Monitoring the Monitors: Understanding Election Observation in Today’s World

Review by Thomas E. Flores
The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University


As the Third Wave of democracy spread, elections grew in number and importance, coming to symbolize not the apotheosis of a democratic transition, but the first step on a long and uncertain path of political change.1 And as elections spread, so did election observation; while only 9% of national elections were observed between 1945 and 1990, 63% were observed between 1990 and 2011.2 Election observers’ pronouncements became front-page news, yet new doubts emerged regarding monitors’ ability to constrain incumbents from stealing elections. As of the late 2000s, however, there had been little scholarly attention to election monitoring.3

Two new books have fortunately filled this gap—Susan Hyde’s The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma and Judith Kelley’s Monitoring Democracy. The books significantly contribute to our understanding of the who, what, why, and where of election monitoring. Indeed, they have much in common. Each fuses a practitioner’s understanding of the technical and political demands of election monitoring with a researcher’s eye for theory-building and data collection. Each book evaluates the efficacy of election observation, but also offers a more complex portrait of its origins and evolution. They should therefore interest scholars of democracy promotion, international norms, and experimental methods.

Yet Hyde and Kelley’s contributions also diverge in purpose, theory, and methods. Kelley more eagerly addresses questions of the impact of election monitoring and consequently offers a more public policy-friendly critique of its practice. Hyde, in contrast, is more interested in constructing a new theory of how international norms originate. In essence, Kelley has written a book on the practice of election monitoring, while Hyde has written a book on the norm of election monitoring. The authors also come to divergent conclusions regarding the impact of election monitors.

---


2Figures based on the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data set and the author’s calculations.

3See Abbink and Hesseling (2000) for a notable exception.


© 2013 International Studies Association
Background and Questions

Both Kelley and Hyde begin their books by pointing to several empirical facts now familiar to political scientists: the explosion in the use of elections to promote democracy and the concomitant surge in election observation as a tool of democracy promotion. Yet these facts inspire different questions. Hyde regards the spread of election observation as an intriguing empirical puzzle. Why, she asks, would electoral autocrats risk international opprobrium and the loss of power by inviting election monitors? How, in short, did election observation become an international norm?

Kelley, in contrast, is more interested in the impact, rather than the emergence, of the norm of election observation, alluding to growing pessimism regarding international election monitoring. She therefore asks two questions. First, do election observers provide an unbiased, accurate assessment of election quality? Second, do election observers improve the quality of elections?

Explaining Normative Emergence

Both Hyde and Kelley describe election observation as a new norm in world politics. Hyde defines the norm as “the shared belief that all potentially democratic elections are internationally observed and any nonobserved election is not democratic” (p. 5). Western democracies punish violators by withdrawing international benefits.

Kelley argues that the end of the Cold War weakened norms resisting election observation (e.g., sovereignty), while bolstering norms supporting it (e.g., human rights). This normative environment convinced Western governments that democracy promotion would best serve their security interests, increasing the supply of monitors. The demand for election monitoring also rose. Aspiring democrats invited monitors to establish their credentials and eventually less committed politicians who coveted Western approval imitated the signal.

Hyde does not dispute these broad outlines, but develops a more robust theory of normative emergence, beginning with a formal model of the decision by incumbent politicians to invite observers. That model features two types of political leaders—true democrats and pseudo-democrats. When the end of the Cold War increased returns to democratic governance relative to other traits, rational state leaders responded. True democrats began to invite outsiders to monitor their elections; doing so incurred negligible costs since they never intended to cheat, while also providing benefits from the West by bolstering their democratic bona fides. In time, the explosion in demand for monitors convinced Western democracy promoters that election monitoring was a credible signal of democratic credentials; in time, they came to regard any unobserved election as fraudulent.

This new norm created the titular “pseudo-democrat’s dilemma.” Incumbents with weak commitments to democracy could refuse to invite observers, but risk a loss of international benefits, since doing so would effectively concede their lack of legitimacy. Yet inviting observers risked actually losing office in a fair election or getting caught cheating; either way, pseudo-democrats would lose access to the riches of office. The growing strength of the norm eventually shifted the balance of this equation enough that pseudo-democrats also began to invite observers in droves.

