

# Institutional Crowding in the International Electoral Monitoring Regime

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## **Abstract**

Engaging with Western IOs often requires governments to subject domestic institutions to norm-based scrutiny. Countries increasingly have a choice to affiliate with non-Western IOs that impose less rigorous standards. We introduce the phenomenon of “institutional crowding,” in which countries simultaneously align themselves with Western and non-Western IOs in the same issue area. We argue that this strategy can be beneficial for mitigating the international and domestic costs of scrutiny. On the international level, governments keep a door open to Western actors while diversifying their economic and political linkages; on the domestic level, governments can use conflicting IO signals to construct narratives that support their own political survival. We develop this argument in the area of international election observation, a prime example of a complex international regime populated by IOs of varying provenance and professionalism. Using newly-comprehensive data on the presence and assessments of election observation missions from 1990-2018, we show that (a) states receiving high levels of Western aid, and (b) those with a recent history of election-related unrest tend to host larger numbers of EOMs, including a mix of Western and non-Western groups. We present evidence consistent with our theoretical mechanism, that institutional crowding shapes the information environment: elections hosting multiple EOMs are associated with divergent EOM assessments as well as divergent depictions of election quality in the global media.

# 1 Introduction

For decades, countries have sought to attract international prestige and benefits by affiliating with Western international organizations (IOs). Many of these IOs engage in norm-based scrutiny of domestic institutions, either as their primary mandate (e.g., human rights commissions, international courts) or as a byproduct of conditionality (e.g., trade and investment agreements, democratic regional IOs). An assumption underpinning early research on the liberal international order was that states' choice to affiliate with norm-based IOs reflected genuine commitments to open society, market liberalism, and democracy (Moravcsik, 2000; Hafner-Burton, 2005; Mansfield and Rosendorff, 2002; Allee and Scalera, 2012; Mansfield and Milner, 2018). But as countries have joined ever more IOs without notable effects on state behavior (Chaudoin, Hays and Hicks, 2018), this logic seemed to fall flat. Not only may IO engagement fail to produce lasting domestic change (Meyerrose, 2020), but a host of overlapping and even contradictory IOs now challenge the supremacy of Western-backed institutions.

Many countries have eagerly embraced alternative non-Western IOs (Davis, 2009). One example of this is in the area of election observation (Kelley, 2009; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Pratt, 2018; Arceneaux and Leithner, 2017). The practice of hosting multiple election observation missions (EOMs) of varying provenance has increased since the first wave of 'color revolutions' in 2000. Many states now host more than five EOMs in a given election, often a mix of Western and non-Western IOs of varying levels of professionalism. Yet, this practice poses some puzzles. For states that hold clean elections, might there be a reputational cost for associating with actors that lack expert credibility (Gray, 2013)? For states that hold problematic elections, why host a mix of groups, rather than simply eschewing professional monitors altogether?

We argue that this proliferation of both Western and non-Western IO affiliations in a given issue—a phenomenon we call *institutional crowding*—can bring distinct benefits. Rather than openly rejecting the liberal order, states can layer on affiliations with

non-Western institutions that possess less stringent normative commitments (or simply less capacity for monitoring). This matters because IOs that engage in standards-based scrutiny *shape the information environment*, with consequences for countries' international reputations and domestic legitimacy. Institutional crowding represents a way for governments under scrutiny to shape the narrative to their advantage.

We claim that the incentives to adopt a strategy of *institutional crowding* vary based on domestic and international factors. Internationally, countries that are economically beholden to Western actors are obligated to maintain Western ties, while at the same time have incentives to diversify their affiliations to mitigate the reputational consequences of negative scrutiny. Domestically, governments whose political survival is in question have incentives to expand their international affiliations in order to cushion against the risk that scrutiny by Western IOs might empower the opposition.

We develop and test this argument on the area of international election monitoring. Election monitoring encompasses a variety of actors. Formal IOs—such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of American States—conduct election observation missions (EOMs), as do nongovernmental organizations, and public officials such as parliamentarians and diplomats. By making public assessments of election quality, election observers shape a country's reputation. We focus in particular on the consequences of negative scrutiny from EOMs, which can lead to a loss of international benefits as well as legitimacy problems at home. Inviting multiple EOMs is a way to manage this risk. As the number of EOMs increases, so does the likelihood that negative scrutiny from one group can be offset by more positive assessments from others. In making this claim, we dispense with the idea that only some EOMs are influential; even new players in election monitoring or those viewed as unprofessional in expert circles may shape the information environment in meaningful ways. We hypothesize that governments have particular incentives to invite multiple EOMs when they are (a) more aid dependent, and (b) facing greater

domestic political risk. We extend these insights further to consider the distinction between Western and non-Western EOMs. Because Western groups are (on average) more likely to issue negative scrutiny than non-Western groups, we expect aid-dependent and domestically at-risk governments to also be those which are more likely to host a mix of Western and non-Western EOMs.

We test these insights using new data on the presence and verdicts of 43 international election observation groups, covering 98 non-OECD countries from 1998-2018. The source material for our data are international and domestic news reports, making these measures well-suited to shed light on the *informational effects* of multiple EOMs. Taking the election as our unit of analysis, we track the number and identity of EOMs. We find that recipients of high amounts of Western foreign aid—which face greater pressure to host Western EOMs—are more likely to host multiple election-monitoring IOs *and* that these are typically a mix of both Western and non-Western groups. The second robust finding is that countries with a recent history of election-related protests—in sum, where political survival is under threat—are more likely to host many EOMs, and that they include non-Western IOs in particular. Notably, we do not find that autocracies shy away from inviting EOMs in general, or even Western EOMs; rather our results suggest that *EOMs from Western IOs are perceived as a threat only to autocrats at risk from domestic unrest*. Our findings therefore indicate that we must look beyond regime type to a set of more nuanced political factors, in order to understand variation in EOM presence across countries.

Supporting the key mechanism of our theory, we offer evidence that hosting multiple EOMs has *informational consequences*: Elections that feature a mix of both Western and non-Western IOs are more likely to see disagreement among different EOMs. This can obscure and confuse beliefs about the true legitimacy of the election, thereby allowing the government to construct a more favorable narrative and disempowering opposition challenges. We also find that elections hosting multiple EOMs exhibit more divergent depictions in Western versus non-Western media—consistent with the idea that contesta-

tion in the election monitoring regime is being used to challenge the liberal international order.

## 2 Institutional Crowding

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, governments rushed to affiliate with a variety of Western international organizations that seek to promote liberal values of open investment, trade, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Many of these institutions engage in *public scrutiny of domestic institutions*. Scrutiny can occur directly through periodic reporting requirements, monitoring missions, and performance evaluation; or indirectly via mechanisms for judicial review and dispute resolution which are activated in the case of alleged violations. The range of international institutions engaging in scrutiny is therefore broad, including IOs that exercise policy or membership conditionality (Dür and Elsig, 2014; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005); international courts and dispute resolution bodies (Davis and Bermeo, 2009; Chaudoin, 2016); human rights commissions; or (the case we focus on here) IO-sponsored observation missions tasked with monitoring and reporting on the country’s adherence to liberal norms.

