The ramifications of authoritarian elections: A quantitative analysis of civil liberties during election years in non-democracies

Stefanescu, Oana-Uta

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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Supervisor: Dr. Kevin Koehler

Oana-Uta Stefanescu

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1. Introduction

Although elections and other inherently democratic institutions are not novel for certain dictatorships, there has been a sharp increase in the number of authoritarian regimes which adopt such institutions, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014; Donno, 2013). To illustrate this, in the period between 1985 and 2014, the number of dictatorships holding multiparty elections doubled, rising from 21 to 43 per cent. Conversely, in the same period, the percentage of autocracies without multiparty elections dropped from 81 to 23 (Kim & Kroeger, 2018, p. 254). The global spread of and support for liberal democracy and its tenets has played a large role in this phenomenon, by signaling to autocratic leaders that in order to maintain both their domestic and international legitimacy, embracing such institutions may be necessary (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014, Levitsky & Way, 2002). At the same time, however, it is these very institutions which contribute to autocratic regime resilience. This is due to the fact that they do not function in the same way their democratic counterparts do, but rather, are being manipulated by the ruling elites in ways which serve to promote regime durability (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009).

More specifically, elections are particularly useful tools which dictators can use to co-opt elites or even larger groups in society, all the while signaling that any attempts to overthrow or subvert the regime will be ineffective (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). However, elections do have their own associated risks – especially on the grounds that they may result in the defeat of the regime. This point is evidenced by the cases of the KANU in Kenya or the KMT in Taiwan as instances where the ruling parties were overthrown as a result of authoritarian elections (Magaloni, 2006; Chao & Myers, 2000). So then, why do dictators continue to take such a big risk? Firstly, because elections confer a certain degree of (international) legitimacy to the regime (Cox, 2009). Moreover, it allows autocrats "to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty" (Schedler, 2002, p. 37). Secondly, elections function as concessions towards the citizens (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). Finally, elections assist dictators in ensuring that the opposition remains divided, by facilitating internal competition and conflict within the opposition (Magaloni, 2006).

Altogether, research has shown that elections are highly beneficial for regime durability and legitimacy. However, there is little attention devoted to whether elections benefit the citizens, not just the regime or the ruling elite. One way of assessing the implications of

elections for the constituents of an autocratic country would be analyzing whether they have an effect on civil liberties. As such, the research question of this paper is as follows:

RQ: How do elections in non-democratic countries affect civil liberties?

In order to elucidate the research question, this paper will begin with a review of the existing literature on elections in authoritarian regimes and the effects they bring about, especially with regards to civil liberties. Subsequently, based upon existing theories, two sets of hypotheses regarding civil liberties and media freedom in the presence of elections will be formulated. In the methodology section, the choice for a large-N statistical analysis will be elaborated upon, along with information regarding the variables. Afterwards, the results of the statistical tests will be presented, followed by a discussion of the findings. Finally, an overview and possible avenues for future research will conclude the paper.

2. Literature Review

The literature on elections in autocratic regimes is extensive, ranging from why dictators choose to adopt such institutions to whether they contribute to regime resilience, or whether democracy is more likely to follow in the aftermath of a breakdown in such contexts (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni, 2006; Geddes, 2005; Cox, 2009). However, there is less emphasis on the implications of autocratic elections, especially at the population level. Miller (2015) is one of the few who brings up the important question of whether electoral authoritarianism is actually a good thing for the constituents. However, Miller (2015a) chooses to explore this question by analyzing human development and social welfare issues such as health and education, and pays little to no attention to civil liberties. The results support the hypothesis that electoral autocracies have a significant and positive effect on human development, in terms of health, education, as well as gender equality (Miller, 2015a, p. 1551).

In a similar vein, seeking to answer the question of whether elections in authoritarian regimes, more specifically non-competitive elections, can potentially benefit citizens, Little (2017) constructs a game-theoretical model. The overall conclusion is that elections, regardless of the fact that they are non-competitive, do seem to have positive effects for the citizens (Little, 2017, pp. 232-233). However, this finding may be overstated, seeing as the paper rests upon a theoretical exercise, lacking a thorough empirical analysis. Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) also

raise a similar question, albeit devoting significantly less attention to it compared to Miller (2015) or Little (2017), of whether elections serve not only the ruling elites, but also the citizens. In their review of the extant literature, Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) note that elections in authoritarian regimes may increase citizen welfare, as they promote "policy congruence between citizens and public officials and voter efficacy" (p. 406).

In their paper, Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) urge scholars to move beyond the topic of regime survival, and rather focus on the implications of elections in authoritarian contexts, regardless of whether or not they increase regime durability (pp. 416-417). Similarly, Miller (2015b) argues that there is a need to move beyond the assumption that in autocracies, elections are merely facades, meant to improve the regime's international legitimacy. This is because elections have been present in dictatorships long before the global, organized effort to promote democracy even began, and they have done so with little to no outside pressure (Miller, 2015b, p. 694). Miller's (2015b) argument also seems to echo that of Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), as the latter also stress that institutions in autocracies matter greatly, and should not be taken for granted.

Donno and Kreft (2019) place women at the center of their analysis, as they investigate whether the presence of institutions has any effect on the protection and promotion of women's rights in authoritarian regimes. Not unexpectedly, the relationship is anything but straightforward. Institutionalized ruling parties in autocracies seem to have a better capacity to promote women's rights, but the presence of multiparty elections is not at all related to performance surrounding their advancement (Donno and Kreft, 2019, p. 744). On the other hand, Donno and Kreft (2019) do find that elections are associated with the provision of coordination goods, an umbrella term which includes civil liberties, as they represent a form of concessions. Furthermore, in her book on authoritarian institutions, Gandhi (2008) finds that wherever institutions are present in an autocracy, respect for civil liberties is increased. It is important to note, however, that Gandhi (2008) refers to a host of institutions, such as legislatures and multiparty politics, not just elections.

