The Review of International Organizations (2025) 20:293–321
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-023-09528-x

SI: AUTHORITARIAN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Competing judgments: Multiple election observers and post-election contention

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Accepted: 20 December 2023 / Published online: 19 January 2024

Abstract

By influencing beliefs about electoral quality, international election observation missions (EOMs) play an important role in shaping post-election contention. As the number and variety of international organizations (IOs) involved in election observation has grown, many elections host multiple missions and disagreement among them is common. This phenomenon of *competing judgments* is particularly prevalent in electoral authoritarian regimes, as leaders seek to invite 'friendly' IOs to counteract possible criticism from more established EOMs. Drawing from research about the varying domestic credibility of EOMs and the demobilizing effects of disinformation, we argue that compared to unified criticism, competing judgments among EOMs increase uncertainty about electoral quality, which in turn dampens post-election contention. Using newly available data on EOM statements as reported in the international media, we show that competing judgments reduce post-election contention in a sample of 115 countries from 1990–2012. A survey experiment in Turkey solidifies the micro-foundations of our argument: individuals exposed to competing judgments have more positive perceptions of election quality and less support for post-election mobilization, compared to those receiving information only about EOM criticism. Our findings provide systematic evidence that governments holding flawed elections have incentives to invite multiple election observation missions to hedge against the political risks of criticism.

Keywords Authoritarian regimes · Democratic backsliding · International organizations · Election observers · Contention

Responsible editor: Axel Dreher

Author's contributions Author contributions to research design and conceptualization: K.M. (25%), D.D. (25%), B.S. (25%), P.D. (25%); statistical analysis: K.M. (50%), D.D. (20%), B.S. (20%), P.D. (10%); writing: K.M. (35%), D.D. (35%), B.S. (30%), P.D. (0%). The order of authors reflects the significance of the authors' contributions.

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Electoral fraud is a powerful catalyst for contentious political mobilization. Particularly in close contests, perceptions of malpractice can bring people into the streets in massive numbers, sometimes even leading to the government's downfall (Brancati, 2016; Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Daxecker et al., 2019a, b, c; Howard & Roessler, 2006; Norris, 2014; Thompson & Kuntz, 2004; Tucker, 2007). For contemporary authoritarian regimes, this prospect poses an urgent threat which has motivated policy reorientation and encouraged tighter cooperation with other autocrats (Cottiero & Haggard, 2021; Debre, 2021; Koesel & Bunce, 2013; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018).

One element of autocrats' defense against electoral revolutions has been an effort to neutralize the risks posed by international election observation missions (EOMs). When EOMs issue a negative judgment, this validates the losers' claims and serves as a focal point for post-election mobilization (Daxecker, 2012; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019). Several noteworthy examples of large electoral protests— including in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2020), Kenya (2007), and Bolivia (2019)—were spurred by condemnation from international observers. In response, a growing "shadow market" of election observers has emerged (Kelley, 2012). Some of these new players are affiliated with autocratic regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) with an overt anti-democratic mission (Cooley, 2015; Debre & Morgenbesser, 2017; Merloe, 2015; Walker, 2016). Others are affiliated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or mixed-membership regional IGOs which lack the capacity or expertise to catch stealthy manipulation (Simpser & Donno, 2012). The result is an increase in the number of observer groups that regularly issue positive judgments on problematic elections.

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes provide a steady source of demand for these groups (Daxecker & Schneider, 2014; Kelley, 2009b). Because *not* inviting international election observers carries international reputational costs (Hyde, 2011), one way around this is to invite many.[1] Recent data from Donno and Gray (2023) show that 40% of elections in non-OECD countries have hosted multiple EOMs since the first wave of electoral revolutions in 2000. As the number and diversity of EOMs has grown, so has the prevalence of disagreement among them (Kelley, 2012). By our estimates, since 1990, in cases where at least one EOM criticized the election, a competing assessment occurred 46% of the time (rising to 55% since 2000).[2] Such disagreements almost always occur in autocratic regimes.

Azerbaijan illustrates this trend. Reflecting standard practice among post-Soviet countries in the 1990s, Azerbaijan hosted a small number of Western IGOs in its 1998 and 2000 elections, including from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Council of Europe, and the International Republican Institute (IRI). As concerns about electoral revolutions grew, and as Russia took a more aggressive

[1] Daxecker and Schneider (2014) find that countries with high levels of foreign aid and a recent history of flawed elections are more likely to host multiple EOMs.

[2] Kelley (2012, Chs. 3–4) documents a slightly lower rate of divergent assessments in a more limited sample of IOs that ends in 2004.

stance against perceived Western meddling, Azerbaijan began inviting new groups, including from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), starting in 2003. In 2013, a dizzying array of more than 20 Western, non-Western, NGO- and IGO-backed groups were present, a move interpreted as an attempt to muddy the waters and dilute criticism from the ODIHR mission (European Stability Initiative, 2013).

Similar dynamics can be observed in African countries, such as Zimbabwe and Tanzania, which typically host a combination of international, European, and regional African IGOs, whose judgments often differ in tone. Following the 2018 election in Zimbabwe, for example, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) mission issued a mixed statement that included both criticism and praise (National Democratic Institute, 2018). In contrast, the statement from the South African Development Community (SADC) was more positive, praising the "remarkable improvement in the exercise and protection of civil and political rights" (Domingos Augusto, 2018).

The causes and implications of these changes in the international election observation regime are only beginning to be explored.[3] We focus on the phenomenon of *competing judgments* among international EOMs and its consequences for domestic politics. Building from Bush and Prather's (2018) findings about the varying local credibility of EOMs, as well as research on the demobilizing effects of election disinformation (Stukal et al., 2022), we posit that competing judgments allow the winning side to construct a more favorable public narrative that influences perceptions of electoral legitimacy among the domestic public. This, in turn, reduces the mobilizing effect of EOM criticism. We therefore expect competing judgments to *dampen post-election contention*, relative to elections marked by unified EOM criticism.

We explore this argument using data from Donno and Gray (2023) on the number and judgments of international election observation missions, as reported in the international media. These data cover an expanded range of groups (26 IGOs and 17 NGOs) and years compared to other widely-used datasets on election observation.[4] Further, the data's basis in media reports allow us to capture how domestic audiences typically acquire information about elections. Combined with information from the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) dataset (Daxecker et al., 2019a, b), we find support for the claim that observer criticism increases post-election contention, but that *disagreement among EOMs dampens contention*. On average, the predicted number of contentious events following an election with unanimous EOM criticism is about 7. When there are competing judgments among EOMs, the predicted number of contentious events falls to under two. These results are robust to a number of methods and model specifications which address the non-random distribution of observer missions and their judgments.

To complement the observational analysis, we present supporting evidence from a survey experiment in Turkey that is designed to evaluate the micro-foundations of our argument while randomizing EOM statements. Consistent with our theoretical

[3] For instance, see Bush et al. (2023).

[4] For instance, see the National Elections Across Democracies and Autocracies (Nelda) dataset (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) and the Dataset on International Election Monitoring (DIEM) (Kelley & Kolev, 2010).

framework, the results show that *competing judgments* among election observers are associated with higher perceptions of electoral quality and lower levels of support for post-election mobilization, compared to a scenario of unified EOM criticism.

