful not to be perceived as legitimizing fraudulent elections.

This study is based on multiple sources such as 23 expert interviews with UN officials and other electoral stakeholders⁴, international election observer reports, newspaper articles, secondary literature and draws on field research⁵ in Libya. Additionally, the author was present in Sudan during the election period.⁶

I. UN Electoral Assistance: Practice and Impact

In the 1990s, international electoral assistance started as ad-hoc support to electoral administration and legal advice (Tuccinardi et al. 2006). By now, electoral assistance has become widespread. In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) alone provided electoral assistance to 60 countries (UNDP 2011). Most international donors (apart from the United States) channel their funds for electoral assistance through the UN (EuropeAid 2008, 30). Additionally, some regional organizations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe provide electoral assistance, but only to a limited number of countries (Gawrich 2014). Given its size and legitimacy as international organization, the UN is perceived as the key player in electoral assistance. Therefore, UN Electoral Assistance is the focus of this paper.

Electoral assistance providers tend to provide support throughout the electoral cycle and pay increased attention to the suitability of the environment for elections and to the capacities of non-state actors (e.g. UNDP 2007). Hence, UNEA programs can be conceptualized as comprising three, interrelated tracks: Election Management, Mediation/Electoral Framework and Capacity Development for Non-State Actors (see Table 1)⁷.

⁴ For methodological clarification on the interviews and a list of interviews see Appendix A1.

⁵ 5-12 July 2012; 6-13 October 2012 and 25-29 January 2013.

⁶ Various activities in Sudan 2009-2011 (among others as consultant for UNDP electoral assistance project).

⁷ This conceptualization of UNEA in three tracks builds on my prior knowledge and twelve interviews with current or former UN officials concerned with elections between 2012 and 2014 (see Appendix A1). Furthermore, I synthesize detailed overviews of typical UNEA activities from the following studies: UNDP (2009), and UNDP Evaluation Office (2012).

Table 1: Three Tracks of UN Electoral Assistance

<p>Track 1 “Election Management”: This traditional track includes supporting the Electoral Management Body (EMB) in all aspects of election management, e.g. planning and procurement, voter and candidate registration, out-of country voting, Election Day management, results counting and tabulation. Other state actors – such as judiciary and security sector – might also benefit from UN election-related training.</p>
<p>Track 2 “Mediation and Electoral Framework”: UN officials mediate between electoral stakeholders and provide technical advice about international standards for the legal framework of elections. In rare cases UN missions verify the credibility of the electoral process.</p>
<p>Track 3 “Capacity Development for Non-State Actors”: This track mainly comprises education of voters about electoral rules and procedures. Additionally, activities target political parties, media and civil society. Often, funds and technical assistance are provided for domestic election observers.</p>

Track 1 includes the traditional UNEA activities in the realm of election management such as logistical, financial and technical assistance to the EMB, but also other support to state actors such as election security trainings. UN officials routinely mediate between electoral stakeholders in order to promote agreement on the electoral framework and facilitate acceptance of election results. Related to such processes, UN experts often provide technical advice about international standards for legal framework. Both activities are combined to Track 2. Track 3 captures capacity development and support to non-state actors such as political parties, media and civil society as well as voter education.

The size and priorities of electoral assistance programs vary greatly. Most UNEA projects have a small number of technical advisors and a minor budget.⁸ There are also larger projects including substantial amounts of financial assistance. For example, in the time period 2004-2011, UNDP implemented three projects over \$100 Mio and at least seven projects with a budget over \$20 Mio (UNDP Evaluation Office 2012, 19). In rare cases, the United Nations directly organize entire elections, e.g. in Cambodia (1992/-93) or East Timor (2001/-02) (Bjornlund 2004, 42).

Overall, it seems that – despite the ambition of the Electoral Cycle approach – technical assistance to electoral management (Track 1) remains the core business of UNEA. The UN Department for Political Affairs (2012) clearly states that its main election-related task is to

⁸ UN DPA. 2016. “Elections.” <http://www.un.org/undpa/elections> (checked on 15.3.16).

provide “expertise (...) to national authorities in charge of administering elections in their country.” Likewise, a meta-evaluation on two decades of UNDP electoral assistance (UNDP Evaluation Office 2012a, 15) names support to election administration the “mainstay” of UNDP electoral assistance.

UN Electoral Assistance and Democracy Aid

Studies specifically assessing the UN’s role in electoral assistance are mainly limited to case studies (e.g. Newman and Rich 2004). Furthermore, Ludwig (2004) describes UNEA activities, but without much critical analysis. Based on several case studies, Newman and Rich (2004, 29) infer that UNEA had a positive role in small societies such as Kosovo, Namibia or East Timor, whereas in larger countries such as Cambodia the impact of UNEA is potentially more problematic.

