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The More the Merrier? The Effects of Having Multiple International Election Monitoring Organizations

Judith Kelley

As the pressure to invite international election monitors rose at the end of the Cold War, states refused to grant the United Nations a dominant role. Thus, today multiple intergovernmental, regional, and international non-governmental organizations often monitor the same elections with equal authority. This article examines the costs and benefits of this complex regime to highlight some possible broader implications of regime complexity. It argues that the availability of many different organizations facilitates action that might otherwise have been blocked for political reasons. Furthermore, when different international election monitoring agencies agree, their consensus can bolster their individual legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of the international norms they stress, and thus magnify their influence on domestic politics. Unfortunately the election monitoring example also suggests that complex regimes can engender damaging inter-organizational politics and that the different biases, capabilities, and standards of organizations sometime can lead organizations to outright contradict each other or work at cross-purposes.

To operate legally and effectively within a country international election monitors must be formally invited. An invitation is always in writing and it is essentially a form of legal agreement that grants the organization official status and access to polling places, policy makers, and documents such as voting registries that they would not otherwise legally be able to access. As monitoring organizations have proliferated,¹ governments often invite multiple intergovernmental, regional, and international non-governmental organizations to monitor their elections. These organizations may cooperate and they sometimes even have a formal umbrella organization. Usually, however, they operate independently and neither organization has any superseding authority in assessing the quality of the election.² The organizations thus arrive independently at their assessments, which sometimes therefore differ.

Monitoring organizations have considerable influence. Domestic elections are highly consequential for countries and their governments. Although governments do not grant monitoring organizations the authority to make a final binding judgment of their elections, the assessment of monitors influences the government's perceived legitimacy. Their invitations to monitors as well as monitors' choices about how to assess an election are highly sensitive decisions. I pose the following questions: How complex is the field of international monitoring? Why did it become so complex? How does the complexity influence the politics of election monitoring? And finally, what observations and questions do the insights from international election monitoring yield for the broader concept of international regime complexity?

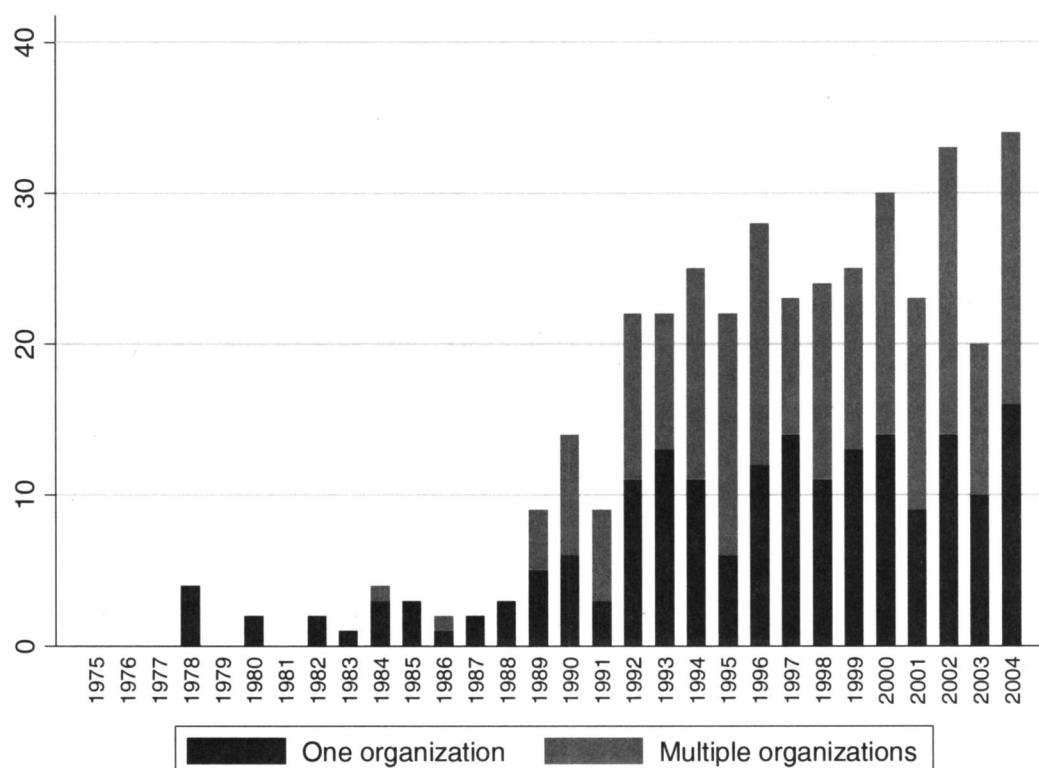
The Density of International Election Monitors

