

ELITE CUES AND CITIZENS' DOUBTS ABOUT ELECTION INTEGRITY:

Preliminary Results From Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines doubts about electoral integrity in African countries. We focus on the supporters of losing candidates and build on growing research on this topic from other contexts. Our cross-national analysis shows that cues by elites regarding a contest significantly shape the perceptions of their supporters. Where losing candidates reject an election result, their supporters are highly likely to question the integrity of the election. This is true even when controlling for the freeness and fairness of the election as assessed by international observers. Overall, the results suggest that losing candidates have substantial ability to shape the stability of democratic rule.

Keywords: elites, rhetoric, electoral integrity, voter perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Events in the United States on 6 January 2021 and protests in Brazil in late 2022 and early 2023 demonstrated how disbelief in the integrity of election results among large segments of a population can threaten democratic stability. A growing body of research examines this phenomenon, seeking to unearth the factors that drive doubts about electoral integrity. Over the last decade, such scholarship has flourished, and there is now a well-established body of knowledge on the topic.

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Yet, even with this work, there remain limits to scholarly understanding. Cross-national research on the phenomenon has been rather scarce (Mauk & Grömping, 2024, p. 968), and we do not know how transferable the results are across contexts. In addition, the importance of key variables that operate at a national level rather than the individual level remain underexamined. By expanding the domain of analysis to more than 30 African countries, most of which were not included in previous cross-national work, we address such limitations.

Our commentary builds on prior research, offering preliminary results from a study on perceptions of electoral integrity in sub-Saharan Africa. We explore the impact of factors that could lead opposition supporters to view an election as fraudulent. These include cues by elites, dimensions of the information environments in which voters are embedded, and levels of polarisation. Our key control variable was international observers' evaluations of the freedom and fairness of elections. Our findings echo those from important research in the United States and other cross-national work (see Berlinski et al., 2023; Hernández-Huerta & Cantú, 2022; Lyons & Workman, 2022). Doubts about the integrity of elections among opposition sympathisers are more prevalent where the losers of electoral contests challenge the results.

Exploring Factors at the National Level

In this analysis, we are interested in examining the impact of national-level variables, while controlling for the de facto freedom and fairness of elections as assessed by third-party observers. We focus on how such national-level variables affect the extent to which election losers, in the aggregate, voice doubts about electoral integrity. As Kerr et al. (2024) usefully instruct, current scholarship brings attention to two kinds of factors as potential drivers of citizens' doubts about electoral integrity. The first are individual-level factors. Some research highlights that citizens' objective experiences of electoral processes, such as the nature of their encounters with poll workers, can shape their assessments of an election (Hall & Monson, 2009). Other work in this category focuses on subjective factors such as voter bias, reasoning and cognitive processes. Important research has examined winner and loser effects, wherein the key factor is whether the voter's preferred candidate prevailed. More recently, research has focused on individuals' ideological leanings and media consumption habits (see Rossini et al., 2023; Van Ham et al., 2025).

The second type of factor operates at the national (or 'contextual') level. Scholars have found, for instance, that the de facto quality of an election (Mauk & Grömping, 2024) or electoral administration (Kerr, 2024) can shape citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity. More recent inquiry looks beyond these

conditions to examine an even wider range of contextual variables, particularly influences that issue from voters' political and informational environments. Given that post-election political instability can emerge where elections have otherwise been assessed as free and fair, understanding such influences is important. For reasons we describe below, our approach centred chiefly on these types of national-level factors. Specifically, we analysed cross-national data to assess how key national-level variables shaped aggregate perceptions of electoral integrity, when the objective or de facto quality of elections was held constant. We focused on three such factors, generating hypotheses concerning each.

Factors that Influence Voters' Perceptions

The first factor we examine concerns cues from political leaders about the freeness and fairness of electoral contests. A growing body of research indicates that elite rhetoric about elections can affect the perceptions of people aligned to those elites. Focused on the United States, Lyons and Workman (2022) and Berlinski et al. (2023) found that claims of voter fraud by prominent politicians decreased citizens' confidence in the integrity of election results. Cross-national research exploring the dynamics in Latin American countries also found that losing elites who refused to accept the election results eroded their supporters' trust in the elections (Hernández-Huerta & Cantú, 2022; see also Van Ham, 2025). Building on such work, we hypothesised as follows:

H1: In settings where losing candidates openly challenge and refuse to accept the election results, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

The second factor we studied concerns voters' informational environments. Research by Blanchar and Norris (2021) and Grant et al. (2021), for example, indicates that exposure to and consumption of partisan media increased the perception of electoral fraud among voters who backed Trump in the 2020 US elections. Mauk and Grömping (2024) similarly found that high levels of exposure to disinformation led to doubts about election integrity among the losers (see also Rossini et al., 2023).

