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Electoral institutions and popular confidence in electoral processes: A cross-national analysis

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Abstract

There is a growing interest among comparative political scientists in electoral integrity, yet little is known about what motivates citizen confidence in the electoral process. This article explores the factors that shape perceptions of electoral conduct in a cross-national context, testing the hypothesis that institutional structures that promote a 'level playing field' at each stage of the electoral process will enhance the extent to which voters perceive their elections to be fair. The analyses carried out here are based on 28 elections that formed part of Module 1 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Project. Multilevel models including both individual- and election-level variables demonstrate that proportional electoral systems and the public funding of parties have positive impacts on confidence in the conduct of elections, while the formal independence of electoral management bodies is negatively associated with this variable.

Keywords: Electoral integrity; Electoral systems; Election administration; Political support

Surprisingly little is known about the factors associated with popular confidence in electoral processes. While support for other democratic institutions has been extensively analyzed, perceptions of the legitimacy of elections have been largely bypassed as a topic of study. The aim of this article is to probe the correlates of confidence in the conduct of elections, in order to determine what accounts for differential perceptions of electoral integrity both within and across states.

The legitimacy of the electoral process is crucial for the establishment and maintenance of a healthy democracy (Elklit, 1999; Elklit and Reynolds, 2002, 2005a,b; Goodwin-Gill, 1998: 56–8; Lehoucq, 2003: 252; López-Pintor, 2000: 104–17; Lyons, 2004; Pastor, 1999a; Mozaffar, 2002; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002; Schedler, 2002a,b, 2006). Case and regional studies have shown that when citizens lack full confidence that elections in their countries are free and fair, the result can be a decline in levels of voter participation (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 206–10; Bratton, 1998; McCann and Domínguez, 1998; Zovatto and Payne, 2003), and, in extreme cases, popular protest (Eisenstadt, 1999, 2002; Pastor, 1999a; Schedler, 2002b), as witnessed dramatically recently in the so-called 'colored revolutions' in Eastern Europe where mass mobilization led to reversal of the results of fraudulent elections (D'Anieri, 2005; McFaul, 2005; Thompson and Kuntz, 2004). Even in established democracies, confidence in electoral processes is arguably a precondition for popular support for the other institutions of representative systems. In the words of Banducci and Karp (2003: 443), 'fairly conducted and regular elections create system legitimacy'.

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Threats to electoral fairness can be seen as falling into three principal categories, representing the three stages of the electoral process. In the first stage, the rules of the electoral game can be skewed; electoral systems can be designed so as to favor one actor (or one type of actor) over others. At the second stage, voters' choices can be manipulated, through inequalities in access to information about the electoral options on offer. Finally, the voting process itself can be rigged through electoral administrative practices that benefit some contestants over others. In short, deviations from the ideal of electoral integrity can occur through manipulation of the rules, the voter, or the vote. All three forms of activity involve a tilting of the metaphorical 'level playing field' representing the values of neutrality and equality that are commonly held to underpin fair elections (Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002).

The combination of factors that interact to foster free, fair and credible elections is undeniably complex, but it can be anticipated that the institutions governing core aspects of the electoral process have an important role to play in strengthening both the objective impartiality built into electoral institutions and their credibility in the eyes of the electorate. The principal hypothesis of this analysis is that popular confidence in electoral processes will be enhanced by institutions that serve to level the electoral playing field by promoting equality among contestants. Three such institutions can be identified as being particularly important, one at each phase of the electoral process: proportional representation as a principle governing overall electoral system architecture, the public funding of electoral campaigns as a principle governing the process of winning voters' hearts and minds, and electoral management body (EMB) independence as a principle governing voting operations. The aim of the analysis that follows is to test the extent to which these three institutional design factors influence popular confidence in the conduct of elections, controlling also for a range of other individual- and country-level variables that can be expected to be associated with perceptions of electoral fairness.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 considers the dependent variable in this analysis – confidence in electoral processes – in the context of existing studies of regime support. Section 2 focuses on the principal independent variables hypothesized to be associated with electoral confidence, and in particular on the trio of institutional variables identified above: electoral system design, the public funding of parties, and electoral management body independence. Section 3 details the data and methods to be employed in the analysis, Section 4 presents the empirical results, and Section 5 concludes.

1. Political support, regime legitimacy, and popular confidence in electoral processes

The legitimacy of institutions has long intrigued political scientists, and recent research has extended this line of scholarship to the context of democratic institutionalization following transition from authoritarian rule (e.g. Norris, 1999, 2002a; Mishler and Rose, 2004; Seligson, 2002). There is a well-established tradition linking citizen support for the state to various aspects of political behavior; research in this tradition has demonstrated that political support is cause and consequence of voting, vote choice, activism, protest, and other forms of behavior (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Banducci and Karp, 2003; Dalton, 1996, 2004; Finkel, 1985, 1987; Ginsberg and Weissberg, 1978; Kaase and Newton, 1995; Klingemann, 1999; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1995; Nadeau and Blais, 1993; Norris, 1999). Yet the study of political support has focused on a relatively narrow range of indicators, defined in the early days of survey research and retained largely unchanged for reasons having to do with the desirability of consistency over time (Weatherford, 1992).

In an important assessment of the relationship between concept of political support and the indicators most commonly employed to measure it, Weatherford (1992) identifies a number of different dimensions of political support, one of which is fairness. Weatherford points to evaluations of 'fairness of the political process' (a variant on the traditional concept of 'procedural fairness') as a key aspect of citizen judgments of political system performance. The indicators employed to assess fairness typically include evaluations of public bodies such as the representative and judicial institutions that make up the state, as well private interests such as business. These indicators, originally developed in the US, have been exported (sometimes in modified form) to a variety of contexts, as cross-national survey projects such as the World Values Survey, European Values Survey, International Social Survey Program, Eurobarometer, Latinobarometer and New Democracies Barometer have been developed. Yet the procedural fairness of elections has rarely been assessed in such analyses, largely, one surmises, due to lack of suitable data.

It is worth noting that elections are a process that ordinary citizens are more likely to be competent to

assess than most government procedures given widespread participation and the attentiveness this is likely to breed. Heavy press coverage of elections and possible violations of electoral integrity make it even more probable that ordinary citizens will be 'tuned into' the election as a process. When elections are corrupted or fraudulent, there will in all probability be fairly widespread popular awareness of this fact. Citizens are thus in all likelihood better placed to evaluate electoral practices than they are in other aspects of procedural fairness on which survey researchers regularly quiz them.

