INSTITUTIONALIZED ELECTORAL FAIRNESS AND GOVERNMENT QUALITY[1]

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A r t i c l e I n f o	*A b s t r a c t*
	This paper proposes that differences in fairness of elections between democracies can explain differences in government quality. Institutionalized unfairness in parliamentary elections decreases incumbents' perceived political costs of underperforming in democracies. When incumbents are aware that formal and informal political institutions allow manipulation of upcoming elections to maximize chances of winning, they can invest less in policies normally expected to win them votes, resulting in below-par economic, political and social outcomes for the society. I propose a simple yet novel measure of electoral fairness and test it against governments' average regulatory quality for 34 European countries between 1998-2017. The findings suggest a significant relationship between institutionalized electoral fairness and government quality, implying that countries with unfairer elections are governed less efficiently.

KURUMSALLAŞMIŞ SEÇİM ADALETİ VE HÜKUMET KALİTESİ

M a k a l e B i l g i s i	*Ö z e t*
	Bu makale, demokrasiler arasındaki seçim adaleti farklılıklarının hükumet kalitesi farklılıklarını açıklayabileceğini öne sürmektedir. Parlamento seçimlerindeki kurumsallaşmış adaletsizlikler iktidarların kendi performans düşüklüklerine dair algıladıkları siyasal maliyetleri düşürmektedir. İktidarlar, formal ve informal siyasal kurumların gelecek seçimlerin manipülasyonuna izin verdiğinin farkında olmaları durumunda oylarını arttırıcı politikalara daha az yatırım yapmakta ve bu durum, toplum adına beklenenin altında ekonomik, siyasal ve sosyal sonuçlara yol açmaktadır. Bu çalışma, seçim adaletini ölçmek için sade fakat özgün bir yöntem önermekte ve bu yöntem ile 1998-2017 yılları arası için 34 Avrupa ülkesinde seçim adaleti ile hükumet kalitesi arasındaki ilişkiyi ampirik olarak incelemektedir. Çalışmanın bulguları, kurumsallaşmış seçim adaleti ile hükumet kalitesi arasında, seçimlerin daha az adaletli olduğu ülkelerin daha kötü yönetildikleri sonucunu gösteren, istatistiki olarak anlamlı bir ilişkiye işaret etmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

Free and fair elections are an indispensable characteristic of democracy. Fair elections are especially associated with levels of economic welfare enjoyed by advanced democracies, while most flawed democracies still have room for improvement in this respect (Landman and Splendore, 2020). This paper connects electoral fairness and government quality to explain how the former can account for cross-country differences in the latter.

Democratic governments are by definition incentivized to implement economic policies designed to increase living standards of citizens (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000). This is due to incumbents' reelection motives, for voters reward or punish governments based on their perceptions of how well the government has managed the economy. Since elections can serve to filter out underperforming governments, perceived political costs of failing at pleasing voters economically is high for incumbents in a well-functioning democracy.

The paper at hand provides a simple explanation as to why lack of institutionalized electoral fairness can result in lower government quality. The explanation builds on the premise that pleasing voters economically to increase vote share is not the only strategy reelection prospects incentivize incumbents to formulate. In a simplified approach, I assume incumbents face three types of incentives in determining their reelection strategy:

    i.   Incentives for transfer of resources to interest groups, in exchange for political support
   ii.   Incentives for transfer of resources to self (via corruption), in order to consolidate power
  iii.   Incentives for formulation and implementation of good economic policies to increase living standards of voters, in exchange for votes

These three incentives shape incumbents' reelection strategies in different ways in advanced and flawed democracies, due to differences in institutional quality. The outcome is political equilibria that vary in their effects on economic welfare: Advanced democracies can more easily arrive at political equilibria that translate into policies that have a positive effect on living standards, while flawed democracies can more easily arrive at political equilibria that, at best, do not have as positive an effect on living standards as it does in advanced democracies.

The goal of this study is to empirically test the validity of the above statement. The study hopes to contribute to the institutional economics literature by establishing a link between electoral fairness and government quality in democracies.

GOVERNMENT QUALITY AND ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

Government quality is a topic that has received much attention from the field of economics since the mid-1990s (Rothstein and Teorell, 2012). Seminal studies have linked government quality to economic and political phenomena such as economic growth (Rivera-Batiz, 2002; Rothstein, 2003), public investment (Rodríguez-Pose and Garcilazo, 2015), corruption (Rothstein, 2011), inequality (Ezcurra and Rodríguez-Pose, 2014), rule of law (O'donnell, 2004), features of democracy (Charron and Lapuente, 2010). Government quality is economically important because it translates into sound economic policymaking that benefits not only a privileged few but the entire society. Government quality ensures accountability and transparency, creating a level playing field for all members of a society by promoting human rights, freedom of speech, dialogue and cooperation. According to United Nations (2000),

government quality is a must for raising living standards and reducing poverty through economic development.