Furthermore, electoral assistance providers have published evaluation reports and studies on electoral assistance.⁹ UNDP’s recent meta-evaluation report provides a relatively systematic account of its electoral assistance from 1990 to 2012 (UNDP Evaluation Office 2012). The study concludes that UNDP often successfully enhances the management of elections (ibid. 38). However, the authors also state frankly that UNDP’s electoral assistance has no tangible impact on the overall electoral environment if the regime is not committed to democratic norms (ibid, 41).

The broader literature on democracy promotion reflects similar notions. Several large-N studies found moderate average positive effects of democracy aid on democracy (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson 2007; Dietrich and Wright 2015). However, many studies emphasize that local political conditions need to be conducive for democracy aid to have a substantial impact.¹⁰

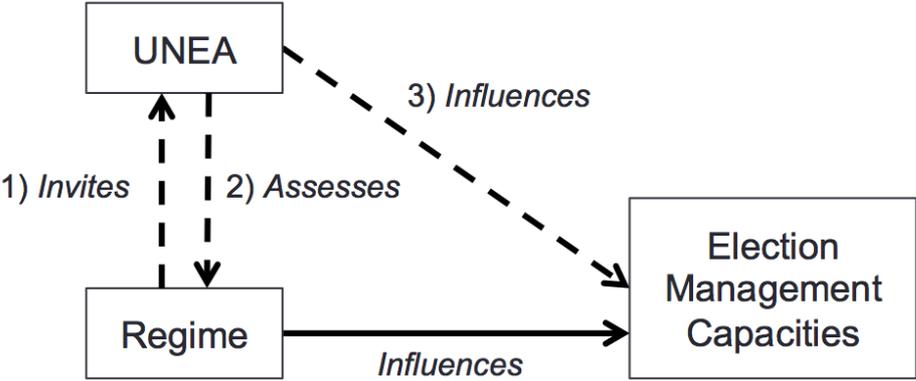
Allocation of UN Electoral Assistance

Democracy aid is not allocated at random (Dietrich and Wright 2015). This is likely to apply for UN Electoral Assistance as well. Therefore, for studying the effectiveness of UN Electoral Assistance we need to model selection effects and therefore first have to analyze what determines UNEA allocation (see Figure 1).

⁹ For an overview see Rao, Sumedh. 2013. “Helpdesk Research Report: Impact of Election Assistance.” Governance and Social Development Resource Centre. <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq895.pdf> (checked on 20.4.16).

¹⁰ See for example Whitehead (2004, 158), de Zeeuw et al. (2006, 282), Vichery and Sheinberg (2012, 9) and Cornell (2012).

Figure 1: Allocation and Implementation of UN Electoral Assistance



Note: 1) The regime issues a formal invitation for electoral assistance. 2) The UN decides on this request based on an assessment of the regime’s commitment to electoral credibility and electoral infrastructure. 3) If UNEA is invited and granted, it can influence election management capacities.

In theory, the allocation of UNEA proceeds in two steps (UNDP 2007, 9ff). First, governments formally request UNEA. Second, after receiving a request for electoral assistance, the UN considers several political and developmental factors in a needs assessment process (UNDP 2007, 9ff). This often includes the deployment of a “Needs Assessment Mission” with representatives of UNDP and the UNEA Division (UNDP 2007, 10). Based on their recommendations, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs decides whether to send UNEA or not (UNDP 2007, 9).

In practice, it seems that most requests for UNEA were approved, but exact records and figures are not available publicly. According to a UN document, 72% of all positive recommendations of needs assessment missions have led to “formulation of electoral support projects” between 2012 and 2013 (United Nations General Assembly 2015, 23). This supports the notion of relative high approval ratings, but in order to calculate the figure of overall approval ratings more information would be needed, for example the number of positive recommendations of needs assessment missions, which is not available publically.

One of the reasons for a relatively high success rate of formal requests could be that informal mechanisms are at work as well. In many developing countries, the UN maintains a strong local presence. Based on expert interviews, it seems plausible that local staff encourages governments to request UN Electoral Assistance if they think it is likely that the country passes the UN’s allocation criteria and discourages less promising applications in order to avoid problems in the relationship with this country. UNEA is likely to be allocated to cases where the

strategic interests of both the regime and the UN overlap. Regarding the allocation of UNEA, it is therefore important to understand the strategic calculus of 1) the regime and 2) the UN.