Given the importance of voting behavior in political science, it is therefore somewhat odd that the traditional survey indicators do not include perceptions of the legitimacy and procedural fairness of the electoral process itself. The most probable reason for this is that the integrity of electoral processes in the US and other states to which US political science conventions were exported was long taken for granted. Yet as the study of political support is extended to an ever-wider range of states, many of which have fragile and weakly established democratic procedures, this assumption is not necessarily valid. This suggests that evaluations of the procedural fairness of elections could be profitably incorporated into the study of the relationship between political support and voting behavior.

A significant step was made in this direction with Module 1 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), which covers 39 elections in 33 countries, including established, new and partial democracies. A total of 35 of the surveys included a question on the fairness of elections. Answers to this question have been employed in several of studies based on CSES data (Norris, 2002a, 2004: 216–26; Anderson et al., 2005a), yet there has been no systematic effort to assess the determinants of electoral confidence. This paper makes a first step toward addressing this lack by employing the CSES data to conduct an investigation of the individual- and election-level factors that condition perceptions of electoral integrity.

In a recent study using CSES data from 12 countries, Norris (2002a, 2004: 216–26) found a limited effect of cultural variables such as religion, language group, and ethnicity on perceptions of electoral fairness. Those who are members of ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic minority groups are in some countries less likely to agree that the election they had just witnessed met with their approval in terms of integrity.

A second preliminary analysis of the determinants of election quality was undertaken by Anderson et al. in a recent volume, focusing on the attitudes and behavior of 'losers' in the electoral process – those who support losing parties in elections. Anderson et al.'s model support for electoral fairness among 'losers' in 20 parliamentary elections around the world, and find that overall, even those whose have come out on the 'wrong' side in an election, are mostly willing to admit that the election in question was fairly conduced. Yet they find that a number of individual-, country- and election-level factors condition the extent to which losers are prepared to voice this opinion.

The analysis conducted in this paper extends Norris's and Anderson et al.'s work in several key ways. First, it includes a larger range of cases than those studied by the aforementioned scholars. Second, it considers the impact of a wider range of individual- and country-level variables than those included in previous analyses, including the larger range of institutional variables that are of primary theoretical interest in this investigation. Third, it employs multilevel modeling methods, which are widely recognized to be most appropriate when dealing with data at different levels of aggregation.

2. Electoral institutions and popular confidence in electoral processes

The factors that influence popular confidence in electoral processes can be expected to include institutional design, contextual factors, and individual-level variations. It is worth considering each of these in turn, while paying special attention to the institutional design elements that are the main focus of this paper.

At the aggregate-level, three types of institutional factors specifically related to elections are considered here: electoral system design, regulations governing political finance, and the structure of electoral administration. Our main hypothesis with regard to political institutions is that factors that level the playing field and those that increase transparency will enhance confidence in the electoral process.

With respect to electoral system design, a 'level playing field' is likely to be associated with electoral systems such as proportional representation (PR) that allocate seats in parliament in proportion to the popular vote, as the outcome under such systems is transparent, and proportional representation is most obviously fair to parties. Moreover, PR has been linked with the promotion of democracy in transitional settings (Birch, 2005a), as well as to reduced levels of electoral fraud (Birch, 2007; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002: 61, cf. 94–5).

Case studies lend support to these conjectures. The proportionality of electoral systems has been found to

contribute to perceptions of electoral fairness in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kasapović, 1997: 118); while in Botswana the bias generated by the single-member district (SMD) system has been seen as undermining confidence in the electoral process (Elklit and Reynolds, 2002: 104). In Lesotho, a switch from SMD to a mixed-member proportional system in 2002 resulted in an increase in perceived legitimacy (Fox and Southall, 2004: 546). Cross-national statistical analysis also confirms this supposition. Anderson and Guillory (1997) and Anderson et al. (2005a) have found proportional representation electoral systems to be associated with higher levels of various forms of political support, and specifically, they found more disproportional electoral systems to be linked to lower evaluations of electoral fairness (Anderson et al., 2005a: 154–8).[1]

The link between perceptions of electoral fairness and the public funding of political parties has received scant treatment at either the theoretical or the empirical level, but it is possible nevertheless to speculate as to likely relationships. Money has always been a defining feature of politics, and if there is one way in which modern democratic politics can be said to be manifestly unfair, it is in the financial requirements of standing for office in many countries and the advantages afforded to candidates and parties by campaign spending. It is perhaps for this reason that most of the political scandals in modern times have revolved around campaign fundraising abuses.

The aim of public funding is, as with many electoral provisions, to 'level the playing field' and seek to ensure that all those contesting elections have an equal opportunity to win office. The direct public funding of political parties was originally introduced in Latin America in the 1950s, adopted by most established democracies in the 1970s (Alexander, 1979), and integrated into the new democratic frameworks in most Central European and former communist states in the 1990s (Lewis, 1998; Gel'man, 1998).

Little systematic cross-national analysis has been conducted on the impact of campaign funding on political outcomes. In one of the few existing studies, Scarrow and Kaplan (2004) found that public subsidies have a positive impact on regime support in 14 states. In the present study, these findings will be tested with regard to perceptions of the electoral process itself, as opposed to the general regime support indicators employed by Scarrow and Kaplan. The public funding of parties can be expected to generate the perception of a level playing field.

The organization of electoral administration is the third main institutional 'leveling' device that can be expected to be associated with public confidence in the electoral process. Among practitioners in the fields of electoral assistance and observation, independent central electoral commissions have come to be regarded as the hallmark of accountable electoral administration (Goodwin-Gill, 1994, 1998; McCoy and Hartlyn, 2006; López-Pintor, 2000; Mozaffar, 2002; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002; Pastor, 1999a,b). Even established democracies such as Canada and the UK have begun to make moves toward the establishment of independent commissions with powers of electoral administration.

The extent of electoral commission independence from government can be hypothesized to be linked to confidence in the electoral process, for, in the words of Elklit and Reynolds (2001: 5), 'Perceptions about EMB independence are in any case almost as important as the actual, but indiscernible, level of independence, for perceptions might also be the basis for actions and counteractions of political actors at all levels'. Lehoucq (2002: 31) even goes so far as to say that 'there are good reasons to think [independent electoral commissions] are one of the central institutional developments that made democratization stick in some places, but not in others'.

