



Electoral manipulation, opposition power, and institutional change: Contesting for electoral reform in Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

Opposition forces in electoral authoritarian regimes frequently protest against electoral manipulation with varying degrees of success. Why are opposition forces in some countries able to turnout the masses and successfully pressure a dominant regime to allow for electoral reform, whereas those in other countries exhibit much less success? This article argues that the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation and the form of opposition organization explain divergent contestation and reform trajectories. Where the complexity of electoral manipulation is high, opposition forces are demobilized. Where the complexity of electoral manipulation is low, opposition forces may potentially mobilize the masses to protest for reform. Subsequently, the type of electoral reform – technocratic or partisan – pivots on whether opposition power is concentrated in one veto player or dispersed among multiple actors. I test the arguments through a controlled comparison of electoral reform in three Southeast Asian electoral authoritarian regimes – Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, electoral authoritarian regimes have become one of the most common regime types in the world (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Morse, 2012; Schedler, 2013, 2006). From Russia to Ethiopia, Venezuela to Azerbaijan, these regimes rely on a “menu of manipulation” to systematically distort multi-party elections to their favor, thereby securing overwhelming victory (Schedler, 2002a). These manipulative tactics range from blatant electoral fraud such as stuffing ballot boxes, to gerrymandering and malapportionment, to shoddy voter and candidate registration procedures, to the uneven application of electoral laws, and the unequal access to campaign finances and media exposure (Alvarez et al., 2008; Birch, 2011; Frank and Martínez i Coma, 2017; Lehoucq, 2003; Norris et al., 2014a, 2014b; Simpser, 2013).

Autocrats in electoral authoritarian regimes allow for and tolerate multi-party elections to the extent that it serves to buttress the regime's durability in a variety of ways (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). Ruling parties can use the opportunity to distribute patronage, signal dominance, identify and resolve grievances, and divide the opposition (Lust, 2005; Magaloni, 2006; Miller, 2015). Yet, elections can also potentially undercut or cripple the regime if the autocrat miscalculates his ruling party's own popularity. Opposition parties can use elections as a focal

point to mobilize their supporters, especially during periods of economic crises, potentially leading to elite defection from, or electoral victories against the dominant incumbent (Brancati, 2016; Greene, 2007; Lindberg, 2009; Reuter and Gandhi, 2011; Tucker, 2007). The delicate balance of such elections between propping up the regime and undermining it has catalyzed a wave of research asking the conditions under which authoritarian elections impede or lead to democratization (Lindberg, 2009; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Donno, 2013; Schuler et al., 2013; Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, 2016; Bernhard et al., 2016; van Ham and Seim, 2017; Wahman, 2013; Magaloni, 2010; Knutsen et al., 2017).

This article continues this vein of inquiry about the conduct of autocratic elections by examining the sequential relationship between the type of electoral manipulation¹ that autocrats practice, the organizational form of the opposition, and the distributional consequences of electoral reform – a relationship that is not yet fully explored in the existing literature. Specifically, I am less interested in why opposition parties may boycott elections or not (Beaulieu, 2014; Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009; Butterff and Dion, 2017); but more interested in how opposition forces, broadly construed as both opposition parties and their civil society allies, may respond to electoral manipulation and attempt to pressure the autocrat to concede electoral reforms. The history of electoral reform in the advanced democracies of Europe and North

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¹ Throughout this article, I use the terms “electoral manipulation,” “electoral misconduct,” and “electoral malpractice” interchangeably.

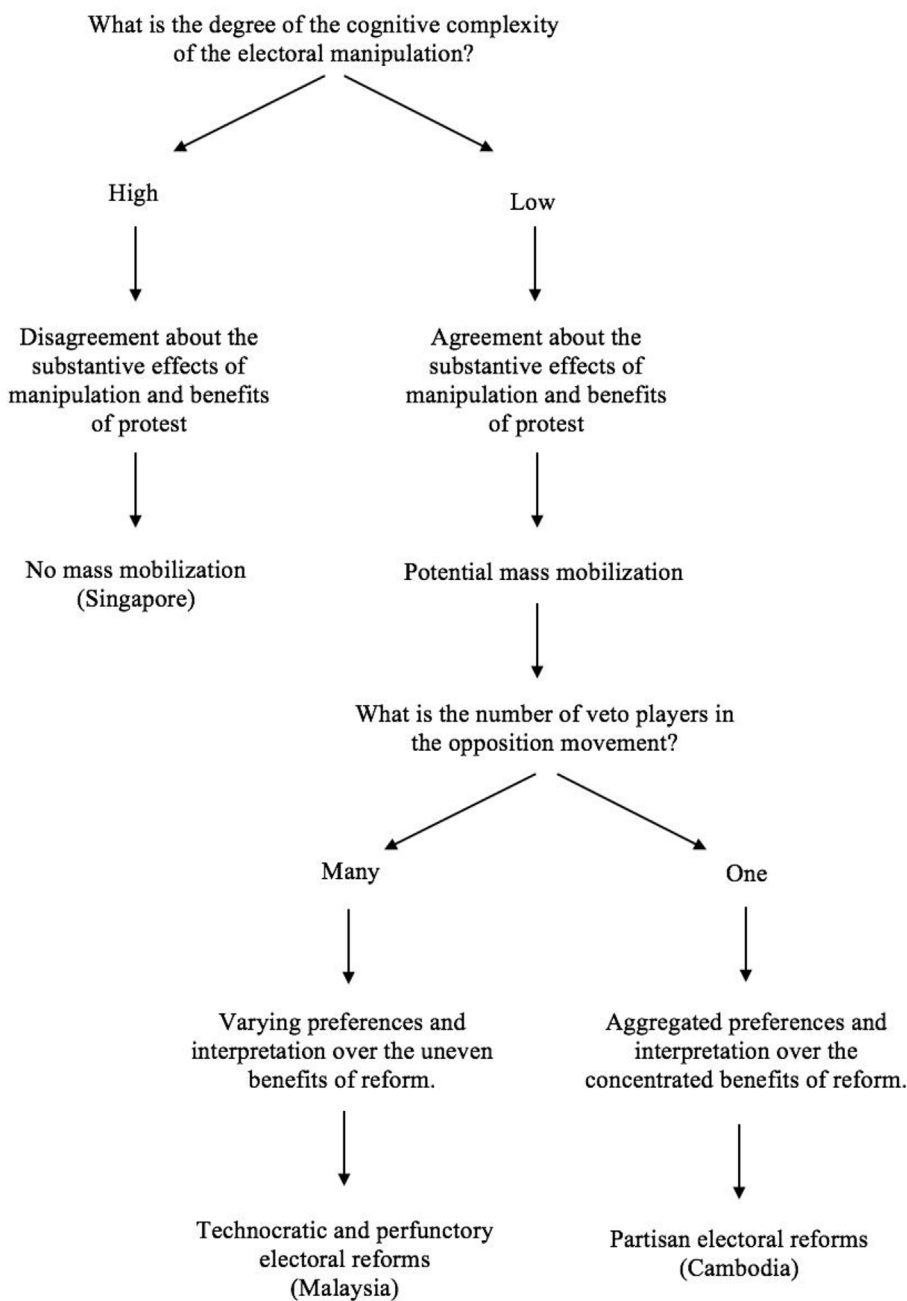


Fig. 1. Argument flow.

America as well as in Mexico and Costa Rica suggests that electoral reform towards more free and fair elections is oftentimes iterated, protracted, uneven, and multi-dimensional (Eisenstadt, 1999, 2000; 2004; Mares, 2015; Teorell et al., 2017; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002). They are not one-shot games. As compared to these past cases of electoral reform, how do the trajectories of contests over electoral reform in present-day electoral autocracies vary across countries and over time? More specifically, what are the conditions necessary for building reform coalitions, and how do they compel the dominant incumbent to concede different kinds of reforms?

This article develops two arguments towards answering these questions (see Fig. 1). First, I argue that a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for protest mobilization against electoral malpractice is the salience of electoral misconduct which is best indicated by the *degree of the cognitive complexity* of electoral manipulation. I define the cognitive complexity of any form of electoral manipulation as the extent to which

voters perceive that particular manipulation as violating the democratic principle of one-man-one-vote. When it is difficult to trace how an autocrat's particular manipulative action leads to the violation of one-man-one-vote, then that particular form of electoral manipulation is of high cognitive complexity. Consequently, when voters encounter highly complex electoral misconduct, dissent is muted because there is substantial disagreement among about how to interpret the severity of manipulation and the autocrat's culpability in perpetuating manipulation. Opposition parties and civil society organizations lack the raw material of dissent to collectively mobilize the masses, and status quo ensues. Conversely, where autocratic electoral manipulation is so cognitively simple and comprehensible to the extent that it is common knowledge, then the severity of manipulation and the benefits of protests are obvious. Opposition forces are more likely to be able to draw on overt dissent to overcome collective action problems and mobilize the masses to protest for electoral reform.