In short, our findings indicate that, for governments seeking to hedge against the risk of election observer criticism, inviting multiple groups works as intended. While EOM disagreement does not eliminate electoral contention, it does limit its scope—an important point for autocratic leaders seeking to prevent societal mobilization on a scale that would threaten their grip on power. This therefore represents one pathway through which illiberal IOs can influence domestic politics. From a normative standpoint, our findings are concerning for proponents of democracy. By taking the low-cost step of inviting multiple EOMs, autocrats can blunt the impact of this most widely-used tool of international democracy promotion. On the other hand, considering the human toll of electoral violence, the fact that competing judgments reduce post-election contention may be interpreted in a positive light, at least in the short term. In the longer-term, competing EOM judgments may contribute to authoritarian survival and deepen societal polarization.

1 International election observers and domestic beliefs about election quality

Elections are public events that serve as focal points for how domestic audiences, including citizens, bureaucrats and political elites, evaluate the legitimacy of the regime. Violations of electoral integrity can therefore be a powerful motivator for *post-election contention*, or "public acts of mobilization, contestation, or coercion by state or nonstate actors that are used to affect the electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition" (Daxecker et al., 2019b, 3). Such contentious events reflect fundamental disagreement about the legitimacy of the contest (Norris et al., 2015). Research shows that elections marred by outcome-changing fraud—or the widespread belief that such fraud occurred—are especially likely to generate contention (Daxecker et al., 2019c; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Thompson & Kuntz, 2004; Tucker, 2007; Rod, 2019; Brancati, 2016, Ch. 5). Further, non-violent mobilization can easily spill over into violence as politicians and non-state groups make strategic use of election-related grievances (Beaulieu, 2014; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014; Daxecker & Prasad, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Fjelde & Höglund, 2022).

International election observers are one important source of information that shapes public beliefs about electoral conduct. Scholars have documented the role of observer criticism in fomenting protests (Beaulieu & Hyde, 2008; Kelley, 2012; Donno, 2013; Beaulieu, 2014; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Sedziaka & Rose, 2015). Others have shown that negative judgments increase the risk of election violence (Daxecker, 2012; Kavakli & Kuhn, 2020; Laakso, 2002; Luo & Rozenas, 2018; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019). However, existing research is limited in its predominant emphasis on a subset of long-established, mainly Western election observers, advancing the idea that "criticism by one internationally reputable group is usually sufficient to cast doubt on the quality of the process and potentially arm postelection protesters with greater legitimacy" (Hyde & Marinov, 2014, 334).

We know little about whether countervailing judgments from other groups have an effect on post-election contention. Taking a first step in this direction, Daxecker and Schneider (2014) find that the simultaneous presence of high- and low-quality international observers leads to a somewhat lower likelihood of protests, but questions about the impact of observers' statements remain unexplored.

Among first-generation studies of election observation, which assumed a positive view of observers' democracy-promoting potential, 'shadow' EOMs were downplayed as having less credibility and impact. Yet this idea is at odds with more recent contributions from the study of authoritarianism, which argue that an important source of demand for multiple EOMs is precisely leaders' desires to "neutralize the statements of professional observers" (Bader, 2018, 33). In other words, incumbents bet that if some observers are critical, others will be more positive, and that a diversity of judgments will mitigate threats to the regime (Daxecker & Schneider, 2014; Debre & Morgenbesser, 2017; Lansberg-Rodriguez, 2015; Merloe, 2015). As Kelley (2009b, 62) summarizes, "anticipation of criticism by some organizations may lead governments to forum shop," and the range of possible EOMs includes many with "different biases, political agendas, capabilities, methodologies, and standards."

Consider first EOMs that are *biased*. IOs like the CIS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are examples of those which reliably issue favorable reports about deeply flawed elections. Analysts have characterized these groups as 'zombie' monitors (Bush et al., 2023; Cooley, 2015) or as members of a 'shadow' market (Kelley, 2012). From one perspective, their existence could be interpreted as consistent with liberal democratic norms, in that autocratic governments are choosing to "influence the content of election observer reports…rather than reject the norm" (Hyde, 2011, 195,196). Such a benign interpretation may have held in the 1990s, when Western actors still enjoyed a global soft power advantage, but it is less warranted today as democracy faces a global crisis of legitimacy (Boese et al., 2022) and autocratic powers are increasingly assertive.[5]

An alternative perspective on these shadow groups is that their activities are consequential and can reduce public outcry in response to electoral misconduct. Debre and Morgenbesser (2017) argue that the emergence of these zombie monitors is deeply intertwined with the politics of contemporary authoritarianism, and that their purpose is to "build a generalised perception *amongst citizens* about the integrity of the election and the right to rule held by autocratic regimes" (329, emphasis added). In line with this perspective, Bush et al. (2023) find that zombie monitors are especially likely to observe elections in countries with membership in authoritarian IGOs.

In addition to bias, non-traditional observer organizations may suffer from principal-agent problems and limited *capacity*. Assessing election quality is a complex task. Comprehensive evaluations require observing the entire electoral cycle,

[5] For examples, see research on autocratic influence in the EU (Winzen, 2023), the Council of Europe (Lipps & Jacob, 2023), the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (Meyerrose & Nooruddin, 2023), and on Russia's attempts to gain influence across a range of IOs through the creation of new norms (Baturo, 2023).

including the legal framework, campaign conditions, counting of ballots and the adjudication of post-election disputes. In their qualitative study of divergent EOM reports, Arceneaux and Leithner (2017, 43) note that "approaches to the electoral cycle vary a great deal among organizations, as well as from case to case." Missions that deploy a small number of short-term observers are unable to engage in a thorough assessment. EOMs from regional organizations like the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the SADC, or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) may fall into this category. Non-Western regional IOs are often composed of a mix of weakly democratic and autocratic regimes, whose lack of expertise and resources limit their capacity (Gray, 2018).

As a result of this variation in preferences and capacity, the presence of multiple EOMs opens up the possibility for competing judgments and varied public narratives about electoral quality. These alternative perspectives—even from groups viewed by democracy experts as less credible—have the potential to shape domestic beliefs about elections and willingness to mobilize. There are a few reasons why seemingly unprofessional (or outright authoritarian) EOMs may nevertheless matter to domestic audiences. First, the public often lacks detailed knowledge about EOMs. Citizens and even domestic elites are unlikely to possess expertise on the capacity of different IOs. Moreover, low-quality missions may be associated with otherwise well-known regional organizations which can lend them credibility (Bush & Prather, 2018). Other groups may possess benign names that mask the identity of anti-democratic sponsors (Merloe, 2015). In a study of local perceptions of election observers in Africa, for instance, Molony and Macdonald (2023) find that few citizens know the names of particular EOMs and that respondents conflate observers with other actors, like election management bodies.