By revealing information about compliance, these IOs shape countries’ reputations, with knock-on effects for a range of international and domestic outcomes. Internationally, negative scrutiny can harm government’s access to Western aid, investment, or inclusion in formal or informal “clubs”—in one recent example, the Biden Administration’s initiative to exclude nondemocracies from the Summit of the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Domestically, negative scrutiny can be used by regime opponents to strengthen their political hand.

The costs of scrutiny are crucial for understanding the present backlash against the liberal international order. Scholars have observed the growing phenomenon of withdrawal and contestation within IOs (Chaudoin, 2016; Walter, 2021; Vabulas and von

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<sup>1</sup>Toosi, Nahal. 11 May 2022. Biden’s Americas summit is drawing jeers and threats of boycott. *Politico*: <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/11/biden-americas-summit-boycott-threats-00031717>.

Borzyskowski, 2021; Bowen and Broz, 2022). Others have focused on the rise of alternative institutions that seek to challenge the Western-led order, including the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) (Broz and Wang, 2020; Qian and Zhao, 2023) the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and informal arrangements like the BRICS. The result has been increasing institutional overlap and regime complexity: the spaghetti bowls of agreements, conflicting rules, and overlapping jurisdictions which can undermine the overall goals that IOs are meant to promote (Alter and Meunier, 2009).

We shift focus from the level of the regime to that of participating states. We ask, in the face of a complex international regime, why do governments sometimes choose to simultaneously affiliate with *multiple IOs* that exhibit varying value commitments and professionalism. We term this strategy *institutional crowding*, noting that it differs from *forum-shopping*, in which governments select which IO will best serve their interest. It also differs from a strategy of simple rejection or *backlash*, in which governments withdraw or reject Western-led institutions altogether. Institutional crowding entails affiliating with multiple organizations with the same ostensible mandate, but which in practice may exhibit drastically different normative commitments or capacity to engage in effective scrutiny.

Here, we focus on one domain which illustrates the dynamics well: international election monitoring. To motivate our analysis, consider the experience of Azerbaijan. In its first post-independence elections in the mid-1990s, Azerbaijan, like most postcommunist states, hosted a small number of election observation missions from European IOs. Its 1995 election was monitored by the OSCE and Council of Europe; and its 2000 contest by these same two, plus a mission from the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI). By the mid-2000s, as the supply of monitoring groups increased, Azerbaijan began inviting a much wider range of missions. Its 2003 election hosted missions from four IOs, including the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2013 and 2018, it hosted no fewer than 13 missions, from a variety of democratic and autocratic IOs, NGOs, as well as diplomats and officials from friendly countries, without trying to

hide serious shortcomings in electoral integrity, in a practice that one analysis called “lazy election fraud.”<sup>2</sup> Although missions from the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) continued to issue assessments that criticized shortcomings, most other EOMs issued positive reports. Our analysis of news articles surrounding Azerbaijan’s 2018 election underscores how these positive assessments were used to provide a distorted picture of election quality in the domestic media.<sup>3</sup>

Research on international election monitoring does not provide a clear explanation for the many instances, as in Azerbaijan, in which governments host a large number of diverse EOMs. “First generation” studies conceived of election monitoring as a tool of Western democracy promotion and focused on a set of reputable IOs, such as the EU, Carter Center, NDI and OSCE, with the capacity to detect flaws and the will to report them (Kelley, 2008; Hyde, 2011; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Donno, 2013). The growth in alternative, non-Western and less-capable EOMs took off in the mid-2000s in response to the post-Soviet electoral revolutions. Research on ‘shadow’ or ‘zombie’ election monitoring accordingly conceives of this phenomenon as part of the toolkit of “smart” authoritarian regimes (Kelley, 2009; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Morgenbesser, 2020; Bush and Prather, 2022; Cottiero and Haggard, 2021*a*). But regime type is arguably only the first layer of this problem. Many questions remain about the precise factors that drive governments to pursue a strategy of “institutional crowding” in election monitoring. In what follows, we develop a theory of the conditions under which standards-based scrutiny is costly, which in turn explains variation in demand for multiple EOMs. Though we develop these insights with respect to international election monitoring, we discuss in the conclusion how they travel to other domains.

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<sup>2</sup>“Five remarkable things about Azerbaijan’s unremarkable election”, EU Observer, Apr 13, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Azeri media disproportionately touted positive statements from a range of IOs and individual parliamentarians, for example a television report mentioned observers from the CIS, Turkey-Azerbaijan Interparliamentary Friendship Group, Organization of Turkic States, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and a mission from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). The latter is noteworthy because it allowed the government to claim positive assessments from “European” observers. When the ODIHR mission was mentioned in Azeri media, it was in the context of government statements undermining its credibility.



### 3 Argument

Scrutiny by election observation missions (EOMs) provides information to domestic and international audiences that may otherwise be uncertain about the legitimacy and quality of elections (Bush and Prather, 2017; Hyde, 2011). Several consequences can flow from this scrutiny. For opposition parties and the public, election observers' assessments shape decisions about whether to boycott, protest, or even engage in violent resistance (Kelley, 2012; Donno, 2013; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Beaulieu and Hyde, 2008; Smidt, 2016; Daxecker, 2012; Von Borzyskowski, 2019), particularly when election results are close (Thompson and Kuntz, 2004; Tucker, 2007). At the international level, EOM assessments influence the distribution of "democracy-contingent benefits" such as foreign aid, IO membership, multilateral loans, foreign investment, and economic sanctions (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012) (Ch.12).

In practice, these contingent benefits flow from mainly Western states and IOs who, in turn, expect and encourage governments to host election observers that they deem reputable. Thus, for any country wishing to maintain good standing with the West, inviting (Western) election observers is an international norm. We assume that all states face some level of pressure or incentive to host Western election observers. (Below we consider sources of variation in this pressure). We also assume that Western observers are, on average, more likely than non-Western observers to criticize electoral malpractice.

There is now a far more diverse global landscape of election observers than existed in the 1980s and nineties: regional organizations in Africa, Asia/Eurasia and Latin America; a host of new NGOs; and the now widespread practice of inviting teams of foreign parliamentarians and diplomats to serve as loosely-organized observers. These newer players make their own mark on the information surrounding elections. They cannot be dismissed simply because they may lack credibility in the eyes of Western democracy experts. As Bush and Prather (2018) show in their study of Tunisia, ideas about EOM credibility vary across audiences, with the domestic public actually favoring regional IOs over Western groups. One reason for this is that the differences in capacity across IOs

may not be widely understood, as with EOMs from otherwise well-known and trusted regional organizations (e.g., the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)). Other observer groups possess benign names which mask the identity of anti-democratic sponsors. Elections in Azerbaijan, for example, are regularly monitored by a Brussels-based think tank called the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, which is in fact bankrolled by the Azerbaijani government. Governments may also actively dissemble, promoting a false picture of whom observers are speaking for. In Cambodia’s 2018 election, for example, the European Union declined to send an EOM due to the uncompetitive nature of the contest (the opposition was banned). But the government later referred to a group of parliamentarians from right-wing populist parties in Europe as “EU observers”—a characterization that was picked up in media reports (Sassoon, 2018).

