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Double standards: the verdicts of western election observers in sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article tests whether Western election observers apply a "double standard" to elections in sub-Saharan Africa. It demonstrates that they do: Western election observers were statistically less likely to allege that significant fraud had occurred in an election in sub-Saharan Africa, than an election of the same quality held elsewhere, throughout the period from 1991 to 2012. This discrepancy exists despite controls for other factors commonly thought to influence the verdicts of observers, such as the strategic interests of Western countries. Yet, there is variation over time. Between 1991 and 2001, the double standard is partly explained by "progress bias," a tendency to tolerate flawed elections that improved on those held previously. From 2002 to 2012, observers' application of a double standard is much harder to explain. In that period, the analysis points to several factors that discourage Western observers from alleging fraud, including the risk of triggering electoral violence and a desire to protect relationships with strategic partners. It also identifies factors that make allegations of electoral fraud more likely, including the precedent set by past allegations of fraud and – unexpectedly – higher levels of foreign aid. None of these factors, however, account for the regional discrepancy.

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International election observers not only aim to detect and deter fraud, but to increase the credibility of elections. This is increasingly difficult in sub-Saharan Africa due to allegations that observers are biased, applying lower standards to elections in that region than they do to elections elsewhere. In 2017, Kenya's presidential election brought this issue to the fore. After international observers cautiously endorsed the poll, Kenya's Supreme Court invalidated it on constitutional grounds, ruling that the election process was neither sufficiently transparent nor verifiable.[1] Though the Court did not allege that fraud had taken place, the verdict was highly embarrassing for international observations and called their credibility into doubt.[2]

While the belief that observers accept lower quality elections in sub-Saharan Africa appears widespread, there is surprisingly little research that examines its empirical

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foundations. Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas calculate that between 1989 and 2012, Western groups were 4% less likely to allege that fraud had occurred when they observed an election in Africa.[3] However, their calculation is based on how frequently fraud is alleged in different regions, without controlling for potential underlying sources of bias. This article goes further, testing whether Western election observers accept lower standards in sub-Saharan Africa, even when we control for other factors commonly thought to bias the verdicts of these groups. It focuses on Western observers because they ought to have the highest standards; if anyone is applying a double standard to African elections, it is them.

Drawing primarily on data from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset,[4] this article uses logistic regression to analyse all elections observed by Western groups between 1991 and 2012. It finds that a double standard does exist; Western election observers are less likely to allege that significant fraud has occurred in an election in sub-Saharan Africa, than an election of the same quality held elsewhere. This effect is significant and substantial, even when controlling for factors – such as foreign aid, democratic progress, risk of electoral violence, and strategic importance – commonly thought to bias the verdicts of observers.

In the first half of the period analysed, part of the double standard can be explained by what Judith Kelley termed "progress bias"[5] – Western election observers tend to tolerate flawed elections when they represent an improvement on the past. From 2002 onwards, the double standard not only persists but is more difficult to explain. There is strong evidence that the risk of triggering election violence discourages observers from making allegations of fraud in this period, and less robust evidence that the desire to protect relationships with strategic military allies has a similar effect. These factors do not, however, account for the regional discrepancy. Other factors commonly proffered as explanations for bias in election observation – including natural resource wealth – lack any significant effect or – in the case of foreign aid – have the opposite effect to what was anticipated.

The importance of credibility and known sources of bias

Election observation is the observation of an election by an independent party in order to assess the conduct of that election on the basis of national legislation and international election standards. *International* election observation, which occurs only at the invitation of national governments, is defined by who carries it out: typically, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Carter Center, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republication Institute (IRI) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as the European Union (EU), the Commonwealth, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the South African Development Community (SADC). Although most international observers subscribe to a common set of standards, the methodologies they apply varies. Generally, an observation mission launched by one of these organizations comprises a small team of long-term observers and a larger team of short-term observers. The latter are normally tasked with observing the campaign and analysing the broader political context in which it takes place, while the former focus on the casting and counting of ballots on election day.

For decades, international election observation has been "the best-established, most visible, and often best-funded type of democracy-related assistance."[6] It aims to improve the quality of elections and to increase public trust in the electoral process. However, the ability of international observers to achieve the latter of these goals depends on their

credibility because it influences the impact of their verdicts on individual's perceptions of electoral quality.[7] Perceptions of bias therefore pose a real threat to their effectiveness. Despite this, the history of allegations of bias in election observation is as long as the history of election observation itself, with a disproportionate number of critics citing elections in sub-Saharan Africa as evidence.[8] Such allegations fuel a widely-shared belief that election observers apply lower standards to elections in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet there may simply be more fraudulent elections in the region, and so more opportunities for observers to "miss" electoral fraud. Alternatively, the apparent double standard might be the product of underlying causes, rather than something that is distinct about the region. That is, the region might simply be a proxy for other types of bias.

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the tendency of international observers to "pull their punches" has long been attributed to a desire, on the part of Western donors, to protect development programmes from disruption.[9] Some recount stories of Western aid officials pressuring observers to tone down their reports lest they trigger aid suspensions or reductions.[10] The strategic interests of Western countries might also play a role. A desire to maintain good relationships with governments that control critical natural resources, are valuable allies in the war on terror, or play an important role in peacekeeping are commonly cited as explanations when observers appear to overlook electoral fraud.[11] For example, Western observers' apparent reluctance to call out electoral manipulation in Uganda is often attributed to the important role it plays in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).[12]

The apparent regional double standard might also be explained by a tendency to forgive flawed elections providing that there is evidence of progress towards democracy more generally. International observers are notorious for excusing poor-quality elections in sub-Saharan Africa on the basis that they represent "a step in the right direction." Indeed, critics have described that phrase as "one of the most worn-out metaphors in the field" and "an effort in self-delusion,"[13] though it may simply be a convenient excuse, rather than the true reason why electoral deficiencies are tolerated.[14]A desire to minimize electoral violence might also help to explain the behaviour of Western election observers in sub-Saharan Africa. Existing work suggests that a fear of causing, or exacerbating, electoral violence tends to encourage observers to tone down their criticism, lest accusations of fraud trigger protests by the opposition or repression by the incumbent.[15] This bias might be stronger in sub-Saharan Africa, either because international observers have made the maintenance of peace a higher priority there, or because electoral violence is (or is assumed to be) more common in the region.