For the purpose of this study, I argue that quality of government in a country cannot be explained without an emphasis on electoral institutions. This intuition is apparent in one of the most frequently cited definitions of government quality, attributed to the World Bank[2]:

"Governance consists of the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them."

The definition above refers to elections as an important component of government quality, as it states that governance includes '*the process by which governments are selected... and replaced*'. In modern democracies, governments are selected and replaced via elections. The primary goal for all governments in a modern democracy, be it an advanced or a flawed one, is to win the next election. Like all economic agents, governments respond to incentives to reach this end goal and while these incentives may vary in their nature, they cause any and every action by a government to be related, in one way or another, to electoral motives. In a well-functioning, advanced democracy, this is supposed to translate into reserving a portion of the government's budget to formulation and implementation of good economic policies that please voters by raising their living standards, with the intention of increasing vote share. In a flawed democracy, it can be expected to translate into, in addition to policymaking, efforts to manipulate elections.

A number of studies have investigated the relationship between elections and government quality. Moreno-Jaimes (2007) provides evidence from Mexican municipalities (1990-2020) on whether competitive elections result in higher government quality. His finding is that electoral competition does not incentivize incumbents to implement better policies but rather literacy, socioeconomic conditions and higher voter participation do. Chauvet and Collier (2009), on the other hand, examine the effect of elections on economic policy in developing countries and find that presence of regular elections results in better policy outcomes, hence higher quality of government. In another influential study, Collier and Hoeffler (2015) find that incumbents running in free and fair elections who do not deliver economic growth are penalized more severely than incumbents running in flawed elections who do not deliver economic growth: They hold office for an approximately 40% shorter amount of time.

In parallel with the above studies, this paper aims to test the hypothesis that electoral institutions have an impact on government quality. To be precise, I argue that fairness of elections can be influential on how well a country is governed. The reasoning behind this argument is as follows.

Quality of governance is closely related to any and every feature of an electoral system that influences how votes translate into seats. While design and implementation of good economic policies is an expected response by incumbents to incentives created by formal and informal electoral institutions, it is not the only one. Elections can incentivize politicians to engage in corrupt practices (Pereira et. al., 2009) or give in to lobbying pressures from interest groups (Giger and Klüver, 2016). I follow a simplified approach in that office-seeking incumbents face three types of incentives described as (i) incentives to transfer resources to interest groups in

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[2] World Governance Indicators, *https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/*

exchange for political support, (ii) incentives to transfer resources to self, via corruption, in order to consolidate power and (iii) incentives to formulate and implement good economic policies to increase living standards of voters, in exchange for an increase in votes. Incumbents determine optimal reelection strategy depending on the perceived political costs and benefits associated with responding to these incentives.

Institutionalist perspective advocates that politicians in advanced democracies are indeed no wiser than their counterparts in the rest of the world; they just happen to respond to incentives created by long-lasting, good institutions that surround them. These institutions reward examples of good governance such as transparency, responsiveness, accountability and inclusivity, and punish examples of bad governance such as abuse of power, economic underperformance, political instability, and corruption. Politicians in flawed democracies are also not ignorant or intrinsically 'bad', they only happen to respond to incentives created by long-lasting, 'bad' institutions that surround them, under which the above reward and punishment mechanisms can malfunction. The outcome is good policy making in advanced democracies versus bad policy making in flawed democracies: In an advanced democracy, it can be expected that the optimal strategy in the above scenario should involve less corruption and better economic policymaking than in a flawed democracy.

Fairness of elections has a significant impact on the said political equilibria because it shapes how politicians perceive upcoming elections. Electoral institutions rarely change in the short run. Their features, namely electoral rules and regulations, dictate how freely and fairly elections can be held in a country. For electoral institutions are fixed in the long run, while it would be meaningless to say that two consecutive elections in a given democracy should be identically fair, their 'mean' fairness is intrinsic to those long-lasting formal and informal electoral institutions of the country. This is due to certain features of electoral institutions, such as electoral thresholds, gerrymandering, district magnitudes giving incumbents the upper hand in elections by means of creating opportunities for manipulation. For these features are fixed in the short run, electoral fairness also becomes an embedded, 'institutionalized' feature in a democracy, rarely changing in the short run.