Our key premise is that *institutional crowding is a strategy aimed at shaping the informational environment*. As the number and diversity of EOMs present in an election increases, so does the likelihood that critical assessments by one will be counterbalanced by more positive assessments from others. In this way, governments set themselves up to shape the media narrative in ways that can influence audiences—domestic elites, the public, international investors, neighboring leaders—that have weak or incorrect priors about which EOMs are reputable. Public contestation among different election observer groups has the potential to, at minimum, sow confusion about the true quality of the election (Morrison et al., N.d.). By hosting a larger and more diverse set of EOMs, states hedge against the material and reputational consequences of criticism. *We therefore expect the incentives for institutional crowding to increase as the likelihood and cost of EOM criticism increases*. We proceed to lay out hypotheses about the factors associated with hosting multiple EOMs; in our analysis, we include tests that distinguish between Western and non-Western observers, and we discuss the combined presence of both Western and non-Western groups as a special case of multiple EOMs.

### 3.1 Regime Type

As noted in prior research, one factor that shapes the baseline likelihood of EOM criticism—and therefore incentives to invite multiple monitors—is regime type (Kelley, 2009, 2012; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Bush and Prather, 2022). For democracies, criticism from election observers is unlikely because elections are typically clean; observers may note irregularities related to capacity or logistical issues, but they do not question the fundamental legitimacy of the contest. For autocracies, criticism from capable EOMs—those with the capacity and will to detect irregularities—is far more likely. Some autocracies may eschew inviting capable EOMs altogether (as with the most recent elections in Russia and Belarus), but this remains uncommon because it alienates influential Western states. A more desirable strategy for most autocracies, we argue, is to offset the risk of criticism by inviting multiple EOMs of varying quality.

We also expect hybrid regimes—competitive authoritarian and weak electoral democracies—to be particularly susceptible to the *costs* of EOM criticism, and therefore to have incentives to invite multiple groups. In closed autocracies where opposition parties are very weak (or nonexistent) and repression high, EOM criticism may occur but is less likely to pose risks to the regime’s grip on power. It is in hybrid regimes—where the political space is open enough for the opposition and international partners to leverage EOM criticism for costly mass mobilization—where the anticipated costs are higher.<sup>4</sup> Regimes ‘in the middle’ therefore have incentives to invite multiple monitoring groups to increase the chances of mixed or conflicting verdicts that blunt the effect of any outright criticism.

**Hypothesis 1.** Autocratic and hybrid regimes tend to host larger numbers of international election observation missions (EOMs).

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<sup>4</sup>For a similar logic on the costs of human rights treaty ratification, see Simmons (2009).

## 3.2 Domestic Unrest

The most immediate threat that can flow from EOM criticism is domestic anti-regime mobilization. Indeed, fear of the contagion of electoral revolutions has arguably been the animating force behind Vladimir Putin’s tightened repression at home and increased assertiveness abroad. Not all regimes are at equal risk of election-related instability, however; durability in the face of legitimacy threats and political crises can differ substantially. Some regimes enjoy entrenched elite support, control of the coercive apparatus, and dominance over electoral competition which allow them to weather political challenges, even when it is widely understood among citizens that elections are manipulated (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Gehlbach and Simpser, 2015). Others possess a more benign source of strength in the form of genuinely high levels of popular support, which makes anti-regime mobilization unlikely to gain traction in response to criticism from international election observers. To capture this more specific regime-level variation in domestic political risk, we consider whether the country has a recent history of election-related anti-regime mobilization. In such cases, there is a demonstrated cost associated with EOM criticism, because it can serve as a catalyst for opposition protests (Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Von Borzyskowski, 2016; Daxecker, 2012). Accordingly, we anticipate that the incentives to invite multiple EOMs will be particularly high in countries where previous elections featured contentious mass mobilization.

**Hypothesis 2.** Countries with a recent history of election-related protest tend to host larger numbers of international EOMs.

*Foreign Aid* At the international level, countries that are economically dependent on the West face both greater pressure to host (Western) election observers, as well as greater consequences if these EOMs issue negative judgments. We focus here on the most direct form of economic dependence: reliance on Western foreign aid. Unlike trade benefits which are politically difficult to withdraw, foreign aid is regularly suspended or reduced as an instrument of international conditionality in response to violations of

democratic norms (Donno and Neureiter, 2018). Regimes dependent on Western official development assistance (ODA) therefore face a double bind. They are expected to host election observers as a condition for continued good standing with donors, but the material consequences of criticism by these observers is high. Add to this the fact that aid-dependent regimes often face capacity problems in election management which election observers document and publicize. Such regimes have incentives to find ways to counter a public narrative of flawed or manipulated elections. Hosting multiple EOMs, including non-Western or otherwise ‘friendly’ missions, is a low-cost strategy to achieve this goal.

**Hypothesis 3.** Recipients of high levels of foreign aid tend to host larger numbers of international EOMs.

## 4 Data

To date, efforts to explore the phenomenon of multiple election observation missions have been marked by certain data limitations. Daxecker and Schneider (2014) and Kelley (2012) (Chapter 4) examine the factors associated with hosting multiple international EOMs, using the Kelley and Kolev (2010) DIEM dataset that covers 21 monitoring groups, from 1980-2004. They find that multiple monitors are associated with mid-range and/or less democratic regimes (Daxecker & Schneider 2014; Kelley 2012, Ch.4); foreign aid dependence and a history of flawed elections (Daxecker & Schneider 2014). But 2004 is precisely the point at which many of the new players in election monitoring were emerging. It is an open question how well the insights from prior research travel forward, as the supply of election observers has expanded and diversified. Another widely-used data source on international election observation is the NELDA dataset (Hyde and Marinov 2012), which includes questions on whether international monitors were present, and whether Western monitors made allegations of significant vote fraud (Nelda questions 45, 46 and 47). But NELDA does not contain information on the identity and number of groups, or on their more detailed judgments.

Updating this empirical picture, Bush and Prather (2022) have gathered data on EOMs that covers a more recent time span (2000-2020) for African, East European and Central Asian countries. Their project offers a categorization of the quality of election observer groups as high, medium and low, with the goal of understanding why some governments host both high- and low-quality groups in the same election, as well as why democracies may (puzzlingly) host low-quality groups. As explained below, our data seeks to complement theirs by inductively identifying a wider range of election observer groups beyond just IOs, as well as coding for the content of EOM assessments based on news reports as our source material.