Hyde’s theory is innovative for two reasons. First, the theory rejects previous theories relying on purposeful action by “norms entrepreneurs” or external coercion as the origins of international norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). She instead proposes that norms originate in an unintentional, demand-driven process rooted in rational, not normative, calculations. Second, uncertainty
regarding the effectiveness of election observation and the commitment of Western governments to democracy was critical to the spread of the norm. If monitoring were costless to pseudo-democrats, it wouldn’t represent a credible signal. On the other hand, if election observers flawlessly detected election manipulation and Western governments imposed sanctions without fail, pseudo-democrats would never invite monitors, as the costs would far outweigh the benefits. The global norm would never have developed in such a circumstance, effectively closing any opportunity to catch cheaters.

Hyde marshals an impressive array of evidence to test the implications of her theory of normative emergence. She relies heavily on the NELDA data set on elections and monitoring collected in conjunction with Nicolay Marinov. Hyde is appropriately careful in her cross-national analysis to recognize the pernicious effects of nonrandom selection; since pariah states likely do not hold elections or request monitors, we will tend to not observe decreases in international benefits after negative reports. Yet she finds persuasive evidence in favor of the theory: election observation is more likely when an election is competitive, but held in an unconsolidated democracy or after elections have been suspended for some time; observation is less likely in strategically important countries, where pseudo-democrats have less need for Western benefits; and governments expected to hold clean elections that are then caught cheating do lose international benefits.

### Information Quality and Election Observation

Election observers must travel to hundreds of far-flung polling places, closely monitor the complicated process of tallying votes, and frequently monitor months of pre-election preparations. They then must decide whether and how to criticize elections in polarized settings while under political pressure from incumbents, opposition figures, and external actors. Can we realistically expect observers to produce reliable judgments of electoral quality, given these technical and political obstacles? Kelley provides an answer. She argues that a “shadow market” of compliant election monitors eases Hyde’s pseudo-democrat’s dilemma. Monitoring organizations vary in their age and organization, but most critically in their propensity to criticize “highly problematic” elections. Self-interested incumbents readily exploit these differences; less democratic states more likely invite only obliging monitors from this shadow market.

Even tough monitors, however, sometimes refrain from criticizing suspect elections. Why do they do so? Kelley, like Hyde collects new, innovative cross-national data on elections and election monitoring to answer this question. The Data on International Election Monitoring (DIEM) relies on the exhaustive coding of the official statements and documents of election observers while the Quality of Elections Data (QED) codes reports of the US State Department on Human Rights Practices on both monitored and nonmonitored elections. Kelley finds that monitors often fail to catch pre-election and administrative cheating. Monitors, she concludes, are hardly neutral observers, but instead have biases that cloud their judgments. They are less likely to condemn elections in countries making democratic progress, where the incumbent loses, where cheating occurs earlier and more subtly, and where monitors fear a condemnation will lead to violence.

### Do Election Observers Improve Elections?

How can election observers improve electoral quality when they frequently hesitate to criticize flawed elections? Policymakers will almost certainly approach these books seeking an answer to this important question. Both books deliver. Yet they come to different conclusions, despite at times similar findings.
Each author to her credit carefully considers the question of nonrandom selection; organizations likely choose which elections to observe on the basis of their \textit{ex ante} estimates of their likely quality (Kelley, p. 112). If observers are more likely to monitor clean elections, our estimates will be overly sanguine, and vice versa. Kelley solves this problem using genetic matching to produce samples balanced on observable \textit{ex ante} indicators of election quality. She also takes steps to exclude elections held in single-party and fully democratic regimes, effectively limiting her analysis to unconsolidated democracies.

Kelley’s results indicate that election observation improves election quality and increases the probability of turnover. She also finds that the positive impact of election observation is dependent on the presence of high-quality monitors.

Matching methods unfortunately cannot eliminate concerns regarding selection bias if it is driven by unobservable factors, as Kelley readily admits (p. 129). Hyde’s experimental research is thus well positioned to deepen our understanding of election observation’s impact. Hyde reports the results of two experiments in which monitoring was assigned to polling stations either randomly or as if randomly in order to study whether they lower incumbent vote share. The authors, then, are differentiated by their definitions of success in election observation; election observation in Kelley’s estimation succeeds if the election has fewer problems or if it results in incumbent loss, while Hyde demands that election observers directly affect election-day behavior.