Three main types of electoral administrative bodies have been identified in the literature, in order of decreasing independence, these are: (1) fully independent electoral commissions, (2) electoral commissions that are part of government but are under the oversight of an independent (usually judicial) body, and (3) electoral administration that is solely under the control of a government agency (López-Pintor, 2000; Mozaffar, 2002). We would expect that greater electoral commission independence would be associated with higher levels of popular confidence in the electoral process, all else being equal. Inasmuch as independent electoral commissions conduct elections with greater impartiality than do arms of the government, electoral commission independence should lead citizens to perceive that the election has been conducted on a level playing field. In practice, however, independent electoral commissions are a relatively recent invention, and they tend to have been introduced in new and fragile democracies (Massicotte et al., 2004: 101), a fact that will be considered in greater detail below.

In addition to the institution variables outlined above, other aggregate-level controls include closeness of the

[1] Using a smaller data set, Norris (2002a, 2004) found no clear relationship between these variables.

race, level of democracy, level of overall corruption, and level of socio-economic development. We can expect closer races to draw greater attention to questions of electoral integrity and thereby to magnify existing suspicion. We can also expect more democratic states, those with less overall corruption and those with higher levels of socio-economic development to exhibit higher levels of confidence in electoral institutions. Democracy and low levels of political corruption will build confidence in electoral institutions inasmuch as citizens can be expected to perceive the electoral authorities as both effective and impartial in this context.[2] As far as levels of economic development are concerned, richer states are ones that can afford to devote larger amounts of money to electoral administration, which can be expected to result in greater professionalism and administrative capacity. Furthermore, a wealthier citizenry is one that is less likely to be tolerant of political manipulation of the electoral process and better equipped in resource terms to mobilize against such manipulation. Even politically naïve citizens are likely to recognize that electoral malpractice is a seedbed for other forms of misconduct and unaccountable behavior by elected politicians, and that lack of accountability generates poor government performance. An affluent citizenry with the means to prevent such an outcome and little need for the particularistic rewards offered in exchange for votes by corrupt politicians will be likely to employ all the tools at its disposal to ensure that elections are as free and fair as possible.

At the individual-level, factors known to be associated with various forms of regime support include age, education, socio-economic status, gender, religiosity, and political knowledge/interest, left–right self-placement, and support for a winning/losing party or candidate (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Bowler and Donovan, 2002, 2007; Banducci and Karp, 2003; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Dalton, 2004; Listhaug, 1995; Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995; Mishler and Rose, 1999, 2002; Nadeau and Blais, 1993; Newton and Norris, 2000; Norris, 1999; Seligson, 2002). In their study of perceptions of electoral fairness among losers in parliamentary elections, Anderson et al. (2005a: 154–9) found education and left–right self-placement to have significant impacts, with the more highly educated and those further to the right on the political spectrum having greater confidence in the conduct of elections. In the study cited above, Norris also finds cultural variables to be related to institutional support in a number of states.[3]

In the analysis that follows, the impact of these factors on perceptions of electoral integrity will be tested on a cross-national data set of elections held in 28 countries.

3. Data and methods

The individual-level data used to test the hypotheses elaborated above are drawn from Module 1 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The Module 1 database includes pooled data from the relevant sections of 39 election surveys conducted in 33 countries between 1996 and 2002.[4] Usable data for the key variables under consideration here were available for 28 cases (see Table 1 for details).[5] CSES data on these 28 elections were supplemented by aggregate-level data drawn from a variety of sources, detailed below.

The dependent variable, perceptions of electoral fairness, was constructed on the basis of the following survey item: 'In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe that their elections are conducted unfairly. Thinking of the last election in [country], where would you place it on this scale of one to five where ONE means that the last election was conducted fairly and

[2] On the relationship between corruption and regime support, see Anderson and Tverdova (2003), Seligson (2002).

[3] Other factors such as economic satisfaction and campaign effects have also been found in many studies to be associated with levels of political support, but these will not be considered here, because in the first case there is no theoretical reason to expect an association between economic evaluations and confidence in electoral institutions, and in the second case, comparable data on campaign effects are not available for the elections considered here. Behavioral variables such as electoral and other forms of participation are problematic due to concerns with endogeneity. It may be that those who participate exhibit an increase in electoral confidence in consequence; but it may equally be, as found by Birch (2005b), that perceptions of electoral fairness provide incentives for participation. The impact of electoral participation on perceptions of electoral fairness is nevertheless explored in Appendix 3.

[4] For full details, see the 'Comparative Study of Electoral Systems – Module 1 (1996–2001 [sic]) Micro-District-Macro Data Codebook: Variable Description', full release, 4 August 2003, available from: www.cses.org.

[5] Of the 39 election surveys included in CSES Module 1, four did not ask the electoral fairness question used in this analysis (Australia, Belgium–Flanders, Belgium–Wallonia, and Chile), and four did not include usable data for other key variables (Peru 2000, Peru 2001, Russia 2000, and Thailand). In three cases (Hong Kong, Mexico, and Spain), more than one election was included for the same country. In these cases the most recent election only was used, in order to avoid temporal dependencies in the data.

Table 1
Perceptions of electoral fairness in 28 elections worldwide

Country (year of election)	Proportion of respondents with full confidence in the electoral process (%)[a]	Proportion of respondents with broad confidence in the electoral process (%)[b]
Belarus (2001)	45.36	59.58
Canada (1997)	34.60	71.42
Taiwan (1996)	37.77	62.14
Czech Republic (1996)	46.53	79.79
Denmark (1998)	88.68	94.87
Germany (1998)	73.92	90.66
Great Britain (1997)	56.66	80.55
Hong Kong (2000)	17.55	51.21
Hungary (1998)	59.33	81.89
Iceland (1999)	59.46	83.89
Israel (1996)	38.53	62.61
Japan (1996)	19.29	42.30
South Korea (2000)	10.60	30.74
Lithuania (1997)	30.57	55.75
Mexico (2000)	52.38	67.98
Netherlands (1998)	70.91	91.74
New Zealand (1996)	47.41	76.92
Norway (1997)	81.97	93.16
Poland (1997)	46.93	72.07
Portugal (2002)	64.71	81.36
Romania (1996)	62.24	81.66
Russia (1999)	25.31	44.05
Slovenia (1996)	45.47	67.78
Spain (2000)	55.96	79.73
Sweden (1998)	75.54	88.02
Switzerland (1999)	74.18	88.20
Ukraine (1998)	22.84	37.04
US (1996)	49.31	75.35
Mean	49.79	71.16

See Appendix 1 for data sources.

[a] Percentage of survey respondents who answered '1' to the electoral fairness question (denominator excludes cases with missing data).