We generate original data on the presence, identity, and verdicts of international election observers, as reported in the international media. At present, our coding covers 694 executive elections in 98 countries, spanning all global regions, from 1990-2018.<sup>5</sup> We excluded OECD members from our coding efforts.<sup>6</sup>

The source material for our dataset are international newspaper and newswire reports, accessed by a team of research assistants using the ProQuest Newsstand Database. To begin, we identified the set of elections known to have hosted international observers, using the comprehensive record constructed by Roussias and Rufino (2018). For these elections, research assistants ran keyword searches to retrieve all articles with any mention of election observation or election monitoring, for a period covering one month prior to one month after the election date.<sup>7</sup> Research assistants were trained to remove irrelevant articles. The average number of relevant newspaper articles retrieved per election was 18, while the median number was 4.

Our goal in creating these data based on news sources is to capture how most domestic and international audiences actually acquire information about international election

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<sup>5</sup>In countries with presidential systems we code for presidential elections; and in parliamentary systems we code for legislative elections.

<sup>6</sup>Per country, the modal number of elections which hosted international observers is 5, meaning that the large majority of countries in our data host international observers over multiple and repeated electoral cycles.

<sup>7</sup>Election date and election type (presidential, legislative) were identified using NELDA (Hyde and Marinov, 2012).

observers. Our intuition—based on what we know about reliance on informational shortcuts and heuristics (Gray, 2013)—is that few people, even elites, take pains to seek out the official reports on election observation organizations’ websites; rather, they consult familiar media sources that provide immediate coverage. Along these lines, it is apparent from our research that election observers’ preliminary statements, which are made in the 1-2 days following the election, receive the lions’ share of attention; final reports, which are published weeks to months later, are more detailed but receive less media coverage.

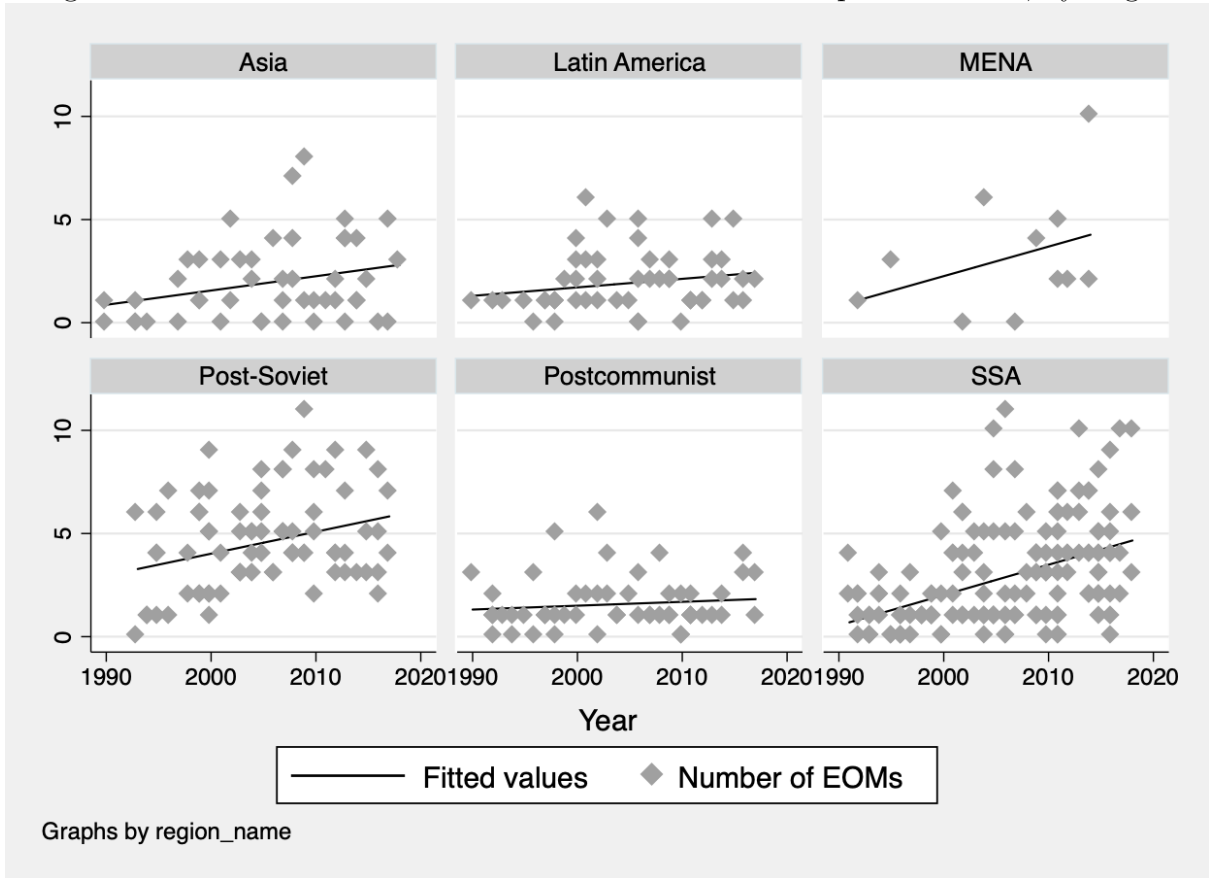
Our dataset stands in contrast to those based on election observers’ official reports and statements.<sup>8</sup> This carries particular advantages and disadvantages. First, media coverage of EOMs is often less detailed from what is gleaned from the missions’ own reports. News articles tend to feature a one- or two-sentence summary. Typical examples include phrases such as: “International observers approved of the election and praised it as orderly and peaceful;” “Observers praised the government for a well-run election but noted some problems with voter registration lists.” Sometimes the identity of the observer groups are explicitly mentioned in news reports (and we record when this is the case), but it is not uncommon for reports to simply reference “international observers.” We embrace this vagueness and consider it a point of interest—and even an advantage—in our data, because it allows us to capture variation in the specificity of the signal that is sent to international and domestic audiences. If what filters out in the end is a general reference to “international observers” without information on their identities, then this supports the idea that governments can host multiple groups without concern for their credibility. This is particularly relevant for small, less strategically important countries, whose elections receive relatively little attention in the international media.

We also differ from existing data sources in that we adopt a more flexible approach to identify a larger range of international observer groups. In addition to coding for the presence of a pre-specified set of 43 organizations, we also code open-ended variables

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<sup>8</sup>For example, the Kelley and Kolev (2010) Dataset on International Election Monitoring (DIEM) codes election observer verdicts based on the missions’ reports and statements for 17 IOs, from 1975-2004. Donno (2013) also uses official reports and statements to code for the presence and verdicts of 12 election observation IOs from 1990-2008.

Figure 1: Number of International Election Observer Groups Over Time, by Region



Note: Point indicates the number of groups per election, line is the fitted linear prediction.

on the total number of reported international EOMs. This includes the presence of bilateral observers from foreign embassies or parliaments; and observers from international nongovernmental organizations that are not coded by other datasets.