Møller and Skaaning (2013) take a closer look at civil liberties in authoritarian contexts, by drawing comparisons between different autocratic subtypes, as well as distinguishing between four civil liberties – freedom of expression, of assembly and association, of religion, and of movement. Not unexpectedly, civil liberties are curtailed to a much greater extent in autocracies, compared to democracies. More notably, the differences between the autocratic subtypes are negligible, both in the aggregate measure, as well as based on the different categories of civil liberties (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). However, Møller and Skaaning (2013)

make no distinction between closed autocracies and electoral autocracies, a distinction which may prove more insightful.

An analysis of the literature surrounding electoral autocracies would not be complete without mention of the theoretical argument that hybrid regimes are the most threatening to their constituents, an argument commonly referred to as "More Murder in the Middle". The argument rests on findings that point to an inverted U-shaped relationship depicting the level of repression in democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies (Fein, 1995). Davenport and Armstrong (2004) further explore this argument, finding that repression only decreases after a certain threshold of democracy is achieved; simply adding democratic elements or institutions (such as elections) in an autocracy will do little to decrease repression (p. 552).

As previously mentioned, the effects resulting from the presence of elections in authoritarian regimes are nowhere near straightforward. On the one hand, institutions in general seem to encourage the provision of, and respect for civil liberties in authoritarian regimes. When it comes to elections in particular, however, there is no consensus among scholars. Some argue that adding democratic institutions in dictatorships is little more than a façade, while repression is still regularly employed (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Davenport & Armstrong, 2004). Others maintain that autocratic elections serve the citizenry, at least to some extent, and not just the ruling elite (Gandhi, 2008; Little, 2017; Miller 2015b). On the other hand, autocracies are very complex political systems; there is large variation not only between autocracies and democracies, but also within the category of autocracies. The reasons as to why a dictatorship would even introduce elections in the first place greatly differ, and so do their commitments towards how skewed the political competition will be, or how necessary repressive tactics are in order to encourage popular support (Schedler, 2002).

Just because elections are inherently democratic institutions, does not mean that they function justly or democratically in authoritarian contexts. Furthermore, it does not necessarily mean that the regime is becoming any more democratic. Rather, autocratic elections may simply result in "a desultory mix of freedoms and controls", whereby political competition is present and more or less legitimate, while the citizenry faces "the containment of liberal participation" (Case, 1996, pp. 453-459). What is clear, however, is that the effects of autocratic elections – especially those pertaining to the general population, require further scholarly attention, seeing as there is no academic consensus thus far. Therefore, this paper serves to bring a contribution to the existing literature on this topic, by examining the effects of autocratic elections on civil liberties.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Conceptualization

Before turning to the existing theories on elections in autocratic contexts, it is necessary to first conceptualize the relevant terms. While increasingly common, especially in the past few decades, the presence of elections in authoritarian regimes should not be taken for granted, as it nonetheless signals a departure from the traditional understanding of autocracies as fully closed regimes that do not permit any political competition (Schedler, 2002). This creates an important distinction between those autocratic regimes in which the dictators rule unbounded by and with complete disregard for the popular will, and those which "institute the principle of popular consent, even as they subvert it in practice" (Schedler, 2006, p. 13). As such, electoral autocracies are those that hold regular elections for the executive and/or the legislature (Bogaards, 2009, p. 407). More explicitly, these elections are "broadly inclusive, minimally competitive and minimally open", while also being "subject to state manipulation so severe, widespread, and systematic that they do not qualify as democratic" (Schedler, 2006, p. 3).

The concept of civil liberties is highly dense, as it rests on abstract values which reflect decades of political philosophy and liberal thought (Skaaning, 2008). However, when examined through the lens of human rights conventions and developments in the agenda setting of civil liberties, one can identify five main categories of civil liberties which governments (*in theory*) should not infringe upon (Skaaning, 2008, p. 5). The categorization is as follows: "1) independence of courts; 2) freedom of opinion and expression; 3) freedom of assembly and association; 4) freedom of thought, conscience and religion; 5) freedom of movement and residence" (Skaaning, 2008, p. 5). For the purpose of this article, however, the freedom of the media will be examined in greater detail, and not as part of the larger freedom of expression. This is due to the fact that the media functions as a prominent opposition figure in electoral autocracies, and thus, it is often times attacked and repressed in various ways (Bogaards, 2009, p. 413). As such, this leads me to anticipate that media freedom may have a more intricate relationship with the presence of elections, compared to other civil liberties. Further elaboration of this expectation will be provided in the theoretical framework section.

3.2. Authoritarian Elections and Civil Liberties

As previously stated, elections in authoritarian regimes can contribute to regime durability, as well as offer both domestic and international legitimacy. Furthermore, dictators have become

increasingly adept at manipulating institutions such as elections in order to effectively maintain their power and uphold the regime (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014, p. 75). Research has also shown that the presence of elections in autocratic regimes does not translate into lower levels of repression (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014, p. 73). However, while repression is still regularly employed, the manner in which it is used differs greatly between electoral and non-electoral autocracies. In the former context, repression is targeted towards specific opponents, rather than the entire population. This allows dictators to attack and deal with overt threats to the regime, without having to repress the entire population in the process. As a result, there is less of a need to restrict civil liberties (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014, p. 73). Moreover, repression alone is not sufficient to maintain a regime's durability – support from elites, but also citizens in some cases, is necessary (Miller, 2015b). In electoral autocracies, support from the population is even more relevant, since the citizens can be seen as more of a threat to the regime. One way of addressing and quelling this threat is to provide concessions; this is especially the case in autocracies with limited resources, as repression is rather costly (Miller, 2015b, p. 696). Concessions can come in many forms, such as public goods or social protections, but also in the form of enhanced civil liberties protection.