Second, variation in the success of protests in pressuring a regime to concede electoral reforms is contingent upon the degree of the opposition unity which is best indicated by the *number of veto players* within the opposition. If mass protest supports an opposition whose power is dispersed among multiple actors, then any ensuing electoral reforms are likely to be technocratic and perfunctory. This is because the dispersion of opposition power entails multiple veto points, which entails multiple preferences and interpretations about the distributional benefits of reform (Baron and Ferejohn, 1989; Cunningham, 2011). The autocrat can then exploit disagreements within the opposition by offering technocratic and perfunctory reforms that seemingly benefit everyone, but satisfy only some. Alternatively, if mass mobilization supports an opposition whose power is highly concentrated in a single actor, then explicit one-on-one bargaining with the autocrat is more likely to occur. In such negotiations, the focus is on developing a credible bargain that is acceptable to both the incumbent regime and its opponent (Chernykh and Svolik, 2015; Fearon, 1995; Reiter, 2009, 2003; Reuter and Robertson, 2015). The opposition must find that concessions extracted from the incumbent autocrat are enough to warrant demobilizing its supporters. The autocrat must concede enough reforms to induce the opposition to demobilize, but not so much that it raises the ire of its own coalition. As a result, the benefits of any subsequent electoral reforms typically take the obvious form of a partisan split between the opposition leader and the incumbent autocrat.

I undertake a cross-case controlled comparison combined with within-case process tracing of three most similar Southeast Asian countries – Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia – to test my arguments. These cases are most similar to the extent that they are all electoral authoritarian regimes with dominant parties helmed by autocrats, have had a history of electoral manipulation, have enjoyed relatively stable economies since the global financial crisis, and have extensive diplomatic and economic linkages to the international community, especially advanced democracies in the West. We should expect similarly vigorous contests over electoral manipulation and reform in all these three countries. Yet, their respective internal struggles have diverged significantly. Singapore has experienced almost no contests over electoral reform. Malaysia has seen sustained pre-electoral street protests and perfunctory, technocratic reforms, while Cambodia has had short-term post-electoral protests and the most substantive electoral reforms in the past few years. Why there is such empirical variation in protest and reform outcomes is a puzzle that cannot be explained by the prevailing theoretical literature (Schedler, 2002b; Magaloni, 2010).

In making these arguments, this article contributes to the existing literature by introducing additional conceptual nuance to prevailing analyses of electoral misconduct and reform. In particular, current scholarship oftentimes conceptualize electoral manipulation and reform as dichotomous variables – autocrats either steal elections, or implement clean elections; they either persist in electoral manipulation, or they yield to the opposition's demands; the opposition either coordinate to protest against manipulation, or they acquiesce (Schedler, 2002b; Magaloni, 2010). While these simplified models have proven to be very valuable analytical tools in studying the overall meta-game of democratization by elections, they have been less useful for elucidating the puzzling empirical range of protest mobilization and reform outcomes. As Schedler (2002b, p. 117) himself cautions,

“... it is clear that the choice between electoral manipulation and electoral integrity is not a binary choice. Rulers do not have to choose either one or the other but may take an intermediate route. They may try to fine-tune manipulation by picking just certain items from the menu. They may try to reap the fruits of legitimacy by selective reform while containing its risks by selective bias. They may make partial concessions to build credibility ...”

This article takes Schedler's counsel as the point of departure and proposes new dimensions of variation to clarify exactly the “intermediate route” electoral manipulation can take, reconsider how

political opposition can organize themselves, and assess what kinds of “selective reforms” or “partial concessions” can result. Towards this end, I adopt a more graduated and pragmatic approach to conceptualization and operationalization (Collier and Adcock, 1999; Adcock and Collier, 2001).

First, introducing the degree of cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation as a new ordinal indicator variable for assessing the salience of electoral misconduct emphasizes understanding the voters' perception of electoral manipulation. Examining voters' perception is useful insofar as it affects voters' subsequent (non-)participation in collective protests. This stands in contrast with existing scholarship that uses a binary indicator of pre-election-day manipulation and election-day fraud to distinguish between “less visible” or “more visible” electoral misconduct (Birch, 2011; Donno and Roussias, 2012; Gehlbach and Simpser, 2015; Simpser, 2013; Simpser and Donno, 2012). While these studies assume and imply that pre-election-day manipulation is “less visible” and therefore reduces the autocrat's culpability for “stealing elections”, nothing makes this theoretical assumption empirically true. In other words, assessing whether electoral misconduct is pre-elections or during elections is not necessarily a valid indicator of the salience of electoral misconduct. For example, while disqualifying an opposition candidate from contesting in an election may be a form of pre-election-day manipulation, the autocrat's culpability in curtailing genuine electoral competition and restricting the expression of political preferences is exceedingly clear. To be sure, there may be overlaps between the two variables. But the point remains that one is not directly reducible to the other.

Second, I introduce the number of opposition veto players as a new variable for coding opposition unity. Again, this proposed ordinal variable is distinct from existing scholarship that uses other binary indicators of opposition unity – whether opposition pre-electoral coalitions may form or not, or whether the opposition unites to protest against electoral fraud or not (van de Walle, 2006; Wahman, 2011, 2014, 2017; Gandhi and Reuter, 2013; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Magaloni, 2010; Lust, 2005). While these other indicators may be used to code opposition unity and strength (Greene, 2007; Rakner and van de Walle, 2009), they are less helpful in theorizing about the type and outcome of bargaining between the autocrat and the opposition. A full opposition coalition such as the Rainbow Coalition in Kenya in 2002, for instance, may be a potential indicator of opposition unity. Yet, its true unity may be considered low, given that its organizational powers are dispersed separately amongst the various competing parties and factions that constitute that coalition. At other times, as in the early years of the Democratic Progressive Party in the late 1980s Taiwan, opposition forces may have little resources, but their limited power may be highly concentrated within a single party. In other words, the variable of the number of opposition veto players is a different, potentially more useful indicator. Assessing its theoretical and empirical utility requires close attention to case-specific details.

Third, and finally, I introduce a binary typology of electoral reforms – technocratic and perfunctory versus partisan reforms. Understanding this particular dimension of variation of electoral reforms provides us with a useful analytical frame for recognizing the distributional consequences of electoral institutional change (Knight, 1992). Most existing studies ask whether autocrats implement reforms or continue to steal elections, and also assume any electoral reform as a generally positive outcome for the opposition and a negative outcome for the autocrat. A more considered approach is to explicate the ways in which certain types of reform may be beneficial for some opposition actors at the expense of others, or which may benefit both the opposition and the incumbent.

A summary of the new indicator variables proposed and their connections to the relevant systematized and background concepts is provided in Table 1.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: At the outset, I introduce my argument concerning the relationship between the type of electoral

Table 1
Existing and new indicator variables for systematized concepts.

Background Concept	Electoral manipulation	Opposition strength	Institutional reform
Systematized concept	Salience of electoral misconduct	Opposition unity	Electoral system reform
Existing indicator variables	Pre-electoral manipulation or election day fraud	Presence or absence of pre-electoral coalition; Presence or absence of “massive protests”	Whether autocrats reform or not; Whether autocrats steal elections or not
New indicator variable proposed	Degree of cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation	Number of veto players	Technocratic and perfunctory versus partisan reforms

manipulation and protests against them, specifying where I concur with and depart from the existing literature. Subsequently, I elaborate the causal logic of variation in the number of opposition veto players and the divergent bargaining trajectories for electoral reform. In these two sections, I provide clarifications for defining the variables proposed, suggest operationalization guidelines, and provide examples of their empirical manifestation. Thereafter, I explicate my research design, and assess my arguments through a controlled comparison of electoral reforms in Singapore, Malaysia and Cambodia. Finally, a short conclusion summarizes this article's most salient insights, briefly discusses the precariousness of regime-initiated institutional reforms, and contemplates future areas of research.