**Figure 1** shows the average number of international election observation groups over time, by global region. This is based on a variable that measures the number of reported EOMs in an election.<sup>9</sup> This captures in the broadest brush the phenomenon of ‘institutional crowding.’ Figure 1 shows that in most regions, there is at least a moderately increasing trend, i.e., more EOMs are present over time. The exception are Central and Eastern European (CEE) states—distinct from post-Soviet republics. Since the mid-1990s most CEE countries have held competent elections and have progressed toward

<sup>9</sup>Not all of the EOMs may have been reported by name (we have other variables that code the identity of groups).



EU membership. The common practice among these countries is to invite a single EOM from the OSCE/ODIHR. The picture is different for the post-Soviet states, where the issue of electoral quality has been weaponized in the competition for influence between Russia and the West (Fawn, 2006). These countries hosted more observation groups on average and demonstrate an increasing trend over time. Observation organizations active in the post-Soviet space include the OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe, NDI, IRI, the Russian-backed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the China-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). We also see a clear increase over time in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is driven in part by the rise in regional organizations involved in election observation (Cottiero and Haggard, 2021*b*).

## 5 Analysis

We base our dependent variables on a measure that counts the number of international EOMs that were reported by name as being present in the election. It ranges from 0 to 11. (We make no distinction as to the type or quality of the different EOMs.) We begin by estimating a series of logit models, with dichotomous dependent variables, that predict (a) EOM presence (one or more missions), (b) the presence of multiple EOMs (at least two missions), (c) the presence of five or more EOMs. This approach is intended to capture different threshold numbers of EOMs, and it will allow us to compare whether the factors predicting any EOM presence are different from those predicting multiple EOMs. As an additional check, we estimate a zero-inflated negative binomial model (ZINB) with the number of EOMs as the dependent variable. This model is appropriate because we have reason to think that zeros (i.e., no EOMs) may emerge as a result of two processes: (1) structural zeros represent high-quality elections that have no need for international election observers; and (2) other zeros “by choice,” where EOMs could be useful—and where monitoring organizations would be willing to go—but where governments choose not to accept. Recent examples of this include Russia and Belarus which took steps

to block the accreditation of international observers. Accordingly, we estimate the first equation of the model, which predicts structural zeros, as a function of liberal democracy and past electoral quality.<sup>10</sup> The second step of the model, which predicts the number of EOMs, includes the set of right-hand-side variables explained below. This is the baseline model specification that we use throughout to predict the number of EOMs.

## 5.1 Model Specification

Our hypotheses identify three factors that we expect to be associated with hosting multiple EOMs. Domestically, we expect autocratic and hybrid regimes, as well as those with a recent history of election-related protests to host more EOMs. Internationally, we expect countries receiving high levels of Western foreign aid to host more EOMs.

For regime type, we include a dichotomous variable for *Autocracy* (measured using the V-Dem regimes of the world classification) to model categorical differences between democracy and dictatorship. Second, we include the squared value of the V-Dem polyarchy index (*Polyarchy*<sup>2</sup>) to capture hybrid regimes between closed autocracies and liberal democracies. High values on this variable represent full autocracies and full democracies; we therefore expect a negative relationship between *Polyarchy*<sup>2</sup> and multiple EOMs. Both regime variables are lagged one year.

Second, we capture whether a country has a recent track record of election-related unrest using the Nelda question (Nelda29) for the country’s previous election: “Were there riots and protests after the election?” We label this *Previous election protests*. This is a direct measure of domestic political risk associated with election monitor criticism, and we expect this to be associated with more EOMs even after controlling for regime type.

Third, to capture foreign aid dependence, we include a variable for *Official Development Assistance (ODA)* from the OECD DAC, measured in logged constant USD (lagged

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<sup>10</sup>We use the V-Dem regimes of the world classification of liberal democracy. For electoral quality, we take the value of the V-Dem clean elections index in the previous election (Coppedge et al., 2021).

one year).

We include four additional controls which may be correlated with our variables of interest and also influence the dependent variable. These are: *GDP per capita* (in logged constant USD); a measure for the quality of the previous election (*Previous election quality*), on the logic that countries with previously flawed elections are more likely to host EOMs, in part because of greater interest by the IOs that send observers; a measure of whether the previous election represented a gain for the opposition (*Previous opposition gain*), and an indicator for whether the incumbent was running in the present election (*Incumbent running*).<sup>11</sup> When the opposition gained ground in the previous election, or when the incumbent is not running, elections represent moments of greater domestic political risk and uncertainty, which may increase incentives to host multiple EOMs.

All models include region dummy variables and robust standard errors clustered by country. Results for these models predicting the number of EOMs are shown in **Table 1**. In **Table 2** we distinguish between Western and non-Western EOMs. We code this based on the location of the organization that sends the EOM. If the headquarters are located in North America or an EU member state, we code the EOM as Western; if not, we code it as non-Western. In **Table 2**, we estimate models that predict: (1) the presence of at least one Western EOM, (2) the presence of *only* Western EOMs, (3) the presence of (at least one) non-Western EOM, and (4) the presence of *both* Western and non-Western EOMs. Selected coefficients are graphed in **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**.

## 5.2 Findings

Beginning with **Table 1**, in the model that predicts EOM presence, we find that autocracies, hybrid regimes and countries receiving high levels of foreign aid are more likely to host at least one election observation mission. This is broadly consistent with previous