The argument that elections serve as valuable signaling tools for dictators is also relevant in the context of civil liberties. Due to their role as sources of information on the citizenry, elections can indicate that making certain concessions might be necessary, especially in such cases as when there is a decrease in support for the regime (Miller, 2015b). As such, autocrats will engage in a tradeoff, conceding on policy items such as civil liberties or political rights, in order to avoid the possibility of a loss in support spiraling into civil resistance or opposition (Miller, 2015b, p. 697).

The aforementioned theories are concerned with elections as institutions separating closed autocracies and electoral autocracies. However, by taking into account elections by and of themselves, as cyclically-occurring political events, it allows for a more in-depth analysis of their possible effects in non-democratic countries. To elaborate, Davenport (1997) suggests that elections are events that can be seen as key determinants of state repression levels, both in democracies, as well as in autocracies. Generally speaking, the expectation is that, should an election be seen as possibly threatening to the regime, repression efforts increase, while a legitimizing and non-threatening election would bring about less repression (p. 521). However, in a non-democratic setting, elections can be seen as both threatening and legitimizing, thus complicating the relationship. Nevertheless, Davenport's (1997) findings point to an inverse

relationship between elections and repression in authoritarian regimes (p. 530). In other words, repression and political restrictions decrease during election years.

In a similar fashion, Bhasin and Gandhi (2013) bring up the argument that dictators are faced with the dilemma of finding a balance between encouraging political participation in elections and ensuring their victory in the polls, or simply put, between electoral credibility and electoral control (p. 621). This complicates the obvious choice of relying on repression, the preferred tool used by most autocrats. Because popular support and participation are needed, citizens are no longer the targets; rather, the efforts are strategically and almost exclusively redirected towards opposition leaders and activists (Bhasin & Gandhi, 2013, p. 621). This finding is in line with the aforementioned argument made by Kendall-Taylor and Frantz (2014). Just as importantly as the shift in the direction of repression is its timing in relation to the electoral process. Bhasin and Gandhi (2013) find that this decrease in repressive activities towards citizens mainly occurs prior to an election; after the election, it seems that repression levels do not significantly differ from those employed outside the electoral cycle (p. 628).

It is important to note that both Bhasin and Gandhi (2013) as well as Davenport (1997) refer to the relationship between elections and repression in general. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is placed upon the relationship between elections and civil liberties. However, the two are closely related, as repression takes many forms, including that of limiting civil liberties. Thus, the overall expectations are in line with the aforementioned theory, in that during election years, the repression of civil liberties should decrease. As such, the main hypothesis of this paper is as follows:

H_1: During election years in non-democracies, civil liberties are increased, compared to years outside the electoral cycle.

3.3. Authoritarian Elections and the Media

The importance of media freedom in any political system cannot be understated. Furthermore, it also serves as a subtle indicator of political changes and shifts, especially pretraining to hybrid regimes, including electoral autocracies. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) note that autocratization – the "process of moving away from democracy" regardless of the democratic/autocratic starting point, mainly and firstly harms media freedom, rather than

(nominally) democratic institutions (pp. 1097-1099). On the other hand, Schedler (2002) points to the history of authoritarianism in Mexico, whereby the independent media played a large role in the PRI's demise (p. 46). Regardless of whether they predict a move towards or away from democracy, changes in media freedom are nonetheless significant. As such, this paper will also provide an in-depth analysis of media freedom and its presence (or lack thereof) in relation to authoritarian elections.

As previously mentioned, I expect media freedom in electoral autocracies to be treated differently to other civil liberties because of its salience as an opposition figure. In their paper on electoral autocracies, Levitsky and Way (2002) point out the influential nature of the (independent) media, which subsequently drives the ruling elite to seek to repress it, albeit through the use of more subtle techniques than in closed autocracies (pp. 57-58). Thus, while independent media is allowed, the government may seek to systematically censor it, via restrictive press laws, co-optation or the prosecution of journalists (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Bhasin & Gandhi, 2013). Schedler (2002) also identifies that in electoral autocracies, the state media is "at the beck and call" of the rulers, while independent media is subject to harassment and intimidation (pp. 43-44). The main goal for the harassment of private media is to dissuade it from promoting opposition candidates, while the state media continues to provide favorable coverage of the ruler (Schedler, 2002, pp. 43-44).

Thus, one would expect media freedom to be infringed upon, regardless of the timing in relation to elections. On the other hand, the overall theoretical expectation regarding repression, as previously mentioned, is that it decreases during election years. This puzzle is further complicated by the fact that the question of whether media freedom also enjoys this decrease in repression has been addressed rather briefly thus far, and where it has been, the results were mixed (VonDoepp & Young, 2013). As such, this paper aims to elucidate this relationship, by use of a test of competing hypotheses:

H_{2a}: Media freedom increases during election years in non-democracies, compared to non-electoral years.

H_{2b}: Media freedom remains unaffected during election years in non-democracies.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

In order to elucidate the research question, this paper will conduct a large-N statistical analysis, using SPSS. This choice was determined by the fact that I am looking to observe the relationship between my two main variables in multiple contexts. Therefore, a large-N study allows for covering many cases across space and time. It also helps to avoid any selection bias issues, as well as to identify outliers and deviant cases, possibly identifying those cases that require further empirical analysis. Moreover, this method produces a high level of external validity, thus allowing for generalizability of the findings.