In this vein, we focus on two issues. The first is the extent of internet use in society, which expands people's exposure to and consumption of partisan messaging and misinformation. The second is the quality of media outlets in a country, especially the extent to which the media are corrupted in ways that could undermine the neutrality and objectivity of their reporting. Our second and third hypotheses were as follows:

H2: In settings with high levels of internet use, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

H3: In settings with high levels of media corruption, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

Our third factor concerns the extent of polarisation in countries. Research suggests that partisan identification and political homophily – which means affiliating mainly with like-minded people – can increase partisan-motivated reasoning. In turn, partisan-biased logic affects people's assessments of electoral integrity (Blanchar & Norris, 2021; Van Ham et al., 2025). Polarisation implies both a hardening of party identities and increasing homophily. We therefore hypothesised as follows:

H4: In settings with high levels of polarisation, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

A National Aggregate

As the hypotheses imply, our focus was on how opposition supporters – the apparent 'losers' of electoral contests – across various African countries have assessed the integrity of elections. Our analysis examined the *aggregate* percentage of opposition supporters who claimed that a recent election was not free and fair. This use of national-level aggregates as the dependent variable stands in contrast to the conventional approach, which treats individuals as the unit of analysis so that specific drivers of individual doubts about electoral integrity can be examined. While we have employed that approach in other work, our focus here on national-level aggregates is intentional.

By focusing on the aggregate percentages of opposition supporters who doubt electoral integrity, we target a phenomenon that is related to, but distinct from, individual-level assessments; furthermore, it has potentially significant consequences. Simply put, as the percentage of people who doubt electoral integrity rises, so too does the potential for system-destabilising consequences. For example, post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 and in Gabon during 2016 occurred in the context of widespread doubts among the opposition about the integrity of electoral contests in those years. In both cases, more than 40% of opposition supporters maintained that the respective elections were not free and fair. Keeping such destabilising consequences in mind, it is critically important to understand the drivers of such aggregate outcomes.

VARIABLES AND DATA

To measure our dependent variable, we relied on data from Afrobarometer surveys that were conducted after specific elections, using Rounds 3 through 9. Our data thus covered surveys conducted from 2005 to 2022 and for which results were available through the end of 2023. We identified two groups of survey respondents who could be considered supportive of or sympathetic to the opposition. The first was those who indicated they trusted the opposition ‘a lot’ or ‘somewhat’. The second was respondents who distrusted the president, indicating that they had either ‘no’ or ‘little’ trust in the president. Although these groups are intuitively related (and strongly correlated), they are nonetheless distinct. We ran analyses with each group to check for robustness.³ We assessed the percentage of each group that, in response to an Afrobarometer question about the freeness and fairness of the most recent election, deemed the contest not to have been free and fair. As evident from the first two rows of Table 1, there was considerable variation in how opposition supporters evaluated the freeness and fairness of specific electoral contests.

Building from our hypotheses, our first independent variable reflects whether opposition candidates indicated that they accepted or rejected the results of elections. To assess this, we initially used data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity project,⁴ which contains a variable indicating whether parties or candidates challenged the results. However, in light of limitations with this data, we turned to additional sources to crosscheck and complete our dataset. These included accounts from Africa Confidential,⁵ Freedom House’s (FH) ‘Freedom in the World’ reports, Wikipedia and news accounts accessed through Nexis Uni. We called this variable ‘opposition challenge’ and coded it as 0 or 1, with 1 indicating that the leading opposition candidate openly challenged and refused to accept the results.

Our second hypothesis focuses on levels of internet penetration. To capture this variable, we drew from World Bank data and included the level of penetration for the year in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted.