1) For *regimes elites*, the presence of UN Electoral Assistance has two main potential benefits. First, they might be interested in actually improving the quality of election with the help of the UN. The logistics of elections are challenging and expensive. International support can help to lower the election-related costs for the regime and avoid managerial as well as other problems. Second, the mere presence of UN Electoral Assistance can increase electoral credibility and hence legitimacy in the national and international arena. Similar arguments can be found in the literature on election observation (Hyde 2011, 3f). The main risk for regimes is that UN-induced improvements of the electoral process substantially increase their chance of losing elections. However, past research has shown that international actors have little leverage to prevent electoral manipulation against strong political will of the regime (Elklit 1999). Hence, the risk of increasing the chances for electoral defeat for the regime exists, but can be mitigated. Therefore, requesting UN Electoral Assistance may appear to be beneficial for most regimes seeking to enhance their electoral credibility.

2) *UN officials* have two main criteria for granting UNEA: Gaps in electoral infrastructure and a country's "commitment to organize and conduct credible elections" (UNDP 2007, 9). The first criterion is quite straightforward and gives prejudice to countries with weak prior election management capacities. Regarding the second criterion, the UN provides a list of issues to be considered during Needs Assessments Missions including the situation of political parties and media (UNDP 2007, 10–15). The UN acknowledges that it runs the risk to damage its own reputation by supporting fraudulent elections.¹¹ The more the UN supports rigged elections, the less they will be able to enhance the credibility of future electoral processes. If a regime has a track record of restricting media freedom and the activities of political parties this is likely to be perceived as an indicator for a lacking commitment to credible elections. Hence, I assume that such regimes should be less likely to receive UNEA. Finally, the UN refrains from allocating UNEA if other actors (particularly regional organizations) are or will be providing electoral assistance.¹²

Considering both the regime's and the UN's strategic interests, a set of key hypotheses emerge that can be expected to influence the allocation of UNEA. The UN should be more interested in providing electoral assistance to countries with low levels of prior election management capacities, because here they are more likely to be able to fill gaps in the electoral

¹¹ UNDP (2009: 85) acknowledges this problem and states that careful needs assessment is "a critical factor in upholding the reputation of the United Nations as a credible, standard-setting institution in this field."

¹² Author interviews with UN officials, New York, June 2013 (# 14,15, 17, see Table A1).

infrastructure. Such considerations should resonate with the incumbent regime's interests of achieving more electoral credibility. However, the desire for electoral credibility should be higher in countries in transition - in an interval of ambiguity, under foreign occupation or in the realm of a period of severe instability. Such elections should also be more likely to attract UN support, because they present political openings and are typically high on the international agenda (e.g. Libya 2012, Afghanistan 2009, Iraq 2010). Conversely, countries, which do not subject the Head of the Executive to multiparty elections, have made a conscious choice to limit electoral credibility. Such so-called closed autocracies (Schedler 2009) should be less likely to receive UNEA, which applies also in general in repressive contexts.

Effectiveness of UN Electoral Assistance

Once UNEA is granted, it can be mainly expected to influence election management capacities. As discussed above, nowadays, electoral assistance includes not only management support but also several other components of the electoral process such as building the capacity of non-state electoral stakeholders or advising on the legal framework. Nevertheless, in the area of election management capacities a tangible impact of UNEA appears more plausible than in other areas of the electoral process for several reasons. First, this area remains the main focus of UNEA as discussed above. Second, an election is typically the "largest peacetime mobilization of the national population in a short time span" (Schedler and Mozaffar 2002, 1). Hence, the management of elections is extremely resource and knowledge intensive (Pastor 1999) whereas other areas of the electoral process are more dependent on the political will of the regime than on such capacities. International actors can substitute and build capacities, but not the political will of national actors (Tolstrup 2014). Therefore, this paper focuses on the UN's influence on election management capacities and not on other aspects of the electoral process.

However, even the management of elections is often not free from political influence. The regime shapes the level of election-related capacities (Vickery, Sheinberg 2012, 9). As "gatekeepers" (Tolstrup 2014), regime elites also have the tools and power to limit the influence of UNEA on election management. However, for several reasons it seems plausible that – once UNEA is invited – most regimes would allow UNEA to at least partially improve the quality of election management. First, through inviting UNEA they have already shown that they are at least somewhat interested in electoral credibility. For many regimes strong signals of electoral credibility are vital, particularly if there are doubts about their democratic credentials (Hyde 2011). In established democracies, governments are not likely to survive without electoral credibility. Even to many non-democratic regimes signals of electoral credibility might be highly

attractive in order to help regimes to gain legitimacy not only in the eyes of international, but domestic audiences, too, and deter rivals within the national elites (Birch 2011, 52). For example, voters in Nigeria reportedly base their trust in electoral outcomes on their experiences with the management of elections (Kerr 2013).