[b] Percentage of survey respondents who answered '1' or '2' to the electoral fairness question (denominator excludes cases with missing data).

FIVE means that the last election was conducted unfairly?

1. LAST ELECTION WAS CONDUCTED FAIRLY
2.
3.
4.
5. LAST ELECTION WAS CONDUCTED UNFAIRLY'

Answers to this question were dichotomized, generating a dummy variable representing replies of '1' or '2' (defined here as 'broad' confidence).[6] Bivariate correlations between the 'broad' confidence variable and other legitimacy/trust variables demonstrate that perceptions of electoral conduct are distinct from other aspects of regime support.[7]

It must be admitted that reliance on a single survey item is not ideal. But while single-item indicators may decrease reliability, the use of such an item as a dependent variable will not bias regression estimates; at most it will depress significance levels (Anderson et al., 2005b: 780). The validity of this indicator is perhaps a more serious concern; in that the question might have been interpreted slightly differently in different countries, depending on variations in common perceptions of the electoral process. For this reason the concept behind the variable – 'confidence in electoral conduct' – is interpreted in a fairly general manner in this analysis, such that this interpretation is compatible with minor cultural differences. Both these arguments suggest that the 'test' set for this item is a tough one, and that if the statistical results support the hypotheses advanced here, we can have a relatively high degree of confidence in these results.

[6] The dependent variable is dichotomized for two principal reasons. First, there are potential problems of comparability across cases when it comes to more fine-grained assessments of electoral conduct. It cannot necessarily be assumed that the threshold between 1 and 2 will be understood in the same way in Spain as it is in Taiwan, as cultural differences are likely to mean that the five-point scale is interpreted differently in different contexts. It is safe to assume that the distinction between broadly favorable and broadly unfavorable assessments of electoral processes will be less sensitive to cultural differences. Second, dichotomization also avoids the well-known problems associated with interpreting the results of ordinal logit/probit models.

[7] The gamma coefficient for the relationship between the 1–5 electoral conduct scale and a question on satisfaction with democracy (A3001) was 0.466 (though it is worth bearing in mind the difficulty associated with interpreting the latter variable; Canache et al., 2001); that for the relationship between electoral conduct and view that 'who is in power can make a difference' (A3028) was 0.129; and that between electoral conduct and perceptions that 'who people vote for makes a difference' (A3029) was 0.188. All these coefficients were significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that the various legitimacy variables are related, but the relatively modest associations suggest that the question on perceptions of electoral conduct is tapping a distinct view. It should be noted that these variables were not included as controls in the multivariate models reported in this analysis because it is not clear in which direction the causal arrow runs. It could be that more positive overall assessments of democracy and personal efficacy as measured by these variables influence perceptions of the electoral process, but an equally plausible – perhaps even more plausible – hypothesis is that perceptions of electoral conduct color citizens' evaluations of the quality of democracy in their country and the ability of elections to generate responsive government.

Indicators for age, education level, and gender were straightforwardly derived from survey questions pertaining to those attributes. Socio-economic status was measured in terms of relative levels of household income, as this measure affords greatest comparability across states. Frequency of religious service attendance was employed instead of expressed degree of religiosity, due to greater data availability. Political knowledge was coded in terms of a correct response to the first of the three such questions included in the Module; missing data for the second and third questions precluded their use.[8] Left–right self-placement was measured on a 0–10 scale, and also in terms of two dummy variables representing the extremes of that scale (0–2 for the left, and 8–10 for the right). Dummy variables were constructed for identification with a losing party/candidate and lack of party identification according to replies to the survey item 'Are you close to any political party?' and associated questions (leaving identification with the winner as the base-line category). Finally, cultural group membership was coded as a dummy variable designating membership in the relevant majority group in the state in question. Full coding details for these variables can be found in Appendix 1. The pooled survey data were weighted by the sample size of each survey to prevent any one election from having a disproportionate impact on the results.

The election-level control variables were constructed on the basis of data taken from a variety of sources.[9] Electoral systems were measured in terms of a dummy variable indicating that the electoral process in question included a proportional representation component. Finer gauges of electoral system design were not viable, as a number of elections analyzed here were concurrent presidential and parliamentary contests, or presidential elections alone. The closeness of the race was operationalized in terms of the margin of victory. Level of democracy was operationalized in terms of the (inverted) Freedom House Political Rights score for the year in question. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index was used to measure corruption. Following Anderson et al. (2005a), the United Nations' Human Development Index was employed as a measure of economic development. Appendix 1 contains full details of data sources and variable construction.

Multilevel modeling was employed in this analysis due to the use of pooled data and variables at different levels of aggregation (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002; Jones et al., 1992).[10]

4. Results

We start with the overall frequencies for 'full' and 'broad' confidence in the electoral process. As can be seen in Table 1, about half the citizens in the countries included in our sample were willing to grant that the election they had just witnessed met the highest standards of electoral integrity (defined here as 'full confidence'), and slightly more than two-thirds of all respondents were prepared to give the election in question a generally positive assessment ('broad confidence'). The highest scores on both measures were found in the Danish sample; 88.68% of Danes interviewed gave the 1998 election in their country the highest rating, while a full 94.87% gave it a favorable score. South Korean respondents were gloomiest about electoral conduct, with only 10.60% awarding full marks to the 2000 election and fewer than a third (30.74%) rating it positively. It is clear that even in established democracies, not insignificant numbers of citizens have some doubts as to the probity of elections. In Japan, for example, only 19.29% of interviewees expressed full confidence in their electoral process (the 1996 election in this case), and the figure for Canada (1997) was an only slightly less despondent 34.60%. The corresponding score for the US 1996 election was, at 40.31%, also somewhat low for a democracy of such pedigree. In many newer democracies, the proportion of the population that shares concerns about their elections reaches substantial proportions: over half of Ukrainians and Russians gave their elections neutral or unfavorable ratings. Figs. 1 and 2 present these data visually.

Turning now to multivariate analysis, we are presented with the problem that several of the individual-level variables of interest were available only for a limited number of aggregate-level cases. Inclusion of all the individual-level variables hypothesized to be relevant would thus decrease the number of

[8] It should be noted that the political knowledge questions asked in the Module 1 surveys vary from country to country, causing Milner (2002: 56) to question their utility for the purposes of comparative analysis. This variable will be dropped from the main models presented in this paper, however, so its possible defects will not have a substantive impact on the results of the analysis.

[9] Details of the institutional variables that are the main focus of this paper are included in Appendix 2.