Second, domestic audiences in developing countries may view non-Western observers as more trustworthy than their Western counterparts. Although many professional EOMs— those present for the whole electoral cycle, employing democratic standards of evaluation, and willing to criticize flaws when they see them—are from Western IOs, this is by no means always the case. For example, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) has developed a strong record of issuing detailed judgments that do not shy away from criticism when it is warranted. Nor do all Western groups have a stellar track record. European Parliament observation missions have issued superficial and friendly evaluations of some post-Soviet elections, putting them at odds with missions from other European IOs (Retmann, 2021; Merloe, 2015, 88). The Organization of American States (OAS) has been criticized for its negative judgment in Bolivia's 2019 election, based on problematic data analysis and apparent bias against incumbent president Evo Morales (Johnston & Rosnick, 2020). Others have documented persistent biases among even well-known Western election observers (Geisler, 1993), such as the tendency to gloss over electoral malpractice in countries with an Islamist opposition (Kavakli & Kuhn, 2020) or in countries at risk of civil war (Kelley, 2009a).

Finally, domestic audiences may prefer regional EOMs for ideological reasons. The purpose of such missions is often precisely to serve as a counterweight against Western 'meddling' (Daxecker & Schneider, 2014; Laakso, 2002; Merloe, 2015),

or to correct for perceived neocolonial intervention (Ngaje & Nganje, 2019).[6] As a result, these organizations may have greater legitimacy among the local public. For instance, following Zimbabwe's 2013 election, President Robert Mugabe hailed the supportive assessment of the SADC, which contradicted the judgments of Western groups, stating: "we abide by the judgment of Africa. […] Today it is these Anglo-Saxons who dare contradict Africa's verdict" (quoted in Debre and Morgenbesser (2017, 339)).

In sum, if we move beyond the idea that EOM influence is limited to a subset of wellknown Western groups, then the connection between international observers and electoral contention becomes more complex. In what follows, we theorize the effect of competing EOM judgments on perceptions of election legitimacy and the likelihood of post-election contention.

2 Theory: Competing observer judgments and post-election contention

Common to studies of contentious elections is the idea that negative EOM judgments serve as a focal point for mobilization by the losing side. Hyde and Marinov (2014) view this as contributing to a self-enforcing democratic equilibrium, in that the information provided by observers helps citizens overcome collective action problems and encourages them to defend democratic norms. Still, it is important to note that empirical evidence of the link between criticism and post-election contention is somewhat limited, much of it being restricted to African countries (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019) and to the activities of a subset of Western EOMs (Hyde & Marinov, 2014). Thus, we begin by (re)evaluating the effect of EOM criticism in a global sample of countries and for a wider set of election observers. Our baseline hypothesis stems from prior research:

H_1 EOM Criticism: Criticism by international election observers increases post-election contention.

The reality on the ground is often more complex than a uniformly negative EOM judgment. As discussed, international election observation is a heterogeneous regime populated by organizations with different biases, capacity, and professionalism (Arceneaux & Leithner, 2017; Fawn, 2006; Kelley, 2009b, 2012; Walker, 2016). It is now common for governments to host multiple groups, increasing the prospect of competing judgments among them. In the 2001 presidential election in Belarus, for example, observers from the OSCE sharply criticized the contest, noting that the government "did everything in its power to block the opposition" and concluding that it "did not meet international standards of free and fair elections" (Baker, 2001). In contrast, the judgment of the CIS observers—which received more publicity in

[6] On the broader question of the creation of non-Western IOs or autocratic IOs to counter Western influence, see Daugirdas and Ginsburg (2023); Hallerberg (2023); and Kaya et al. (2023).

the Belarussian media—ruled that the election was "free, open and in keeping with universal democratic institutions" (Belapan News Agency, 2001).

Observers also disagreed about the quality of Uganda's 2016 presidential election. Many African regional organizations, including the African Union (AU), COMESA, and the East African Community, supported the election. They judged that, in spite of some logistical shortcomings, the polls were peaceful and "met the minimum standards for free and fair elections" (BBC Monitoring Africa, 2016). This evaluation contrasted with those from EU observers, who criticized the intimidating political atmosphere and said that the contest "fell short of meeting some key democratic benchmarks" (Honan & Biryabarema, 2016). Media reports picked up on these divergent reports with headlines in local websites such as "Poll Observers Give Mixed Verdict" (Musisi, 2016).

How do domestic audiences process such competing judgments? Our basic claim is that the mobilizing potential of a negative EOM verdict is strongest when it is a clear and undiluted signal. In contrast, if criticism from some groups is countered by a positive judgment from others, the public receives a noisier signal about election quality. This influences beliefs, uncertainty, and ultimately the cost of collective action. We focus on how EOM judgments affect *citizens*. To be sure, opposition and government elites play key roles in post-election contention: they organize protests, incite violence, challenge results, and engage in repression (Fjelde, 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Election observer statements—as with other forms of validation from international actors—can play a role in emboldening political elites, for example by encouraging opposition post-election unity and challenges (Beaulieu, 2014; Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Daxecker, 2012; Abbink, 2006), or by discouraging government-led violence (Smidt, 2016). But we view the effect of EOM judgments on the *level* of post-election contention as running importantly via citizen beliefs. In many countries, party activists challenge results and incite some level of post-election contention no matter what; these efforts only gain traction and breadth when accompanied by sizeable public support.

Competing judgments influence beliefs While "noisy" EOM judgments may not have an effect on hard core partisans, it can influence the sizeable group of people with less fixed prior beliefs. These less ideologically committed and/or less politically active individuals matter tremendously for the strength and momentum of post-election mobilization. Successful electoral revolutions involve many large protests that indicate the regime has lost the support of the people as a whole—not only of opposition supporters, but also of the 'median' or otherwise uncommitted voter (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010). A large number of contentious acts encompassing a broad swathe of the population poses danger to the regime (Brancati, 2016, 23–25). When there are fewer protests, the government can more easily put them down and dismiss them as the complaints of sore losers. Thus, from an autocrats perspective, any strategy that can prevent mobilization from spreading beyond a limited number of contentious events is highly desirable.

As outlined above, EOMs that counter the negative judgments of other groups can influence public perceptions. This is so, in part, because negative judgments typically come from *Western* EOMs, and domestic audiences do not always consider

these groups to be the most trustworthy, preferring instead regional or local sources of information. In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, EOMs from the United States and Europe may be perceived as outsiders that parachute in to pass advance their own political agendas (Kavakli & Kuhn, 2020). Such claims are central to Russia's pushback against the so-called pro-Western bias of OSCE election observation in the Post-Soviet republics (Bader, 2018; Ghebali, 2005; Kropatcheva, 2015; Zellner, 2005). In a survey experiment in Tunisia, Bush and Prather (2018) find that most citizens viewed an EOM from the Arab League—whose members are uniformly autocratic—as more trustworthy and credible than observers from European IOs.[7] These findings suggest that disagreement among international observers may indeed influence public perceptions of electoral legitimacy. More specifically, competing judgments should improve the perception of electoral quality compared to unified EOM criticism.

Competing judgments increase uncertainty Competing judgments can matter even if they do not change minds. The winning side can seize upon positive EOM reports to promote alternative narratives about the election with the goal of sowing confusion or increasing uncertainty. Cambodia's 2018 election, for example, was entirely autocratic, as the government had prevented the main opposition party from competing. While experienced international election observers like the United Nations and the EU refused to observe the contest, the regime hosted a number of parliamentarians from right-wing populist parties in Europe, as well as a veritable "horde" of zombie monitors from sham NGOs (Morgenbesser, 2018). The government trotted out these dubious observers to the international press, hailing their supportive statements as evidence that "EU observers" approved of the election (Sassoon, 2018). Commenting on the lack of opposition in the election, one such observer from the UK independence party said: "The opposition, I know nothing about it, my only job was to come here, see the election and report on the process, and that's what I've done" (quoted in Sassoon (2018)).