Judith Kelley labels these different forms of bias, respectively, as "special relationship bias", "progress bias" and "stability bias."[16] She also provides empirical evidence demonstrating their influence on the likelihood that international observers will approve (or condemn) an election. Any, or all, of these could explain the apparent double standard that is applied in sub-Saharan Africa. Perversely, Western observers may actually be more vulnerable to these sources of bias than other international observers. Western governments and IGOs with Western members are the largest providers of foreign aid and are more likely to come under political pressure to suspend aid if the democratic credentials of recipients are in doubt. They constitute the audience most strongly motivated to incentivise democratic reforms by rewarding progress and are particularly keen to avoid the costs (human and economic) of electoral violence.

This vulnerability to bias is paradoxical because perceptions of partiality are more damaging to Western election observers; they are expected to have higher standards.

Western countries played a central role in institutionalizing the norm that elections should be monitored by international actors.[17] This implies that Western observers should be more sensitive to electoral fraud. To some extent, they are: IGOs with highly democratic members are less likely to endorse the elections they observe.[18] Thus if Western election observers apply a regional double standard, it is particularly perplexing, and something that we need to understand.

In seeking to do this, we should be alert to the possibility of change over time. The practice of international election observation has evolved over the last few decades. One important shift has been professionalization. This has taken several forms, including the training of observers and the codification of standards to which they must adhere. Observers have made these changes partly in response criticism, including the complaint that elections observers lacked credibility because they were not impartial.[19] The context in which observation takes place has also shifted in relevant ways. In the 1990s, a significant number of countries, including many African states, were making clear progress towards democracy. By 2014 analysts looking back on the previous 15 years observed "neither substantial gains nor substantial losses" in democratization.[20] Thus, "progress bias" might explain the apparent regional double standard in the past, but not the present. This possibility will therefore need to be accommodated in the empirical analysis, to which this article now turns.

Research design

To test whether Western election observers apply lower standards to elections in sub-Saharan Africa than those held elsewhere this article draws on a global dataset of 633 national legislative and/or executive elections. This covers all elections at which Western observers were present from 1991 to 2012. This dataset has been compiled from several sources, with NELDA providing the foundation.[21] The unit of analysis is the election. However, where NELDA codes concurrent legislative and executive elections (i.e. those held on the same day) separately, the dataset used here collapses those elections into a single observation and omits Constituent Assembly elections.

Key variables

In the analyses presented below, the outcome of interest is the verdict of Western election observers, ALLEGE FRAUD (based on NELDA47). This is captured as a dummy variable, coded 1 if Western election observers alleged that significant fraud occurred in an election, and 0 if they did not.[22] NELDA defines "Western" election observers as those from Western countries (identified by OECD membership) or Western international organizations but, unfortunately, does not provide an explicit list of which organizations its coders included within this category. Elections held in sub-Saharan Africa are identified by SS.AFRICA, a dummy variable, coded 1 if an election was held in sub-Saharan Africa, and 0 if it was held elsewhere.

The variable ELECTION QUALITY is the Clean Election Index from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-Dem).[23] This index measures the extent to which an election was free and fair. It varies from 0 to 1, with higher scores denoting better quality elections. The index aggregates 8 indicator variables, coded by V-Dem country experts. These measure: (i) the autonomy of the electoral management body; (ii) its capacity; (iii) the accuracy of the voter registry; (iv) the extent of vote-buying; (v) the presence of

other voting irregularities (such as ballot stuffing or intentional absence of voting materials) or electoral fraud; (vi) whether opposition candidates, parties or campaign workers were subjected to government intimidation; (vii) the presence (or absence) of other types of electoral violence (i.e. violence not committed by the government, ruling party or their agents); and, (viii) whether the election was generally considered (by country experts) to be free and fair.

Observers might be less critical of electoral flaws when they occur in political systems that are, on the whole, more democratic. To control for this, the models below use the V-Dem index of ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY. This index measures electoral democracy, understood broadly as polyarchy: a political system whose core value of making rulers responsive to citizens is achieved though electoral competition in a context where suffrage is extensive, political and civil society organizations can operate freely, elections are free of fraud or systematic irregularities, there is freedom of expression, and there is a capable and independent media.[24]

Observers might tolerate lower standards in poorer countries, including many countries in sub-Saharan Arica, on the basis that they cannot afford high quality elections. Expectations here, however, are not entirely clear. Some developing countries spend far more on elections (per voter) than established democracies,[25] with costs continuing to rise as donors and governments embrace new technologies designed to improve election quality.[26] Keeping this in mind, the models presented below control for GDP PER CAPITA. This is measured in current US dollars, logged and lagged by one year, with data sourced from the World Bank.[27]

The impact of potential disruption to aid programmes is controlled using FOREIGN AID. This measures foreign aid as the log of net official development assistance and official aid, in current US dollars, in the year prior to the election. Data are sourced from the World Bank.[28] Total, rather than per capita, figures are used as – theoretically – what matters is the importance of the aid flows to donors, rather than the importance of that aid to recipient governments.

The strategic interests of Western countries are controlled for with two variables. One is MILITARY AID. This is the log of (US military aid + 1)[29], in the year prior to the election, measured in constant US dollars. Data are sourced from USAID's database, *U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants,* informally known as "the Greenbook." Though US strategic interests are not necessarily synonymous with those of other Western countries, the US is undoubtedly the most influential Western country. Moreover, several of the most prominent international NGOs that engage in election observation – IRI, NDI and the Carter Center – as based in the US, while the US is a key player in several of the regional IGOs that engage in election observation, including the OSCE and the Organization of American States. US military aid is therefore a useful proxy for Western strategic interests in the context of this article.