Level of institutionalized electoral fairness in a country thus influences incumbents' perceived political costs of entering upcoming elections with or without having pleased voters economically. Under institutions that ensure fair elections with little to no chances for manipulation, governments are incentivized to please their voters to the best of their ability, while under institutions that make room for election manipulation, incumbents can afford to spend a smaller portion of the budget to sound policymaking, as they know that election manipulation can compensate for voter dissatisfaction. Below I discuss the roles of the three types of incentives described above in determining optimal reelection strategies in advanced and flawed democracies in order to explain this phenomenon.

i.   *Incentives for transfer of resources to interest groups, in exchange for political support*

Sirowy and Inkeles (1990) show that governments in flawed democracies are more vulnerable to lobbying activities than their counterparts in advanced democracies. Thus, a higher quantity of resources can be expected to be transferred to interest groups in flawed democracies, leaving less funds to be allocated to consolidation of power and implementation of good economic policies. On the other hand, incumbents' perceived political costs in this context depends on a comparison between the opportunity cost of transferring resources to interest groups and gains

from political support bought. The result of such comparison would depend on a number of factors that are exogeneous to whether a country is an advanced or a flawed democracy. These factors are outside of the scope of this study. The role of this incentive in differentiating optimal reelection strategies between advanced and flawed democracies is thus ambiguous.

ii.   Incentives for transfer of resources to self (via corruption), in order to consolidate power

In terms of engaging in corruption in order to consolidate power, incumbents in flawed democracies are obviously at a more advantageous position for two reasons. Firstly, corruption in advanced democracies is more severely punished by the legal system than in flawed democracies. Secondly, voters in flawed democracies have been shown to care less about corruption in politics and not punish corrupt politicians as severely in elections as voters in advanced democracies do. While incumbents in advanced democracies could likely be thrown out of office by voters due to corruption, incumbents' perceived political costs associated with corrupt practices is lower in flawed democracies, for which reason, a higher ratio of resources can be expected to be transferred to corruption in flawed democracies for consolidation of power, leaving less funds for implementation of good economic policies.

iii.   Incentives for formulation and implementation of good economic policies to increase living standards of voters, in exchange for votes

Incumbents in flawed democracies have lower perceived political costs of not implementing good economic policies in the face of an election, since they have in their disposal a second type of tool to increase chances of winning elections, that which governments in advanced democracies can't wield as much: Election manipulation.

Features of electoral institutions such as electoral thresholds, gerrymandering, district magnitude serve as tools that governments' can use manipulate elections to their favor. These features rarely change in the short run in a country and are rarely inventions of a ruling party in the present. Rather, they are there for the taking in the short run, even for a newly founded party, hence they are elements of 'institutionalized' electoral fairness. Ruling parties are often at a more advantageous position to benefit from these, as they are endowed with more political power than opposition parties. Thus, these features help determine the level of electoral manipulation incumbents can get away with in the endeavor to maximize own seats and minimize opposition seats in an election. Due to the presence of election manipulation opportunities, incumbents in flawed democracies can be expected to invest less in policies meant to raise living standards of citizens.

Considered in context, the study at hand asserts that lack of institutionalized electoral fairness can directly contribute to implementation of below-par economic policies in flawed democracies, as incumbents in these countries do not feel as compelled to satisfy voters via good economic policymaking as incumbents in advanced democracies do. In order to test this hypothesis, I follow a seminal paper in the field by La Porta et. al. (1999). The authors investigate determinants of government quality by regressing it against a number of indicators related to political institutions and processes such as government intervention, public sector efficiency, public good provision, size of government, political freedom. They find that countries that are richer, that use the English common law and have a predominantly Protestant population with less ethnolinguistic fractionalization exhibit a higher quality of government.

The reasoning for the relationship between government quality and these variables are as follows. A higher level of economic welfare is associated with better governance. The development of the English common law since the 17th century, according to La Porta et. al. (1999), has been shaped by the parliament and the aristocracy in the endeavor to limit the powers of the crown and protecting the individual against the rulers. The authors argue that Protestant governments are less interventionist than Catholic and Muslim governments which are built on excessive state power. Finally, higher ethnolinguistic fractionalization is associated with more interventionist governance, lower government efficiency, inferior provision of public goods, smaller governments with more state enterprises and less political freedom.

Building on the findings of the study, I regress government quality against the indicators which the authors found to be statistically meaningful in explaining the former, by using ordinary least squares regression, except the variable on the English common law, as the only country in the sample set of this study that employs the English common law is the United Kingdom.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this section, I introduce a novel proxy variable to account for institutionalized electoral fairness, describe other data sources that I use and finally describe my methodology for testing the hypothesis of the study described in the above section.