It is now common practice for electoral autocracies to bring in such friendly observers to serve as cogs in the state's propaganda machine. The ultimate aim may be to generate a particular kind of uncertainty related to dissonant perceptions about pre-election versus election-day quality. Citizens concerned about an undemocratic electoral context—lack of competition, pre-election repression, media bias—may have difficulty reconciling this with EOM signals that election day itself is clean.[8] Moreover, cross-national evidence shows that most citizens in autocracies view their countries' elections as clean (Williamson, 2021); evidence of fraud that undermines

[7] Beyond elections, research in the Middle East similarly documents public backlash against reforms perceived to be initiated by Western actors (Bush & Jamal, 2015). Donno (2013) finds that democracy promotion efforts by regional organizations are effective due to their greater local legitimacy, compared to outside actors like the United States.

[8] Szakonyi (2022) finds that Russian citizens are less concerned about pre-election manipulation than election-day fraud.

this view can reduce the leader's approval ratings among the regime's base of supporters (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2021).

An analogy to the strategy behind disinformation campaigns is instructive, where the goal is not necessarily to convince people that an election was free and fair, but rather to *sow confusion* that leads to demobilization and apathy (Arceneaux & Leithner, 2017; Grimes, 2022, 33). Indeed, Cooley (2015, 55–56) argues that the purpose of shadow election observer groups is to "confuse and distract, to sow uncertainty by promoting pro-government narratives, and to boost the plausibility of government complaints that critical foreign observers are biased." A goal of Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, for example, was to demobilize minority constituencies and reduce democratic turnout (Kim, 2020). When a significant portion of the public believes that nothing is true, there is little basis for collective action (Pomerantsev, 2015).

Competing judgments increase collective action problems Individual decisions to engage in potentially risky post-election mobilization are a function of both perceived costs and likelihood of success (Chong, 1991; Tarrow, 1994). As the strength of the public signal about fraud increases, so will individuals' beliefs that others will mobilize, and that protests may reach a tipping point (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Kuran, 1991). A uniform condemnation of election quality by EOMs can also help reduce divisions and increase coordination among opposition elites (Thompson & Kuntz, 2004). This sends a clear signal to the voters about the competence and credibility of the opposition—one of the key ingredients in successful electoral revolutions (Daxecker, 2012; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Tucker, 2007). In contrast, an ambiguous signal of election quality, due to competing verdicts, renders the losing side's mobilization efforts less effective. The perceived chances of success are lower. Anticipated costs are also higher: as the number of participants in contentious events declines, the ability of state actors to engage in discriminate repression increases, thus raising the cost of participation (Tucker, 2007).

We sum up these insights with the following hypothesis:

> H_2 Competing Judgments Reduce Contention: Competing judgments among EOMs dampen post-election contention, compared to a scenario of unanimous EOM criticism.

An alternative perspective, based on the idea that people filter information through a partisan lens, is that competing EOM judgments should not influence beliefs about electoral quality one way or the other. When individuals engage in motivated reasoning, they discount information that does not conform to their prior beliefs (Kraft et al., 2015). If citizens evaluate competing EOM judgments in this way, supporters of the losing candidate would not be discouraged from mobilizing by information that contradicts their view that the election was illegitimate.

Research on individuals' perceptions of election quality has found some support for motivated reasoning (Bush & Prather, 2017; Corstange & Marinov, 2012;

Daxecker & Fjelde, 2022; Kerr, 2013; Robertson, 2019). However, this evidence is not monolithic and may be confined to individuals that are committed partisans (Broockman & Kalla, 2022; Sedziaka & Rose, 2015). For instance, in an experimental study with Russian citizens, Robertson (2019) finds that regime supporters do discount critical information from election observers, but that opposition supporters are "less coherent in their responses" (604).[9] Bush and Prather (2017) similarly find an imbalance in the (partisan) effects of positive and negative EOM judgments in Tunisia. Studying Nigeria's 2007 election, Daxecker et al. (2019c) do not find that perceptions of fraud are correlated with partisan orientation. In short, evidence indicates that motivated reasoning surrounding elections is not uniformly present across countries or individuals. We surmise that, in most cases, EOM judgments can influence a meaningful share of citizens without strong partisan attachments. It is the "masses"—distinct from core party activists and supporters—whose choices determine the frequency and depth of post-election contention.

3 Research design

To test our hypotheses, we analyze the relationship between observer disagreement and post-election contention in a cross-national time-series framework. Later, we present evidence from a survey experiment in Turkey that supports the microfoundations of our argument. The observational analysis begins with a sample of executive elections (all presidential contests and legislative elections in parliamentary systems) from the Nelda dataset (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). The sample covers countries that were not liberal democracies at the time of the election, according to the Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Regimes of the World classification (Lührmann et al., 2018).[10] The temporal coverage ranges from 1990 to 2012, during which data are available for the variables of interest. In total, the sample contains 504 elections and 328 elections that hosted international election observers. In our main analyses, we specify negative binomial regressions, given that the dependent variable is a count of the number of postelection contentious events (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016). Standard errors are clustered by country.

Our primary models use a sample of elections that hosted at least one international election observer mission. We opt for this approach because monitored elections may be systematically different from non-monitored elections, due to the choices of both the government (which invites observers) and the observers (which

[9] Yet, a more recent study in Russia finds that regime supporters are more likely than others to update beliefs about election quality (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2021).

[10] We exclude liberal democracies because there is higher certainty that elections will be free and fair, lower rates of EOM presence and criticism, and lower probability of post-election contention. Our main results are nevertheless robust in alternative samples, including all electoral regimes, electoral autocracies, and non-OECD countries.

decide whether to send a mission).[11] To sidestep potential threats to inference due to this heterogeneity, we limit our main analysis to monitored elections.[12] Below, we outline in more detail additional steps taken to address confounding factors that simultaneously influence the presence of observers, their judgments, and the likelihood of contention. These strategies include adding additional control variables, country fixed effects, matching analysis, and alternative dependent variables. Our experimental survey design is intended to further increase confidence that competing EOM judgments exert a causal effect that is not the result of confounders.

3.1 Independent variables: International election observation

We make use of new data, from Donno and Gray (2023), to measure the presence and judgments of international election observers. This dataset expands upon existing sources by identifying a larger range of international observer groups, covering more recent years, and capturing greater nuance in terms of EOM judgments.[13] The source material for these data are international newspaper and newswire reports for a period covering one month prior to one month after the election date. Notably, the data include reports from the BBC World Monitoring newswire, which covers *domestic* news sources translated into English. For most countries this includes one or two national news agencies as well as transcripts from television and radio broadcasts.

As with any events-based datasest, it is possible that news sources do not report on every election observer group or report. Indeed, research suggests that there are differences between media coverage of EOM reports and the reports themselves (Molony & Macdonald, 2023, 4). However, we believe that this works to our advantage. People rarely seek out official reports on EOM websites. They tend to learn about what election observers say via the media, whose coverage is more accessible and available immediately following the election. By basing our coding on news sources, the data capture information that domestic audiences are more likely to access.