All the necessary data will be selected from the latest version of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, namely version 12, which was published in March 2022. In order to take into account observations across multiple countries and within multiple years, not just at a specific point in time, panel data will be used. Panel data, or longitudinal data, is comprised of multiple subjects (countries in this case), observed over a long period of time. As such, the unit of analysis will be country-years. Having such a large number of observations increases the accuracy and reliability of the empirical analysis. Furthermore, choosing a specific year would be quite limiting in terms of the availability of data, and it could potentially introduce selection bias since that year could, for any reason, differ significantly to other years. Using panel data eliminates such risks.

With regards to the case selection, the sample will include all non-democratic countries (or country-years, to be precise) present in the dataset. Any missing values will be excluded from the analysis. As per the theoretical framework, the main aim of the analysis is to compare election years and non-election years, in terms of the levels of civil liberties and media freedom they may bring about.

4.2. Variables

As previously mentioned, two separate analyses will be conducted. The first one is concerned with identifying the effect of election years on civil liberties. Therefore, the main dependent variable in this first model pertains to civil liberties, operationalized through the use of the *Civil liberties Index* from the V-dem 12 dataset. This variable measures the extent to which civil liberties are respected, on a scale from 0 to 1, whereby 0 indicates least respect for civil liberties, and 1 indicates complete respect. This index aggregates the levels of physical (state-

sponsored) violence, as well as that of political and private civil liberties (Coppedge et al., 2022). The main independent variable, *Election Year*, is a dichotomous variable, where 1 indicates that the year in question is an election year, while 0 indicates that the year is outside of the electoral cycle. This variable was computed manually, by recoding the Election turnout variable from the V-dem 12 dataset into a new variable, *Election Year*, whereby all the existing values were recoded as 1, while the missing values were coded as 0.

For the second set of analyses, while the independent variable remains the same, the focus shifts on media freedom exclusively. However, since there is no aggregate index measuring media freedom, several indicators will be used instead. All the indicators come from the V-dem 12 dataset. The first indicator is the *Government censorship effort – Media* variable. It represents a measurement of whether and how often the government attempts to censor the media for *political* reasons, regardless of the manner through which the censorship is attempted (e.g., withdrawal of financial support, bribery, selective distribution of advertising). The measurement is ordinal, with responses ranging from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates direct and routine censorship efforts, while 4 indicates that such efforts are rare (Coppedge et al., 2022). The second indicator measures the *Harassment of journalists*, again on a 0-4 scale, where 0 signifies that the harassment of journalists is so severe that none dare to challenge the regime via their work, and 4 signifies that no journalists are ever harassed. The harassment can take many forms, ranging from libel threats to imprisonment or even death (Coppedge et al., 2022). Third, an indicator of *Media bias* is used. This variable exclusively refers to bias against opposition parties or candidates. Just as the previous indicators, *Media bias* is measured on a 0-4 scale, where 0 signals that the media only covers the reigning party or candidate, while 4 signals impartial media coverage (Coppedge et al., 2022). Finally, the last indicator measures *Media self-censorship* – whether and to what extent journalists and media sources self-censor with regards to sensitive political issues. Similar to the other variables, this variable is measured on a scale from 0 to 3, where 0 indicates complete and thorough self-censorship, and 3 indicates little or no self-censorship (Coppedge et al., 2022).

Despite the aforementioned variables being ordinal for recording purposes, they are all subsequently converted into interval through the use of the Bayesian item response theory (IRT) measurement model (Coppedge et al., 2022). This is done in order to account for variance in coder reliability and sparsity of data (Marquardt & Pemstein, 2018). As a result, the scale is no longer 0 to 4, but rather the observations for each variable can take values between -4 and 4 (or -3 and 3 in the case of media self-censorship).

Several control variables will also be used in both sets of analyses, all of which are taken from the V-dem 12 dataset. As civil liberties and media freedom are closely related, the same controls will be used throughout the tests. *GDP per capita* is one of the control variables, as poorer countries tend to rely on repression more than their richer counterparts (Poe, Tate & Keith, 1999). Furthermore, the poorer a country, the lesser the effort to advocate for civil liberties, as the population's main concern is material survival (Gandhi, 2008). *Population size* has also been proven to be positively related to civil liberty restrictions, and will thus be included as a control (Landman, 2005, Poe et al., 1999). Because the residuals for both *GDP per capita* and *Population* have skewed distributions, the natural logarithm of these variables will be used in the analysis, so as to ensure both linearity and homoscedasticity. Both Davenport (1996) and Poe and Tate (1994) find that internal, as well as external conflicts are associated with a greater repression of civil liberties. Thus, a variable pertaining to each type of conflict will be included in the analysis. Furthermore, Møller and Skaaning (2013) suggest that there are notable differences in both the levels of civil liberty restrictions in autocracies, as well as in the types of civil liberty restrictions, brought about by the end of the Cold War (p. 88). As such, a control variable accounting for pre- and post-Cold War observations will also be added. Finally, the *Polity score* of each country-year will be controlled for.

As previously mentioned, this analysis will make use of panel data, which consists of multiple observations of the same units (countries), over a long period of time. However, with panel data comes the issue of autocorrelation, as any observation of country *A* at time *t* is highly associated with the same country's observation at time *t+1* and so on. In order to account for this, all the variables of interest – *Civil Liberty Index*, *Government censorship effort*, *Harassment of journalists*, *Media bias* and *Media self-censorship*, will be lagged. Subsequently, the lagged variables will be included in the model, as control variables.

4.3. Statistical Models

The statistical analysis consists of several linear regression models, using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method. This method was chosen based on the type of variables used: the dependent variables are all interval ratio, while the main independent variable is dichotomous. Furthermore, such a method allows for the use of control variables, which greatly improve the quality of the analysis. As will be seen in the tables of the following section, each independent variable is attributed a coefficient, which depicts the association between that variable and the

dependent variable, whilst holding the other variables constant (ceteris paribus). The explanatory power of the model is shown by the R^2 and the Adjusted R^2, while the F-statistic points to the goodness of fit of each model.