The second measure of strategic interest is NATURAL RESOURCES. This is the log of the value of a country's natural resource rents, measured in the year before the election. It has been calculated using World Bank data on natural resource rents (comprising rents from oil, gas, minerals, coal and forests).[30] NATURAL RESOURCES are measured by reference to their total value, rather than as a proportion of GDP, since what matters (for the purposes of this article) is the relative importance of those natural resources to Western countries.

To control for the possibility of "progress bias", the analyses below use two different variables. One – PROGRESS: DEMOCRACY – measures improvements in democracy

over the three years preceding an election. This is measured using the V-DEM measure of electoral democracy, describe above. Measuring changes in the level of democracy over a three-year period allows adequate time for change to occur, but also ensures those changes occur in sufficient proximity to an election that they are likely to influence the behaviour of observers.

Western observers might be more sensitive to improvements in election quality, rather than progress in democratization more broadly. To control for this, some models include PROGRESS: ELECTION QUALITY. This is the difference between ELECTION QUALITY for a given election and ELECTION QUALITY for the election that preceded it. As was the case for the other measures of progress, this has been calculated so that positive scores correspond to improvements. In contrast, however, to the other progress variables, this measure is not calculated over a fixed time period because the temporal lag depends on the length of the electoral cycle in each country.

To control for what Kelley terms "stability bias,"[31] we need a variable that captures the risk that an allegation of significant fraud will trigger electoral violence. Since past experience is likely to affect present risk, I use PAST: RIOT/PROTEST. This is based on NELDA30 (for the previous election) which identifies cases in which riots or protests occurred after an election *and* were linked to complaints of fraud (but not necessarily allegations by observers). PAST: RIOT/PROTEST is coded 1 where the *previous* election was followed by riots or protests related to allegations of fraud, and 0 where no riots or protests occurred, or where they occurred but were not linked to allegations of fraud. In case Western observers are more sensitive to the risk of triggering electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa, some models also include an interaction term (SS.AFRICA*PAST: RIOT/PROTEST) to capture this.

Finally, verdicts of Western election observers might be influenced by precedent. Having made an allegation of fraud with respect to a country's elections in the past, they may be more likely to do so again. To control for this possibility, I use PAST: FRAUD ALLEGED. This is based on NELDA47 (for the previous election). It is coded 1 if Western observers alleged that significant fraud took place in the previous election, and 0 if they did not, or were not present. Table 1 provides a descriptive summary of variables.

Potential selection bias

International election observers only provide verdicts on elections at which they are in fact present. Therefore, the dataset used in this article only includes those elections at

Table 1. Summary of variables.

Variables	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
ALLEGE FRAUD	633	0.223	0.416	0	1
ELECTION QUALITY	626	0.542	0.258	0.050	0.981
SS.AFRICA	626	0.310	0.463	0	1
ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY	623	0.495	0.216	0.087	0.911
FOREIGN AID (LOG)	560	19.429	1.178	15.634	22.908
GDP PER CAPITA (LOG)	614	7.350	1.326	4.789	11.186
NATURAL RESOURCES (LOG)	602	19.823	2.346	12.467	26.608
MILITARY AID (LOG)	633	11.391	6.530	0	22.667
PAST: RIOT/PROTEST	611	0.167	0.373	0	1
PAST: FRAUD ALLEGED	611	0.182	0.386	0	1
PROGRESS: DEMOCRACY	615	0.038	0.114	−0.355	0.663
PROGRESS: ELECTION QUALITY	604	0.022	0.117	−0.354	0.960

which this was the case. Although the emergence of a norm that elections ought to be observed means that international monitors are present at a much higher proportion of elections than in the past, international election observation is still not universal.[32] Moreover, the presence (or absence) of election observers is not random; they must be invited by incumbent governments. Where an invitation is issued, it may be declined if observers fear their presence will only legitimate the re-election of an authoritarian regime. This means Western observers are less likely to be present when elections are highly likely to be rigged – either because they have chosen not to attend, or because they were not invited. This generates selection bias.

In other studies, researchers have solved this problem with statistical techniques including instruments, propensity score matching and matching using "genetic" algorithms.[33] These techniques have some utility where the problem is more properly described as endogeneity than selection bias. That is, when the outcome of interest is something that can occur regardless of whether or not an election is observed, such as changes in the quality of governance,[34] opposition boycotts,[35] or variation in the competitiveness of elections.[36] These techniques are less useful when the relevant outcome – Western election observers making a declaration of fraud – can occur *only* if they are present at an election. Thus, while Kelley uses genetic matching to account for endogeneity in her examination of the impact of international observation on opposition boycotts,[37] she does not do so in her analysis of the different types of bias that influence the verdicts of those observers.[38]

As an (admittedly imperfect) alternative to matching, the analyses in this article exclude the period prior to 1991. This helps to reduce selection bias because the late 1980s witnessed a dramatic expansion in international election observation, transforming it from an exception to the rule.[39] Thus, there should be less "selection" in the presence or absence of Western observers in the period from 1991 onwards. Indeed, this fact has led others to use the collapse of the communist bloc in 1989 as an instrument for their presence.[40] However, this approach cannot entirely eliminate selection bias.

There is, unfortunately, little empirical evidence about what determines which elections are observed by international monitors. The limited evidence that does exist suggests that Western observers are more likely to be present at elections held in countries that receive large amounts of aid.[41] This may prevent us from accurately capturing the influence of foreign aid, particularly given that major recipients of development aid are more likely to be found in sub-Saharan Africa. Other variables, such as progress towards democracy, might also influence which elections are observed by Western groups, but on the face of it, seem less likely to vary systematically between sub-Saharan Africa and other regions. These possibilities must be kept in mind when interpreting results.