Our third hypothesis focuses on corruption within media outlets. For this variable, we used data from the V-Dem dataset.⁶ V-Dem engages country experts to assess various aspects of a country’s political environment annually. We used the V-Dem scores for the variable ‘media corrupt’, which reflects the extent to which media professionals ‘accept payments in exchange for altering news coverage’.

3 Measuring opposition affiliation after the election was not ideal but was the best path with the existing data.

4 See <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/pei>

5 See <https://www.africa-confidential.com/news>

6 See <https://v-dem.net/>

V-Dem scores the measure on a scale of 0 to 4, with higher scores indicating less corruption. We included the variable for years in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted.

For our fourth hypothesis, we again drew from V-Dem, which has a measure called ‘political polarisation’ that reflects ‘the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions’. We included the variable for the years in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted. V-Dem scores polarisation on a 0–4 scale, with higher scores indicating greater polarisation.

We also included several control variables, and the first deserves special emphasis. Given that our goal was to understand citizens’ perceptions of electoral integrity while holding constant the de facto quality of the elections, we needed a measure of the de facto quality. We drew from two sources. The first was FH’s assessments of specific elections, which is a component of the FH annual evaluations of countries included in the reports. FH scores this 0–4, with higher scores indicating a better quality of elections. We labelled this variable ‘FH freedom and fairness’.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variable</i>					
Election not free and fair (among opposition trusters)	120	0.15	0.12	0	0.52
Election not free and fair (among presidential non-trusters)	122	0.21	0.14	0.02	0.53
<i>Independent Variables</i>					
Opposition Challenge	121	0.46	0.5	0	1
Internet Penetration	121	18.89	18.6	0.39	72.31
Media Corruption	122	2.6	0.54	1.33	3.79
Political Polarisation	122	2.21	0.76	0.56	3.94
FH Freedom and Fairness	89	2.23	1.26	0	4
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness	123	2.52	0.86	0.32	3.88
Human Development Index Score	122	0.52	0.09	0.35	0.81
Executive Election	123	0.77	0.42	0	1
Ethnic Fractionalisation	121	0.68	0.2	0.06	0.93
Margin of Victory	120	36.74	26.69	0.46	100
Boycott	122	.12	0.32	0	1

The FH data extend back only to 2012, which truncated our dataset. We thus ran additional analyses using data from V-Dem, which includes the measure ‘election free and fair’. V-Dem scores this variable the same way (0–4), and we labelled it ‘V-Dem freedom and fairness’.

Our other controls included factors considered in other cross-national studies on citizens’ evaluations of electoral integrity (e.g., Mauk & Grömping, 2024). These included the country’s level of development, measured on the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI); whether the election was for the executive; Alesina et al.’s (2003) measure of ethnic fractionalisation; the winner’s margin of victory; and whether or not the election was boycotted, which we obtained from the same sources that provided data on the acceptance of election results. Table 1 shows the summary statistics for our variables.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We obtained data from 35 countries across seven rounds of the Afrobarometer surveys.⁷ Thus, our dataset was a panel, and each entry corresponded to a country-round referring to a specific election (e.g., Kenya 2007 or Malawi 2019). We estimated the effects of the independent variables using cross-sectional time-series regression. We had no reason to suspect that any one country was driving the results, so we did not use country dummy variables.

Table 2 shows the results of four models. Models 1 and 2 pertain to the group of respondents who trusted the opposition, whereas Models 3 and 4 pertain to respondents who distrusted the president. Models 2 and 4 substituted the FH freedom and fairness control variable with the equivalent V-Dem measure, which increased our sample size and provided a check for robustness.

Our findings suggest clear support for the first hypothesis. When a losing opposition politician challenged the election result, a larger percentage of their supporters viewed the election as fraudulent. This result held for both groups, namely those who trusted the opposition and those who distrusted the president. Even more strikingly, the result was significant when we controlled for the de facto quality of elections as assessed by third-party observers. Indeed, in Model 1, opposition challenges were significant, whereas the FH freedom and fairness of elections was not. As discussed below, elite rejections of results also have an important *substantive* impact on citizens’ assessments.

Regarding our other hypotheses, the results were somewhat less striking. Although we expected that greater internet penetration, media corruption and polarisation would all increase opposition supporters’ perceptions of electoral fraud, our estimates for these variables were insignificant. These findings suggest that such factors do not meaningfully influence citizens’ perceptions.