The OLS method has certain assumptions, however, which need to be met, in order for the results to be substantial. The first assumption is linearity, or a linear relationship between the variables. Secondly, it requires the residuals to be normally distributed (normality). Thirdly, the mean of the error terms needs to be zero. Fourthly, there should be no multicollinearity, or no linear relationship between the independent variables. Finally, the error terms need to have the same variance; this assumption is termed homoscedasticity. Similarly, there should be no autocorrelation (errors must be independent of one another). All but the final two requirements are fulfilled by both sets of models. By conducting a Durbin-Watson test for each model, it showed that there is cause for concern. However, this is expected with panel data, as the observations from one year to the next in the same country are closely related. As such, this violation will be addressed via the use of lagged variables. Further elaboration of this process will be provided in the following section. Furthermore, detailed information regarding each assumption and its test can be found in Appendix A.

5. Analysis and Results

5. 1. Election Years and Civil liberties

As previously mentioned, the first set of statistical analyses focuses on the relationship between elections and civil liberties, through the lens of a comparison between election and non-election years in non-democracies. The results of the OLS regression are presented in Table 1. Two different statistical models were constructed, the first of which only contains the dependent variable (the civil liberty index) and the main independent variable (which differentiates between election and non-election years). The second model also takes into account the control variables, thus providing more clarity into the relationship, by limiting the potential influence of confounding or extraneous variables. For this reason, the second model will be the focus of the subsequent discussion.

Table 1. Linear regression models of civil liberties according to election years

	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)	.364***	.023*
	(.002)	(.010)
Election Year	.121***	.017***
	(.006)	(.002)
Lagged Civil Liberty Index		.970***
		(.005)
Polity Score		.000*
		(.000)
GDP per capita		.000
		(.001)
Population		-.001
		(.001)
Cold War		.007**
		(.002)
International Armed conflict		-.002
		(.004)
Internal Armed Conflict		-.009***
		(.002)
R^2	.030	.926
Adj. R^2	.030	.926
N	3858	3858

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

Overall, according to the value of the Adjusted R^2, which is .926, the model explains 92.6 per cent of the total variance in civil liberty protection levels in non-democratic countries. Such a high value is expected, due to the use of the lagged dependent variable. The probability of finding an F-value of 6012.799 or more extreme is smaller than 0.001 ($p < 0.001$), thus indicating that the model allows for the ability to predict the outcome variable. It also means that the null hypothesis – according to which changes in the independent variable do not cause

and cannot explain subsequent changes in the dependent variable, can be rejected. Put simply, this model fits the data significantly better than a model with no independent variables. A 1-point increase in the independent variable, ElectionYear, which, due to its categorical nature, indicates that the specific year is an election year, translates into a 0.017 increase in the civil liberty index. As previously mentioned, the index is measured on a scale from 0 to 1. This means that the expected level of civil liberty protection increases by 0.017, on that scale, during election years in non-democratic countries. The increase is significant at the 0.1% level. Some of the control variables are also significant, namely the Polity score (5% level), the timing in relation to the Cold War (1% level) and the presence of internal armed conflict (0.1% level). The latter has a negative effect on the civil liberty index – a finding which is in line with expectations from previous literature (Gandhi, 2008; Oztig & Donduran, 2020). The finding that civil liberties are overall higher in the post-Cold War period also confirms previous theoretical expectations (Møller & Skaaning, 2013).

5. 2. Election Years and Media Freedom

The second set of analyses concerns the level of media freedom in accordance to election years. As mentioned in the research design, media freedom is rather complex, encompassing many different aspects. As such, for the purpose of this paper, media freedom will be gauged using indexes on government censorship efforts, the harassment of journalists, media bias and media self-censorship. These four indexes served as the basis of the models presented in Table 2.

The four models are quite similar regarding the values of the Adjusted R^2; they explain 88.1%, 91.1%, 91.1 %, and 91.5% of the variance in the different components of media freedom respectively. For the first model, the F-value is significant, thus indicating that the model is better able to predict the dependent variable than an intercept-only model. According to the results, if the independent variable increases on a 1-point scale, which, as previously discussed, indicates the presence of an election year, the government censorship effort index increases by 0.115 points, on a scale from -4 to 4. However, because the index is measured from routine censorship (as -4) to no censorship (as 4), this can be interpreted as: in non-democracies, during election years, government attempts to censor media are more limited. This finding is statistically significant at the 0.1% level. Besides international armed conflict and population, all other control variables are also significant at various levels.

Table 2. Linear regression models of media freedom according to election years

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
(Constant)	-.050	-.068	-.135*	-.071***
	(.069)	(.059)	(.066)	(.068)
Election Year	.115***	.106***	.090***	.127***
	(.018)	(.015)	(.017)	(.017)
Gov. Censorship Lag	.943***			
	(.006)			
Journ. Harassment Lag		.956***		
		(.005)		
Self-Censorship Lag			.957***	
			(.005)	
Media Bias Lag				.962***
				(.005)
Polity Score	-.001***	-.001***	-.001**	-.002***
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
GDP per capita	-.006***	.004	-.001	.002
	(.007)	(.006)	(.006)	(.004)
Population	-.001	.001	.006	.002
	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)
Cold War	.057***	.032*	.046**	.048**
	(.016)	(.014)	(.015)	(.016)
Intl. Armed conflict	-.039	-.019	-.025	-.009
	(.028)	(.024)	(.026)	(.027)
Internal Armed Conflict	-.036*	-.059***	-.043**	-.040*
	(.017)	(.015)	(.016)	(.017)
R^2	.881	.911	.911	.915
Adj. R^2	.880	.911	.911	.915
N	3858	3858	3858	3858

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

The second model concerns the level of harassment towards journalists. As can be seen in the table, the coefficient of the election year variable is .106, and is statistically significant at the 0.1% level. Thus, the presence of elections seems to increase the index on journalist harassment by .106 points on a scale of -4 to 4. Because of the way it is coded, with the lowest value indicating extreme levels of harassment, it can be inferred that the presence of elections decreases the volume, as well as the degree of journalist harassment in non-democracies. As in the first model, and perhaps unsurprisingly, internal conflict has a significant (0.1% level) negative effect on the index, thus indicating an increase in journalist harassment. The statistical significance of the F-value ($p < 0.001$) confirms that this model fits the data better than an intercept-only model.