Endogeneity

There is an inescapable degree of endogeneity in the analyses presented below. This arises because there is a subjective element to ELECTION QUALITY (and the indicators it aggregates), which is based on the perceptions of country experts rather than a completely "objective" set of indicators.[42] Since that coding has been done retrospectively by V-DEM country experts, whether or not Western observers made allegations of fraud could have affected country experts' assessments of electoral quality.

This is not, however, a fatal problem. ALLEGE FRAUD, which is taken from NELDA, is a dichotomous dummy variable that has been coded based on a range of sources, including US State Department Library of Congress Country Reports and newspaper reports.[43] As such, it captures only the "headline" verdict of Western observers. It does not necessarily reflect the more detailed information that is typically included in the full reports of election observers. V-DEM's country-experts can be expected to have looked beyond observers' headline verdicts to the detail of their reports in coding the 8 indicators that ELECTION QUALITY aggregates. With the potential exception of the indicator which captures whether an election was generally regarded as being free and fair, all of the indicators on which ELECTION QUALITY is based demand more nuanced analysis than can be found in headline verdicts. An analysis of the relationship between ALLEGE FRAUD and ELECTION QUALITY reinforces this point. The latter is in fact a relatively poor predictor of the former: V-Dem country experts frequently assign low scores for election quality in the absence of any allegation of significant fraud from Western observers, though they rarely assign high scores when a fraud allegation has been made.

This endogeneity cannot be avoided through statistical techniques, so it must be factored in to how results are interpreted. To the extent that Western election observers' verdicts affect country experts' assessments of electoral quality, it should make electoral quality a stronger and more reliable predictor of observers' verdicts. From a statistical point of view, this would make it even more remarkable if the analysis nevertheless reveals a bias linked to the geographic location of elections. Endogeneity between ALLEGE FRAUD and ELECTION QUALITY should make this harder, not easier to demonstrate.

Empirical results

To test whether Western election observers apply a different standard to elections held in sub-Saharan Africa, I use a logistic regression, where ALLEGE FRAUD is the dependent variable. In addition to controlling for any regional effect, using SS.AFRICA, I include controls for other factors, discussed above, that are likely to influence the behaviour of observers. All of the models below use robust standard errors clustered on countries.

Table 2 shows the results of three models, across three different time periods: 1991–2012, 1991–2001 and 2002–2012. Together, these provide strong evidence that Western election observers apply lower standards to elections held in sub-Saharan Africa than to elections held elsewhere. In every model, the co-efficient for SS.AFRICA is negative, indicating that Western observers are less likely to alleged that significant election fraud has occurred when an election takes place in sub-Saharan Africa, even when the quality of the election (and other control variables) is held constant. The regional variable is clearly significant across all time periods, though it is less strongly significant in the earlier period, from 1991 to 2001 (i.e. Models 4–6).

The coefficients of a logistic regression provide little insight into the substantive effect of variables (beyond direction). However, using Stata's margins command to calculate predicted probabilities based on the models in Table 2 reveals that the substantive effect of SS.AFRICA is quite large. If an election scores 0.3 for ELECTION QUALITY, and that country is in sub-Saharan Africa, the probability that Western election monitors will allege that serious electoral fraud has taken place is about 21%

Table 2. Allegations of significant election fraud by Western observers.

Variables	Model 1 1991–2012	Model 2 1991–2012	Model 3 1991–2012	Model 4 1991–2001	Model 5 1991–2001	Model 6 1991–2001	Model 7 2002–2012	Model 8 2002–2012	Model 9 2002–2012
ELECTION QUALITY	−7.269***	−6.442***	−6.433***	−7.208***	−6.084***	−6.330***	−8.422***	−7.720***	−7.739***
	(−1.295)	(−1.311)	(−1.297)	(−1.737)	(−1.699)	(−1.707)	(−1.765)	(−1.699)	(−1.673)
SS.AFRICA	−1.548***	−1.421***	−1.256***	−1.361**	−1.262*	−1.011†	−2.248***	−2.128***	−2.160***
	(−0.377)	(−0.369)	(−0.381)	(−0.495)	(−0.494)	(−0.521)	(−0.534)	(−0.526)	(−0.623)
ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY	0.965	−0.00394	0.0468	2.688	1.449	1.672	−0.672	−1.744	−1.761
	(−1.530)	(−1.477)	(−1.451)	(−1.900)	(−1.811)	(−1.864)	(−2.142)	(−2.008)	(−2.050)
FOREIGN AID (LOG)	0.227	0.218	0.222	−0.056	−0.0758	−0.0808	0.621*	0.619*	0.620*
	(−0.144)	(−0.144)	(−0.145)	(−0.215)	(−0.220)	(−0.223)	(−0.251)	(−0.258)	(−0.259)
GDP PER CAPITA (LOG)	−0.0522	−0.0135	−0.00947	−0.0804	−0.072	−0.0409	−0.0427	0.0129	0.0142
	(−0.172)	(−0.169)	(−0.169)	(−0.229)	(−0.222)	(−0.223)	(−0.266)	(−0.278)	(−0.277)
NATURAL RESOURCES (LOG)	0.120†	0.115†	0.116†	0.103	0.0943	0.097	0.14	0.144	0.144
	(−0.0646)	(−0.063)	(−0.0632)	(−0.0873)	(−0.0887)	(−0.0878)	(−0.092)	(−0.0946)	(−0.0938)
MILITARY AID (LOG)	−0.0301	−0.0188	−0.0177	−0.0213	−0.00915	−0.0087	−0.0826*	−0.0773*	−0.0778*
	(−0.0254)	(−0.0252)	(−0.0249)	(−0.0307)	(−0.0287)	(−0.0282)	(−0.036)	(−0.0357)	(−0.0368)
PAST: RIOT/PROTEST	−0.838*	−0.824*	−0.515	−0.124	0.00329	0.601	−1.703**	−1.778**	−1.825*
	(−0.362)	(−0.374)	(−0.516)	(−0.513)	(−0.543)	(−0.705)	(−0.622)	(−0.625)	(−0.834)
PAST: FRAUD ALLEGED	1.109***	1.322***	1.354***	0.337	0.596	0.636	1.637***	1.772***	1.767***
	(−0.263)	(−0.270)	(−0.272)	(−0.384)	(−0.384)	(−0.391)	(−0.389)	(−0.382)	(−0.373)
PROGRESS: DEMOCRACY	−3.331*	−1.051	−0.934	−1.986	−0.0279	−0.0233	−8.495*	−5.987	−6.04
	(−1.602)	(−1.584)	(−1.599)	(−1.629)	(−1.554)	(−1.586)	(−3.451)	(−3.747)	(−3.805)
PROGRESS: ELECTION QUALITY		−5.216**	−5.380***		−5.075**	−5.057**		−5.994*	−5.939*
		(−1.653)	(−1.628)		(−1.933)	(−1.934)		(−2.770)	(−2.864)
SS.AFRICA*PAST: RIOT/PROTEST			−0.842			−1.678†			0.127
			(−0.773)			(−0.917)			(−1.178)
constant	−4.153	−4.37	−4.599	1.032	1.267	1.013	−10.42†	−10.87*	−10.84*
	(−2.981)	(−3.003)	(−3.071)	(−4.746)	(−4.789)	(−4.986)	(−5.360)	(−5.437)	(−5.430)
N	524	524	524	247	247	247	277	277	277
Wald chi^2	116.8	112.6	120.0	53.57	52.90	54.96	67.79	74.35	74.30
Probability > chi^2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R^2	0.335	0.352	0.354	0.232	0.254	0.263	0.479	0.492	0.493
Log pseudolikelihood	−191.565	−186.613	−185.931	−101.489	−98.608	−97.421	−81.072	−78.915	−78.908