Second, allowing Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to receive adequate capacities does not significantly increase the risk of losing elections for incumbents. There are plenty of other avenues for the regime to tilt the playing field – for example by limiting EMB autonomy, restricting media freedom or repressing opposition activities (Schedler 2002). Hence, improving election management has mainly positive effects for the regime and carries little risks.

Summary and Hypothesis

The management of elections is not a trivial task – particularly not for regimes with low prior election management capacities. If national governments do not have sufficient election-related capacities, I expect international electoral assistance seems crucial for ensuring the professional conduct of elections by substantially improving the management of elections.

Nevertheless, UNEA can only improve the quality of elections if regime elites cooperate. Most regimes have a sustained interest in receiving more electoral credibility – at least to the extent that it does not endanger their chances of re-election. In more open contexts, international assistance may provide technical tools necessary to substantially improve election quality. However, even in some less conducive contexts, incumbent elites could still be interested in incremental improvements in election management in order to appear more credible. Therefore,

H1: On average, UN Electoral Assistance has a positive effect on EMB capacity.

II. UNEA and the Capacity of Election Management

Bodies

Data

Surprisingly, the many comparative data sets on elections do not include reliable information on electoral assistance. Hence, based on reports of the UN Secretary General to the General Assembly, I compiled the first comprehensive data set on UNEA (between August 2007 and December 2014).¹³ These reports can be considered a reliable data source, because all formal requests for UNEA have to be cleared by the very UN department, which is responsible for the aforementioned report.¹⁴ Consistent information on the size of the electoral assistance operations is unfortunately not available. Therefore, the subsequent empirical analysis is based on binary information of whether an election was supported by the UN.

National electoral events in polities with 500 000 inhabitants or more are the unit of analysis based on the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset (V.4) (Hyde and Marinov 2012).¹⁵ Outside of established democracies,¹⁶ 286 national elections took place in between 2007 and 2014. 48% of them have received UN Electoral Assistance, which is a remarkable large share. Sub-Saharan Africa is a hot spot for UNEA with 75% of elections receiving support. In the other world regions UN supported the following share of elections: 49% Asia, 41% Middle East and North Africa (MENA); 44% Latin America; 24% Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Asia (Figure 2).

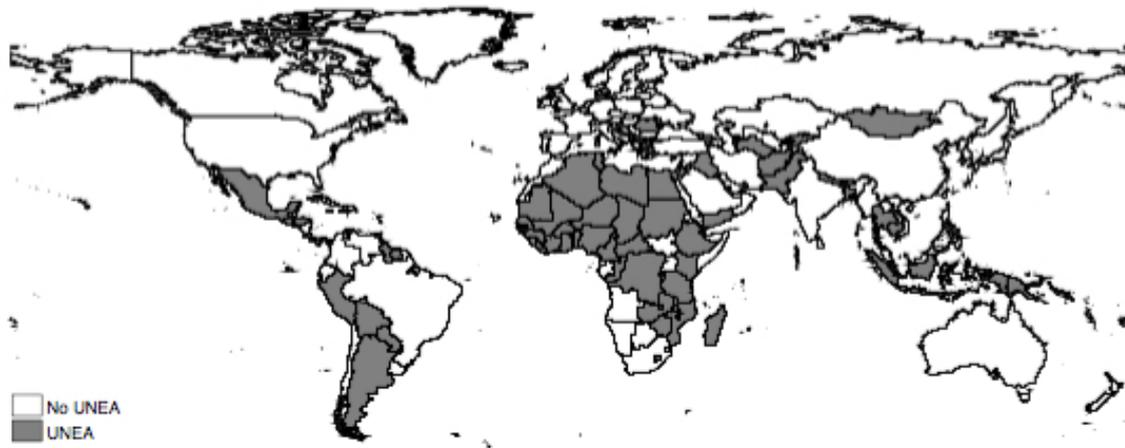
¹³ The UN Secretary General submits biannual reports to the General Assembly on UNEA. In the annexes of the last four reports from 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015, all UN assisted electoral processes are listed (UN document A/64/304, A/66/314, A/68/301 and A/70/306). Unfortunately, earlier reports do not include these detailed data (for 2007 see UN document A/62/293).

¹⁴ Author interview UN staff (#14 and 17; see Table A1); UNDP might have delivered small electoral assistance projects to elections that are not captured by the report.