International election monitoring has grown increasingly common over the last 15–20 years. Between 1975 and 2004, 385 elections were monitored by at least one of 18 major organizations. In about half these monitored elections just one major monitoring organization was present. In about a quarter of all the monitored elections two major organizations were present. About 12 percent had three major organizations present, and in the remaining roughly 15 percent of elections there were between 4 and 7 major organizations present. Naturally, if minor organizations were added to the data, the number of elections with multiple monitoring bodies would grow drastically. In Cambodia in 1998, for example, the United Nations (UN)

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Figure 1

Number of elections with one organization present and with multiple organizations present, 1975–2004



Source: The data includes the following organizations: The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE—formerly CSCE), Council of Europe (CE), European Union (EU), Carter Center, CS, the OAS, NDI, IRI, IFES (Formerly the International Foundation for Election System), the Norwegian Helsinki Center, the European Parliament, the International Human Rights Law Group, the Asian Network for Free Elections, the Elections Institute of South Africa, the South African Development Community, the Economic Community Of West African States, the African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity) or the United Nations (UN).

fielded a Joint International Observer Group which oversaw 34 separate observer missions.

From a theoretical perspective it is also interesting to note the different possible relationships that countries may have with monitoring organizations. Sometimes the organizations represent the different institutions to which the states belong, such as the OAS and the UN, or the Commonwealth Secretariat and South African Development Community may operate alongside each other, or the OSCE, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe may go to the same election. At other times, however, other organizations such as the European Union or non-governmental organizations may express an interest in monitoring the elections and thus be invited.

When there are multiple international election observation missions present, they can operate in several different ways. Occasionally the UN or a regional IO supervises all the monitoring organizations under a so-called umbrella system. This happened for example in Cambodia in 1998 under the Joint International Observer Group. This coop-

eration structure resembles some form of “nesting” although the cooperation is entirely voluntary and an organization can break free of it should it disagree with the joint conclusions. For example, the Cambodia 1998 case turned out to have considerable inter-agency wrangling.³ There may also be cooperative arrangements between international non-governmental and regional organizations. For example, several non-governmental organizations may operate under the aegis of the OSCE, collectively formulating an OSCE position, although these organizations may in addition issue individual reports. Most commonly, however, international monitoring organizations operate independently.

Why Did International Election Monitoring Become So Complex?

The field of international election observers was not always so crowded. Initially only a few regional and international organizations were active. The UN began by supervising

elections in non-sovereign territories throughout the 1950s–1980s. The Organization of American States (OAS) joined as the first regional organization to conduct some nominal election monitoring starting in 1962, and shortly thereafter the Commonwealth Secretariat (CS) began to monitor elections in British colonies. When the demand and supply of monitoring rose rapidly with the end of the Cold War, an intense debate arose over the extent to which the UN should assume a leading role. Many Western States favored enhancing the UN role, but many other states hesitated to compromise the principle of non-intervention and sovereignty.⁴ If the debate had been able to overcome these objections, today's election monitoring capacity might have been more centrally coordinated through the UN. This was not to be, however. Although the UN capacity to assist in elections was expanded, its mandate remained quite restricted, but continued to operate within multiple organizational agencies such as Unit for Democracy, the UNDP and sometimes in peace-keeping operations.