2. Types of electoral manipulation and protests in electoral authoritarian regimes

An electoral authoritarian regime's use of electoral manipulation and biased electoral rules is part of the overall institutional matrix of autocratic rule (Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni, 2006; Svoblik, 2012). Any attempts at electoral reform, therefore, are attempts at institutional change. Recent scholarship on institutional change by scholars invested in historical institutionalism suggests that if an institutional change agenda has low salience among the masses, then its elite advocates are unlikely to surmount the high costs of mass collective action necessary for advancing institutional change (Capoccia, 2016, pp. 1111–1114; Culpepper, 2011; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Specifically, Capoccia (2016, p. 1112) proposes that institutional change can have low salience when (a) highly technical rules generate information asymmetry between the institutional incumbent and change advocates, (b) high institutional complexity deters the change advocates “from investing the time and resources necessary to actively oppose the status quo”, and (c) other pressing issues distract change advocates. Separately, institutional change is also oftentimes difficult because the masses typically have “limited cognitive capabilities, time, and resources” to comprehensively process the causes and effects of institutional reform (Capoccia, 2016, p. 1112).

It follows that one important indicator of the salience of electoral manipulation, alongside other potential indicators, is the degree of cognitive complexity of the manipulated rules of the electoral system. For instance, highly obscure and technical electoral rules, such as malapportionment or election finance, that require a large amount of pre-existing knowledge to process and comprehend are often of low salience to voters. Cognitive complexity is further increased when these technical rules affect different groups of people in different ways. In contrast, low complexity forms of electoral misconduct, such as ballot box stuffing, require little prior knowledge about how it works, are immediately observable to the typical voter, and have easily understood causal effects on violating the democratic norm of one-man-one-vote. Table 2 summarizes the differentiation.

To be more explicit, imagine how gerrymandering combined with malapportionment (i.e. deviation of voters to seat ratio) is a form of highly complex electoral manipulation in an electoral system that applies the single-member district plurality rule. To comprehend how the re-drawing boundaries and subsequent malapportionment in their own constituency Y violates the “chain of democratic choice” and the principle of one-man-one-vote, voters in country X must make the following

calculations: (1) find out if they themselves are affected by the newly drawn boundaries of constituency Y, (2) find out who else in their constituency Y are affected by the newly drawn boundaries, (3) calculate the extent of malapportionment in their own constituency Y relative to the new average of malapportionment in country X, past average of malapportionment in the country X, and averages of malapportionment in comparable countries to country X, (4) assess the extent to which the deviations from these averages are justifiable according to the reasons purported by the incumbent or held against some standard of democratic theory or international norm, and then (5) come to some reasonable conclusion if the malapportionment affects the democratic value of their single vote, which would then (6) affect how they themselves calculate the benefits and costs of participating in collective protest against the regime, and (7) impact their discussions with fellow citizens about how to coordinate to protest against such manipulation. Arguably, any typical voter will be hard-pressed to find the necessary time and resources to gather all the data to make the necessary calculations, comparisons and assessments. Even if all voters can complete the entire analysis, they may come to different conclusions depending on the degree of malapportionment that they experience. Under-represented voters may argue that gerrymandering and malapportionment is a truly egregious problem, while over-represented voters may be entirely content that their single vote wields more influence.

To be clear, this definition of the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation does not mean that information about electoral manipulation is impossible to obtain or unreliable, or that formal electoral procedures are poorly implemented. It may be surprisingly easy for a typical voter to obtain information about the relevant electoral campaign laws. But if the typical voter finds it difficult to understand how the entire collection of campaign laws violates or inhibits his own vote and how they translate into changing actual electoral outcomes, then we can conclude that the manipulation of campaign laws to provide advantages to the autocratic incumbent is of high cognitive complexity.

Consequently, I hypothesize that the degree of cognitive complexity of the particular type of electoral manipulation significantly conditions the potential for mass mobilization for electoral reform (Tucker, 2007). Where the cognitive complexity of the electoral manipulation is high, there is high uncertainty over the extent and culpability of electoral misconduct (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009, pp. 400–403; Simpson and Donno, 2012, p. 503). Voters cannot agree on whether electoral misconduct has occurred at all. Voters also cannot, moreover, make accurate assessments and inferences about whether the autocrat truly intended to manipulate the elections to secure victories, or whether they are properly justified. Hence, as Simpson and Donno (2012, p. 503) suggest, because such manipulation “are more ambiguous in their causes and effects,” they are “therefore, less likely to spark international punishment or domestic protests, *even if they are documented by international monitors*” (original italics). Voters will not be able to recognize the benefits of mass collective protests, and will be less likely to coordinate to protest against electoral manipulation.

Alternatively, if the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation is low, such as erroneous voter registration lists and voter intimidation, then voters' direct resentment at such blatant electoral misconduct becomes the necessary raw material of dissent that potentially fuels mass collective action. When genuine voters turn up at the polling

Table 2
Operationalization and empirical examples of the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation.

Degree of Cognitive Complexity	High Complexity	Low Complexity
Clarity of manipulation	Highly technical	Simple to understand
Amount of pre-existing knowledge required	High	Low
Visibility and causal length of action affecting outcomes	Obscure and long	Transparent and short
Distribution of the effects of electoral manipulation	Unevenly distributed over many people	Concentrated in a few people
Empirical examples of electoral manipulation	Gerrymandering district boundaries; Malapportionment; Media censorship or restrictions; Unequal access to campaign finance resources; Changes to electoral system to increase disproportionality	Restricted voter, party, or candidate registration; Erroneous voter registry lists; Phantom voters; Ballot box stuffing; Voter intimidation and violence

station to find their names not on the list or if someone else has already voted in their name, they are directly disenfranchised. If they are coerced through verbal threats of physical violence or community sanctions, they are prevented from expressing their true vote preferences. These straightforward denials of the right to vote and to get one's vote choice counted is easily and readily understood as a clear distortion of the democratic principle of one-man-one-vote. When voters participate in a protest against such overt electoral manipulation, they are demanding for their personal democratic vote to be restored and counted, alongside others who share similar fates. Even unaffected voters can easily empathize with such blatant manipulation. Of course, sparks that form the sufficient conditions to light the flames of mass mobilization come in a variety forms – from the organizational strength of the opposition to the presence of international observers (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011, 2009; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Kuntz and Thompson, 2009). But without the necessary fuel of dissent, there is no fire.

Note that in theorizing the causal role of this new variable, this article does not seek to explain why autocrats may decide to use one form of electoral manipulation over another, or different mixes of manipulation. An autocrat's choice of manipulation is in part endogenously determined by the autocrat's calculation of the costs and benefits of electoral misconduct, in part by the probability of getting caught for blatant electoral fraud, and in part determined by historical legacies before the onset of autocracy (Case, 2006; Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009; Simpser, 2013; Simpser and Donno, 2012; Gehlbach and Simpser, 2015; Harvey, 2016). A full explication of the many potential determinants of institutional variation is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I take the existing mix of electoral manipulation present in an autocratic regime as it is and ask how opposition forces may respond to it.

3. Protests and electoral reform in electoral authoritarian regimes

While electoral manipulation with low cognitive complexity may increase the likelihood of protest, they do not directly influence the organizational form of protest movements. In line with Beaulieu (2014), I posit that opposition forces mobilize to initiate the iterative bargaining process of negotiating acceptable electoral conduct between themselves and the autocrat. Yet, different organizational forms among the opposition forces can imply divergent processes of bargaining. As I

explicate in Table 3, even when different opposition elites and civil society organizations coalesce into an all-encompassing protest coalition, opposition power can remain dispersed among different elite actors. Not only is each elite actor a veto player, everyone also interprets the benefits of potential institutional change differently from each other, and therefore prioritizes different agendas as compared to other elite actors. Any bargains with the autocrat, then, must first require a prior negotiation among these multiple actors first about what exact concessions they want.

When opposition forces are concentrated behind a single dominant actor, however, then an autocrat knows who and what he is dealing with. A single opposition actor acts as a single veto player for the entire protest movement, aggregates the movement's preferences into a coherent set of agenda, is consistent about what benefits the institutional reform entails for future elections, and takes all the credit for successful negotiations. Certainly, a single protest leader may still be beholden to internal factional rivalry within the protest movement. These factions may have conflicting views about how much concessions are enough to warrant demobilizing, and what sort of concessions are desirable at all. But by virtue of his position as protest movement's leader, I assume, for parsimony, that the single actor is able to aggregate these preferences and offer precise terms to the autocrat.