¹⁵ This includes legislative and executive elections and elections for constituent assemblies. Following Hyde, if executive and legislative elections take place on the same day, only executive elections are kept in the data set as “general” election. Potential second rounds of elections are not included (Hyde 2011, 62). NELDA 4 only reaches until 2012. A research assistant has updated the election data for 2013-14 based on the NELDA coding rules.

¹⁶ Following common practice in the field, all countries with a Freedom House Political Rights Score of 1 are considered established or liberal democracies (Schedler 2013, 189f). In such context, UNEA is rare (7% of all national elections in the studied time period). Therefore, I exclude these cases from the analysis.

Figure 2: Countries with UNEA 2007-2014



*Note: Own illustration using *spmap*. Data source for UNEA as described above.*

Dependent Variable: Capacity of Election Management

As discussed before, the strongest component of UNEA is its support to the EMB. Hence, when thinking about the effect of UNEA, -first and foremost- we can expect a contribution of UNEA to the capacity of the EMB. Therefore, the level of EMB capacity is the main dependent variable of this study, for which I take an indicator from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set (Version 5.0; Coppedge et al. 2015).

The V-Dem project has compiled a huge data set on 400 different aspects of democracy with the help of more than 2600 expert coders from the entire world (Coppedge et al. 2015b: 2). The expert coders are typically academics from the respective country and are recognized experts on a specific sub-set of V-Dem indicators (Coppedge et al. 2015b: 2-3). To ensure reliability of the indicators, five expert coders per country are typically assigned to each indicator and also record their confidence in their assessment. These ratings were then aggregated based on a Bayesian ordinal item response theory model – which takes the reliability of individual coders into account - to the point estimates used in the regression analysis of paper (Pemstein et al. 2015). The described measures enhance the reliability of the data.

For the indicator in question, V-Dem expert coders assessed whether the EMB has “sufficient staff and resources to administer a well-run national election” on a scale from 0 (No) to 4 (Yes) (Coppedge et al. 2015: 74). V-Dem data is available as immediate measurement model output with 0 representing approximately the mean of all country-years, which is used here as dependent variable (see Pemstein et al. 2015: 37 and histogram in Appendix Figure A1). For better substantive interpretation, the data have also been reconverted to the codebook scale ranging from 0 to 4 (OSP-Version).

On average, in the studied sample of 217 elections¹⁷, the UN-supported EMBs have a lower capacity (2.26 on the V-Dem EMB capacity indicator; OSP version) than the non-supported EMBs (2.78). This does not surprise, because the UN aims to specifically provide support to those countries with weak EMBs. Hence, I expect the capacity of the EMB at the last election to influence UNEA selection considerations as well as the level of EMB capacity at the studied election. The important question is how much the EMB capacity changes compared to the last election and if this change could be attributable to the involvement of the UN. Therefore, I control for EMB capacity at the prior election both in selection and main model. Furthermore, findings hold when estimated with change in EMB capacity (the difference in EMB capacity at the studied election compared to the prior) as dependent variable (Model 5 on Table A3).

The V-Dem indicator more precisely covers the capacity of the EMB than other available cross-national indicator of election quality. Nevertheless, for external validity it is important to note that it correlates highly with an indicator of overall election quality from Freedom House (Pearson's $r=0.64$). Furthermore, the main findings of this paper hold when I estimate the regression models not with V-Dem data but with the Freedom House Electoral Process score (see Model 4 on Table A3).

Further Control Variables

Additionally, various control variables are included (for summary statistics see Table A2). As discussed, closed autocracies – authoritarian regimes without multiparty elections for the Head of the Executive – are expected to be less likely to attract UNEA. Hence, a dummy for closed autocracies is created based on two criteria: A FH Political Rights Score of 4 or greater and absence of multiparty elections for the head of the executive (V-Dem data).¹⁸ Likewise, UNEA is less likely to take place in countries that severely limit the autonomy of opposition parties (discussed above). Therefore, a variable from the V-Dem data set on opposition autonomy is included (low: no opposition parties allowed; high: opposition parties independent of the ruling regime).

Conversely, transitional elections – taking place in an interval of ambiguity, under foreign occupation or in the realm of a period of severe instability – are more likely to attract UN support. Therefore, the absence of a stable regime is measured with a dummy variable from

¹⁷ This number is different from the total sample of 286 elections, because V-Dem data is only available for 217 elections.

¹⁸ The concept of closed autocracies is based on Schedler (2013: 189f). Absence of multiparty elections is indicated with a score of 0 or 1 on V-Dem variables `v2elmulpar_ord_ex` or `v2elmulpar_ord_leg`, depending on the institutional configuration (Coppedge et al. 2015: 74).