[10] The analyses reported here were carried out using MLwiN version 2.02 software with restricted iterative generalized least squares (RIGLS) estimation, which is most appropriate with restricted numbers of level-two cases (Rasbash et al., 2004; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002), and predictive quasi-likelihood (PQL) approximation for the estimation of equations with discrete dependent variables.

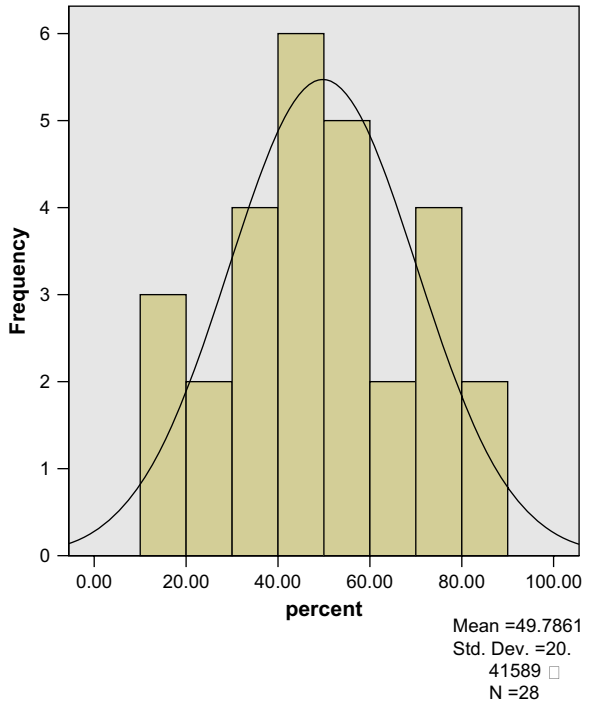

Fig. 1. Distribution of full confidence in the electoral process.

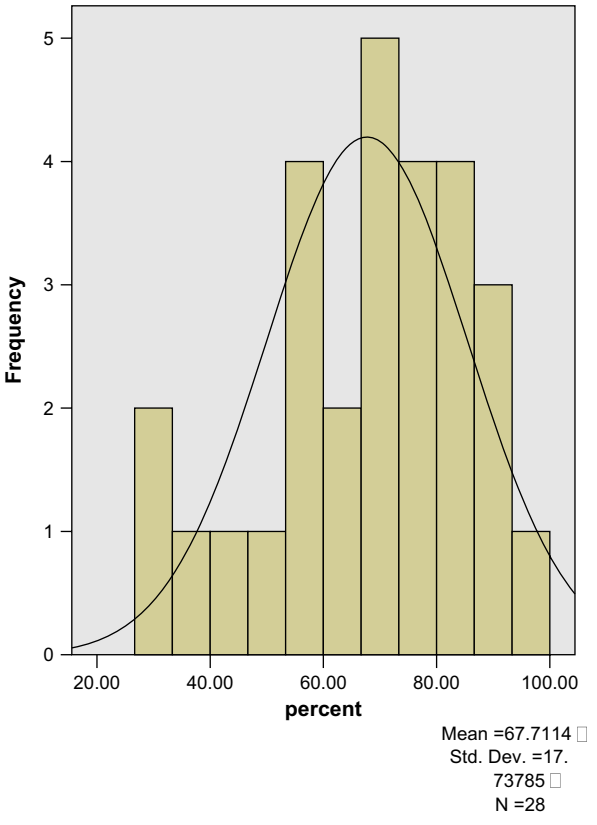

Fig. 2. Distribution of broad confidence in the electoral process.

aggregate-level cases below the level at which multilevel modeling is possible. The strategy employed was therefore first to conduct an analysis with individual-level variables only, so as to determine which variables are most influential. Variables for which there was considerable missing data – those designating religious attendance, cultural group membership, and political information – were then removed from the model prior to the inclusion of aggregate-level variables, in order to maximize the number of aggregate-level cases (elections) included.[11] Details of the individual-level models are included in Appendix 3, which shows that the exclusion of these variables does not greatly affect the impact of the remaining variables.

Table 2 presents the full multilevel models with both individual- and aggregate-level variables.[12] At the individual-level, all three models show – in line with expectations – that older respondents, those with higher education levels and higher incomes, and men are all more likely than the population overall to give the election in their country a positive evaluation.[13] As expected, supporters of losing parties and those with no party identification are less likely to be confident that their election was conducted fairly. The variables designating self-placement at the left and the right wings or the political spectrum proved largely insignificant.[14]

Turning to the aggregate-level variables, the results of this analysis partially confirm the hypotheses advanced above as to the impact of institutions that promote the establishment and maintenance of a 'level playing field'. As anticipated, elections that include a proportional representation component are rated more highly than those that do not, confirming the

[11] Following the inclusion of the aggregate-level variables, tests (not reported) were also carried out to determine whether the reintroduction of each of the individual-level variables excluded would alter their significance levels, the results of these tests are reflected in the final models reported below.

[12] Though it would be desirable to be able to allow the individual-level variables to vary at the level of the election in this model in order to test for possible cross-level interactions between individual and institutional variables, the small number of cases at the aggregate-level precludes the inclusion of the multiple interaction effects this would entail. The model is therefore restricted to a random-intercepts specification.

[13] The findings for age and education are the reverse of those generated through bivariate analysis of survey data from the 1991 and 1994 elections in Mexico by McCann and Domínguez (1998: 488). These elections are not included in the present study.

[14] The variable for right wing support reached the conventional 0.05 significance level in Model 3, but given that this model includes 28, 478 cases, it does not make sense to attach much importance to this finding.

Table 2
Multilevel logit models of perceptions of electoral fairness

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Individual-level variables			
Age	0.009**** (0.001)	0.009**** (0.001)	0.009**** (0.001)
Education	0.098**** (0.022)	0.111**** (0.020)	0.099**** (0.023)
Higher income	0.207**** (0.050)	0.227**** (0.049)	0.222**** (0.051)
Female gender	−0.204**** (0.058)	−0.208**** (0.060)	−0.227**** (0.057)
Identifies with loser	−0.477**** (0.144)	−0.455*** (0.147)	−0.489**** (0.144)
No party identification	−0.515**** (0.076)	−0.512**** (0.080)	−0.514**** (0.078)
Left	−0.036 (0.094)	−0.051 (0.094)	−0.034 (0.094)
Right	0.144 (0.103)	0.133 (0.106)	0.178* (0.101)
Election-level variables			
PR component to election	0.375** (0.158)	0.567**** (0.170)	0.305* (0.179)
Public funding of parties	0.872**** (0.148)	0.776**** (0.187)	0.791**** (0.125)
Independent electoral commission	−0.955**** (0.193)	−1.118**** (0.282)	−0.848**** (0.189)
Margin of victory	0.022 (0.019)	0.052** (0.025)	0.022 (0.022)
Corruption Perceptions Index	0.193**** (0.039)		
Human Development Index		4.515** (2.201)	
Freedom House Political Rights			0.334**** (0.059)
Constant	−1.416**** (0.402)	−4.393** (1.951)	−2.137**** (0.506)
Intercept variance	0.273**** (0.087)	0.334**** (0.094)	0.285**** (0.085)
Chi squared − fixed effects	1250.284 (14df)	1401.106 (14df)	1354.960 (14df)
Chi squared − random effects	9.861 (1df)	12.687 (1df)	11.248 (1df)
N: individuals	28,804	28,306	28,478
N: elections	25	24	24