Accordingly, I hypothesize that the type of electoral reform that ensues is likely to be conditional upon the number of veto players. Table 4 proposes how we can operationalize and empirically observe two divergent potential outcomes from the two different bargaining processes – technocratic, perfunctory reforms and partisan reforms. When autocrats encounter an all-encompassing protest movement with many opposition parties and civil society organizations, they can readily exploit the divisions between the multiple veto players by offering technocratic reforms. For example, the autocrat can delegate discussions over electoral reform to a technical committee. While overtly a concession, committee-delegation has the dual advantage of being acceptable to some protest groups which can immediately de-escalate parts of a protest movement, and of further fracturing and delegitimizing the protest coalition through endless technical and rhetorical discussions about what concessions are acceptable. Furthermore, the autocrat can also offer technocratic reforms such as the professional training of poll workers, increasing the bureaucratic capacity of the electoral management body (EMB), or standardizing voter

Table 3
Operationalization and examples of the concentration of opposition power.

Number of Veto Players	Many	One
Number of preferences of the types of reform	Many	One
Interpretation of the potential benefits of institutional reforms	Varies across actors	Consistent
Realization of potential benefits of institutional reform	Unevenly distributed among multiple actors	Wholly consumed by single actor
Empirical examples of opposition power concentration	All-encompassing protest movement of multiple opposition parties and civil society organizations	Protest movement lead by a single dominant opposition party with single opposition leader

Table 4
Operationalization and examples of the electoral reform.

Dimensions of Institutional Change	Technocratic Reforms	Partisan Reforms
Timing of reforms	Detailed discussions to be delegated to a long-term committee.	Short-term agreement to medium-term implementation.
Focus of reforms	Tends to be technocratic.	Tends to be partisan.
Distribution of benefits	Subjective and ambiguous; thinly distributed across all opposition actors	May or may not be equal between incumbent and opposition
Empirical examples of electoral reform	Appointing technocrats to helm the EMB; Standardize voter identification rules; Professional training for poll workers; Cleaned and updated voter rolls.	Mutual oversight; Partisan process of appointing officials to helm EMB; Nominating party members to board of EMB.

identification processes. Again, these technical reforms may be an overt concession, but their chief advantage lies in the subjective ambiguity of their benefits. For some opposition actors, technocratic reforms are welcomed. For others, they do not make elections any more free and fair.

Partisan reforms, on the other hand, reflect the direct one-on-one autocrat-opposition divide in bargaining over electoral reform. Whether an agreement is reached is conditional primarily on whether there are information asymmetries between the two parties, and the credibility of enforcement (Fearon, 1998, 1995; Reiter, 2003; Walter, 2009). Both actors should have clear information about the threats that they pose to each other, the resolve that they have, and must signal credibility that they are willing to honor and enforce any agreements. Two forms of such partisan agreements may be particularly exemplary – the partisan process of appointing bureaucrats to work in the EMB, or the appointment of partisan party members as board members to oversee the work of the EMB. The former process typically allows both incumbent and opposition parties to have a mutual veto over each other, thereby ensuring that any final candidate is acceptable to both parties. The latter process sees both parties as principals appointing their own agents to a committee that oversees the EMB. The final effect of either process is to increase the degree of mutual oversight in order to enhance the “independence” that an EMB has from a dominant incumbent regime. Where previously the EMB was a mere institutional hammer of the autocrat seeking to destroy, partisan reforms underscore mutual control over the hammer. Most importantly, such partisan reforms are credible enough to both actors for the agreement to be reached, and for either side to credibly withdraw from continued conflict on the streets.

4. Research design

The arguments outlined above specifies particular causal pathways and observable implications about the different types of electoral manipulation, the organizational form of protest movements, and the resulting nature of electoral reform. Theory testing will require identifying a universe of cases that have representative variation among our key variables, as well as making causal process observations via process tracing within those cases to assess if the stipulated causal processes are valid (Beach and Pedersen, 2013; Bennett, 2010; Bennett and Checkel, 2015; Collier, 2011; Lijphart, 1975; Slater and Ziblatt, 2013). Case-specific data is also required to correctly identify the coding of each case. Finally, the cases identified must also allow us to control for alternative explanations. Towards that end, I have identified a cross-case controlled comparison between Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia as most useful for helping to test the theory for a number of reasons.

First, the lack of detailed cross-national data from all electoral authoritarian regimes in the world for the new variables proposed in this article severely limits the possibility of large-N statistical testing. While there are some existing measures of mass perceptions of electoral integrity, they do not provide enough detail to infer how voters perceive the cognitive complexity of the misconduct in different parts of the electoral process. Ditto for the number of veto players in the opposition and the types of electoral reform.

Second, all three countries – Singapore, Malaysia (until 2018), and

Cambodia – have experienced substantive electoral manipulation to qualify as electoral authoritarian regimes. In the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) report released in October 2017 that examined global variation in the quality of elections, Singapore scored 52 in the overall 100-point PEI index, just under the global mean of 55, but “far lower than any other country of comparable socio-economic development” (Grömping, 2016; Norris et al., 2017). Malaysia and Cambodia scored 35 and 32 respectively, both the lowest scores in the Asia-Pacific region.² Yet, there is variation in the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation in these countries. As I shall demonstrate in the case studies later, electoral manipulation in Singapore is highly complex, whereas misconduct in the latter two countries are a mixture of both simple and complex manipulation.

Second, all three have had different trajectories in protests against electoral manipulation and the outcomes of electoral reform – the requisite variation in my dependent variables. In Singapore, protests against electoral manipulation and actual electoral reform are non-existent. In both Malaysia and Cambodia, popular mobilization against electoral reform has been broad and sustained. But reforms have been technocratic and perfunctory in the former while highly substantive in the latter.

Third, all three countries are very similar with regards to alternative explanations for protests and democratization in authoritarian regimes – all three are highly linked to advanced Western democracies, and have had stable economies since the global financial crises. Singapore has one of the most open economies in the world with a highly professional bureaucracy that has successfully avoided economic recession in the past decade. Both Malaysia and Cambodia, like Singapore, are very open to foreign direct investment from multi-national companies, and maintain active links with western democracies. Although both countries suffered significantly due to depressed export-manufacturing sectors in the global financial crises, economic recovery has been steady, though not spectacular. All these similar features mean that opposition parties should theoretically engage in broadly similar strategies to contest for electoral reform. Yet, the converse is true.

To be sure, state strength varies across these three countries, which may in turn affect protest and reform outcomes. The high institutionalized states of Singapore and Malaysia generate significant public goods, whereas Cambodia's neopatrimonial state continues to engage in corruption and patronage (Kuhonta, 2011; Morgenbesser, 2017; Slater, 2012). But state strength in itself cannot explain both dissimilar street mobilization in Singapore and Malaysia, and different opposition cohesion and reform outcomes between Malaysia and Cambodia. A disaggregated, sequential analysis of trajectories of electoral reform across all three countries best explains the contingent and divergent empirical reality that we observe.

In the rest of this article, I present a range of process-tracing evidence from the secondary literature, newspaper articles, parliamentary speeches, reports from local civil society organizations, local interviews with opposition forces including opposition politicians and civil society activists, archival material such as declassified diplomatic cables, as well as local survey data, where available.

² Excluding the single-party state of Vietnam.

5. Evidence from three Southeast Asian electoral authoritarian regimes

5.1. Manipulation without protest – Singapore

Singapore has been ruled by the dominant People's Action Party (PAP) for more than fifty years since self-government in 1959. Elections are held periodically every four to five years. By all accounts, these elections are spared the worst of electoral manipulation – there has been no ballot box stuffing, electoral rolls are clean, voters are not physically intimidated, and opposition parties can campaign freely subject to prevailing regulations on law and order. In short, there are no incidences of simple and easily observable electoral manipulation.³

But social scientists have documented and examined the effects of a range of complex electoral manipulation that grant significant advantages to the ruling party. For instance, the PAP's legislative supermajority has granted it freedom to change electoral rules, while the continued bureaucratic designation of the EMB as a department under the Prime Minister's Office has allowed it to control the drawing of electoral boundaries (Mutalib, 2002; Tan, 2013; Tey, 2008). More specifically, the introduction of the group representative constituency (GRC) system, a form of party plurality bloc voting, in 1988 significantly raised the barriers to entry for opposition parties. They now have to compete in teams of four, five, or six candidates in certain constituencies, as compared to only single-member constituencies in the past. Gerrymandering in the GRC system has also been pervasive (Tan, 2013). The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, headed by the Secretary to the Prime Minister, almost always changes the constituency boundaries, or deletes old constituencies to create new ones, before every election. For example, in the 2015 General Elections, the marginal single member constituency of Joo Chiat was erased off the electorate map and absorbed into Marine Parade GRC for no apparent reason.⁴ As a result, as shown in Fig. 2, the PAP has always achieved domineering victory with more than 90% of the seat share despite declining vote share since independence in 1965.