Notes: Logistic regression. Robust standard errors, clustered on countries, are in parentheses.
†$p \leq 0.1$; *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

(based on Model 2 in Table 2).[44] In other regions this probability more than doubles, to 47%.

The discrepancy in the probability of Western monitors making allegations of significant electoral fraud in Sub-Saharan Africa, compared to other regions, lessens once the confidence levels on these predicted probabilities are taken into account. In the years from 1991 to 2001, the gap effectively disappears. Yet – as illustrated in Figure 1 – in the later period, a gap remains when ELECTION QUALITY suggests the election process was questionable but not blatantly fraudulent.

Returning to the results in Table 2, we find evidence to suggest that the apparent application of a regional double standard by Western election observers is partly explained by "progress bias", but only between 1991 and 2001. As Model 1 shows, progress in terms of electoral democracy, broadly understood, reduces the likelihood that Western observers will make allegations of significant fraud, holding other variables (including the quality of the election) constant. In a country where the level of electoral democracy increases by 0.1 in the three years prior to an election, the probability that Western observers will make an allegation of fraud is about 21% (based on Model 1). In a country where the level of electoral democracy has deteriorated by the same amount, that probability is 29%.

However, the differences between Models 1 and 2 (and Models 7 and 8), suggest that Western observers are more strongly influenced by improvements in the quality of

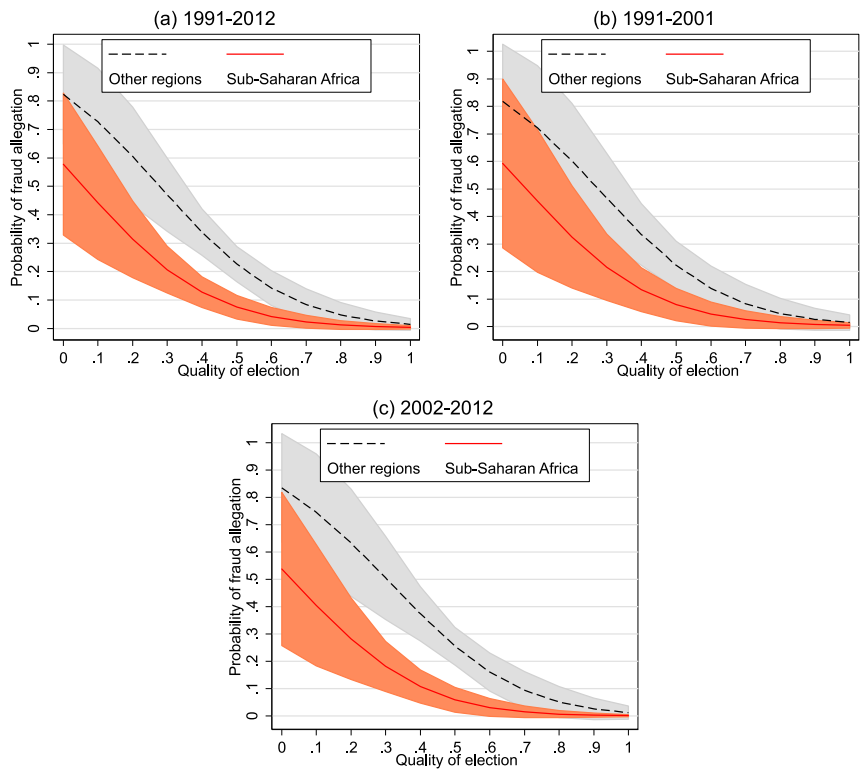

Figure 1. Impact of region on the probability that Western observers allege significant fraud.

Note: Based on models 2, 5 and 8 in Table 2, with 95% confidence intervals.

elections specifically, rather than improvements in democracy more broadly. The more targeted measure of progress is significant across all time periods analysed and its inclusion (in Models 2 and 8) suppresses the significance of the broader measure of improvements in democratic quality. The substantive effect of progress in election quality is also notable. In a country that has improved the quality of its elections by 0.1, Western observers are roughly half as likely to make an allegation of fraud than if the quality of the election process had declined by the same amount.