Data

In order to proxy for institutionalized electoral fairness, I utilize a novel indicator of political representation produced by Yıldırım (2020). The political representation indicators in Yıldırım (2020), namely PR_i and PR_{ii}, exploit a phenomenon called 'wasted votes' to measure the ratio of politically unrepresented voters to all voters, by accounting for the combined effect of all election-manipulation tools incumbents voluntarily or involuntarily benefit from in an election, such as electoral thresholds, gerrymandering, district magnitude mentioned above. Votes are 'wasted' when owners of those votes have been 'left out' of the legislature, meaning their voters have not transitioned into seats in the parliament, resulting in voters having been left without representatives in the legislature.

Often times, wasted votes are a systematic consequence of above features of electoral institutions being in effect in an election. Incumbents may or may not have utilized these features on purpose, yet they are there, as products of long-lasting electoral institutions unique to a given country. They rarely change in the short run, and have therefore been 'institutionalized'. When features such as electoral thresholds, barriers to entry, gerrymandering, district magnitude or any combined effect of these features prevent opposition parties from winning seats in the legislature despite having received votes in the election, the political representation indicators in Yıldırım (2020) give an exact ratio of the number of votes who have not won access to political representation, to total voters. This way, the indicators provide a measure of the *de facto* electoral unfairness in an election, saving one from having to investigate into *de jure* accounts of which election manipulation tools were in effect in a given election. The indicators thus constitute reasonable proxies for measuring institutionalized electoral fairness in a democracy.

While Yıldırım (2020) introduces two indicators of political representation, for the purpose of this study, I use the PR_i indicator. PR_i is annual in form, exhibiting a total of 1.784 observations for 39 European countries, between 1950 and 2017. The indicator was derived from the official

results of 527 parliamentary elections that took place across Europe in the given time period. PR_i takes values between 0 and 100 and the value it takes is equal to the proportion of voters whose votes have been wasted in an election to all valid votes. In other words, it is the ratio of voters deprived from access to official political representation to all voters in a given country and year. If PR_i takes the value of, for instance, 15 in an observation, it means that 15 percent of all voters in the given country have not been given access to political representation in the legislature for the given year.

In order to generate an indicator of electoral fairness, I divide PR_i by 10 and subtract 10 from it. I name this indicator EF, standing for electoral fairness. EF takes values between 0 and 10 where the higher the value, the fairer elections a country holds.

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
RQ	39	0.962	0.650	-0.458	1.811
Fraction	34	0.277	0.158	0.043	0.631
Income	38	19504.2	8557	3396.8	46135.9
Protestant	39	0.308	0.468	0	1
EF	39	9.4	0.493	8.07	9.95

To account for government performance, I use the 'Regulatory Quality' (variable name: RQ) indicator from World Governance Indicators. The 'Regulatory Quality' indicator reflects perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development. The remainder of the variables I use, and the respective data sources are as follows. I utilize the Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization Dataset by Drazanova (2019) to control for ethnic fractionalization (variable name: Fraction). As the Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization includes 34 European countries, I eliminate five countries from the sample, which are France, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta and Montenegro. I use Penn World Table 10.0 for per capita real GDP (variable name: Income) and the Worldmark Encyclopedia of Nations (1995) for data on countries with a predominantly Protestant population (variable name: Protestant).

Methodology

In order to test whether institutionalized electoral fairness has a significant impact on government quality, I follow the empirical model by the seminal work by La Porta et. al. (1999). I employ the statistically significant variables in the empirics of La Porta et. al. (1999) and include in the regressions the EF indicator described in the Data section above.

The difference between the regressions in La Porta et. al. (1999) and this paper is that I use averaged data in regressions. The reasoning behind the choice is as follows. I treat electoral fairness as a long-run phenomenon that keeps incumbents' perceptions of opportunities for election manipulation fixed in the short run. Incumbents' perceived political costs of responding to various forms of reelection incentives is not a function of short-run fluctuations in electoral

fairness on an election-to-election basis, but rather of long-lasting electoral institutions that are perceived to have become the 'norm' in the country. I do not expect previous short-run fluctuations in de facto electoral fairness to significantly affect incumbents' prospects for immediate future election manipulation opportunities: If long-lasting electoral institutions have created an environment in which election manipulation has become standard procedure in a country, then incumbents will be looking to get away with manipulating their way out of the next election regardless of how fewer-than-average manipulation opportunities they might have had in the one previous election.