*$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; ****$p < 0.001$; Cell entries are logit coefficients (standard errors).

findings of Anderson et al. The public funding of parties is also associated with notably higher levels of electoral confidence. Contrary to expectations, however, elections conducted by formally independent electoral management bodies exhibit a significant negative association with perceptions of electoral fairness. It may be conjectured that this is due to the fact that many such bodies have been introduced in response to perceived problems with impartiality; this variable may therefore be somewhat endogenous to the credibility of elections.[15] One may speculate that the formal independence of EMBs does not always reflect their true status, and that voters respond more to perceived bias in electoral administration that may well linger even after efforts are made to insulate electoral administration from partisan influences.

Turning finally to the other factors predicted to be associated with electoral confidence, bivariate analysis reveals substantial multicollinearity between level of socio-economic development, level of democracy, and level of corruption. This will not be surprising to students of comparative politics. The link between development and democracy is well-established (e.g. Burkhart and Lewis-Beck, 1994; Hadenius, 1992; Helliwell, 1994; Londregan and Poole, 1996; Przeworski et al., 2000). Likewise corruption has been found in previous studies to be associated with lower levels of both economic development and democracy (see, for example, Gerring and Thacker, 2004; Montinola and Jackman, 2002; Theobald, 1990; Triesman, 2000). It was thus not possible to all three variables in the same model. Separate models including each variable in turn demonstrate that all three variables have similar impacts. Model 1 includes the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), as governance and corruption can in some sense be seen as located at the structural nexus of socio-economic and political development. As can be seen from the positive and highly significant coefficient for the CPI variable (on which 'cleaner' states are awarded a higher score), residents of more corrupt states are likely to have less positive evaluations of their electoral processes. There is in all probability both an objective and a subjective component to such ratings; elections in more corrupt states are likely to be objectively of worse quality than those in states with little corruption, due to the fact that different forms of

[15] In other words, the impact of electoral management body independence may be conditional on the overall quality of governance in the state. An additional model (not shown) was therefore run in which election management body independence was interacted with the Corruption Perceptions Index (see below), but the interaction term was not significant.

malpractice can be expected to vary together.[16] From a subjective point of view, citizens' evaluations of electoral institutions can be expected to be affected by their perceptions of other aspects of the democratic process, and if there is widespread perception that abuse takes place in other areas of politics, citizens may suspect that such practices affect electoral institutions as well.

Model 2 includes the Human Development Index as a measure of socio-economic development. As expected, levels of socio-economic development are positively associated with perceptions of electoral fairness. The same is true for levels of democracy, measured by means of the (inverted) Freedom House Political Rights score (see Model 3). Not surprisingly, more democratic states are those in which citizens have more confidence in electoral processes, all else being equal.

Substantive interpretation of these results is enhanced if we calculate predicted probabilities for typical combinations of the institutional variables of interest. Based on the coefficients in Model 1, a system with proportional representation, public funding of parties, and an independent electoral commission is one in which citizens have a 0.86 probability of expressing confidence in their electoral process, all else being equal.[17] In a system with proportional representation and an independent electoral commission but no public funding of parties, respondents have a 0.72 probability of falling into this category. The corresponding figure for a system with proportional representation but neither public funding of parties nor an independent electoral commission is 0.87, and where there is an independent electoral commission but neither proportional representation nor public funding of parties, the figure is 0.64. If, on the other hand, there is both proportional representation and public funding, but no independent electoral commission, there is 0.94 probability of confidence in electoral processes. Finally, if there is neither proportional representation, public funding of parties, nor an independent electoral commission, the probability of having broad confidence in electoral conduct is 0.82.

[16] The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index is based on a 'poll of polls' tapping different forms of public corruption, but not including electoral corruption specifically (Transparency International, 2002). The two variables can therefore safely be assumed to be distinct.

[17] The predicted probabilities reported here are calculated by setting the continuous variables in the model to their means and selecting modal categories of the nominal and ordinal variables. In the sample employed in this model, 76% of respondents had broad confidence in the conduct of elections in their country.

5. Conclusion

Until recently, electoral integrity was seen as being mainly an issue for emergent and semi-democratic states, but concern over voter registration practices in the US in the wake of the 2000 election has reawakened interest in this topic in established democracies. Furthermore, unease over falling turnout levels has prompted leaders and scholars alike to investigate possible means of restoring or increasing citizens' faith in political institutions. This study has made a preliminary attempt to model confidence in electoral administrative institutions in a cross-national context. One of the most interesting findings is that even in established democracies, substantial numbers of citizens are less-than-sanguine about the conduct of elections (as reported in Table 1). This finding confirms the importance of integrating the analysis of confidence in electoral institutions into the broader study of political support.

The analyses reported here provide mixed support for the hypothesis that institutions which 'level' the playing field in electoral contests ought to promote greater confidence in the conduct of elections. Of the three variables employed to test this hypothesis, the public funding of parties has the strongest impact. The relationship between overall electoral system architecture and perceptions of electoral fairness was in the expected direction, but of less magnitude and significance. Certainly the unusually low levels of electoral confidence in single-member district systems such as Canada and the US would accord with the notion that plurality systems generate a perception that elections are less fair than might be desired, but overall, the relationship is relatively weak. It may be speculated that this is due to the small number of level-two cases included in this study.