Singapore's absence of simple electoral malpractice but high incidence of complex electoral manipulation is reflected in its PEI score of 52 (global mean 55). This middling aggregated score masks the gross inequality in the different disaggregated components of electoral integrity. According to the experts surveyed, while Singapore scored best in electoral procedures (77, versus global mean of 65) and voter registration (75, versus global mean of 51), it scored terribly for electoral laws that “were seen as highly skewed in favor of the governing party” (27, versus global mean of 53), and for the delimitation of district boundaries (14, versus global mean of 54). On district boundaries, the Electoral Integrity Project's “Year in Elections 2015” report noted that,

“Only two countries – the United States and Malaysia – scored worse in this dimension. The country (Singapore) fared very poorly on the category's items such as “boundaries discriminated against some parties”, or “boundaries favored incumbents”. Singapore's large multi-member districts deter electoral competition and increase the likelihood of super-majorities in gerrymandered districts, leading to a large number of essentially uncontested seats.” (Norris et al., 2016, p. 51, p. 51)

As hypothesized, however, partial electoral laws and constantly changing district boundaries are highly complex, and therefore, of low salience to the common voter. Local survey data found that

³ Data source: Singapore Elections Department Website. http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html Last accessed November 14, 2017.

⁴ “Election boundaries report 2015: PAP and opposition politicians react to changes.” *The Straits Times*. 24 July 2015. Last accessed <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/electoral-boundaries-report-2015-pap-and-opposition-politicians-react-to> on March 12, 2018.

Singaporeans did not perceive that these electoral misconduct violated the democratic principle of one-man-one-vote. In post-election surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015 by the Institute of Policy Studies, a local think tank, more than 90% of survey respondents expressed agreement to the statement that “I felt free to vote the way I wanted to.”⁵ Moreover, in 2006, with regards to the integrity of the entire electoral system, 63% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the “whole election system is fair to all political parties,” and 61% agreed or strongly agreed that there was “no need to change the election system.”⁶ In 2011, agreement for the two statements remained high at 61% and 56% respectively, and, in 2015, surged to 79% and 71%. These results are summarized in Fig. 3.

Within this local context of voter apathy over complex electoral manipulation, opposition forces in civil society and opposition political parties have found themselves preaching to a non-existent crowd. As early as 1972, opposition parties were already maneuvering to raise awareness of unfair elections, and pressure the government to concede some institutional reforms.⁷ On 8 April 1972, six opposition parties sent a joint memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding, amongst other requests, for the Government to set up an independent Election Commission “to allay the fears of the electorate and to convince them that the government considers it its duty to see that elections are held fairly and as democratically as possible.” If there was no time for such a Commission, the Government should then call for independent UN observers to observe the forthcoming elections. The government dismissed the recommendations. They argued that Singapore electoral regulations had been adopted from the former British colonial authorities with no ill effects. In declassified British diplomatic cables, the British High Commission noted that “the suggestion of inviting UN observers was remarkably inept and has attracted a good deal of criticism in the press,” and that it “has gained [the opposition] no credit whatsoever.” Moreover, even the Acting High Commissioner himself acknowledged that the elections were unfair because the contest was between two unequal competitors, and not due to the unfair playing field. In a section titled “Were the elections fair?” in his final report, he wrote that “the contest can however only be considered fair in the same way as might be a match under Queensberry rules between a professional heavyweight boxing champion and an under-nourished, unskilled lightweight opponent.”

The campaign for electoral reforms saw no substantial change even when opposition parties escaped from political wilderness and entered parliament. A comprehensive search of the Singapore's parliamentary records between 1981, when J.B. Jeyaretnam became the sole opposition Member of Parliament, to 2016, where there were six elected opposition Members of Parliament, saw only 124 instances where electoral integrity was debated, or about 3.5 times every year.⁸ Faced with repeated opposition accusations of gerrymandering facilitated by the Election Boundaries Review Committee and the Elections Department, the PAP has repeatedly dismissed such charges by suggesting that the high integrity of Singapore civil servants ensured that electoral contests

⁵ IPS Post Election Survey 2011. Last accessed at http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/POPS-4_May-11_slides1.pdf on 23 September 2016; and IPS Post Election Survey 2015. Last accessed at http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/10/POPS-8_GE2015_061115_web-Final.pdf on 23 September 2016.

⁶ General Election 2006 Post Election Survey. Last accessed at http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2006/06/IPS-Report-website7-May_070711.pdf on 23 September 2016.

⁷ The quotes cited in this paragraph are from declassified British diplomatic cables from the UK National Archives. Copies of these diplomatic cables are stored on microfilm at the National Archives of Singapore, NAB 1423, “Political Situation in Singapore,” FCO 24/1463.

⁸ The data cited in this paragraph are collected from an online search of keywords related to electoral integrity through the Hansard record online at <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/publications-singapore-official-reports>. The full dataset is available upon request from the author.

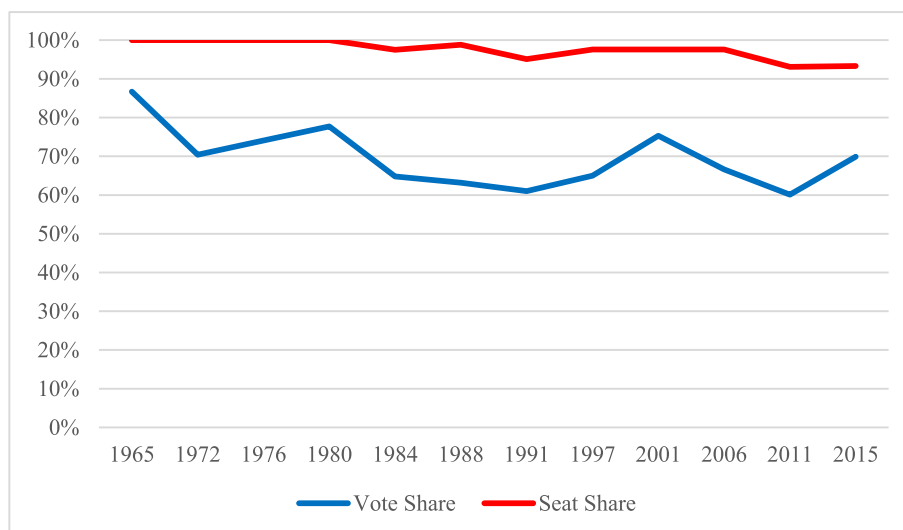


Fig. 2. The PAP's vote and seat share in parliament.

Institute of Policy Studies Post-Election Surveys

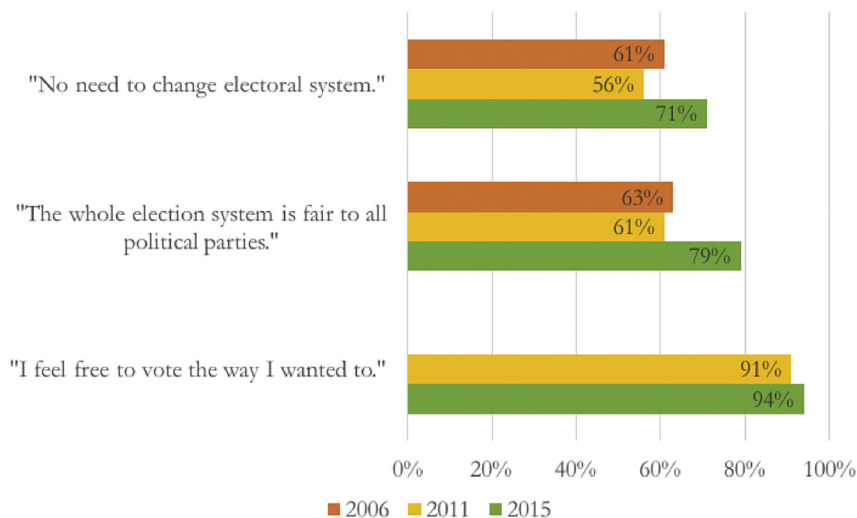


Fig. 3. Proportion of survey respondents who “agreed” and “strongly agreed” to statements in IPS Post-Election Surveys.

were fair, and that “if you cannot play the game properly, do not blame the pitch.”⁹

For their part, Singaporean civil society did make efforts to try to raise the awareness of unfair elections mainly through writing and disseminating reports. In 2000, the Open Singapore Center published a booklet titled “Elections in Singapore: Are They Free and Fair?” which highlighted both structural and institutional obstacles to free and fair elections such as the Internal Security Act, the biased mass media, the recording of ballot numbers, and the gerrymandering of electoral constituencies (Open Singapore Centre, 2000). More recently, between 2013 and 2014, MARUAH, the human rights NGO in Singapore released four reports analyzing the legitimacy of Singapore elections (MARUAH, 2013a, 2013b; 2014a, 2014b). Yet these efforts were fruitless within the overall domestic context of voter apathy. No subsequent rallies were organized, and there

was no groundswell of support from both online or offline print media.