Polity IV's "Standardized Authority Codes."¹⁹ Post-conflict elections are controlled for with a dummy variable signifying an armed conflict during the ten years prior to the election based on data from the widely used UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002; taken from Teorell et al. 2015). The wealth of a country might play a role both for allocation of UNEA and for election quality. Hence, the log of GDP per capita (constant 2005 USD; t-1) and aid dependency (net Official Development Assistance to GDP ratio; t-1) are added as control variables. Furthermore, resource wealth may reduce a regime's incentive to gain electoral legitimacy and hence improve the quality of elections. Therefore, the share of oil revenues/GDP is added as control variable.²⁰

Finally, UNEA is distributed unevenly among world regions (see above). UNEA is less present in East Europe/Post-Communist Asia - probably due to the engagement of the OSCE in this region.²¹ Hence, a dummy variable for this world region is added to the selection equation.

Treatment Effect Models

To summarize, the theoretical discussion above allows us to derive two main implications that are testable with quantitative methods. I would expect election quality – in particular the quality of election management – to improve in UN-supported elections. As discussed above, UNEA is not allocated at random, but purposefully to some elections and not others. Such selection considerations need to be taken into account when modeling the effect of UNEA. To this end I estimate Heckman-type treatment effect models with EMB capacity as dependent variable (Guo and Fraser 2015, 100–1).²² All models are run with robust standard errors clustered by country to take autocorrelation of observations in the same country into account (N= 217; 114 countries) and are using maximum likelihood estimation.

¹⁹ For a description of the "Standardized Authority Codes" see Marshall, Monty G., Robert T.; Gurr, and Keith Jagers. 2013. "Polity IV Project. Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2013." Dataset Users' Manual, Center for Systemic Peace. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/p4manualv2013.pdf> (checked on 15.11.15), p.19.

²⁰ Source for the economic indicator are the World Bank's "World Development Indicators." <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators> (checked on 15.11.15).

²¹ Author interviews with UN officials (#14, 16 and 17; see Table A1). On the engagement of the OSCE see Gawrich (2014)

²² Regression equation: $EMB\ capacity_i = x_i\beta + UNEA_i\delta + \varepsilon_p$

Selection equation: $UNEA_i^* = z_i\gamma + u_p$ with $UNEA_i = 1$ if $UNEA_i^* > 0$, and $UNEA_i = 0$ otherwise;

z_i is a vectors for the covariates of UNEA and x_i for the covariates of EMB capacity; α and β are parameter vectors and δ is a scalar parameter. ε_p and u_p are bivariate normal with mean zero and covariance matrix of

$\begin{bmatrix} \sigma_\varepsilon & \rho \\ \rho & 1 \end{bmatrix}$ (see Guo et al. 2015, 97).

Table 2: Treatment Effect Models with EMB Capacity as Dependent Variable

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>EMB Capacity</i>		
UNEA	0.521** (0.123)	0.527** (0.130)
EMB Capacities (Prior Election)	0.888** (0.0453)	0.885** (0.0496)
Closed Autocracy	0.177+ (0.0995)	0.159 (0.0992)
Post-Conflict	0.123+ (0.0645)	0.125+ (0.0652)
GDP per capita (logged; t-1)	0.200** (0.0565)	0.180** (0.0545)
In Transition		-0.0630 (0.227)
Oil revenues/GDP (log; t-1)		0.00137 (0.0194)
Aid Dependency (t-1)		-0.00413 (0.00610)
Constant	-1.742** (0.464)	-1.564** (0.447)
<i>UN Electoral Assistance</i>		
EMB Capacities (Prior Election)	-0.239+ (0.139)	-0.234 (0.145)
Opposition Autonomy (t-1)	0.198* (0.0961)	0.198+ (0.101)
In Transition	2.364** (0.892)	2.489* (1.064)
Closed Autocracy	-0.684* (0.333)	-0.650+ (0.341)
Post-Conflict	-0.136 (0.239)	-0.138 (0.228)
Aid Dependency (t-1)	0.00604 (0.00778)	0.0139 (0.0123)
GDP per capita (logged; t-1)	-0.701** (0.150)	-0.661** (0.149)
East Europe/Post-Soviet Asia	-0.229 (0.261)	-0.226 (0.263)
Constant	5.412** (1.154)	5.056** (1.163)
Observations	217	217
AIC	384.4	388.3
Wald test of $\rho=0$: χ^2	13.56**	12.82**

*Robust standard errors in parentheses (clustered by country); + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$*

Model 1 estimates that the likelihood of UNEA allocation decreases with increasing EMB capacities at prior elections and increases with opposition autonomy (Table 2). Taking these selection effects into consideration, the presence of UNEA is correlated with a higher EMB capacity. Hence, the predicted increase at UN presence of 0.521 points is substantially large considering that the V-Dem indicator for EMB capacity ranges from -1.93 (min) to 2.84 (max). Model 2 includes all of the above-discussed control variables and still estimates a substantially relevant effect (0.527 points) on EMB capacity (Model 2).