Because of the limited UN mandate, some regional organizations increasingly came to see it as their responsibility to monitor elections in their regions and, since they were looking out for the interests of their members, sometimes in other regions as well. Several regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, formerly CSCE), the Commonwealth Secretariat (CS), and the Council of Europe declared free elections in member states as an organizational concern and intensified monitoring efforts. The OAS created a Unit for Democratic Development (Organization of American States 1990). The European Union (EU) eventually got onboard with its first monitoring mission to Russia in 1993 as part of its Common Foreign and Security Policy. Separately, however, the EU's European Parliament also engaged in election monitoring, sometimes jointly with the OSCE.

In addition, several strong non-governmental organizations had also been engaged in election monitoring in the 1980s and were gaining expertise. These NGOs, mostly U.S.-based organizations such as the Carter Center (CC) and the Council of Head of Government of Freely Elected States, the International Human Rights Law Group, the International Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) also began to receive official invitations from governments to monitor elections. NGOs in other regions soon followed.

What Are the Costs and Benefits of a Complex Election Monitoring Regime?

The complexity of the international monitoring regime has benefits as well as costs. One benefit may have the benefit of allowing several organizations to reinforce each other in important ways. Organizations may, for example,

coordinate to expand their coverage of polling stations, hold joint conferences to discuss the election process, and even seek to arrive at mutually supporting conclusions and align their public statements. The coordination can even include jointly-directed operations and joint statements. In the case of South Africa in 1994, for example, the four groups of international observers present issued a joint demarche in early March 1994.⁵ The UN Secretary General later commented that the level of coordination between the four observer groups was “probably the closest form of cooperation seen by our organizations so far,” although he noted there was still room for improvement.⁶

Mutual positive reinforcement has several positive effects. When different organizations agree on the norms to be used and on their assessment, they bolster each other's legitimacy and the legitimacy of their findings. More importantly, consensus between multiple assessments increases the burden on the incumbent government to respond to criticisms and makes it more difficult to dismiss the assessments. Thus the international community and domestic actors gain greater support for a push for reforms of the incumbent regime. For example, the fact that the majority of monitoring organizations present declared that the Ukraine 2004 presidential elections had been rigged increased the pressure on the government to rerun the elections, which resulted in a change of government. Mutual enforcement of criticism of the governments is actually quite common in the field of election monitoring. As noted later, a portion of international election monitoring missions have disagreed with each other. Still, in the majority of the cases the monitors agree. It seems that organizations are most likely to reinforce each other when the facts on the ground are very clear or when they have a history of cooperation or other institutional links. Thus, this type of relationship is common between the Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute, between the Elections Institute of South Africa, the South African Development Community, or between the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

A second benefit of the complexity of the monitoring regimes is that the availability of multiple organizations may help avoid deadlock and paralysis. Although so-called forum shopping has downsides too, as discussed later, the existence of a choice of regimes can open up alternatives that might not otherwise have been politically feasible to implement. For example, if only one organization was in charge of election monitoring (perhaps because this capacity had been bestowed more fully to the UN), this certainly would avoid many complications that overlapping election monitoring produces. However, it might also reduce monitoring operations significantly. If countries seeking to invite monitors thought that the only existing agency was biased against them, for example, they might be less inclined to have monitors. Certainly there are some

countries that would prefer to exclude certain organizations from their elections, yet many of these countries can find regional organizations or non-governmental organizations that are acceptable to them. Thus, in the same way that the use of NATO provided the West with an alternative organ for taking action in the Balkans, or in the way that the EU uses its own trade agreements to link trade and human rights because the WTO cannot do so, the availability of multiple institutions within the regime of election monitoring or other fields may facilitate desirable action.⁷

Unfortunately these benefits are countered by some costs. For example, the presence of multiple international monitoring organizations can lead to inter-organizational politics. As Cooley and Ron have argued, all transnational actors are concerned about organizational survival.⁸ Recognition as an important monitoring organization helps non-governmental organizations fundraise and helps inter-governmental organizations to enlarge their mandates. Thus, a crowded field of monitoring organizations may lead to competition for resources, attention, and influence.⁹ One Carter Center observer of Guyana's 2001 election noted that when the observers all gathered to provide input for a press statement, there was considerable pressure to rush to issue the statement before other organizations.¹⁰ Other case studies indicate that such competition is common. The overlap of organizations in Cambodia 1998 also displayed turf wars between organizations. In one assessment, the United Nations Development Program reports:

Relations with the European Union (who recruited many observers through UNDP's UN Volunteers programme) and US funded long-term observers, on the other hand, were more challenging for UNDP and the EAD [the UN Electoral Assistance Division], which was mandated to coordinate all international election observers. Intending to maintain a high profile during the election, some EU technicians gave the impression that they were, in fact, charged with the overall coordination of international election observers and were reluctant to share information with the UN/UNDP. Similarly, despite repeated efforts by the UN, several US funded observers behaved as if they refused to acknowledge their link to the UN structure.¹¹

The lack of coordination and information sharing at an organizational level also risks inefficiencies and the pursuit of sub-optimal strategies.¹² Competing for the public eye, election monitoring organizations may all decide that the capital is the most important place to allocate their resources, whereas if larger agencies pooled their resources, they might instead be able to send monitors to the countryside as well. Thus, overlaps may lead to redundancies, communication failures, and waste.

Finally, because organizations may have different biases, political agendas, capabilities, methodologies, and standards, they may outright contradict each other or work at cross-purposes. Although this is not the most frequent

effect, it is potentially the costliest. The *Data on International Election Monitoring* (DIEM), which includes 577 election monitoring missions between 1980 and 2004,¹³ shows 56 cases where at least one monitoring organization denounced elections. However, in twenty-two of these cases other monitoring missions endorsed those very same elections and in 34 cases missions chose to remain ambiguous. Examples of contradictions include the elections in Kenya in 1992, in Cambodia in 1998, in Zimbabwe in 2000 and 2002, and in Nigeria in 2003. In Haiti in 1995 the head of the official U.S. observer delegation described the elections as "a very significant breakthrough for democracy," while the IRI criticized "the nationwide breakdown of the electoral process."¹⁴ The Council of Europe election report sums up similar contradictions after elections in Azerbaijan in 1998:

Their [other elections monitoring missions] comments on the elections the day after polling day ranged from the positive "in keeping with national legislation and international standards" (the delegation of observers of the Interparliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States); "not a single violation in an polling station" (observers from the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation) to more negative comments: "an improvement over the 1993 and 1995 elections but a missed opportunity falling short of international norms" (International Republican Institute).¹⁵

The possibility of contradictions can engender what Alter and Meunier call "chessboard politics."¹⁶ Anticipation of criticism from certain organizations may lead governments to forum shop. Although formally most organizations have prerequisites for monitoring an election, governments can often find organizations that are more favorable than others. For example, in Kenya's election in 1992, President Moi's government invited the Commonwealth Secretariat which he expected to be favorably disposed towards him, whereas he refused the Carter Center and NDI because his relationship with the U.S. had "cooled" since late 1989.¹⁷ For the Zimbabwe 2000 and 2002 elections the government erected so many impediments for monitors that only highly sympathetic organizations remained.¹⁸ Russia's strict conditions for the OSCE monitors similarly led the OSCE to refuse to monitor the 2008 presidential election, subsequently leaving the field dominated by friendlier monitoring organizations. That said, the Council of Europe did remain an active observer group and did criticize the elections severely.

If governments are successful at engendering contradictions between monitors, then they can contrast contradictions to spin and manipulate their conclusions or quote only the assessment they prefer.¹⁹ Cambodia 1998 once again provides a clear example. The highly varying assessments were ripe political fodder. Most misused was a comment by a U.S. observer, calling the elections the "miracle of the Mekong." Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen latched onto this isolated statement to support his country's

admission to the ASEAN. Meanwhile, witnesses before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee cited critical election observer statements to undermine the credibility of the election, while the Australian press used the positive assessments to criticize the cries of foul play by the opposition.²⁰

Another example of spin and manipulation was the aforementioned 2002 Zimbabwe election in which the OAU secretary general officially endorsed Mugabe's refusal to allow the EU to monitor the election.²¹ In an absurd use of statistics, which also highlights the density of monitoring organizations, *The Herald*, a Zimbabwean government controlled newspaper, argued that:

There were 33 teams of international observers, or 528 individual team members. Of the 33 teams [counting national delegations], 24 teams or 324 individual team members judged the elections to be generally free and fair while nine teams, or 204 individual team members, generally condemned the elections as neither free nor fair. . . . Taken together, the majority carried the day and so, the minority should submit to the verdict of the majority.²²

The ability of governments to manipulate the election monitoring experience increases as the number of organizations available for monitoring grows. The slate of invitations to the 2008 Russian presidential election, for example, carefully balanced the number of Western versus pro-Russian observers invited, almost as if strategically ensuring that the assessments would be split evenly.²³ The ability of governments to exploit the diversity of monitors and engender contradictions is also higher in countries that are geopolitically important or experience violence during the election, because monitors may be willing to temper their criticisms to retain diplomatic goodwill or peace.²⁴

Conclusion

Focusing on the overlaps between international election monitoring organizations highlights some effects that have not received much attention. Whereas there has been considerable criticism of individual organizations for endorsing flawed elections or managing their missions poorly,²⁵ discussion of the interactions of monitors has been absent. As this article has shown, however, focusing specifically on the effects of the organizational overlaps prompts questions about why contradictions arise and the policy consequences such contradictions. It also raises questions of how monitors can avoid competing with each other and avoid wasteful duplication in the field. In a positive light, the focus on the multiplicity of monitoring organizations also highlights ways that international actors can magnify their influence on domestic politics, because their consensus can bolster their individual legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of the international norms they stress. On the latter point about norms, it is also interesting to note the changing role of the UN and its influence on the norms of

monitoring. Whereas the complexity of the regime arose partly because a lack of agreements on norms about elections and sovereignty prevented the UN from taking a unitary role, the UN has recently steered the effort to bring diverse election monitoring organizations together to establish a set of joint standards of election observation. The result was the "Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers."²⁶ The declaration has not assuaged the competitive elements of monitors, improved coordination to avoid waste, or preempted instances of disagreement. However, it is an indication that convergence on these norms is progressing. This is good, because there is absolutely no indication that the complexity of the regime is decreasing.

Notes

- 1 Kelley 2008.
- 2 Alter and Meunier 2009 call these "overlapping regimes" (15).
- 3 Bjornlund 2004.
- 4 Santa-Cruz 2005; Kelley 2008.
- 5 Anglin 1995.
- 6 Ibid 86.
- 7 Hafner-Burton 2009.
- 8 Cooley and Ron 2002.
- 9 Alter and Meunier call this a "feedback effect." This issue, 16.
- 10 Personal interview with anonymous mission member, August 2006.
- 11 United Nations Development Programme, n.d.
- 12 Cooley and Ron 2002.
- 13 National Science Foundation sponsored data gathering project by the author. For more information, see the data website at <http://www.duke.edu/web/diem>.
- 14 Carothers 1997, n 11.
- 15 Council of Europe 1998, 6.
- 16 Alter and Meunier 2009, 5.
- 17 Throup and Hornsby 1998, 269.
- 18 Government to bar poll observers from 'hostile states', says Chinamasa, *Daily News*, 26 November, 2001, cited in Dorman 2004.
- 19 Balian 2001. This is akin to Alter and Meunier's point that different agreements in a complex regime can sometimes be used to undermine each other; Alter and Meunier 2009, ms. p 11.
- 20 Fraud claim smacks of sour grapes, *The Australian*, August 11, 1998.
- 21 *BBC Monitoring Africa—Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, February 15, 2002.
- 22 *Africa News*, April 30, 2002.
- 23 "List of foreign and international organisations invited to observe preparation and conduct of the election of the President of the Russian Federation

on March 2, 2008." Available at http://www.cikrf.ru/eng/elect_president/international/list.doc. Last accessed on March 25, 2008.

24 For more extensive treatment of this idea, see Kelley, forthcoming.

25 Geisler 1993; Carothers 1997.

26 United Nations 2005.

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