In order to capture this effect, I use period-averaged data for the EF variable in regressions to provide a mean measure of a democracy's level of institutionalized electoral fairness. I also use averaged data for the other variables to account for long-run averages – rather than short run fluctuations – in regulatory quality, ethnolinguistic fractionalization, and predominance of Protestant population and GDP per capita. While this approach causes a loss of variance in the data, detection of statistically significant relationships to answer the research question of this study in the *absence* of such variation is an indicator of the presence of long-lasting, institutionalized trends in the variables of interest.

In the next section of the study, I present and discuss the results of the regression analysis.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the four OLS estimations. The first column of results, OLS (1), gives the findings of the base model, consisting of the variables Fraction and Protestant. While ethnolinguistic fractionalization cannot explain variations in government quality in the sample countries, the presence of a predominantly Protestant population is seen to significantly result in a higher quality of government. Per capita GDP enters the equation in the OLS (2) column. Inclusion of income is based on the idea that economic development, proxied by per capita income, results in better institutions, which results in better governance. Yet, better governance is also expected to result in higher income, thus, inclusion of income as an independent variable is problematic. When income enters the equation, it can cause underrated coefficients on the other independent variables. But, following La Porta et. al. (1999) I keep the Income variable intact in OLS (2) and OLS (4) to examine its impact on the regressions. In OLS (2), inclusion of Income is seen to cause a decrease in the coefficient of the Protestant variable.

Table 2. Regression Results

	OLS (1) RQ	OLS (2) RQ	OLS (3) RQ	OLS (4) RQ
Fraction	-0.703	-0.269	-0.0625	0.0135
	(-1.22)	(-0.52)	(-0.17)	(0.04)
Protestant	0.849***	0.516*	0.450**	0.382**
	(4.41)	(2.68)	(3.49)	(2.82)
Income		0.0000367**		0.0000123
		(3.42)		(1.44)
EF			0.899***	0.801***
			(7.34)	(5.79)
Constant	0.861***	0.138	-7.648***	-6.961***
	(4.34)	(0.51)	(-6.56)	(-5.61)
N	34	34	34	34
R^2	0.416	0.580	0.791	0.805

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The main variable of interest in this study, EF, first enters the equation in column OLS (3). The variable has a coefficient of 0.899 that is strongly significant in explaining government quality. As the values for the regulatory quality variable in the sample changes between -0.46 and 1.811 with a mean value of 0.962, a one-point increase in EF results in a 0.899-point increase in regulatory quality. EF's significance is only slightly weaker in OLS (4), with a coefficient of 0.801, which can be attributed to inclusion of Income in the respective estimation.

The findings of the empirical analysis support the hypothesis of this study in that institutionalized electoral fairness can explain cross-country differences in government quality among democracies. Democracies with generally unfairer elections are less efficiently governed than advanced democracies with fair elections, the proposed explanation to which is that increased opportunities for election manipulation causes declines in incumbents' perceived political costs of not delivering great policymaking, as the losses in votes due to dissatisfied voters can be compensated by use of certain electoral features in the disposal of incumbents for extracting more seats out of a given number of votes. This way, resources not going into sound policymaking can be transferred instead to interest groups in exchange for political support, or to incumbents' own selves, in the form of corruption, for consolidation of power. The end result is below-par political equilibria with negative political, economic and social consequences for a society.

CONCLUSION

This paper tests a simple idea: Differences in institutionalized electoral fairness can be expected to account for differences in government quality between democracies. The underlying mechanism is that reelection prospects incentivize governments to engage in better economic policymaking when electoral manipulation is not an option, with the intention of increasing vote share. Incumbents in advanced democracies face higher political costs of underperforming in delivering sound policies than their flawed-democracy counterparts, due to the latter having more effective tools in their disposal for electoral manipulation, less risks associated with getting caught with corruption and possibly higher chances of buying political support by transferring resources to interest groups. Incumbents in flawed democracies will thus succumb more easily to underperforming, as they know they can get away with manipulating their way out of the next election, even if they have failed to increase living standards of the public. This scheme results in worse policymaking in flawed democracies with negative economic, political and social outcomes for the society. The study tests the above argument by regressing government quality against a number of variables in line with an established empirical model in the literature, supplemented by the use of a novel proxy variable to account for electoral fairness in the regressions. The findings of the empirical analysis support the above hypothesis that governments in democracies with unfairer electoral institutions actually perform worse in designating and implementing sound economic policies.

The findings of the study implies that lack of fairness in elections has direct consequences for economic development in a democracy. As the primary goal of any government is to win the upcoming election, governments can get away with not investing in designation and implementation of sound policies and regulations that promote private sector development, when election manipulation is an option. Structural reforms to ensure fairer electoral institutions can thus result in higher living standards in democracies, for as long as election manipulation is no longer an option, winning upcoming elections will require higher government quality to make voters economically better off.

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