The most puzzling finding of this study is undoubtedly the strong negative association between electoral management body independence and perceptions of electoral fairness. As suggested above, this may well be due to the fact that the formal independence of electoral management bodies does not in many cases accord with their actual (and perceived) status. In this connection, it would be desirable for researchers to develop a measure of actual EMB independence, as has been done recently for judicial independence (La Porta et al., 2004). Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

In probing the correlates of confidence in electoral institutions, the paper has also shown that perceptions of electoral fairness appear to be affected by

aggregate-level variables associated with levels of political and socio-economic development. Another set of relevant factors are the individual-level resource-linked variables known to be associated with other forms of political support; older, better educated male citizens, as well as those with higher incomes and higher levels of political knowledge are generally more likely to express confidence in the electoral process. It is perhaps not surprising that these are the same variables which have in numerous studies been found to be associated with electoral participation (see, for example, Blais, 2000; Franklin, 1996, 2002, 2004; Norris, 2002b, 2004; Powell, 1986), suggesting that turnout could well be affected by perceptions of the quality of electoral conduct (as found in Birch, 2005b).

Most of the individual-level effects are apparent across countries and across elections; there is relatively little election-level variance in the majority of these variables, suggesting that these findings are general phenomena, and confirming the expectation that support for electoral institutions would share many of the socio-demographic characteristics of support for other types of political institution.

A potential area for fruitful further investigation is the role of short-term factors such as electoral campaigns and the direct personal experience of voters in the electoral process in altering perceptions of that process. Banducci and Karp (2003) have shown that electoral campaigns and media coverage of elections have notable impacts on overall support for democracy, perceptions of efficacy, and trust in government. This line of enquiry could be usefully extended to an analysis of perceptions of electoral conduct.

Widespread confidence in electoral conduct certainly does not guarantee the success of democracy, and the data presented in Table 1 suggest that democracies can persist for considerable time in the absence of full support for electoral institutions on the part of substantial sectors of the population. The credibility of an election in the eyes of the citizenry is often key to determine the legitimacy of the government formed on its basis. When elections go drastically wrong and are perceived as having been illegitimate, the result can be widespread protest and even violent conflict. The experience of recent electoral protests in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere testifies to the fact that a dearth of trust in the electoral process can lead to severe political crises. Even lesser concerns about electoral fairness can reduce electoral participation, as has been found in several case studies (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 206–10; Bratton, 1998; McCann and Domínguez, 1998) and potentially undermine other aspects of confidence in the regime. Long-term lack of full confidence in electoral conduct may therefore have less visible but nevertheless nefarious consequences. This is a field where much work remains to be done, but the present paper has sought to make an initial step in sketching the correlates of confidence in electoral conduct.

Appendix 1. Data sources and variable construction

Election-level data

Electoral system

This variable was coded as a dummy variable, with '1' representing an electoral event that included a PR component and '0' representing an event that did not. Data on electoral system types were taken from the CSES Module 1 database, supplemented by Reynolds and Reilly (1997) and Reynolds et al. (2005).

Public funding of parties

This was constructed as a dummy variable from the International IDEA database on the funding of political parties and election campaigns, on the basis of the following question: 'Do political parties receive direct public funding?' (IDEA, 2003: 209–13). These data were supplemented by data from the Epic Project database at www.epicproject.org and Chau (2004).

Electoral administrative system

This variable was constructed as a dummy variable designating a formally independent electoral commission. Source of data: López-Pintor (2000).

Closeness of the race/margin of victory

Following Franklin (2002, 2004: 75), the closeness of the race was operationalized in terms of margin of victory as the difference in vote share between the strongest and the second strongest party (or presidential candidate). Where parliamentary and presidential elections were held simultaneously, this figure is calculated as the average of the differences in the two different contests. Data were from the CSES Module 1 database, with the exception of Belarus (missing from the CSES database), which was taken from OSCE/ODIHR, 2001.

Level of democracy

This variable was operationalized in terms of the inverted Freedom House Political Rights score for the

year in question. Freedom House data were obtained from www.freedomhouse.org.

Level of corruption

Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (available from: www.transparency.org). Data for Lithuania were not available for the year of the election (1997). The closest available data, those from 1999, were employed instead. For the same reason, Belarusian data for the 2001 election are from 2002, those for Romania 1996 are from 1997, and those for Slovenia 1996 are from 1999.

HDI

Scores on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI) are for 1999. They were obtained from the UNDP Human Development Database at http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/.

Individual-level data

Individual-level data were taken from Module 1 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems; see 'Comparative Study of Electoral Systems – Module 1 (1996–2001 [sic]) Micro-District-Macro Data Codebook: Variable Descriptions', full release, 4 August 2003, available from: www.cses.org, for full details of questions, responses, and variations employed in individual surveys.

Variables from the CSES data set were coded as follows:

Perceptions of electoral fairness (variable A3002): see above for question wording. This indicator was constructed as a variable coded '1' if respondents answered '1' or '2' on the five-point scale of electoral fairness perceptions, and '0' if they answered '3', '4' or '5'.

Age (A2001) was measured in years.

Education level (A2003) was coded on an eight-point scale ranging from 1 for 'none' to 8 for 'university undergraduate degree completed'.

Gender (A2002) was coded as a dummy variable for female.

Higher income: household income (A2012) was measured in population quintiles in the CSES surveys. The variable employed here was coded as a dummy variable designating those respondents who place themselves in the top two quintiles.

Religious services attendance (A2015) was measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 for 'never' to 6 for 'once a week'.

Left–right self-placement (A3031) was constructed on the basis of responses to the question: 'In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right'. The resulting answers generated an 11-point scale ranging from '0' for 'Left' to '10' for 'Right'. 'Don't know' responses were coded as missing data. Three variables were derived from this question: a scale representing responses to the original question, as well as two dummy variables, following Anderson et al. (2005a), one representing respondents on the far left of the spectrum (0–2), and one representing respondents on the far right (8–10).

Party identification: variables were constructed for identification with a losing party/candidate and no party identification on the basis of responses to the question 'Are you close to any political party?' (A3004), respondents were asked 'What party is that?' (A3005). In some surveys they were also asked about identification with party blocks (A3007). In a few cases only one response was allowed, while in most of the surveys up to three responses were recorded in reply to these questions. The 'party identification with a loser' variable was coded '1' if none of the parties identified by respondents in A3005 and/or A3007 was a winner, where 'winner' was defined as a party/block that formed the government following the election, a party that was part of a governing coalition following the election, or, in the case of legislative elections held in presidential systems, the party that won the largest number of seats in the legislature (details of government formation were obtained from country notes in the CSES Codebook as well as from various issues of *Electoral Studies*). In all cases but one, the winning presidential candidate in concurrent elections was from a party that was coded as a winner in this way. The exception was the US, where the winning presidential candidate was from a party different from that which won the most seats in the House of Representatives. In this case, winners were coded according to the presidential election result. Respondents from the Belarusian and Lithuanian surveys could not be coded because in both these presidential elections, the winning candidates were independents.