The models presented in Table 2 provide strong evidence that the risk of triggering electoral violence discourages Western observers from calling out electoral fraud when they see it. The variable PAST: RIOT/PROTESTS, which indicates whether the previous election was followed by riots or protests related to allegations of fraud, is statistically significant in Models 1 and 2, as well as Models 7, 8 and 9. Its effect appears to be strongest between 2002 and 2012, when it is more strongly significant and has a large substantive effect. If the previous election was followed by riots or protests linked to complaints of fraud, the probability that Western observers will make an allegation of fraud is on average 13 percentage points lower than if this is not the case (based on Model 8).

There is some evidence that Western observers are particularly sensitive to the risk of triggering election violence in sub-Saharan Africa, and that this plays a role in explaining why they are less likely to allege that fraud has occurred in that region. However, that evidence is quite weak. Introducing the interaction term SS.AFRICA*PAST: RIOT/PROTEST in Model 3 results in PAST: RIOT/PROTEST losing significance (compared to Model 2), but the interaction term itself is not significant. The interaction term approaches significance in Model 6, where its p-value is 0.067, and supresses the significance of the regional dummy. Notably, this model is the only one where the significance of the regional dummy falls below the 95% threshold, albeit not by much (the relevant p-value is 0.052).

There is strong evidence that past experience shapes the behaviour of Western election observers, though as is the case with concerns about the triggering electoral violence, this variable appears to play a role primarily in more recent years. Past experience of alleging fraud, captured by PAST: FRAUD ALLEGED, is positively and very significantly related to Western observers' allegations of fraud both when the entire period from 1991 to 2012 is analysed (Models 1–3) and when only the latter half of that period is analysed (Models 7–9). Thus, Western observers are more likely to allege that fraud has occurred when they made such an allegation regarding the previous election. The size of the effect varies. For an election held in sub-Saharan Africa, a previous allegation of fraud increases the probability that Western election observers will make a similar allegation with respect to the current election from just over 11% to 25%. For elections held elsewhere, this probability shifts from 26% to almost 45% (based on Model 2).

This result suggests a degree of path-dependency in Western observers' application of a regional double standard; having failed to call out election fraud in sub-Saharan Africa in the past, they are less likely to do so in the future. In contrast, having set the precedent of pointing out serious electoral fraud when they see it elsewhere, they are more likely to do so in the future. This raises the question of whether there is something about the practices of Western election observers that helps to perpetuate the regional double standard, a question that this article returns to in the final section.

The results in Model 7–9 suggest that the strategic interests of Western governments, measured through US military aid, do influence the verdicts of Western election

observers, but do not account for the regional double standard. The variable MILITARY AID is significant at the 95% level in all three of these models, making allegations of significant electoral fraud less likely. The substantive effect, however, is not large. In a country with a MILITARY AID "score" of 12.5 (equivalent to the receipt of roughly $270,000 in military aid) the probability that Western election observers will make an allegation of significant fraud is almost 22%. Increasing the MILITARY AID score to 18.5 (approximately $100 million) raises that probability only slightly, to just under 26%. Once confidence intervals are factored in, the gap between the predicted probabilities disappears. Notably, diagnostic checks (discussed below) suggest that this result in less robust than others. This may, however, be due to the difficulty of capturing strategic interests rather than their irrelevance.

The second measure of strategic interest, natural resource wealth, does not have the expected effect. It is significant in Models 1–3 only if the threshold is dropped to 90%, with the sign of the co-efficients indicating a positive rather than a negative effect on the probability of a fraud allegation. This result could indicate a lack of measurement validity, stemming from the fact that the measure of natural resource wealth does not capture whether the primary customers for those natural resources are (or are not) Western states.

Foreign aid also has an effect, but one that is counter to expectations, in the period from 2002 to 2012. Here it is significant at the 95% level and has a positive effect on the probability that Western observers will allege that electoral fraud has occurred. In a country that received $100 million in foreign aid in the year prior to the election, the probability that Western observers will make an allegation of fraud is about 18%. If foreign aid rises to $800 million, that figure is about 28%. Though this result is counter to expectations, it should be noted that Kelley's earlier finding with respect to foreign aid was one of her less robust, a result she described as potentially "tenuous." [45] Perhaps more importantly, Kelley's finding was based on data that did not cover years after 2004. This article's divergent finding with respect foreign aid might therefore reflect change over time. For example, it could be the product of pressure on donors to apply higher standards or shifts in aid modalities, including the declining use of general budget support as a result of its political vulnerability when high profile breaches of democratic practice or human rights standards occur.

Robustness of results

Replicating the models in Table 2 using a probit regression produces extremely similar results, both in terms of goodness-of-fit and in terms of the significance of independent variables. The results presented above are also robust to checks for particularly deviant cases. Diagnostic tests identify two deviant cases – Macedonia's presidential election in 2004 and India's general election in 1996. Neither case, however, exerts much influence on the results. In contrast, a handful of cases, while not deviant, provide a large amount of the leverage with respect to one result: the role of MILITARY AID in Models 7–9. The significance of that variable is driven by Egypt's elections in 2012, Armenia's presidential election in 2008, and Rwanda's presidential election of 2003. If these cases are removed, then MILITARY AID loses significance in Models 7–9.

The less robust nature of the finding with respect to MILITARY AID may indicate it does a poor job of capturing Western government's strategic interests. Here, another check is useful. Since sub-Saharan Africa may not be the only region in which

Western election observers apply a double standard, I re-ran the models in Table 2 several times, substituting a dummy variable for a different region in each iteration. Those models suggest that a double standard also exists with respect to two other regions: post-communist/former Soviet countries, and Asia. In those regions, Western observers are *more*, rather than less, likely to allege that significant electoral fraud has occurred. This could be interpreted as a sign that Western observers are more willing to call out electoral fraud in elections where the primary regional power is not only a geo-political rival, but an authoritarian state. In such contexts, fraudulent elections might be perceived as a more direct threat to Western interests. Thus, the strategic interests of Western governments may have more influence than the results in Table 2 suggest.