Donno and Gray (2023) code each EOM's judgment, for each election, in three categories: (1) no criticism of the election (approval) (2) a 'mixed' judgment that combines praise and criticism, or (3) outright disapproval of the election. We code our main independent variable, *Observer Disagreement*, as "1" when at least one EOM approved of the election and at least one EOM issued outright disapproval of the election. These are the cases where disagreement is clearest to domestic audiences. In our sample, disagreement occurs in 44% of cases where at least one EOM

[11] For example, Hyde (2011, 77) finds that elections where the incumbent's commitment to democracy is questionable, and the risk of contention is likely higher, are especially likely to be observed.

[12] Nevertheless, Model 4 in Table A2 shows that the results are robust in the full sample of elections.

[13] The DIEM data from Kelley and Kolev (2010) ends in 2004, while the Nelda data (Hyde & Marinov, 2012) lacks information about the identity, number, and judgments of specific EOMs.

issued an outright disapproval of the election and 9% of all cases with multiple observer groups.[14]

In our analysis, we include two additional EOM-related variables. The first measures the *Number of EOMs* present. This helps control for the baseline likelihood that disagreement will occur (there is no potential for disagreement when there are fewer than two EOMs present). This may also plausibly be a confounder, if more EOMs go to contests with a high likelihood of post-election contention. Second, we include an indicator for whether there was any *Observer Criticism*, a dummy coded "1" if at least one EOM issued an outright disapproval of the election. Due to the nested nature of these variables (there can only be disagreement if there is criticism), the coefficient for *Observer Disagreement* should be interpreted as the effect of observer disagreement on contention *in comparison to* the effect of unified observer criticism, aligning with our second hypothesis.

3.2 Dependent variable: Post-election contention

Our dependent variable is post-election contention. We take this variable from the ECAV dataset, an events-based dataset that counts a broad range of contentious events that can be tied (both temporally and substantively) to elections.[15] The ECAV data defines *electoral contention* as "public acts of mobilization, contestation, or coercion by state or nonstate actors that are used to affect the electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition" (Daxecker et al., 2019b, 3). This definition includes both violent and non-violent events but requires that the event involve at least two opposing sides. One-sided mobilization, protest, or celebration are not included. We aggregate the ECAV data to count the total number of contentious events occurring in the month following each election in our sample.[16] The ECAV definition fits well with our theory, which anticipates that EOM disagreement will have a dampening effect on various kinds of post-election mobilization. In addition, measuring the magnitude of contentious events is more informative than simply coding their occurrence with a dichotomous variable. We recognize the problem

[14] Disagreement occurred across a wide range of cases: in Africa, Europe, and Latin America; in countries where both Western and non-Western observers were present as well as cases with EOMs from only Western or non-Western IOs; and across a range of regime types (ranging from -9 to 7 on the polity scale).

[15] ECAV's coding reflects our theoretical interests better than some other sources on election violence and contention. Variables from V-Dem and Nelda do not code whether contention occurred in the post-election period. The Deadly Electoral Conflict (DECO) dataset (Fjelde & Höglund, 2022) counts only events involving at least one fatality, which is a higher threshold than implied by our theory. The Countries at Risk of Election Violence (CREV) data (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020) codes all violent events in the temporal proximity of elections, but does not substantively verify whether they were election-related.

[16] To be precise, our window runs from 3-30 days after the election. This delayed start is to account for EOM judgments, which are typically released in the 1-2 days after the election. We opt for this one-month window to ensure a close relationship between observer judgments and contentious events. However, we demonstrate the robustness of our results to alternative dependent variables used in previous studies (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019). These include a count of violent events in a 1-month and 3-month post-election window (Table 2, Models 1-2), and whether there were *any* violent events in the 3-month post-election period (Table A2, Model 3).

of measurement error in data on violent events (Borzyskowski & Wahman, 2021). In the absence of an alternative measure of the magnitude of post-election contentious events with broad time-series cross-national coverage, we believe that our measure of post-election mobilization is appropriate. From an empirical standpoint, counting the number of contentious events is less likely to be affected by non-random measurement error compared to counting the number of participants or casualties in such events (Seybolt et al., 2013). Finally, we believe that the count of contentious events provides a good approximation of the level of post-election contention. In order for multiple events to occur, citizens must mobilize against the election in multiple regions (across space) or over multiple days (across time). As such, the count of events provides some indication of the magnitude of participation. Following our theory, we expect this level to be dampened after monitor disagreement (compared to a situation of unanimous criticism). Under such circumstances, fewer people are likely to mobilize, leading to fewer (on average) contentious events.

3.3 Control variables

We control for confounders that may influence both EOM disagreement and post-election contention. First, we include factors relating to the conduct of the election. Most importantly, we control for *Election Quality* to allow us to adjudicate between the effect of fraudulent elections *themselves* on post-election processes and the effect of EOM *judgments* (von Borzyskowski, 2019). We use the variable'v2elfrfair' from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021), which is a summary measure of the quality of the electoral process and outcome.

Next, noting the path dependency of election contention and the (lower) likelihood that observers will criticize elections that occur in already contentious contexts (Kelley, 2009a; Luo & Rozenas, 2018), we control for *Pre-Election Contention*. This variable measures the number of election-related contentious events in the ECAV data that occurred in the 6 months preceding the election. Together, these two variables create a hard test for our measure of EOM disagreement.

We next account for domestic structural factors that may influence leaders' propensity to invite multiple EOMs as well as the likelihood of post-election contention. We control for *Polity* (Marshall et al., 2017), since autocrats are more free both to court favorable observers and to incite contentious events after elections (Kelley, 2012).[17] Next, we control for factors that influence the likelihood and intensity of societal contention, including *GDP per capita*, whether a *Civil Conflict* was ongoing (from UCDP's Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2002)), and the level of *Repression* of physical integrity rights (from the Latent Human Rights Scores, version 4 (Fariss et al., 2020)).[18] Research on repression and societal contention

[17] We prefer the Polity index to V-Dem's electoral democracy index (EDI), since the latter includes sub-indicators for election violence (*v2elpeace* and *v2elintim*), which are related to our dependent variable. Nevertheless, Table A3 shows that our results are robust if we substitute V-Dem's EDI for Polity as a control.

[18] We reverse this variable so that higher values represent higher levels of repression.

makes clear that the relationship is complex; repression generally suppresses mobilization but at times can exacerbate grievance that leads to a tipping point (Davenport, 2007; Ritter & Conrad, 2016). Thus, we do not have a strong prior expectation about the direction of this variable, but it is important to control for repression due to its impact on the cost of mobilization. Table A1 presents summary statistics for all the variables in our analysis.[19]

4 Analysis

Table 1 presents our main results. Model 1 is a baseline model with only the three variables related to election observers, while Models 2–5 include the control variables and additional model specifications. We first consider the coefficients on *Observer Criticism*, which we expect to increase post-election contention. We do find evidence of such an effect in most models, in line with hypothesis 1. Similarly, the coefficient for *Number of EOMs* is consistently positive and statistically significant, indicating that a larger number of EOMs is associated with more contentious elections.