5.2. Mobilization with technocratic and perfunctory reforms - Malaysia

The dominant Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, and its predecessor the Alliance coalition, ruled Malaysia from 1957 till its recent defeat in May 2018. BN's dominance can be attributed, at a minimum, to the skillful maintenance of a coalition across ethnic and religious cleavages through an extensive network of patronage that secures acquiescence, and the personalization of coercive authoritarian institutions that effectively suppress an effervescent opposition (Crouch, 1996; Gomez, 2016; Milne and Mauzy, 1999; Pepinsky, 2015; Slater, 2003; Wong et al., 2010).

The regime's extensive electoral manipulation, crafting overwhelming victories for itself over six decades, has also been well documented (Ostwald, 2017). Like Singapore, the BN's control over a non-independent electoral commission has allowed for many instances of complex manipulation (Lim, 2005). The most important form of such manipulation is again the gerrymandering of the boundaries of electoral districts and the uneven application of electoral laws. Malaysia's PEI score for the delimitation of district boundaries and the enforcement of electoral laws is very low at 10 and 16 respectively (versus global

⁹ See speeches by Wong Kan Seng, Deputy Prime Minister, and Zaqy Mohamad, Member of Parliament for Hong Kah, on 2 March 2005 (Accessed at https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00001530-WA¤tPubID=00004689-WA&topicKey=00004689-WA.00001530-WA_1%2B%2B on 27 September 2016) and on 26 April 2010 (Accessed at https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00004346-WA¤tPubID=00004804-WA&topicKey=00004804-WA.00004346-WA_1%2B%2B on 27 September 2016).

means of 54 and 53 respectively).

Gerrymandering helped the BN in two ways. First, gerrymandering can shift opposition voters away from opposition districts to make these districts more vulnerable to recapture by the BN (Ong and Welsh, 2005). Second, gerrymandering can create malapportionment. In Malaysia, this means over-representing small Malay-based rural constituencies, which are BN's traditional stronghold, while under-representing large ethnically-mixed or non-Malay urban constituencies that typically vote for the opposition (Wong et al., 2010, pp. 931–937). In fact, research by Ostwald (2013, p. 524) has demonstrated that Malaysia's degree of malapportionment across its electoral districts "is significantly higher than in fully developed democracies, as well as in many countries below Malaysia's level of development." Hence, even when the BN lost the popular vote in the latest 2013 general elections with a 47.4% vote share, it won almost 60% of the seats available in the legislature. In the most recent boundary delimitation exercise launched by the election commission in late 2016, analysts have charged that the proposed changes will result in the "highest level of malapportionment since 1974" (Ong, 2016).

Unlike Singapore, however, Malaysia's autocratic regime also relies on low complexity and highly salient manipulation to secure electoral victories. The twin problems of missing and "phantom" voters, primarily due to widespread errors on the voter list, has been a perennial bugbear for analysts and NGOs invested in examining electoral fraud. In one of the most serious cases of missing names, about 230,000 people, most of whom were Chinese, had their names deleted from the list of voters during the 1974 General Election (Lim, 2005, p. 272; Ong, 2005, pp. 294–295). In the crucial 1999 General Election, when there was a wave of anti-regime sentiment due to the BN's sacking and brutal treatment of a Deputy Prime Minister, almost 680,000 people, or just over 7 percent of the electorate, were unable to vote even when they had registered to do so (Lim, 2005, pp. 272–273).

As expected, low complexity electoral misconduct generated significant mass dissent. In 2012, Merdeka Center, a reputable polling firm in Malaysia, found that 92 percent of a representative sample of survey respondents wanted the election commission to rectify errors and clean the electoral roll before elections were held, and that 48 percent of respondents agreed that the existing electoral roll was inaccurate.¹⁰ These survey results, in direct contrast to survey results in Singapore, reflect the fact that the manipulation was simple enough for most Malaysians to understand how it was consequential for impinging on their democratic rights. For the 2013 general elections, at least three domestic election observer groups issued their own reports with vastly similar conclusions – that the elections "were compromised by some serious flaws," most notably with regards to inaccuracies over the electoral roll, and was therefore only "partially free and not fair."¹¹

As hypothesized, low complexity electoral manipulation alone was not sufficient for mass mobilization in Malaysia. No significant protests against electoral manipulation occurred throughout the decades of BN's authoritarian rule. The Reformasi movement, a mass movement against the BN government in the late 1990s, was not such a protest. It was more about the amalgamation of opposition forces, leveraging on the brutal treatment of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, turning people out onto the streets to push for governance and economic reforms, than about anger at the violation of democratic choice (Weiss, 2006).

¹⁰ "Merdeka Center refutes EC's claims, insists voter survey accurate." *The Malaysian Insider*. Accessed at <http://merdeka.org/media/249-280512.html> on February 13, 2017.

¹¹ See reports by IDEAS and CPPS, "Was G13 Free and Fair? An Interim Observation Report on Malaysia's 13th General Election," accessed from <http://ideas.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/GE13-Observation-Interim-8-May-20131.pdf> on 13 February 2017, by Merdeka Center "GE-13: Election Watch Report," accessed from [http://www.merdeka.org/v2/download/Election%20Watch%20Report%20\(GE13\).pdf](http://www.merdeka.org/v2/download/Election%20Watch%20Report%20(GE13).pdf) on 13 February 2017, and by Pemantau, "An Election Observation Report for GE13: Clean and Fair?" accessed from <http://www.bersih.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Pemantau-Report-English-Final.pdf> on 13 February 2017.

Protests against electoral manipulation occurred only when Bersih, an opposition movement specifically targeting electoral reforms, was formed in 2005 (Khuo, 2016, 2014a). Originally known as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, it was born when five opposition parties collaborated with each other after their worst results in the 2004 general elections where the BN won nearly 90 percent of all parliamentary seats. All the opposition parties agreed that pressuring the BN regime for electoral reform was the "lowest common denominator" issue that they could all cooperate on (Khuo, 2016, p. 422).¹² The opposition parties subsequently partnered with at least 26 civil society organizations to officially form Bersih (Khuo, 2014a, p. 87), which has now expanded to 93 non-governmental organizations.¹³ Bersih would go on to organize massive rallies against electoral manipulation in the capital Kuala Lumpur and in other major cities around the country in 2007, 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016.

The organizational structure of Bersih itself as an all-encompassing electoral reform coalition with multiple veto players would prove to be its Achilles heel. A cleavage has endured between Bersih's central organizing secretariat and the opposition parties, born by the former's insistence on being purely civil-society-lead to maintain the public image of non-partisanship. This cleavage is not deep, and there are no major areas of disagreements between the two sides. But the arrangements mean that the Bersih central organizing secretariat (a collection of NGOs) has autonomy to decide on the strategy and demands for electoral reform approaching each protest, while the various opposition parties primarily work to help mobilize and organize protestor turnout (Khuo, 2014b, pp. 114–115). As a result, Bersih's eight demands for electoral and governance reforms, such as the demand to clean the electoral roll, the use of indelible ink, and a minimum of a 21 days campaign period, are all technical and bureaucratic demands.¹⁴ Opposition parties do not play any major role in articulating these demands.

Second, the large coalition of NGOs within the Bersih organizing secretariat itself has also lead to conflicting opinions about the timing, form, and strategy of each protest. More specifically, activists frequently have differing opinions about the extent to which protestors should confront security forces deployed against them – should they demobilize to prevent violence, or should they escalate their tactics and risk violent repression? Khuo Ying Hoo's interview with Hishamuddin Rais, a key activist in Bersih, reveals the multiple conflicts within Bersih itself. When asked about the key weakness of Bersih, Hishamuddin replied,

"The weakness is that it is big. It is bulky because it is a coalition. So it is difficult to have a unified opinion, to reach consensus. Let me tell you, for the decision to have the Bersih 2.0 protest, it took four meetings – four enlarged meetings. And there were a lot of arguments. That is the weakness; because everybody has an opinion. Being bulky, however, is also a strength when we look at the macro-level. But when it comes to the details, we have a lot of problems. I mean the strategies, whether we just want to wear yellow or whether we want to paint our house yellow, and all these ideas. It is because not all NGOs are for street protests. Some prefer press conferences and some argue for sending memorandums." (Khuo, 2014b, p. 117)

As predicted, the BN smothered Bersih with a mixture of repression and technocratic, perfunctory reforms. During the July 2011 Bersih protests, security forces fired tear gas and used water cannons to disperse protestors, and conducted mass arrests against recalcitrants. A month later, Prime Minister Najib Razak announced the formation of a

¹² MY002 Interview, 2 June 2015. MY006 Interview, 4 June 2015. All locations: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

¹³ See "Endorsing NGOs," accessed at <https://www.bersih.org/about/ngos/on> 13 February 2017.