As per the third model, the presence of elections is positively and significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with the media bias index. This index is no different than the previous two, in terms of the values and their coding. Therefore, during election years, media bias seems to decrease in non-democracies. Put differently, on a scale from -3 to 3, where 3 indicates the least amount of bias, election years bring a .090-point increase. Just as the previous models, the third one also provides a better fit for the data, as shown by the F-value and its significance at the 0.1% level.

Finally, the fourth model pertains to media self-censorship. In terms of goodness of fit, namely the F-value, the results echo the previous models ($p < 0.001$). According to the model, during an election year, there is a .127-point increase in the self-censorship index, on a scale from -4 to 4. Thus, in non-democracies, election years seem to be associated with lower levels of media self-censorship. This relationship is also statistically significant at the 0.1% level. As with the previous two models, international armed conflict, the polity score and the Cold War controls are all statistically significant.

To conclude this section, one final aspect of the statistical analysis must be discussed. Despite the issue of autocorrelation being resolved through the addition of the relevant lagged variables, their presence leads to a different problem: the residuals no longer follow a normal distribution. This is a clear limitation of this study, as it would seem to indicate that perhaps an OLS model is not the most suitable choice. Further elaboration of this limitation is provided in Appendix A. One possible solution for this issue could be conducting a multilevel model. However, since such a statistical test falls beyond the scope of this thesis, I shall instead focus on the findings of the present analysis.

6. Discussion

While the previous section of this paper presented the results of the statistical analysis, it is also necessary to interpret and discuss them in relation to the aforementioned hypotheses, as well as to relate them to previous literature. When looking at the analysis surrounding the effect of elections on civil liberties in non-democracies, the statistical significance of the findings allows for rejecting the null hypothesis, that of no relation between the predictor variable (the presence of election years) and the outcome variable (the civil liberty index). This would indicate support for H_1, the main hypothesis of this paper, which claims that there is an increase in civil liberties during election years in authoritarian regimes. This finding is in line with the theoretical expectation provided by both Davenport (1997) as well as Bhasin and Gandhi (2013), according to which electoral periods bring about a decrease in repression levels. Evidently, this cutback applies to civil liberties as well, not just state-sponsored violence.

Despite having measured the effect of election years on media freedom through four of its indicators, the results are rather similar for all four models. Overall, there is a statistically significant relationship between the presence of election years and media freedom, and thus, the null hypothesis of no relation can be rejected. The effect of election years on government censorship efforts, the harassment of journalists, media self-censorship and media bias is positive, indicating that in autocracies, during election years, there is less repression on media freedom. Therefore, in the test of competing hypotheses, there is support for H_{2a}, and not H_{2b}, the former of which stipulates that the presence of elections increases media freedom in authoritarian regimes. This would suggest that attempts to repress the media in electoral autocracies are overstated by the previous literature, such as Schedler (2002) or Levitsky and Way (2002). The fact that there seems to be less media self-censorship and bias is more in line with scholarly expectations of media systems in electoral autocracies, seeing as they (claim to) provide more of an outlet for oppositional media, than closed autocracies would for example.

The decrease in government efforts to censor media or in the harassment of journalists is a more striking finding, especially since it seems to contradict the commonly held assumption in previous literature that the repression of oppositional media is a defining feature of electoral autocracies (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002; Bhasin & Gandhi, 2013). However, this discrepancy can be explained in the statistical model – because the analysis does not compare electoral autocracies and closed autocracies, but rather it compares election years with non-election years in all autocracies. Thus, one cannot reject the possibility that during election years, dictators choose to "play nice" and strategically decrease the repression of

media freedom, in order to ensure more support from the constituents – just as they do with other civil liberties. This may provide the citizens with the illusion of a fair electoral game, regardless of how skewed the playing field actually is. Furthermore, permitting criticism from the media would also point dictators towards potential sources of citizen discontent, thus allowing autocrats to address them, possibly via their campaign, before they spiral into overall regime dissatisfaction. This line of thinking is derived from the work of Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang (2019), who argue that in China, media coverage of local protests provides an important information source for the regime, by allowing it to identify and proactively address potential regime-threatening issues. By taking into account that the media is a rather powerful opposition figure, but also a valuable information tool, increasing media freedom only prior to and during an election may prove to be a beneficial strategy.

The findings of this paper also seem to stress that, despite the fact that electoral fraud is commonplace for many electoral autocracies, election results are still relevant for autocrats because of the information they provide (Miller, 2015; Little, 2017; Donno, 2013). As explained by Little (2017), "even if the regime always gets above 90% of the vote, citizens may make a different inference to the regime's genuine popularity or ability to manufacture a favorable result if the final tally is 96% rather than 92%" (p. 218). Therefore, dictators clearly still have a vested interest in gaining citizen support, and engaging in tactics such as lowering (civil liberty) repression levels just before an election would actually work in their favor.