Other results are more robust to the inclusion of additional or alternative control variables. The stakes are higher in Presidential elections, so observers might be more sensitive to fraud in such cases. Yet including an indicator, EXECUTIVE (coded 1 if the election included an executive race) has no effect on results and the indicator itself is not significant in any of the models. Western observers may be less likely to allege that fraud has occurred when incumbents lose power. However, adding INCUMBENT LOSES (coded 1 if the incumbent party loses and 0 if not) suggests this is not the case; it is not statistically significant in any of the time periods tested. It does decrease the significance of MILITARY AID in Models 7–9 but closer inspection reveals that this is the product of a change in the sample being analysed (as a result of missing values).[46]

Since Western election observers might be more strongly influenced by aid from Western donors, I constructed an alternative measure of FOREIGN AID that only includes flows from such sources.[47] This more focussed measure of foreign aid is significant at the 99% level in Models 7–9, which analyse the period from 2002 to 2012. Notably, the sign of the co-efficient stays positive. This adds weight to the finding that the prevailing view (that Western observers are reluctant to allege fraud lest it disrupt development programmes) is wrong. However, since aid flows may influence which election are observed, this result might also be the product of selection bias. Further research would be required to determine which of these is the case.

Using a more targeted measure of strategic importance, ENERGY RESOURCES, in place of NATURAL RESOURCES produces similar results, with two exceptions. First, the significance of the more targeted measure is slightly higher in some models. Second, its inclusion supresses the significance of improvements in election quality in the period from 2002 to 2012; it retains significance only at the 90% level. I also examined the impact of natural resources if foreign aid is not controlled, as missing values for FOREIGN AID may be artificially reducing variation in NATURAL RESOURCES (as cases with high resource wealth – and thus no aid – are dropped). If FOREIGN AID is omitted, NATURAL RESOURCES becomes significant at the 99% level, across Models 1–3 and 7–9 (other results remain largely unchanged). As in Table 2, and counter to expectations, it has a positive sign, suggesting that Western observers are more likely to allege that significant fraud has occurred in countries with greater natural resource wealth. It seems highly likely that some degree of selection bias is at play here: Western observers may avoid (or simply not be invited to) elections in countries rich in natural resources where they anticipate significant diplomatic pressure to give fraudulent elections a "free pass." In others, such as the major oil producing nations in the Gulf, there may simply be no elections to observe.

The findings regarding "progress bias" are robust to changes in the time over which progress is measured. Where progress is measured over a shorter time-frame (2 years) the results are almost identical. If progress is measured over a longer time-frame (4 or 5 years) there is some variation; the relevant variables are more strongly significant in the earlier time period (i.e. in the equivalents of Model 4) but less so in the later period (the equivalents of Model 7).

In one set of alternative models, I replaced the measure of democratic progress based on V-Dem's data with a measure of improvement in the Polity2 score from PolityIV.[48] This produced very similar results. In contrast to the result in Table 2, this alternative measure of progress was not significant in the equivalent of Model 7 but was very strongly significant (at the 99.9% level) in Model 4, in which the regional dummy lost significance (becoming significant only at the 90% level). Measuring progress with data from Freedom House produced an almost identical result; while progress in respect for civil liberties had no effect, progress in respect for political results was very strongly significant in Model 4 and reduced the significance of the regional dummy. These differences probably stem from the fact that these measures of democratic progress are slightly more focussed.

The practice of election observation and the problem of perceptions

This article has shown that Western observers are less likely to allege that significant fraud has occurred in an election held in sub-Saharan Africa, than in an election of the same quality held elsewhere, even when potential underlying drivers of that double standard are controlled. In the period before 2002, this discrepancy is partly explained by "progress bias". Western observers were willing to overlook flawed elections when countries had nevertheless improved the quality of their election process. From 2002 onwards, the double standard is both more distinct and more difficult to explain. There is strong evidence that the willingness of Western observers to make allegations of fraud is decreased by the risk of triggering electoral violence and increased by having alleged fraud in the previous election. There is weaker evidence that a desire to protect relationships with strategic military allies has a similar effect, discouraging allegations of fraud in the period between 2002 and 2012. Yet, these factors are not enough to explain the apparent regional bias in that period.

It is not entirely surprising to find evidence that a double standard does exist. What is unexpected is how persistent this regional discrepancy is in the period from 2002 onwards. The contemporary practice of election observation is by no means perfect, but in recent years, many international observers have professionalized their operations and adopted reforms designed to improve the accuracy and impartiality of their work.[49] One would hope, given these changes, that the verdicts of Western observers have become less biased, rather than more.

There are at least two possible explanations for why the regional double standard has become more, rather than less, pronounced over time. One is that electoral fraud may have taken on distinct regional "flavours", some of which may be more difficult to detect or more difficult to condemn. Vote-buying, for example, appears to have become a more common practice in elections in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere.[50] This practice is arguably harder to condemn than other forms of electoral manipulation, particularly when the amounts involved are (to Western eyes) relatively small, and when their payment is legitimized by local norms.[51]

A second possible explanation is that the tendency of Western election observers to apply lower standards to elections in sub-Saharan Africa is now driven by perceptions of that region, rather than countries' objective characteristics. For example, Western election observers might *believe* that African elections involve much higher risks of post-election violence than is the case. This explanation was not directly tested in this article, but it deserves further examination in future research. If the problem is perceptions, then there is a risk that the professionalization of election observation has played a role in both entrenching and perpetuating the double standard. Indeed, there is potentially some support for this in the analysis present above. As noted earlier, there appears to be a degree of path-dependency in the behaviour of Western election observers; they are far more likely to make an allegation of electoral fraud if they did so in the previous election. This may indicate that observers come to expect, and thus accept, a certain level of electoral quality in a given country, with organizational practices – such as training – perpetuating these expectations over time.