¹⁴ See "Our 8 Demands," accessed from <https://www.bersih.org/about/8demands/on> 13 February 2017.

Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reforms with nine Members of Parliament as committee members – five from the ruling BN, three from the three major opposition parties, and an independent. Bersih itself was not invited to be on the committee. Over the next 6 months, the committee solicited inputs from enthusiastic individuals and civil society organizations (including Bersih) across the country through various townhalls and feedback sessions. The result was a final report that produced 22 recommendations, all of which were technical and non-partisan reforms. A minority report from the committee's opposition members never saw the light of the day, and the final report was accepted and endorsed in parliament by BN only, without support from the opposition.¹⁵ All the recommendations have not been implemented, save for the use of indelible ink, which itself was highly criticized for being easily removable with household detergent in the 2013 general elections.

5.3. Mobilization with partisan reforms - Cambodia

Hun Sen, an autocrat equipped with a dominant party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has ruled over Cambodia since 1985 (Karbaum, 2012; McCargo, 2005; Morgenbesser, 2016, 2017; Roberts, 2002; Strangio, 2014; Un, 2006, 2011). Patronage networks fueled by corruption, combined with the skillful and selective use of repression against fellow elites and the masses, have formed the backbone of his regime. Furthermore, electoral manipulation to ensure the CPP's overwhelming victories at the polls has been ever-present since the first general elections organized by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993 (Croissant, 2016; Sullivan, 2016). Cambodia's overall score in the PEI index is 32 (versus the global mean of 55), the lowest score in the entire Asia-Pacific region. The country ranked 153 out of 161 countries in the world (Norris et al., 2017). It had consistently low scores across all aspects of electoral process, with the score of 13 for voter registration, also the lowest in the world, being the most notable.

Like Malaysia, Hun Sen and the CPP utilizes a mix of high and low complexity electoral manipulation. Complex aspects of the uneven playing field include extensive control over all major media outlets in the country such as television, radio, and newspapers, and the use of state resources as CPP resources for electoral campaigning (Grömping, 2013a; Hughes, 2006; Sullivan, 2016). Opposition parties are denied equal media treatment and access to campaign finance. Low complexity manipulation that directly distorted or denied the democratic principle of one-man-one-vote included persistent violent intimidation of voters, particularly rural voters, to vote for the CPP, as well as gross manipulation of voter lists (Grömping, 2013b).

Within this laundry list of electoral malpractices, it is the extensive errors on the voter list that has garnered the most attention. Two separate voter registry audits conducted by NGOs – the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) with the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections (NICFEC) – estimated that between 10.8% and 13.5% of eligible citizens who thought they were registered were actually not registered, and that “18.3% of names on the list were invalid” because they were deceased, had permanently relocated, or were simply fraudulent.¹⁶ For the 2013 general elections, the opposition estimated that close to 1.5 million voters in Cambodia were

disenfranchised – an astounding number considering the fact that the eventual margin between the CPP and the main opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), was just under 300,000 votes.¹⁷ Like Malaysia, voters found that other people had already voted in their name, or they could not find their names on the voter list. A joint report by the Electoral Reform Alliance, a coalition of Cambodian NGOs dedicated to analyzing the conduct of the 2013 elections, corroborated the claims.¹⁸

Also like Malaysia, moreover, blatantly simple to understand electoral manipulation itself was not enough to galvanize significant protests against the regime for two decades. It was not until 2013 when the political opportunity for extensive and prolonged mobilization emerged. The most crucial development approaching the July 2013 general elections was the merger of the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party to form the CNRP in the previous year. Sam Rainsy, the main opposition leader in Cambodia since 1995, was made President of the CNRP, while Kem Sokha, the former head of the Cambodian Center of Human Rights, became Vice President. Posters depicting the new party logo and the two personalities with their hands raised were plastered throughout the country.

Because the dimension of electoral competition in Cambodia is based primarily on charismatic leadership tied to specific party brands, the merger to form CNRP had the overall effect of helping opposition-inclined voters to strategically coordinate their votes behind the strongest opposition party while abandoning the weaker opposition parties (Cox, 1997; Croissant, 2016, pp. 26–29). The overall results demonstrated this strategic coordination. CPP obtained 68 seats in the 123-seat legislature, while the CNRP garnered 55 seats. No other opposition parties gained any seats. Thus, the CNRP fell just short of an extra 7 seats needed to topple Hun Sen and the CPP, despite the regime's extensive electoral manipulation.

Emboldened by the narrow results, the CNRP first boycotted parliament to undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. Then, the CNRP turned supporters out onto the streets to protest against the perceived electoral irregularities, and demanded a re-vote, re-count, or at least an independent inquiry. They made Freedom Park in Phnom Penh the main site of their protests, returning to the plaza every week. There were some attempts at negotiating a compromise in the ensuing months after the election in July 2013, but progress was not forthcoming because Sam Rainsy delegated negotiations to other CNRP leaders while he flew overseas to seek international support. In December 2013, over 300,000 garment workers, demanding wage increases and who were largely sympathetic to the CNRP, went on strike, with thousands joining CNRP's protest at Freedom Park.¹⁹ This escalation of conflict was first met with severe violent repression, but subsequently catalyzed more extensive negotiations between CPP and the CNRP.²⁰ An agreement over various reforms, including electoral reforms, were finally reached in July 2014.²¹

There are two key issues about this agreement that is relevant for the arguments in this article. First, unlike the all-encompassing protest

¹⁵ The Star. “Report by PSC on Electoral Reform passed in Parliament (Update).” Accessed from <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2012/04/03/report-by-psc-on-electoral-reform-passed-in-parliament-update/> on 13 February 2017.

¹⁶ National Democratic Institute. 2013. “Report on the Voter Registry Audit (VRA) in Cambodia.” Accessed from <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Cambodia-Voter-Registry-Audit-2013.pdf> on 15 February 2017, and COMFREL. 2013. “Final Report on Survey of Voter List, Voter Registration, and Audit of the Voter List Plus Verification of the Deletion Forms for the 2013 National Election (SVRA-Plus).” Accessed from http://comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/484678Voter_Survey_2012_SVRA_Plus_Eng_01_04_2013_Final.pdf on 15 February 2017.

¹⁷ CNRP Interview. 11 June 2015.

¹⁸ The Electoral Reform Alliance. 2013. “Joint-Report on the Conduct of the 2013 Cambodian Elections.” Accessed from http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/684510eERA_Joint_Report_on_Cambodian_Elections_2013_Final.pdf on 15 February 2017.

¹⁹ Radio Free Asia. 26 December 2013. “Striking Garment Workers Join Cambodia Opposition Protests.” Accessed from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/workers-12262013183522.html> on 15 February 2017.

²⁰ BBC. 3 January 2014. “Cambodia garment workers killed in clashes with police.” Accessed from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25585054> on 15 February 2017.