Our key hypothesis (H2) predicts that disagreement among EOMs will dampen postelection contention compared to elections in which EOMs offered unified criticism. We find strong support for this claim across models: there are significantly fewer contentious events following elections in which observers disagree. Recall that our models control for election quality. This implies that holding the level of electoral integrity constant, EOM disagreement exerts an independent effect on post-election contention. The size of this effect is substantively meaningful. The results in Model 2, for instance, suggest that in an election where two EOMs are both critical and all other variables are held at their means, the predicted number of contentious events is about 7. This falls to fewer than two predicted events when one EOM accepts the election and another issues an outright rejection.

Using the restrictive sample of 'monitored elections' in Table 1 allows us to avoid potential selection issues related to EOMs' decisions to observe a particular election. Still, there may be additional layers of selection effects. For one, elections are not randomly assigned a single or multiple EOMs. It is possible that elections hosting multiple groups are different, perhaps because conditions on the ground lead these governments to expect opposition challenges or because regime vulnerability leads them to seek greater external validation. Given these factors, there may be an imbalance in values of key observed covariates between elections that host multiple EOMs and those with only one.

There may also be country-specific factors, correlated with post-election contention, that influence the number of EOMs and the likelihood of observer disagreement. For instance, some regions may be marked by a higher potential supply of election observers (Simpser & Donno, 2012), either in general or of the "zombie" variety in particular. For instance, Bush et al. (2023) find that low-quality observers

[19] We use multiple imputation to fill control variables that are missing in the dataset.

are especially prevalent in countries in the Russian sphere of influence. Other states have alliance ties that give them greater access to friendly observation organizations. Model 3 estimates the results with country-level fixed effects to account for such time-invariant characteristics. The results for H1 and H2 are robust in this specification: criticism alone *increases* postelection contention and, in comparison, observer disagreement *decreases* it.

We also use matching analysis, a commonly used method to reduce threats to causal inference in observational data (Ho et al., 2007), as one strategy to address such selection effects. By pruning and re-weighting observations in treatment and control groups, matching limits the influence of 'extreme' counterfactuals that are not supported by the data. We specify the treatment condition as whether or not there were multiple EOMs present in a particular election, and we employ four covariates: Polity (lagged 1 year), civil conflict (lagged 1 year), election quality, and pre-election contention. The control group is elections with one EOM. We employ a coarsened exact matching technique and confirm that balance was improved on each covariate (King & Nielsen, 2019). The results of this analysis, shown in Model 4 of Table 1, further support our hypotheses: observer criticism increases post-election contention, whereas disagreement decreases it.

Finally, Model 5 runs the results in the smaller sub-sample of elections where there were at least two EOMs present. This further addresses concerns that elections with multiple observers are different than those with only one observer group. We continue to see support for our main hypothesis in this sample. It is worth noting that in this model the coefficient for monitor criticism loses significance, though the relationship between criticism and contention remains positive. We attribute this to the fact that Model 5 covers a smaller sample of elections with a higher proportion of criticism overall. Specifically, 16% of observations in the multiple monitors sample have criticism, while only 9.8% of the observations in the main sample includes an instance of monitor criticism.

We ran a number of additional analyses to test the robustness of our findings to alternative model specifications. In Table 2, we explore different operationalizations of our dependent variable. Models 1–3 utilize a count of violent events only (from ECAV), an indicator from Nelda for election-related protests and riots (Hyde & Marinov, 2012), and an indicator for whether there were *any* post-election contentious events (ECAV), respectively. Across these models, we find support for our hypotheses, indicating that our findings are robust to different types of contentious events, as well as to whether we employ a count or indicator as the dependent variable.

We include additional robustness checks in the Supplementary Appendix (Table A2).[20] First, we employ additional control variables (Model 1). This includes relevant election-related features: *Incumbent Vote Share*, election type (*Presidential* versus parliamentary), and whether there were both *Western and non-Western Observers*

[20] The Supplementary Appendix is available on this manuscript's page on the *Review of International Organizations* website.

Table 1 Observer disagreement and post-election contention

	(1) Baseline	(2) Main	(3) Country FE	(4) Matching	(5) Multiple EOMs
Number of EOMs	0.21***	0.15***	0.23***	0.36***	0.27***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Observer Criticism	2.04***	1.51***	1.37***	1.92**	0.43
	(0.50)	(0.42)	(0.46)	(0.75)	(0.36)
Observer Disagreement	−1.31**	−1.95***	−1.57***	−4.44***	−1.23**
	(0.59)	(0.60)	(0.51)	(1.21)	(0.48)
Election Quality		−0.41***	−0.54**	−1.13***	−0.52***
		(0.12)	(0.24)	(0.39)	(0.17)
Pre−Election Contention		0.01**	0.01**	0.09**	0.01**
		(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.04)	(0.00)
Polity		0.01	0.01	0.05	−0.01
		(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)
GDP per Capita		−0.01	−0.02	−0.04	0.01
		(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Civil Conflict		0.20	−0.26	−1.10	−0.34
		(0.36)	(0.47)	(0.82)	(0.52)
Repression		0.33*	0.63**	−0.17	0.41*
		(0.18)	(0.29)	(0.30)	(0.24)
Constant	0.46**	0.05	−14.73***	−0.85**	−0.37
	(0.20)	(0.21)	(1.11)	(0.42)	(0.35)
Observations	328	328	328	119	156

Dependent variable is the count of post-election contentious events. The samples are executive (presidential and parliamentary) elections with at least 1 observer group (M1-M4) and at least 2 observer groups (M5) in non-liberal democracies, 1990–2012. ***, **, * significant at 0.01, 0.05, 0.10, respectively

present.[21] Next we control for regime-level features related to suppression of post-election contention: *Executive Constraints*, *Media Censorship*, and *Regime Duration*.[22] In particular, we highlight the variable measuring media censorship, which could could be a confounder if leaders who invite disagreeing EOMs also restrict access to information. In such cases, contention could be less likely following EOM disagreement not because of disagreement itself, but because they have restricted access to media coverage about the election. Finally, we control for additional structural factors (*Population*, *Ethnic Fractionalization*, and *Foreign Aid*) and conditions in the previous election (lagged *Observer Criticism* and *Contentious Events*).

[21] Election type is taken from Nelda and the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (Cruz et al., 2020). The incumbent vote share is a combination of the DPI variables *percent1* in presidential elections and the variable *numvote* in parliamentary/assembly-elected presidential elections. We lead this variable by one year to correspond with the election of interest. The variable for Western and non-Western observers is from Donno and Gray (2023).

[22] The variable for executive constraints is from Polity. The other variables are from V-Dem.

Next, Models 2 and 3 of Table A2 show the robustness of the results to a longer post-election window for violent events (3 months), measured as both an event count and a dummy variable. Finally, to further alleviate sample selection concerns, Model 4 replicates the main results in a sample of all elections.

Taken together, the results of the cross-national analyses provide strong and consistent support for our primary hypothesis that observer disagreement reduces the likelihood of post-election contention. The next section presents additional evidence to explore the individual-level mechanisms of our argument using a survey experiment.