The covariates show effects in the expected directions. Noteworthy is that the likelihood of UNEA allocation is estimated to decrease in closed autocracies, but increases in transitional contexts as expected. Furthermore, EMB quality is estimated to increase with per capita GDP and in post-conflict contexts.

Treatment effect models are appropriate if the error terms of the selection and the regression equation are likely to correlate. This can be assessed with a Wald test, which compares independent selection and main models with the treatment effect model (Guo et al. 2015, 103). Based on this likelihood ratio test, the null hypothesis (no correlation of error terms) can be rejected for all two models ($p < 0.01$). This supports the specification as treatment effect model.

For robustness purposes, Model 2 is estimated with alternative dependent variables: The change of the level of EMB capacity (compared to the prior election) (Model 3) and the Freedom House electoral process score (Model 4). Furthermore, Model 2 is estimated with a different indicator for prior EMB capacities. In countries with long interruptions of the electoral cycle the EMB capacity could diminish. Hence, for countries with no elections for 7 years or longer ago this indicator is set to 0 (Model 5).²³ Findings for Model 3, 4 and 5 are substantially the same as Model 2 (see Table A3 in Appendix). This increases confidence in reliability of the V-Dem indicators and the findings. Furthermore, improvements in EMB capacities are predicted to be less likely in countries with high prior EMB capacities (Model 3). This supports the notion that EMB capacity improvements are more likely in contexts with weak prior EMB capacities.

²³ This variable is based on the OSP version of the V-Dem data, which transforms the measurement model output (used in the regression analysis) back to the original codebook scale (see Pemstein et al. 2015). In this version of the data a score of 0 indicates non-sufficient electoral management capacities.

Discussion

Large-scale country-level development interventions – such as UNEA – cannot be studied under experimental conditions. The estimated treatment effect models take key non-random selection considerations into account as well as other determinants of the level of EMB capacity. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that factors systematically influence the allocation of UNEA and/or the capacity of the EMB that were not accounted for in the models. Therefore, the estimated differences in EMB capacity in UN-supported elections compared to non-supported cannot unambiguously be fully attributed to UNEA. Nevertheless, the empirical findings provide support for the notion that UNEA – on average – helps to improve EMB capacity.

Particularly in countries with weak prior election management capacities, a key role for UNEA seems plausible. Take for instance the first Post-Gadhafi elections in Libya in 2012. The Libyan interim authorities faced the daunting task of building an election management body from scratch after living for 42 years under a totalitarian ruler who demonized representative institutions and processes (International Crisis Group 2011, 7). Around 55 UN advisors assisted the Libyan High National Election Commission (HNEC) on all matters of the technical, legal and logistical side of elections (UN Security Council 2012). This included operations, data management, procedures and training, candidate and entity certification, public relations, election security and civic and voter education (EU EAT 9.7.12, 19). The result was a free and fair election²⁴ that the EU chief election observer, Lambsdorff, praised as “one of the best I have seen so far.”²⁵ Given the absence of prior experience with managing elections in Libya, it is highly doubtful that the Libyan elections would have reached international standards without substantial UN advice and logistical support.²⁶ For example, on the eve of elections a helicopter with voting material near Benghazi was shot.²⁷ UN election experts were instrumental for quickly organizing additional ballots from printers abroad.²⁸ These efforts led to a professionally managed election, but did not prevent Libya from sliding down to chaos in subsequent years.

In Sudan the first multiparty elections in 24 years took place in 2010. Given the weak capacity Sudanese state, elections in – at that time - Africa’s largest country were a huge

²⁴ See report of the EU election observers (EU EAT 2012). V-Dem also notes the 2012 elections in Libya as fully free and fair (Coppedge et al. 2015).

²⁵ *Libya Herald*. 2012. “The Libyan Elections: ‘One of the Best I Have Seen so Far’ - EU Chief Monitor,” October.

²⁶ This view has been confirmed in statements of and expert interviews with key Libyan electoral stakeholders, e.g. Author interview with senior HNEC official, Tripoli, 27.January 2013; General National Congress member Abdallah, public speech, 9.11.12, HBS, Berlin.

²⁷ AJE. 2012. “Election Helicopter Attacked in Libya.” July. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/07/20127617053610274.html> (checked on 15.3.16).