The limitations of existing data place constraints on the analysis in this article, but create promising avenues for future research. Relying on NELDA means treating Western election observers as a homogenous group while also lumping all "non-Western" observers together.[52] It is highly likely that the behaviour of different Western election observers, as well as different non-Western observers, varies systematically. Though organizations like the EU and Carter Center adopt a broadly similar approach to election observation, there may be important differences in the precise methodologies they apply, the extent of the resources that they allocate to an election, and their definitions of electoral fraud. African observers might behave differently to those from Latin America. Western observers may also respond differently to African elections depending on whether they are from international NGOs or IGOs. Indeed, we know that international NGOs – Western and non-Western – are less likely to endorse an election than IGOs.[53]

This article is also limited in that it only examines the behaviour of Western observers with respect to allegations of significant electoral fraud. This is not the only thing that can undermine the quality of an election. So too can malpractice or maladministration (which lack the crucial element of intent), as can systemic manipulation (for example, of electoral boundaries) that occurs well before an election campaign begins.[54] Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine how such practices – and the responses of international observers to them – might vary between regions.

These issues warrant further attention in future work, as does the question of why the regional double standard persists despite attempts to improve the accuracy and credibility of election observation in more recent years. It is imperative that we understand what drives the regional double standard because it fosters allegations of hypocrisy and prejudice against international observers. This, in turn, undermines the ability of observers to achieve their ultimate goal; elections that not only meet democratic standards, but are are accepted as credible and legitimate by the people who vote in them.

Notes

1. Chege, "Kenya's Electoral Misfire".
2. Kuo and Dahir, "Foreign Election Observers Endorsed a Deeply Flawed Election"; Cheeseman, Moss, and Smith, "It's Time for International Election Monitors to Start Doing Their Job".

3. Cheeseman and Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, 198.
4. Hyde and Marinov, "Which Elections Can Be Lost?"
5. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*.
6. Carothers, "The Observers Observed", 18.
7. Bush and Prather, "Who's There? Election Observer Identity and the Local Credibility of Elections".
8. For example, Obi, "International Election Observer Missions"; Cooper and Stroux, "International Election Observation in Uganda".
9. Geisler, "Fair? What Has Fairness Got to Do with It?"
10. Brown, "Well, What Can You Expect?"
11. Cheeseman and Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, chap. 6.
12. Ibid., 191.
13. Abbink, "Introduction: Rethinking Democratization and Election Observation", 12.
14. Brown, "Well, What Can You Expect?"
15. Kelley, "D-Minus Elections".
16. With regard to "special relationship bias", Kelley does not clearly distinguish between the desire to reduce disruption to aid programmes and the strategic interests of donors: Kelley, ibid.; Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*.
17. Kelley, "Assessing the Complex Evolution of Norms".
18. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*, chap. 4.
19. Lynge-Mangueria, "Why "Professionalizing" International Election Observation Might Not Be Enough"; Hyde, "Why Believe International Election Monitors?"
20. Plattner, "The End of the Transitions Era?", 13.
21. Hyde and Marinov, "Which Elections Can Be Lost?"
22. In coding this variable, NELDA draws on a range of sources, listed here: https://nelda.co/#sources. This list implies that the variable has been coded on the basis of observers' "headline" verdicts. Unfortunately, however, it is not clear whether NELDA coders have referred primarily to observers' interim statements or their final reports, which can vary considerably.
23. Coppedge et al., "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v7.1".
24. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*.
25. López-Pintor and Fischer, "Cost of Registration and Elections (CORE) Project".
26. Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis, "Digital Dilemmas".
27. The World Bank identifies the data source as World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files.
28. This draws on Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries, Development Co-operation Report, and International Development Statistics database, available online: https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/idsonline.
29. Since a large number of cases receive no US military aid, this approach avoids creating a large number of missing values.
30. In its original form, this is expressed as a percentage of GDP, based on the sources and methods set out by the World Bank, *The Changing Wealth of Nations*.
31. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*.
32. Kelley, "Assessing the Complex Evolution of Norms".
33. Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino, "Tying Incumbents' Hands"; Simpser and Donno, "Can International Election Monitoring Harm Governance?"; Kelley, "Do International Election Monitors Increase or Decrease Opposition Boycotts?"
34. Simpser and Donno, "Can International Election Monitoring Harm Governance?"
35. Kelley, "Do International Election Monitors Increase or Decrease Opposition Boycotts?"
36. Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino, "Tying Incumbents' Hands".
37. Kelley, "Do International Election Monitors Increase or Decrease Opposition Boycotts?"
38. Kelley, "D-Minus Elections".
39. Kelley, "Assessing the Complex Evolution of Norms".
40. Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino, "Tying Incumbents' Hands".
41. Daxecker and Schneider, "Election Monitoring".
42. Sylvia Bishop and Anke Hoeffler claim their measure of free and fair elections offers a more objective approach but its coverage and consistency are unfortunately limited: see Bishop and Hoeffler, "Free and Fair Elections".

43. A list of sources used to code NELDA is available online: https://nelda.co/#sources.
44. Except where explicitly stated otherwise, marginal probabilities were calculated with control variables at observed values.
45. Kelley, "D-Minus Elections", 778.
46. INCUMBENT LOSES is based on NELDA24, which is coded as "N/A" if there is no party associated with the incumbent leader, or it the regime does not allow parties.
47. This measure is the log of total ODA commitments, to the relevant recipient, from: (i) EU institutions; and, (ii) countries that are members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee.
48. Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr, *Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2015, Dataset Users' Manual*.
49. Lynge-Mangueria, "Why "Professionalizing" International Election Observation Might Not Be Enough".
50. Cheeseman and Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, 25, 65.
51. Cheeseman and Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, 25.
52. Kelley's mission-level data does not suffer from this limitation but, unfortunately, does not cover the period after 2004; Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*.
53. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*, chapter 4.
54. For definitions see Vickery and Shein, "Assessing Electoral Fraud in New Democracies".

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