5 Additional evidence: Survey experiment

We fielded a survey experiment in Turkey to assess how competing EOM judgments influence individuals' perceptions about two outcomes central to our theory: (a) electoral quality, and (b) the justifiability of post-election contention by the losing side. The advantage of an experimental approach is that it allows us to manipulate processes (namely, the presence and judgments of multiple EOMs) which are subject to strategic considerations and confounding factors in the real world. Our experiment randomly varies EOM disagreement, allowing us to contrast this treatment effect with an alternative condition in which two EOMs issued unified criticism of the election. Nevertheless, as we discuss below, our experimental analysis stems from a convenience sample, and should be taken as supporting evidence rather than a standalone analysis of the microfoundations of our theory.

Turkey is an electoral autocracy in which the process and outcomes of elections are often contested (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Gauthier-Villars, 2019; Topping, 2017). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as head of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP), has a track record of inviting a range observer groups, including European organizations, such as the OSCE, and regional groups, like the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). This context makes Turkey a good setting in which to explore our hypotheses: individuals may rightly be uncertain about the legitimacy of elections and look for information from international observers. At the same time, Turkey may be a difficult case to find support for the hypotheses. Contemporary Turkish politics are highly polarized, so individuals may have strong priors about election quality (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021; Somer, 2019). Overall, this survey evidence provides an initial exploration into whether contradictory EOM judgments can shift perceptions about elections in an uncertain, polarized context.

The survey was conducted in December 2022 with 583 respondents recruited using targeted Facebook ads, an increasingly common online recruitment platform in countries outside the United States (Boas et al., 2020).[23] Facebook is widely

[23] For instance, recent studies have recruited respondents via Facebook ads in Turkey (Zarpli, Forthcoming), Tunisia (Finkel et al., 2023), Egypt (Williamson & Malik, 2021), Indonesia (Ananda & Bol, 2021), Uruguay (Bentancur et al., 2019), Brazil (Samuels & Zucco, 2014) and Kenya and Tanzania (Rosenzweig and Zhou, 2021). Due to time and resource constraints, we were unable to gather a larger, representative sample, and we highlight that future work should explore the generalizability of these results to the broader population of Turkey and other countries.

accessible in Turkey with over 50 million users. One disadvantage of recruitment via Facebook, as with other convenience samples, is that it is difficult to build a nationally representative sample (Krupnikov et al., 2021). Still, a number of recent studies have shown that there is not a significant difference between treatment effects in convenience and population samples across a range of topics (Mullinix et al., 2015; Samuels & Zucco, 2013).[24][25] Further, the demographic profiles of participants in our sample are not far off from national averages in terms of gender, education, and income.[25] Our sample is least representative in terms of party representation: only 14% of survey participants were AKP supporters, while Erdogan won around 52% of the vote in the last presidential election in May 2023. As such, our results are most applicable to opposition supporters.[26]In sum, we are confident in the internal validity of our experiment, but we recognize that sample limitations do not allow us to draw generalizable conclusions about the average Turkish citizen. Because of the small number of AKP respondents, we are also limited in our ability to test whether treatment effects are moderated by partisanship. In the Appendix, we present exploratory analyses on this point.

The survey begins by showing respondents a vignette about a hypothetical election in which two international EOMs are present.[27] We identify groups that may be perceived as reputable by different factions within Turkey: the OSCE and the OTS. Both groups have a recent history of observing elections in Turkey. The vignette next states the winner of the election, randomly varied between the AKP and the opposition. Subsequently, it randomizes the observers' judgments. In the control condition, both EOMs criticize the election (unanimous criticism). In the treatment, one EOM criticizes and the other approves (disagreement).[28] In the disagreement condition, we randomly vary which group issues the criticism and the approval, so that the identity of the group is not correlated with the verdict. The vignette reads as follows:

> **Baseline:** Think about a presidential election that will be held in Turkey 10 years from now. The government invites two international organizations to observe the election. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is the main international organization in Europe that observes elections. The Organization of Turkic States is an international organization designed to promote political cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries. Turkey is a member of both organizations.

[24] We follow best practices for surveys with convenience samples by targeting a diverse range of participants, removing fraudulent responses, and removing responses from those who failed a pre-treatment attention check (Krupnikov et al., 2021; Neundorf & Oztürk, 2021).

[25] % of our sample is female (compared to 49% of the population), 42% of our sample is college educated (33% of the population), and 40% of our sample earns at or below the minimum wage (the same as the population).

[26] We block randomize the treatments based on the respondent's party affiliation (AKP versus not AKP).

[27] This approach draws from prior research that employs future hypothetical scenarios (Mattes & Weeks, 2019) as well as recent findings by Brutger et al. (2022) that invoking hypotheticality has little effect on experimental outcomes.

[28] In reality, when EOMs disagree, individuals exposed to a biased media environment may receive only information on the *positive* judgment. This implies that our treatment may be under-estimating the effect of competing verdicts.

Table 2 Observer disagreement and post-election contentious event type

	(1) Violent Events	(2) Protests/Riots	(3) Any Event
Number of EOMs	0.13**	0.16**	0.16**
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Observer Criticism	1.08**	1.14**	1.45**
	(0.45)	(0.48)	(0.67)
Observer Disagreement	−1.69***	−1.23*	−1.67*
	(0.58)	(0.70)	(0.90)
Election Quality	−0.33***	−0.84***	−0.32**
	(0.12)	(0.20)	(0.16)
Pre-Election Contention	0.02**	0.01*	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.02)
Polity	0.02	0.07*	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
GDP per Capita	−0.05	−0.05	−0.06
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Civil Conflict	0.50	0.15	−0.21
	(0.39)	(0.48)	(0.42)
Repression	0.25	−0.23	0.24
	(0.20)	(0.24)	(0.22)
Constant	−0.26	−1.80***	−0.62**
	(0.25)	(0.33)	(0.29)
Observations	328	327	328

Dependent variable is the number of post-election violent events (Model 1), whether there were post-election protests and riots (Model 2), whether there were any post-election contentious events (Model 3). The samples are observed executive elections in non-liberal democracies, 1990–2012. ***, **, * significant at 0.01, 0.05, 0.10, respectively

The outcome of this election is very close. [The incumbent president, from the AK Party | An opposition candidate], wins by only 1% of the vote. After the election, [the opposition candidates allege | the incumbent candidate, from the AK Party, alleges] that the votes were not counted properly, and the election was not free and fair. [They say | He says] that the opposition is the rightful winner of the election. To summarize, in this election, [the AK Party wins but the opposition claims that fraud occurred | the opposition wins, but the AK Party claims that fraud occurred].

Control (Unanimous Criticism): Both of the international election observation missions supported the loser's claims. Election observers from the Organization of Turkic States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe agreed that there were many problems in the casting and counting of the votes. They both concluded that the election could not be considered free and fair.

Treatment (Disagreement): The international election observation missions disagreed about the quality of this election. Observers from the [Organization for

Security and Cooperation in Europe | Organization of Turkic States] supported the loser's claims. This mission said that there were many problems in the casting and counting of the votes. They concluded that the election could not be considered free and fair. However, observers from the [Organization of Turkic States | Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] disagreed. They said that the voting was managed well, that the votes were counted properly, and that the outcome reflected the will of the people. They concluded that the election was free and fair.