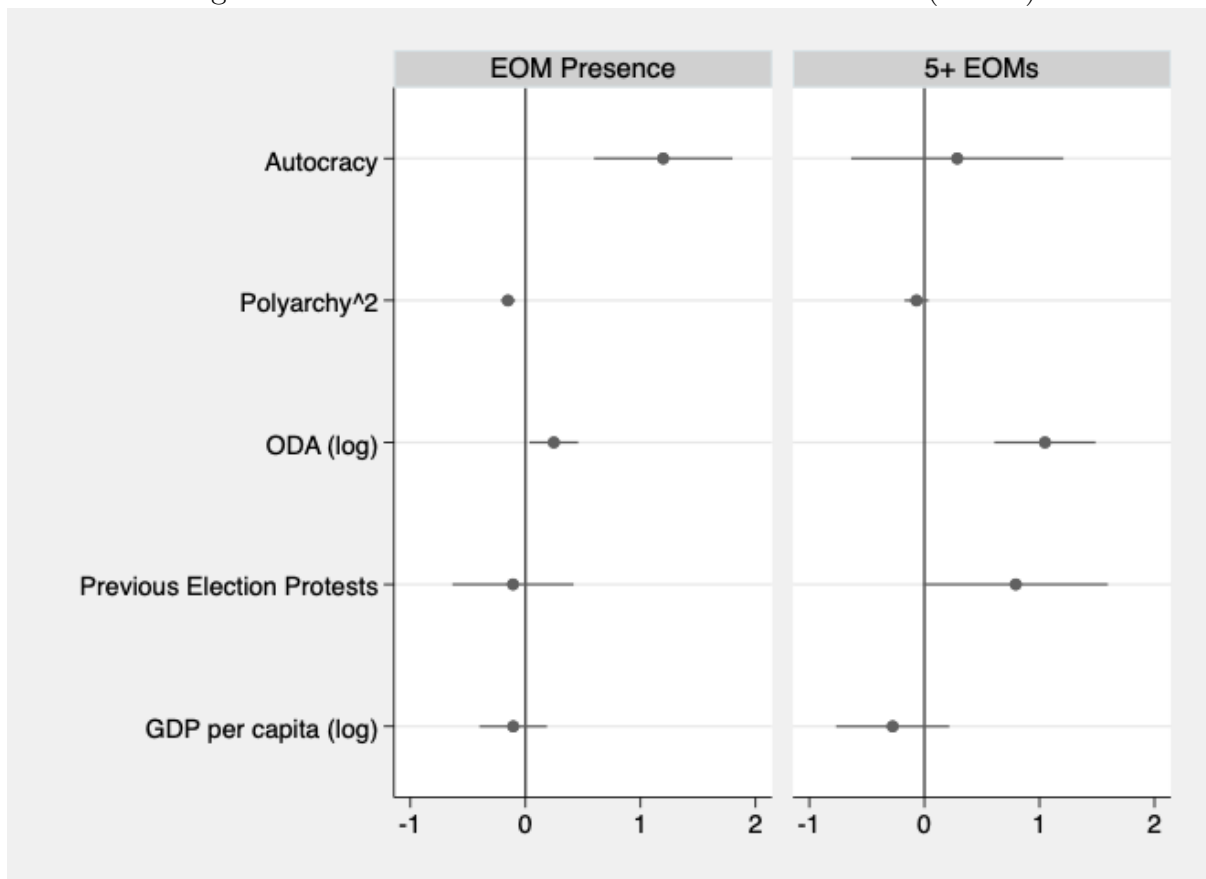
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<sup>11</sup>Data for GDP per capita come from WDI. Previous election quality is the value of the V-Dem clean elections index in the year of the country's previous election. Previous opposition gain is coded using question Nelda27 (for the previous contest). Incumbent running is coded using question Nelda21 (for the current election).

	EOM present	Multiple	5+	ZINB
Autocracy	1.200*** (0.310)	0.778** (0.353)	0.191 (0.471)	-0.029 (0.156)
Polyarchy <sup>2</sup>	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)
Previous Election Protests	-0.109 (0.271)	0.189 (0.301)	0.855** (0.421)	0.303** (0.109)
ODA (log)	0.248** (0.108)	0.412*** (0.112)	1.050*** (0.218)	0.313** * (0.055)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.103 (0.153)	-0.017 (0.157)	-0.399 (0.265)	-0.050 (0.065)
Previous Election Quality	0.649 (0.644)	0.815 (0.738)	-0.922 (1.145)	-0.102 (0.398)
Previous Opposition Gain	0.029 (0.213)	0.054 (0.238)	0.419 (0.391)	0.182+ (0.097)
Incumbent Running	-0.227 (0.222)	-0.304 (0.240)	-0.738** (0.346)	-0.074 (0.098)
Region dummies (not shown)				
Constant	-5.533+ (2.924)	-9.977*** (2.915)	-21.276*** (5.459)	-5.285** * (1.491)
<i>Inflation equation</i>				
Liberal Democracy				1.063 (0.968)
Previous Election Quality				1.190+ (0.610)
Constant				-0.721** (0.303)
/				
lnalpha				-3.042** (1.162)
N	490	490	479	496
+ p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.001				

Table 1: Models Predicting the Presence and Number of EOMs, Executive Elections, 1990-2018

Figure 2: Predictors of Election Observation Missions (EOMs)



Note: Coefficient and C.I.s from Table 1, Models 1 and 3.

research on which elections host international observers (Kelley, 2012; Hyde, 2011; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014). The picture changes when examining which countries host *large numbers* of EOMs. The factors predicting two or more EOMs (model 2) do not differ. But the practice of hosting five or more EOMs, rather, is concentrated in high aid-recipient countries and in those with a prior history of election-related unrest (model 3). This combined finding is robust across a number of models. The ZINB model (model 4) yields the same inference: accounting for the structural zeros in the data (countries that do not host observers because elections are well-conducted), we find that as foreign aid and past protest increase, countries host more EOMs. We conclude that regime type is a good predictor of EOM presence, but does not explain the practice of ‘institutional crowding,’ that is, hosting larger numbers of IOs. This is shaped instead by a more contingent factor—a recent history of election unrest—which varies both across and within regime type.

The significant results for Western development assistance underscore the importance of external pressure in shaping governments’ decisions to invite election observers. Western donors and the community of democracy promotion professionals that advise them tend to look to a favored set of (Western) election observer groups. In light of these expectations, how do governments navigate the balance between Western and non-Western observers? Our findings (*Table 2* and **Figure 3**) indicate that aid-dependent states do not choose between Western and non-Western EOMs. They treat them as complements rather than as substitutes. The factors that predict the presence of Western observers (model 1) are similar to those that predict EOM presence in general: autocracies, hybrid regimes and high ODA recipients tend to host Western groups. (Also as one might expect, GDP per capita is marginally associated with a lower probability of Western EOM presence). But foreign aid is not associated with hosting *only* Western EOMs (model 2). Rather, it strongly predicts the presence of non-Western EOMs and the practice of hosting a combination of Western and non-Western groups (models 3 and 4).<sup>12</sup>