Hyde’s first experiment took place during Armenia’s 2003 presidential elections in which Robert Kocharian, the incumbent candidate and a classic pseudo-democrat, won re-election in the second round after significant cheating. Observers, she argues, were assigned to polling stations as if by randomization (pp. 136–139). The experiment indicates that Kocharian’s vote share in polling stations observed by monitors was significantly lower. Her second experiment took place during Indonesia’s 2004 presidential election, in which incumbent President Megawati Sukarnoputri lost the election and peacefully relinquished power, showing herself to be a “true democrat.” Hyde herself randomly assigned observers from the Carter Center to polling stations in the election’s second round. She finds that Megawati tended to win a larger vote share in neighborhoods assigned to be monitored, a counter-intuitive finding that she is at pains to explain. Still, she concludes, observers had a positive impact on election quality in both cases. Election observation is costly, and far more so for pseudo-democrats.

These results provide ample empirical evidence that the presence of monitors reduces fraud. Yet do elections support the broader, longer-term process of promoting democracy? Kelley argues that monitors should be held to this higher standard, since they dedicate significant resources recommending changes to electoral institutions. Do these suggestions yield improved elections in the future? Kelley examines 15 countries’ experiences and finds substantial improvement in only four, moderate progress in eight, and significant backsliding in three. She suggests that hesitation to criticize fraudulent elections, interference from powerful countries, and political polarization, among other factors, curb monitors’ long-term impact.

The authors disagree on the question of whether election monitoring has transformed how, rather than if, electoral autocrats cheat. Hyde analyzes case evidence and finds that election monitors have responded to criticism and developed more sophisticated means of detecting electoral fraud, including lengthening missions and producing independent vote tallies. Such changes have forced incumbents to engage in more sophisticated means of cheating, through monopolizing media coverage, for example. Kelley disagrees, basing her conclusions on an analysis of the kinds of irregularities discovered
in a broad sample of elections. She finds that in monitored elections, overt and covert cheating are complements, not substitutes. When improvements have occurred, she argues, it is because countries reduced both types of cheating.

Conclusions and the Road Ahead

These books represent the cutting edge of our understanding of election observation and democracy promotion. Each offers a groundbreaking contribution in its own right; taken together, they offer an entirely new understanding of the origins, evolution, and consequences of the spread of election observation. Rather than closing the study of these issues, however, these books should energize the study of election observation and democracy promotion.

Most obviously, these books should stimulate further research into the impact of election monitoring since, as we have seen, the books come to different conclusions on the matter. Kelley clearly harbors more severe doubts regarding the practice, concluding that observers mostly fail to improve election quality in the long run and too often legitimize stolen elections. She concludes by offering practical suggestions meant to improve the practice of election monitoring. Hyde differs, showing that observers impose higher costs on pseudo-democrats, costs that have risen over time as monitoring has become more sophisticated. Future scholars should take up these themes, exploring the impact of domestic monitors relative to international ones and longer- versus shorter-term monitoring missions, among other variation in missions. Research should also address different aspects than “election quality,” including election violence, opposition boycotts, and fiscal management. Hyde and Kelley notably have taken up these themes in journal articles (Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski forthcoming; Hyde and O’Mahony 2010; Kelley 2012).

Both Hyde and Kelley have contributed a major public good to the field in the form of new cross-national data on elections and election monitoring. Researchers should carefully compare and build on their different approaches. Each book, particularly Kelley’s, relies on a comparison of monitors’ assessments and actual events on the ground. Kelley’s QED proposes a means to measure the latter by coding reports from the US Department of State, while Hyde’s NELDA relies on a host of sources to code different aspects of electoral quality, including competitiveness (Hyde and Marinov 2012). Kelley admits that relying on the US government for a coding of election quality introduces clear bias. Yet Kelley’s DIEM allows a more careful comparison of different monitoring organizations’ reports on the same election. Researchers should continue to debate these empirical definitions of key concepts.

Hyde’s theoretical contribution remains her theory of how norms emerge, which challenges extant theories of norms creation (Finnemore 1993; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Scholars should endeavor to test whether her model of international norms formation successfully explains other norms. Hyde suggests that the spread of bilateral investment treaties (BITs), independent central banks, and international weapons inspectors more closely follow her model of normative emergence than pre-existing explanations.

As scholars move forward on these questions, they will undoubtedly benefit from the foundations Kelley and Hyde have built.

References