We assess the treatment effect of disagreement on two categories of outcome variables. First, respondents answered questions about their perceived level of election quality, including (a) whether the election was free and fair and (b) whether the candidate who won was the rightful winner. Second, we ask whether respondents support post-election contention led by the losing party, in the form of (a) protests, (b) threats, and (c) vandalism. The outcome variables are coded so that higher values indicate higher levels of agreement with the question (question text is available in Appendix Section A2). Our expectation is that in the treatment condition (*EOM disagreement*), respondents will have higher perceptions of election quality and lower support for post-election contention, relative to the control condition of unified EOM criticism.[29]

Figure 1 presents the results.[30] The coefficients represent the treatment effect of observer disagreement compared to the control condition where both observer groups criticized the election. All the coefficients fall in the expected direction. When different international observer groups disagree about the quality of the election, respondents are significantly more likely to believe the election was free and fair and significantly less likely to support post-election protests.[31] The results for support for more violent forms of post-election contention, in the form of threats and vandalism by the losing side, fall in the expected direction but below conventional levels of significance. This is in part due to the small sample size for these questions, as only about 80% of respondents answered the outcome questions for these models. Power analysis indicates that, given the size of these last two coefficients, the sample size in these models is not large enough to detect significant effects at the 0.10 level. Moreover, we expected to find smaller treatment effects here, given the sensitive nature of the questions about violence.

Appendix Table A5 shows that most covariates are balanced across treatment and control groups. We present robustness checks that control for imbalanced covariates in Table A6. All coefficients fall in the same direction and the key result remains

[29] We use linear regressions which also includes a control for the winner of the election (AKP victory).

[30] Table A4 shows the tabular results associated with the figure.

[31] In an exploratory, though underpowered, analysis, we find that disagreement by both groups (OSCE and OTS) exhibit significant effects for the protest-related dependent variables (Appendix Table A9). Results for the variables related to election quality are less significant, but in the right direction, for the disagreement condition where it is the OSCE that criticizes. As a whole, these results indicate that the effect of EOM disagreement is not driven by only one of the observer groups.

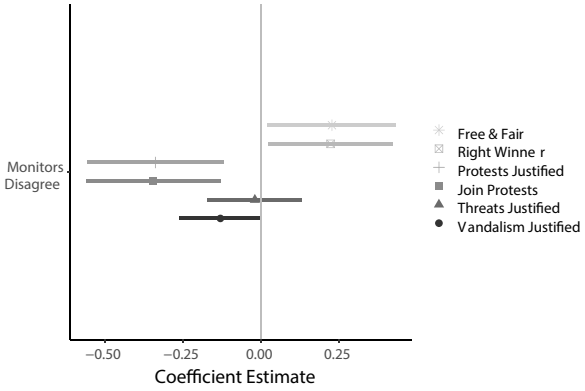

Fig. 1 Effect of observer disagreement relative to unified criticism. *Notes*: Selected coefficient estimates from Models 1–6 in Table A4. Coefficients show the effect of observer disagreement on perceptions of election quality and support for mobilization, compared to the control condition when observers offer unanimous criticism. 90% confidence intervals. Sample is all respondents ($N = 417–522$). These models include a control for the winner of the election in the vignette, as shown in Table A4

significant with one exception.[32] Though we did not hypothesize that the effect of EOM disagreement should be moderated by partisanship, we report the results of exploratory sub-sample analysis for opposition supporters (Table A8) and AKP supporters (Table A7). We note the highly speculative nature of this analysis for AKP supporters, given the small sample size ($N = 62–73$). These results (Figure A1) show that the expected (negative) effect of observer disagreement holds firmly among opposition supporters, but is not significant in the AKP sample. Future research should assess partisan effects in an appropriately powered design. Nevertheless, the clear finding that EOM disagreement dampens mobilization by opposition supporters may be especially concerning given the context of declining democracy in Turkey, where it is the opposition that must take the lead in standing up to democratic backsliding.

Overall, these experimental results offer support for the logic of our theory. When different IOs issue competing judgments on election quality, individuals are more likely to believe the election was free and fair and less likely to support post-election contention.

6 Conclusion

International organizations play an important role in evaluating the quality of contemporary elections. By exposing fraud and enabling citizens to mobilize in defense of democratic norms, election observation missions can contribute to a

[32] The significance level for Model 1 falls below conventional levels after adding controls ($p = .149$). However, this may reflect the results being underpowered: we would need a sample of 766 to detect significance for the effect size in this model.

self-enforcing democratic equilibrium (Hyde & Marinov, 2014). The early 2000s saw a wave of electoral revolutions in which citizens, spurred on by EOM criticism, mobilized to push out illiberal incumbents. Autocrats have not taken this lying down. The norms and standards of the liberal international order are under attack from both inside and out.[33] Illiberal leaders have sought to limit the independence of international EOMs by changing rules of oversight. Russia's repeated efforts to 'reform' the OSCE's election observation capacity serve as one example (Donno, 2024). Other research documents how challenges "from within" operate in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as a contingent of vocal illiberal parties opposes efforts to defend liberal norms (Lipps & Jacob, 2023).

In parallel, authoritarian regimes have sought to undermine the liberal order "from without," by establishing their own election observation missions—often tied to autocratic IOs—whose express purpose is to challenge the judgments of more professional groups. Bush et al. (2023) document the rise of 'zombie' election monitoring organizations, tracing how their emergence is spurred by states that have strong ties to Russia and are members of autocratic IOs. The cast of election observation missions is increasingly diverse. Most elections now host multiple international observer groups that hail from different regions and exhibit different value commitments and capacity. Not surprisingly, disagreement among them is common.

Competing EOM judgments reach domestic audiences through a range of news sources, leaving individuals to formulate their perceptions about electoral legitimacy in the presence of conflicting information. We find that competing judgments do shape beliefs and dilute the mobilizing potential of EOM criticism. Our findings therefore provide the first systematic support for the idea that autocrats can reap domestic political benefits—or more precisely, mitigate political costs—by hosting multiple EOMs, thereby illuminating a particular domestic source of support for illiberal IOs. Notably, inviting multiple election observers is a low-cost strategy compared to other repressive means of defending against popular mobilization.

In sum, our research provides one entry point into the domestic consequences of illiberal IOs. Implications for the contemporary democracy promotion regime, and for normbased international cooperation generally, are admittedly rather discouraging. Though experts understand which EOMs are more professional and credible than others, many domestic citizens in the host countries do not (Mcdonald & Moloney, 2023). Moreover, citizens' views about international election observers, and about electoral legitimacy more generally, are shaped by their media (and social media) environment. In the present global context of information bubbles and media silos, autocrats have ample opportunity to seize on the reports of friendly EOMs to publicize their own favorable narrative. Combating this problem will require professional EOMs—and the IOs that back them—to develop new ways to cut through the noise, increase awareness of their activities, and inform people of the contrasts between election observers of varying quality.

[33] See Gray et al. (2023).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-023-09528-x.

Author's contributions Author contributions to research design and conceptualization: K.M. (25%), D.D. (25%), B.S. (25%), P.D. (25%); statistical analysis: K.M. (50%), D.D. (20%), B.S. (20%), P.D. (10%); writing: K.M. (35%), D.D. (35%), B.S. (30%), P.D. (0%). The order of authors reflects the significance of the authors' contributions.

Funding This research was supported by funding from the University of Cyprus. Human subjects research was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee.

Data availability Data to reproduce all statistical analysis is available on the author website(s) and in the link to supplementary information above.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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