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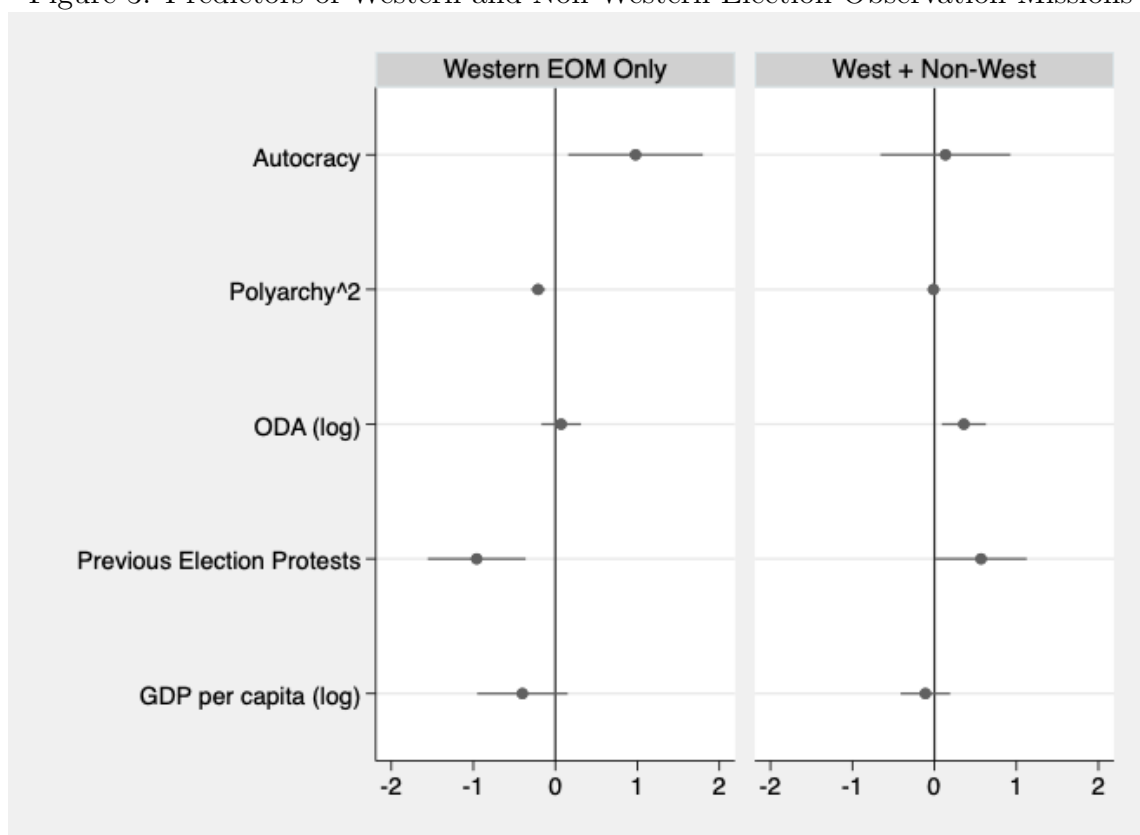
<sup>12</sup>This resonates with an analysis by Daxecker and Schneider (2014) that ODA is associated with the combined presence of high- and low-quality monitors, in a sample of elections from 1980-2004.

	Western EOMs	West Only	Non-Western	West + Non-Western
Autocracy	0.683** (0.319)	1.003** (0.423)	0.527 (0.395)	0.060 (0.395)
Polyarchy <sup>2</sup>	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Previous Election Protests	-0.056 (0.235)	-0.965** (0.305)	0.511 (0.311)	0.606** (0.290)
ODA (log)	0.280** (0.102)	0.084 (0.127)	0.249** (0.117)	0.351** (0.138)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.274+ (0.159)	-0.349 (0.290)	0.026 (0.149)	-0.183 (0.161)
Previous Election Quality	0.018 (0.643)	0.211 (0.859)	0.395 (0.820)	-0.335 (0.813)
Previous Opposition Gain	0.008 (0.209)	-0.248 (0.261)	0.092 (0.274)	0.207 (0.299)
Incumbent running	-0.062 (0.235)	0.187 (0.245)	-0.476 (0.299)	-0.292 (0.335)
Region dummies (not shown)				
Constant	-4.666+ (2.741)	-0.570 (4.155)	-7.625** (3.012)	-8.295** (3.389)
N	490	490	479	479

+ p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.001

Table 2: Logit Models Predicting Western and Non-Western EOMs, Executive Elections, 1990-2018

Figure 3: Predictors of Western and Non-Western Election Observation Missions



Note: Coefficient and C.I.s from Table 2, Models 2 and 4.



Our findings underscore again that regime type alone does not explain the phenomenon of institutional crowding or the rise of non-Western EOMs in particular. Perhaps unexpectedly, autocracies and hybrid regimes are positively associated with hosting *only* Western EOMs (model 2), but not with hosting non-Western groups (model 3) or a combination of Western and non-Western (model 4). Rather, we find evidence again of the importance of domestic political threats in shaping the mix of election observers that governments invite. When the previous election experienced protests, the country is significantly *less likely* to host Western EOMs (model 2), but more likely to host non-Western groups, either alone or in combination with Western observers (models 3 and 4). In sum, autocracies do not shy away from inviting EOMs, or even Western EOMs; rather our results indicate that *EOMs from Western IOs are perceived as a threat only to autocrats at risk from domestic unrest*. It is these at-risk regimes that represent a special source of demand for non-Western election observers.

## 6 Informational Effects of Institutional Crowding

Our argument rests on the idea that institutional crowding—the practice of hosting multiple and various international election observers—is a tool of reputation management. Governments seek to mitigate the political risks associated with EOM criticism by hosting multiple groups, thereby increasing the likelihood of divergent assessments and setting themselves up to shape a more favorable narrative about the election’s legitimacy. If this argument is correct, we should expect to observe at least two patterns in the post-election information environment. First, we expect divergent EOM assessments to be more prevalent as the number of EOMs increases. Furthermore, if our assumption that non-Western groups are (on average) less likely to criticize elections is correct, we should also expect divergent verdicts to be associated with elections that host a combination of Western and non-Western groups. Second, we expect elections that host multiple EOMs to feature more divergent depictions in the domestic media versus the Western (international)

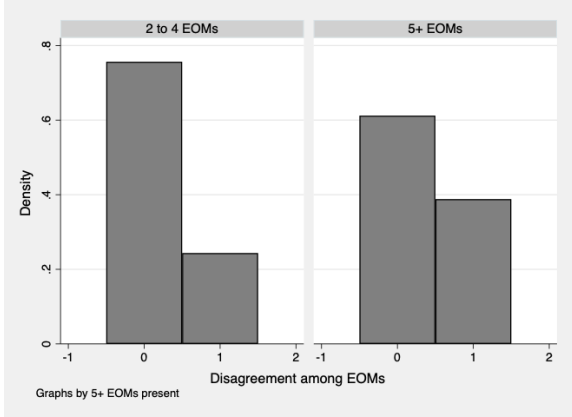


Figure 4: Disagreement Among EOMs

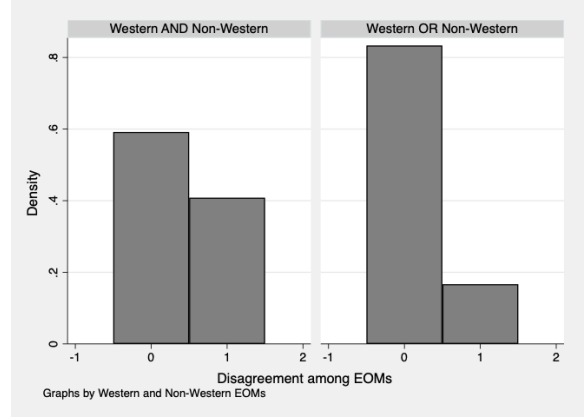


Figure 5: Disagreement among Western and Non-Western EOMs

media. Our data allow us to assess both claims.

To explore patterns of divergent EOM assessments, we examined our news sources and recorded the judgment associated with each EOM (when provided). Judgments were coded in a three-part scheme as either approve, disapprove or mixed, where mixed indicates that both positive and negative aspects of the election were noted by the observers. We code an election as having divergent assessments when at least one EOM differed from others (e.g., a combination of approve/disapprove, approve/mixed, or disapprove/mixed).