7 See <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

Table 2: Regression Results: Perceptions of Election Fraud

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sub-sample	Trust the Opposition	Trust the Opposition	Distrust the President	Distrust the President
Opposition Challenge	0.079*** (.021)	.060*** (.021)	.114*** (.020)	.078*** (.020)
Internet Penetration	.001 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.001 (.001)	.000 (.001)
Media Corruption	-.020 (.030)	.005 (.022)	-.028 (.029)	.009 (.025)
Political Polarisation	.008 (.016)	.007 (.015)	.013 (.017)	.013 (.016)
FH Freedom and Fairness	-.020 (.016)		-.024* (.013)	
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness		-.062*** (.017)		-.077*** (.016)
Human Development Index Score	0.127 (.188)	.066 (.181)	.085 (.193)	.015 (.172)
Executive Election	-.007 (.028)	-.014 (.020)	-.022 (.026)	-.019 (.022)
Ethnic Fractionalisation	-.018 (.071)	-.013 (.064)	.050 (.060)	.048 (.051)
Margin of Victory	-.001** (.000)	-.001*** (.000)	-.001** (.000)	-.001*** (.000)
Boycott	.076*** (.028)	.045* (.027)	.095*** (.035)	.080** (.037)
Number of observations	82	114	83	115

Note: Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses

***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.10

Three other findings are noteworthy. First, as the margin of victory increased, perceptions of electoral fraud decreased. This pattern suggests that close election results may generate suspicion. Second, boycotts had a significant relationship with citizens' evaluations of elections. Like messages from elites alleging fraud, opposition boycotts of elections cast doubt on the integrity of a contest. Finally,

the finding regarding our most powerful control variable, the de facto quality of elections as assessed by FH and V-Dem, was highly relevant. Three of the four models indicated that citizens were more likely to judge an election as fraudulent if third-party observers did the same. This is, of course, an intuitive result.

We turn now to the *substantive* impact of these factors. Table 3 provides estimates of how the independent variables affected the overall percentage of a country's opposition supporters who viewed an election as fraudulent, when other variables were held constant at their mean values.

Table 3: Substantive Effects Based on Table 2 Estimate

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Opposition Challenge	7.9%	6.0%	11.4%	7.8%
FH Freedom and Fairness	n/a	n/a	-9.6%	n/a
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness	n/a	-22%	n/a	-27.4%
Margin of Victory	-9.5%	-9.5%	-9.5%	-9.5%
Boycott	7.6%	4.5%	9.5%	8.0%

Note: The table shows the percentage change in perceptions of elections as not free and fair, given the minimum to maximum change (see Table 1 for reference) for each independent variable. Estimates for variables not significant in Table 2 are omitted.

As the estimates indicate, when losing politicians challenged the election results, the percentage of opposition supporters who doubted the freeness and fairness of elections increased by between 6 (Model 2) and 11.4 (Model 3) percentage points. The effect of these loser challenges was not as large as that of the de facto quality of elections as measured by V-Dem (Models 2 and 4) but was larger than the effect of the FH estimates (Model 3). These findings imply that opposition challenges can appreciably increase citizens' doubts, even when elections are assessed as free and fair by third-party observers.

We mentioned above that close election results appear to drive up perceptions of fraud. However, the range for this variable may have led to an overestimation of the relative impact of the margin of victory. Boycotts also substantially increased people's misgivings about an election. Nonetheless, only one model indicated that the impact of boycotts was greater than the effect of elite rejections of the election results.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results confirm that elites who challenge and reject election results have a substantial influence on how their supporters view the integrity of the election.

Given that perceptions of electoral fraud are associated with political instability, this finding highlights that elites have considerable power to undermine democratic rule.

Future scholarship should continue ongoing comparative work on this important topic. Further broadening the scope of analysis, as we have done here, could help affirm existing insights or reveal other potential drivers of doubts about electoral integrity. Beyond broadening, investigations also need to be deeper. Multi-level analyses of national and individual factors have revealed important insights (e.g., Van Ham et al., 2025; Mauk & Grömping, 2024), and more work of this nature could explore key issues, such as how elite cues interact with individual media consumption patterns. In addition, cross-national studies could focus on whether – and why – doubts may dissipate or become less acute over time. Given the potential consequences that doubts about electoral integrity hold for political stability, such work will be quite valuable.

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