Political knowledge (A2023) was coded as a dummy variable, where '1' indicated a correct reply to the first of three political information items asked in

the Module, and '0' indicated an incorrect response or 'don't know'.

Majority ethnic group: a dummy variable was created designating '1' if the respondent was a member of the majority ethnic group and '0' if he or she was a member of a minority group. This variable was created on the basis of three variables coded from CSES data: variables for religious, language, and ethnic groups. Religious majority group member (A2017) was coded '1' if the respondent was a member of the religious majority group in the country in question, and '0' otherwise. For the purposes of classification, protestant denominations were combined into a single category. If no religious group formed an absolute majority in the country in question, this variable was not coded. *Linguistic majority group member* (A2018) was coded '1' if the respondent was a member of the linguistic majority group in the country in question, and '0' otherwise. If no linguistic group formed an absolute majority in the country in question, this variable was not coded. *Ethnic majority group member* (A2021) was coded '1' if the respondent was a member of the ethnic majority group in the country in question, and '0' otherwise. If no ethnic group formed an absolute majority in the country in question, this variable was not coded. The composite majority group variable was coded on the basis of the three variables described above for 16 states on the basis of data availability and functional salience. Data for all three ethnic variables were missing for the following 10 cases: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Switzerland. In four cases, only one of the above-described variables was generated (ethnicity in Lithuania, religion in Poland, language in Sweden and religion in the US). For the remaining 13 countries, a choice was made between variables on the basis of functional salience. Ethnicity was coded for in Belarus, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Great Britain. Language was coded for in Canada, Spain, and Taiwan. Religion was coded for in Hong Kong and Israel.

Electoral participation was coded as a dummy variable on the basis of the relevant survey item (A2028). 'Inconsistent' responses were coded in accordance with the voter's declared participation behavior. 'Don't know' and 'Refused to say whether voted' were coded as missing data. Respondents under the voting age were removed.

Appendix 2. Institutional variables

Country	Proportional representation component to electoral system	Public funding of parties	Independent electoral commission
Belarus	No	No	N/A
Canada	No	Yes	Yes
Taiwan	Yes	Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	Yes	Yes	No
Denmark	Yes	Yes	No
Germany	Yes	Yes	No
Hong Kong	Yes	No	Yes
Hungary	Yes	Yes	No
Iceland	Yes	Yes	Yes
Israel	Yes	Yes	No
Japan	Yes	Yes	No
Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lithuania	No	Yes	Yes
Mexico	Yes	Yes	Yes
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	No
New Zealand	Yes	No	No
Norway	Yes	Yes	No
Poland	Yes	Yes	Yes
Portugal	Yes	Yes	No
Romania	Yes	Yes	No
Russia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Slovenia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spain	Yes	Yes	No
Sweden	Yes	Yes	No
Switzerland	Yes	Yes	No
Ukraine	Yes	No	Yes
Great Britain	No	Yes	No
US	No	No	No

Sources: see Appendix 1.

Appendix 3. Details of individual-level models

Model A1 includes the individual-level variables expected to be associated with broad confidence in electoral conduct in a random-intercepts model. In addition to the variables included in the main models presented in Table 2, this model also includes variables designating political information and religious attendance, for which there were missing data on a significant number of cases. As can be seen from this model, political information is associated with a more positive perception of electoral integrity, while religious attendance proves insignificant.

Unfortunately it was not possible to test the possible impact of the cultural group variable on the full range of cases, due to the fact that the questions used to generate this variable were not asked in several of the surveys, and in other cases it was not possible to code for the majority group. Model A2, based on a reduced data set of 14 elections, includes this variable. As can be seen,

Individual-level multilevel logit models of perceptions of electoral fairness

Variable	Model A1	Model A2	Model A3	Model A4
Individual-level variables				
Age	0.008*** (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.006*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.001)
Education	0.099*** (0.026)	0.088** (0.030)	0.086*** (0.025)	0.098*** (0.022)
Higher income	0.156** (0.050)	0.098* (0.042)	0.138** (0.050)	0.205*** (0.050)
Female gender	−0.191* (0.080)	−0.149 (0.085)	−0.191* (0.081)	−0.204*** (0.058)
Political information	0.350*** (0.079)	0.329*** (0.087)	0.316*** (0.081)	
Religious attendance	0.028 (0.018)	0.029 (0.021)	0.020 (0.019)	
Identifies with loser	−0.541*** (0.157)	−0.605*** (0.170)	−0.544*** (0.163)	−0.477*** (0.143)
No Party Identification	−0.505*** (0.098)	−0.574*** (0.160)	−0.454*** (0.095)	−0.515*** (0.077)
Left	−0.050 (0.074)	−0.116 (0.077)	−0.061 (0.070)	−0.035 (0.093)
Right	0.057 (0.103)	0.113 (0.111)	0.027 (0.099)	0.142 (0.103)
Majority group member		0.223** (0.082)		
Participated in election			0.446*** (0.072)	
Constant	0.550** (0.219)	0.086 (0.212)	−0.367 (0.205)	0.760*** (0.200)
Intercept variance	0.832*** (0.234)	0.521*** (0.195)	0.821 (0.229)	1.020*** (0.248)
Chi squared − fixed effects	437.826 (11df)	643.645 (12df)	448.328 (12df)	247.387 (9df)
Chi squared − random effects	12.668 (1df)	7.151 (1df)	12.870 (1df)	16.877 (1df)
N: individuals	20,623	12,518	20,412	28,804
N: elections	20	14	20	25

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; Cell entries are logit coefficients (standard errors).

membership in the cultural majority group did have a strong positive impact on perceptions of electoral conduct, as expected, though the coefficients for the other variables are substantially unchanged (save for the reduction in significance levels that is to be expected with the smaller data set employed here).

Model A3 includes electoral participation, on the grounds that those who voted in an election might well have a more positive evaluation of that process, by virtue of the fact that they participated in it. Concerns about the likely endogeneity of the variable[3] preclude its inclusion in the main models presented above, but it is included in Model A3 in order to demonstrate that though it is significant, it does not substantially alter the impact of the other variables tested here.

In order to enable tests for the impact of the institutional variables that are the main concern of this study, individual-level variables with substantial amounts of missing data were omitted, and a fourth model was run. As can be seen from Model A4, the remaining coefficients remain largely unaltered.

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