**Figure 4** shows the rate of divergent EOM assessments in elections that host between 2-4 EOMs (left panel) versus those that host 5 or more (right panel). Clearly, in elections that host 5 or more groups, divergent assessments are more likely, consistent with our claim that institutional crowding is a strategy that can be used by governments to hedge against the risk of criticism by some EOMs. Our data also reveal (**Figure 5**) that among elections that host multiple EOMs, divergent assessments are much more likely in those that feature both Western and non-Western IOs.

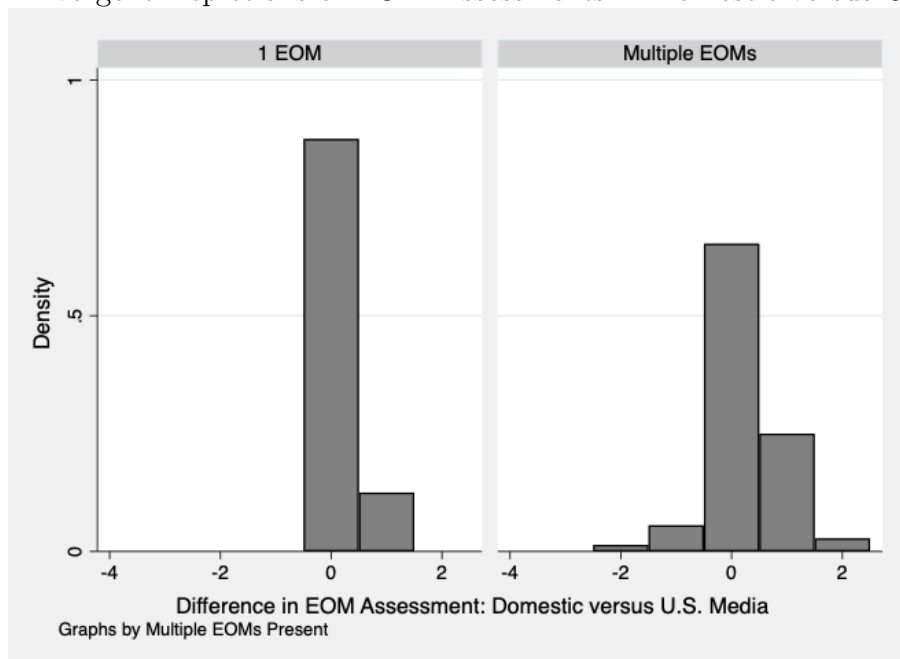
A second element in our story about the information environment concerns media coverage of election observers' assessments. Because hosting multiple EOMs increases the prevalence of divergent assessments, this provides fodder for media outlets that are influenced by, or sympathetic to, the government. To explore this, we leverage the fact that our data collection efforts encompassed a range of Western and non-Western outlets. As

a first cut, we examined differences in coverage of EOM assessments between U.S. media and domestic media from the country holding the election. Our logic is that in many developing countries—and certainly among authoritarian and hybrid regimes—governments possess various forms of leverage to generate favorable coverage in the domestic media; and this is therefore an important target for incumbents that seek to provide a sympathetic portrayal of how EOMs judged the legitimacy of an election. (One next step in our analysis, which we are currently undertaking, will be to examine election coverage in Russian and Chinese media). Examining the entire set of U.S. news articles, we coded whether the overall depiction of EOM assessments was unambiguously positive, unambiguously negative, or ‘mixed’ (in which EOMs are noted to have said both positive and negative things). We then did the same for domestic news articles.<sup>13</sup> **Figure 6** exhibits the difference in reported EOM assessment between the domestic versus U.S. news sources, first for elections which hosted only one EOM (left panel) and next for elections that hosted multiple EOMs (right panel). Here, a positive value on the x-axis represents a more positive depiction in the domestic media compared to U.S. media. We see that this type of divergence is considerably more common in elections that hosted multiple EOMs (right panel), consistent with the idea that multiple IOs can be used by governments to construct a more favorable media narrative. We are not the first to note that election observers can be used in this way—that is, to shape the domestic narrative (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014)—but this does represent the first attempt to assess this idea with systematic evidence. In sum, we consider the patterns presented in this section to be supportive evidence for an informational theory of institutional crowding.

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<sup>13</sup>Domestic news articles are obtained from the BBC World Monitoring database

Figure 6: Divergent Depictions of EOM Assessments in Domestic versus U.S. Media



## 7 Conclusions and Implications

This paper sheds light on an increasing reality of the post–Cold War world, the growing multipolarity of international regimes. IOs associated with liberal values exist alongside others that possess ostensibly similar mandates, but whose capacity and value commitments differ markedly in practice. This has important implications for the integration strategies available to governments around the world. As the hegemonic influence of the West declines, developing and middle-income countries can increasingly seek legitimation from other powers, and seek to use these affiliations to counter the reputational costs of Western scrutiny.

Rather than openly opposing the West, then, many governments adopt tactics akin to those of ‘spin dictators:’ using IOs to manipulate the information environment in ways that subvert, but do not openly challenge, liberal norms (Guriev and Treisman, 2022). Here, we introduced the concept of institutional crowding as one strategy in this toolkit, and we applied this logic to the domain of international election monitoring. Our findings indicate that hosting multiple international election observation missions (EOMs) is a

tool both of international reputation management and of domestic political survival. In line with prior research, we find that official development assistance (ODA) is associated with hosting more EOMs. The new wrinkle we uncover is that high aid recipients also seek to counter scrutiny by inviting non-Western observers alongside Western groups. Paradoxically, Western foreign aid is promoting the emergence of non-Western election observers.

Our second robust finding relates to domestic political threats: a history of post-election protests is associated with inviting multiple EOMs. Post-election mobilization represents a moment of unique danger for political survival, and it is well-documented that criticism from international observers foments protests in the wake of flawed elections. Accordingly, we find that past election protests negatively predict having *only* Western EOMs but positively predict non-Western groups, as well as hosting both Western and non-Western EOMs simultaneously. We conclude that another important source of demand for multiple and non-Western election observers are governments that seek to mitigate the risk of anti-regime mobilization.

Interestingly, our results do not support to the notion that institutional crowding is simply a story about autocracy. Regime type is not one of the factors that predicts hosting large numbers of EOMs. Moreover, in our analysis, autocracies—on average—do not shy away from inviting Western EOMs and they are not more likely to host non-Western groups. This contrasts in some ways with the depiction of the ‘shadow’ market in election monitoring as intimately linked with the global wave of authoritarianism (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Kelley, 2009; Walker, 2016; Cooley, 2015). We offer a more nuanced conclusion: that it is regimes with a history of post-election mobilization—those in immediate danger of domestic unrest—that focus on inviting multiple and non-Western groups. The shadow market in EOMs has undoubtedly been promoted by powerful authoritarian states, such as Russia, but it functions like an insurance policy, which governments avail themselves of only when needed.

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