²⁸ Author interviews with senior HNEC officer, Tripoli, 27.January 2013; and with UN official, Tripoli, 7.July 2012.

logistical challenge. The UN provided large-scale logistical, technical as well as financial electoral assistance worth around 139.2 Mio USD.²⁹ International funds were among others used for ballot boxes, ballot paper and capacity development of electoral stakeholders. The election-related cooperation between UNDP and the UN peace-keeping mission (UNMIS) was not free from challenges (Flores, Morrice, and O’Shea 2012, xvi). This may have affected the effectiveness of electoral assistance. Furthermore, EU election observers report several cases, where Sudanese authorities discarded the technical advice of international experts, which resulted in lower quality polls (EU EOM Sudan 2010, 7; 23). For example, the technologies and procedures provided by international advisors for transparent vote tabulation and counting processes were set-aside during the electoral exercise. Hence, the results tabulation and counting process “became untrustworthy and results were untraceable” (EU EOM Sudan 2010, 5). Overall, serious deficiencies in the management of elections and the freedom and fairness of the electoral exercise were noted.³⁰ Nevertheless, in light of the weak Sudanese administrative capacities and lacking electoral experience, it is likely that elections in 2010 would have turned out even worse without UN support.

The Sudanese case furthermore underscores the limitations of international electoral assistance. If incumbents chose to manipulate the electoral process, international actors can do little to prevent it (Elklit 1999). Due to Sudan’s good relationships with China, Russia and gulf countries, pro-democratic international actors had little leverage on the Sudanese government.³¹ Building on 21 years of rule, the Sudanese president was confident to be able to extend his rule even after flawed elections (Musso 2012; Zahar 2012). Furthermore, even flawed elections may contribute to authoritarian legitimacy (Schedler 2013: 274). This raises questions about potential counter-intended effects of electoral assistance. According to de Zeeuw (2005) democracy assistance “may also have the effect of legitimizing authoritarian practices.” Thomas Carothers (2015, 62) voices deep skepticism about electoral assistance in autocracies. Indeed, 42% of the studied UN-supported elections did not turn out free and fair according to V-Dem data.³² In such contexts, the UN risks being perceived as legitimizing deeply flawed electoral practices. This may have the counter-intended effect of adding legitimacy to non-democratic rulers and risks jeopardizing the UN’s ability of conveying credibility to electoral exercises.

²⁹ International donors (UK, EU, Japan, Netherlands and others) provided 84.2 Mio USD for electoral assistance through a UNDP basket fund (UNDP Sudan 2010, 1). The UN peace keeping mission in Sudan (UNMIS) provided significant technical and logistical support to elections – officially estimated at 55 Mio USD (UNDP Sudan 2010, 1).

³⁰ See for example report of the EU observers (EU EOM Sudan 2010); V-Dem experts rated the 2010 election in Sudan as “not really” free and fair and “not really” well-administered (Coppedge et al. 2015).

³¹ On Sudan’s partners see: Medani (2011); On the importance of leverage for the effectiveness of democracy promotion see: Levitsky and Way (2006).

³² Own calculations based on V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2015).

Conclusions

The management of elections – particularly without prior experience – can be a daunting task. In many cases, international support seems essential for ensuring the proper conduct of elections. Hence, on average UN-supported elections should be better managed than non-supported elections. The empirical analysis of 217 elections outside of established democracies supports this notion. In times of readily available international electoral assistance, lacking electoral experience and limited state capacities cannot be used as an excuse for bad elections, as the free and fair elections in Libya 2012 underscore. However, the chaotic development in Libya after the 2012 elections illustrates once more that professionally managed elections are no guarantee for successful transition processes.

Furthermore, many autocrats are not interested in substantially improving the quality of their elections (Sudan 2010). They may invite UNEA due to national or international pressure, but continue to substantially manipulate electoral process. In such contexts, UN Electoral Assistance risks becoming a fig leaf for a deeply flawed voting exercise. Although international support for elections in such contexts might incrementally improve elections, miracles should not be expected. If opposition politicians are tortured and media censored, it is unlikely that elections turn out free and fair. Conversely, international electoral assistance might be interpreted as international acceptance of non-democratic elections.

Such risks should be avoided through a more careful selection strategy. Already now, the UN avoids – but not excludes – countries with limited freedom for the opposition. In order to avoid legitimizing autocrats without gains in democratization, electoral assistance should not be considered advisable if substantial formal or informal obstacles preclude meaningful electoral competition. Further research is needed to assess the causal link between electoral assistance and authoritarian legitimacy.

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