By connecting the findings on civil liberties as well as media freedom, a clearer picture of authoritarian electoral strategies starts to form. It appears that in order to ensure popular support and quell possible accusations of electoral fraud, dictators choose to give a little – to get a lot. The overall aim is to provide concessions in terms of civil liberties and media freedom, thus giving the citizens the false hope that by continuing to support the regime, their situation may one day improve. Unfortunately, more often than not, the concessions are little more than false promises. One clear case of such disillusionment is that of the 2005 parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe. After the Mugabe government took power, no longer in need of popular support, it launched Operation Murambatsvina, a slum-clearing program which displaced around 600,000 people, many of which were urban youth – precisely the people most likely to protest the election (Bhasin & Gandhi, 2013, p. 623).

Turning over to the control variables, post-Cold War observations seem to have an overall higher level of respect for civil liberties, and so is the case for media freedom and all of its indicators. These findings are in line with the work of Møller and Skaaning (2013), who also found that there are differences in the levels of civil liberty restrictions, brought about by

the end of the Cold War (p. 88). The change seems to, at least partly, mirror Fukuyama's (1989) argument, that of the triumph of the West and its values in the aftermath of the Cold War. This seeming victory consequently led to a global spread of democratic and liberal values, such as the protection of civil liberties (Takeuchi, 2007; Ehteshami & Wright, 2007). Rather unexpectedly, neither population size nor the presence of international conflict seems to have an effect on civil liberties. Similarly, GDP per capita only has a significant, yet negative effect on government media censorship efforts. This could be attributed to the fact that a higher GDP tends to indicate higher state capacity, thus equipping the regime with the necessary tools in order to sustain media repression. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, repression is rather costly – a higher GDP means more resources can go towards it (Miller, 2015b). The Polity score is statistically and negatively associated with all the indicators of media freedom, but not with civil liberties in general. This is a rather unexpected finding, as it would suggest that the higher the Polity score – meaning the closer to democracy a country is, the more transgressions towards media freedom. One possible explanation for this may echo the "More Murder in the Middle" argument, whereby only after achieving a certain level of democracy will a country begin to experience lower levels of (media) repression (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004). Despite the aforementioned effect being rather small, further in-depth analysis into this relationship would prove beneficial. Finally, the presence of internal armed conflict has a significant negative effect on both civil liberties, as well as media freedom. This finding is in line with previous theoretical expectations (Davenport, 1996; Poe & Tate, 1994).

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to elucidate the question of whether –and how– elections, as political events, can affect civil liberties in non-democratic countries. As seen in the analysis section, election years are positively and significantly associated with both civil liberties and media freedom. Thus, compared to years outside the electoral cycle, election years bring about less repression towards the general population and their personal and political rights and freedoms. However, this would also seem to indicate that civil liberties are only increased in time for, and because of elections, as part of a dictator's electoral strategy meant to increase both popular support and participation. This strategy could also lessen the need to resort to electoral fraud. In doing so, dictators would remove (or at least decrease) the risk of civil unrest

that sometimes results in the aftermath of gross electoral fraud – a risk well illustrated by the Color Revolutions of the early 2000s (Tucker, 2007).

While a large-N analysis yields high generalizability, it does so at the expense of complexity and depth – and this paper makes no exception from this limitation. It is not unlikely that certain inner workings of the relationship between elections and civil liberties were overlooked in this analysis. Thus, in-depth qualitative research, especially in the form of case studies, would complement this paper by consolidating the findings. Another limitation of the present study is related to the statistical model. As mentioned in the analysis section, there is cause for concern since the residuals do not follow a normal distribution. This issue could be resolved through the use of a different statistical model, perhaps a multilevel model. Subsequent research should build upon this study, using this limitation as a basis for improvement.

Future research would also benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between elections and civil liberties, namely at the month-level. To elaborate, that would entail the examination of the months prior to an election, the election month, and the months closely following an election, and subsequently comparing them with months outside the electoral cycle. This should provide even more detailed insight into authoritarian elections and the strategies dictators may employ. Further scholarly attention can also be directed towards other parts of citizens' lives, such as wages, employment or healthcare policy, and whether they are affected by elections. Another avenue for future research is focused on women and whether the aforementioned relationship is disproportionate with regards to women.

To conclude, the findings of this paper bring new insights into the study of authoritarian elections and electoral strategies, by focusing on the lesser utilized lens of their effect on citizens. Furthermore, this paper serves to emphasize both the importance of timing in the study of repression in non-democratic countries, as well as the relevance of elections as key determinants of repression levels and targets.

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Appendix A – OLS Assumptions

(No) Autocorrelation/ Independence of errors

Autocorrelation was present in all models, due to the fact that panel data was used. As previously mentioned, it was remedied via the use of lagged variables. As such, each dependent variable was lagged, and the resulting variables were added into the regression models as controls. It is important to mention that a different software, namely R studio, was used for this part of the analysis. This allowed me to lag the variables via a grouping variable (*country_name*), thus ensuring that the lags were applied within countries, not across them. After the lags were created, the resulting dataset was imported into SPSS, where the rest of the analysis was conducted.

Normality

Surprisingly, through the use of the lagged variables, this assumption becomes violated (the assumption holds without the lags, however). The residuals no longer follow a normal distribution, thus indicating there is cause for concern.

Linearity

Just as is the case for the normality assumption, the assumption of linearity is also violated when the lagged variables are added into the model. This would indicate that an OLS regression model is not the most appropriate for this data. However, a non-linear model falls beyond the scope of this analysis.

All three aforementioned assumptions were also tested by running the same regression models in R Studio, so as to ensure that there were no errors caused by using a different program to lag the variables. The results were identical for both programs.