²¹ Radio Free Asia. 22 July 2014. “Cambodia's Ruling, Opposition Parties Agree to End Year-Long Deadlock.” Accessed <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/agreement-07222014154033.html> on 15 February 2017. For a detailed description of the sequence of events, see Licadho, “Freedom Park violence, CNRP Arrests, and Political Deal: Timeline of Events July 14–November 18, 2014.” Accessed from <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/201LICADHOBriefTimelineJuly15Violence2014-English.pdf> on February 24, 2017.

coalition in Malaysia, it was clear that opposition power was concentrated in one veto player – Sam Rainsy. As mentioned earlier, negotiations over electoral reform concessions had initially dragged on for months when he delegated the task to other senior leaders within the CNRP. These negotiations were then hastily concluded after just one meeting on the morning of July 22, 2014, after Hun Sen took action to arrest top leaders of the CNRP, and when Sam Rainsy returned from overseas to broker the deal to secure their release. Reflecting Sam Rainsy's veto power over the deal, his deputy, Kem Sokha, agreed to the bargain with Hun Sen even when he profoundly disagreed with Sam Rainsy about Hun Sen's trustworthiness. In March 2015, Kem Sokha, when quizzed over his opinion of the deal, revealed that he was willing to “swallow gravel and rocks” to maintain opposition unity within the CNRP.²²

Second, as my argument predicts, Hun Sen's concessions and Sam Rainsy's gains settled around the observable partisan split of benefits between CPP and CNRP. Specifically, concessions for electoral reform centered around the appointment of partisan personnel selected by both parties to the oversight board of the National Election Commission (NEC). The nine-member panel would have four members from the CPP, four from CNRP, and one independent candidate to be jointly picked by both CPP and CNRP. As Croissant (2016, p. 37) notes, the NEC reforms “prize(s) partisanship and obedience to authority above professionalism and independence”. Questions about the details of technical reforms to the electoral process were left off the table. In fact, numerous other institutional reforms agreed to in the deal reflect the nature of this partisan split. They included a restructuring of the permanent committee of the National Assembly to have seven members from the CPP and six from the CNRP. There will also be two deputy presidents of the National Assembly, with one each from the CPP and the CNRP. There would be ten standing commissions of the National Assembly, with CPP and CNRP appointing five heads each.

6. Conclusion

A growing literature on electoral authoritarianism and threats to electoral integrity has documented a wide range of causes and effects of electoral manipulation in general. Yet, while all electoral manipulations are equal, some are more salient than others. This article has argued that variation in the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation partially explains variation in protests against such manipulation. Where there is widespread disagreement over complex electoral manipulation, as in Singapore, dissent against the regime is muted. Where there is a broad consensus over simple-to-understand electoral manipulation, protests are more likely to occur, like in Malaysia and Cambodia, if political entrepreneurs and opposition activists can mobilize their supporters to demand for the restoration of their democratic rights. Furthermore, variation in how the opposition is organized can lead to divergent electoral reform outcomes. Where opposition power is concentrated behind a single leader, we are more likely to observe partisan electoral reforms like in Cambodia. Where opposition power is dispersed across multiple actors, there tends to be a focus on technical reforms to the electoral process, just like how the BN dealt with Bersih and the opposition parties in Malaysia. These arguments suggest an alternative model for analyzing electoral reform in contemporary electoral autocracies – a model rooted in a voter's bottom-up perception of the complexity of electoral manipulation combined with a top-down perspective of the bargaining dynamics between opposition elites and the autocrat. It introduces new variables aiming to complement, clarify, and augment, but not invalidate, previous analyses and theories of electoral reform.

²² The Cambodia Daily. 17 March 2015. “Kem Sokha was Unhappy with July 22 Political Deal.” Accessed from <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/kem-sokha-was-unhappy-with-july-22-political-deal-79855/> on 15 February 2017.

To some analysts, overt electoral misconduct in Malaysia and Cambodia, such as the inability to register voters and update voter lists, may reasonably be perceived to be a result of low institutional capacity of the electoral administration. Yet, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that willful autocratic intent, not a lack of bureaucratic capacity, explain overt electoral malpractice. In Cambodia in 2016, the National Election Commission implemented a computerized biometric voter registration drive that registered some 7.9 million voters at over 22,000 voter registration points over a period of 90 days.²³ This resulted in the administration of local elections held in mid-2017 that were “significantly improved and made more transparent than before.”²⁴ If one were to speculate which country was capable of pulling off such an administrative feat, one would be extremely unlikely to mention Cambodia, given that it is still one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, recent voter registration and redistricting anomalies also indicate that the Election Commission at times finds surprising bureaucratic bandwidth to exceed their typical accuracy of registering voters. In October 2017, it was revealed that just over a thousand military voters were transferred to an army camp that had yet to be completely built.²⁵ Analysis of the most recent constituency boundary redistricting exercise in 2015 and 2016 also found that it had precise effects in shifting and packing opposition voters from opposition marginal constituencies into larger opposition safe constituencies. This ensures the continued under-representation of opposition voters while increasing the possibility of the incumbent recapturing previously lost opposition marginal seats.²⁶ If the Malaysian Election Commission lacks institutional capacity, they certainly do not hide it well.

To be clear, none of the discussion in this essay implies that democratization or institutional change in authoritarian regime is more likely if opposition forces coalesced behind a single charismatic leader. That is an open empirical question. Indeed, while an autocrat may choose to concede institutional reforms rather than repress its opponents in the short-term, any bargains reached hinge precariously on a knife's edge as long as the autocrat retains control over his vast network of coercive institutions. Since the bargain was struck with the opposition in July 2014, Hun Sen has sought to reassert political control during the local elections held in mid-2017 and the national elections due in mid-2018. CNRP-nominated members of the election commission have been arrested and jailed, political commentators have been murdered, Sam Rainsy is once again in exile, Kem Sokha has been arrested on charges of treason, and a draconian new law of political parties was passed, effectively de-registering the CNRP.²⁷ While the opposition may enjoy its share of autocratic concessions in the short-term, the anarchic nature of authoritarianism ensures that nothing prevents the autocrat from renegeing on his promises and choosing repression in the medium to long term (Svolik, 2012). Consolidating the

²³ See COMFREL report “2016 Voter Registration Monitoring and Observation Report.” Last accessed at https://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/932236Final_Report_VRM_2016__English_Version.pdf on November 14, 2017.

²⁴ See COMFREL report “Overall and Ultimate Assessment on Commune Council Election for the 4th Mandate.” Last accessed at https://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/439937SRs_Statement_Overall_and_Ultimate_Assessment_on_Commune_Council_Election_for_the_4th_Mandate_24_JUNE_2017_English.pdf on November 14, 2017.

²⁵ “Johor DAP files 1051 objections on army voters in Segamat.” *Malaysiakini*. 7 November 2017. Last accessed at <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/401078> on November 14, 2017.

²⁶ See the Penang Institute report “Malapportionment of Constituencies: Analysis of the 2016 Redelineation Proposal (First Display) for the Peninsula and Sabah and the 2015 Redelineation Exercise for Sarawak.” Last accessed at <http://penanginstitute.org/v3/files/malapportionment/Malapportionment-Report-2.0-20161022.pdf> on November 14, 2017. See also Politweet report “The Impact of Redelineation on the Selangor State Elections.” Last accessed at <https://politweet.wordpress.com/2016/11/09/the-impact-of-redelineation-on-the-selangor-state-elections/> on November 14, 2017.

²⁷ ABC News. 20 February 2017. “Cambodia changes political rules in ‘triumph of dictatorship,’ says critics.” Accessed from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-20/cambodia-changes-political-rules-in-triumph-of-dictatorship/8287662> on 27 February 2017.

gains of electoral reform is a separate and much harder task than acquiring it. The road towards toppling authoritarian regimes is a long and arduous one.

At least three extensions for future research is possible. First, more detailed quantitative and qualitative data is needed on the cognitive complexity of electoral manipulation as well as the organizational form of the opposition to facilitate further cross-national tests beyond the electoral autocracies of Southeast Asia. Existing datasets of perceptions of electoral integrity such as the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index and of opposition coalition formation by Wahman (2013, 2011) and Arriola (2013), provide reasonable approximations, but are not direct valid measurements of the new variables proposed. Scholars will have to combine deep knowledge of their specific cases to score country cases accurately.

Second, beyond electoral authoritarian regimes, political scientists can pay more careful attention to theorizing the consequences of different forms of distortions to electoral integrity across all regime types. As this article has demonstrated, different types of electoral misconduct potentially entail different meanings of public legitimacy. If the masses get to vote and have their votes counted, other forms of complex manipulation, such as gerrymandering, malapportionment or press censorship, while provoking limited outrage, do not necessarily encourage protest mobilization. Within this logic, it is not surprising that gerrymandering in other countries, most notably the United States, has provoked no protests. Campaigning for reforms against gerrymandering, as former President Obama advocated for in his numerous speeches, is likely to be a Sisyphean task.

Third, this article highlights that variation in opposition organization, not just their relative strength or presence of a coalition, has important consequences for institutional change in authoritarian regimes. When autocrats encounter mass or elite threats to their rule, whether they are facing a concentrated or diffused threats to their rule conditions their responses, and subsequently shapes the form, success and distributional outcomes of bargaining. If social scientists do indeed desire to move beyond the transition paradigm, then understanding how these iterative and protracted bargaining process unfold over time will be more important than ever.

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