In an attempt to account for the problematic residuals, I also ran a generalized estimating equation, so as to produce clustered standard errors. The results were very similar to those from the OLS models, both in terms of statistical significance as well as coefficients. This is the syntax that was used:

GENLIN v2x_civlib WITH ElectionYear ColdWar e_miinteco e_miinterc e_p_polity NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop

/MODEL ElectionYear ColdWar e_miinteco e_miinterc e_p_polity NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop INTERCEPT=YES
DISTRIBUTION=NORMAL LINK=IDENTITY
/CRITERIA SCALE=MLE PCONVERGE=1E-006(ABSOLUTE) SINGULAR=1E-012 ANALYSISTYPE=3(WALD) CILEVEL=95
LIKELIHOOD=FULL
/REPEATED SUBJECT=country_id SORT=YES CORRTYPE=INDEPENDENT ADJUSTCORR=YES COVB=ROBUST
/MISSING CLASSMISSING=EXCLUDE
/PRINT CPS DESCRIPTIVES MODELINFO FIT SUMMARY SOLUTION.

Homoscedasticity

In order to test the assumption of homoscedasticity, scatterplots of the residuals were computed. In all of the models, the dots were not as equally spread out as they should have been, thus indicating that there may be cause for concern.

(No) Multicollinearity

The tolerance and VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) values indicate the presence of multicollinearity, or lack thereof. In all models, the values for tolerance are higher than 0.1 (approximately 0.9 for each). For the VIF, all values are below 10, as they range between 1 and 1.09. Thus, there is no cause for concern.

Outliers and Influential Cases

EXAMINE VARIABLES=v2x_civlib
/PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF
/COMPARE GROUPS
/PERCENTILES(5,10,25,50,75,90,95) HAVERAGE
/STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES
/CINTERVAL 95
/MISSING LISTWISE
/NOTOTAL.

EXAMINE VARIABLES=v2mecenefm
/PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF

```
  /COMPARE GROUPS
  /PERCENTILES(5,10,25,50,75,90,95) HAVERAGE
  /STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES
  /CINTERVAL 95
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /NOTOTAL.

EXAMINE VARIABLES=v2meharjrn
  /PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF
  /COMPARE GROUPS
  /PERCENTILES(5,10,25,50,75,90,95) HAVERAGE
  /STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES
  /CINTERVAL 95
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /NOTOTAL.

EXAMINE VARIABLES=v2meslfcen
  /PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF
  /COMPARE GROUPS
  /PERCENTILES(5,10,25,50,75,90,95) HAVERAGE
  /STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES
  /CINTERVAL 95
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /NOTOTAL.

EXAMINE VARIABLES=v2mebias
  /PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF
  /COMPARE GROUPS
  /PERCENTILES(5,10,25,50,75,90,95) HAVERAGE
  /STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES
  /CINTERVAL 95
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /NOTOTAL.
```

The only variable with outliers was v2meharjrn (harassment of journalists). In order to exclude the outliers, the Z-scores were calculated.

```
DESCRIPTIVES v2meharjrn
/SAVE.

FREQUENCIES VARIABLES=Zv2meharjrn
  /ORDER=ANALYSIS.
```

Subsequently, all cases which had an absolute Z-score of over 3.29 were excluded from the regression analysis.

```
USE ALL.
COMPUTE filter_$=(Zv2meharjrn <= 3.29).
VARIABLE LABELS filter_$ 'Zv2meharjrn <= 3.29 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMATS filter_$ (f1.0).
FILTER BY filter_$.
EXECUTE.
```

Finally, there were no influential cases for any of the models, as demonstrated by the value for Cook's Distance which never exceeded 1. To calculate it, the command /SAVE COOK was added to each regression model.

Appendix B – SPSS Syntax

Creation of ElectionYear Variable:

```
RECODE v2eltrnout (MISSING=0) (ELSE=1) INTO ElectionYear.
EXECUTE.
```

Case Selection (Non-democratic countries only):

```
USE ALL.
COMPUTE filter_$=(v2x_regime  <= 1).
VARIABLE LABELS filter_$ 'v2x_regime  <= 1 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMATS filter_$ (f1.0).
FILTER BY filter_$.
EXECUTE.
```

Statistical Models:

1. Election Years and Civil Liberties

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
  /DEPENDENT v2x_civlib
  /METHOD=ENTER Election Year
  /METHOD=ENTER ElectionYear CivLibLag e_miinterc e_miinteco e_p_polity ColdWar
NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop
  /SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
  /RESIDUALS HISTOGRAM(ZRESID) NORMPROB(ZRESID).
```

2. Election Years and Government Media Censorship Effort

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
```

```
  /DEPENDENT v2mecenefm
  /METHOD=ENTER ElectionYear GovCensorshipLag e_miinterc e_miinteco e_p_polity
ColdWar NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop
  /SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
  /RESIDUALS DURBIN HISTOGRAM(ZRESID) NORMPROB(ZRESID).
```

3. Election Years and Harassment of Journalists

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
  /DEPENDENT v2meharjrn
  /METHOD=ENTER ElectionYear JournalistHarassmentLag e_miinterc e_miinteco
e_p_polity ColdWar NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop
  /SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
  /RESIDUALS DURBIN HISTOGRAM(ZRESID) NORMPROB(ZRESID).
```

4. Election Years and Media Self-Censorship

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
  /DEPENDENT v2meslfcen
  /METHOD=ENTER ElectionYear SelfCensorshipLag e_miinterc e_miinteco e_p_polity
ColdWar NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop
  /SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
  /RESIDUALS DURBIN HISTOGRAM(ZRESID) NORMPROB(ZRESID).
```

5. Election Years and Media Bias

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
```

```
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
  /DEPENDENT v2mebias
  /METHOD=ENTER ElectionYear MediaBiasLag e_miinterc e_miinteco e_p_polity
ColdWar NatLogGDPPC NatLogPop
  /SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
  /RESIDUALS DURBIN HISTOGRAM(ZRESID) NORMPROB(ZRESID).
```