The Importance of a Liberal Power's Attention to Democratic Elections Around the World[*†]

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Abstract

We build on the concept of attention costs in international affairs: when the agenda of powerful states is crowded, other states can get away with behavior the powerful state would otherwise sanction. Our example focuses on the US as a liberal power promoting democratic elections. We use a game to demonstrate that greater attention costs by the 'supervising' liberal power result in more cheating by foreign incumbents. We utilize the US domestic election cycle to predict variation in attention costs. Because they need to focus on re-election, American policy-makers have less effort to devote to other policy objectives. We show that this is the case with a novel measure of attention to elections abroad. Finally, we construct an index of bias to show that Presidential elections in the US are associated with more biased elections abroad. We conclude by noting that international pressure may keep cheating incumbents in check.

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[†]Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition

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When countries around the world vote, liberal powers can help keep elections free and fair. Foreign leaders who know that cheating will be punished, are more likely to conduct clean elections (Hyde 2011b). In practice, there are a numbers of reasons why liberal powers may fail to hold cheating incumbents in check. Such powers may not have enough leverage, in the form of foreign aid or the like, to motivate foreign incumbents to 'behave'. Even if they did have such power, liberal states may pursue competing geopolitical objectives and may not be willing to fight for democratic norms. These factors have been noted by scholars and are subject to a lively debate (Birch 2011; Donno 2013; von Soest and Wahman 2015).

One factor that has not received comparable attention is what we call 'attention costs'. Political leaders need to invest some of their attention to policing elections abroad. Attention is costly: many policy objectives may be vying for a policy-maker's time and effort. When their policy agenda is crowded, leaders may fail to register the gravity of the democratic violations taking place abroad. As a result, leaders may not mount an appropriate policy response. Attention costs are not equivalent to information. Bureaucracies – such as the State Department in the United States, or international organizations (including election monitoring ones) may generate a constant and reliable flow of information about democratic violations in countries around the world. Attention costs are the ability of political leaders to process and act on such information.[1] Attention costs are also not equivalent to commitment to democratic norms or leverage: even a power committed to democracy and in possession of leverage may find its attention engaged elsewhere.

Theoretically, we show how monitoring effort, by a liberal principal, and cheating, by a benefit-dependent agent, interact to produce equilibrium outcomes in formal model. We adapt the classic model of a principal monitoring an agent's effort to the problem of holding a foreign incumbent in check. We assume that greater attention to voting contests abroad by powerful liberal democracies is more likely to result in push-back against attempts to

[1]We note that bureaucracies require leadership to act decisively in critical situations: without an attentive leader to push for a policy response, democratic violations elsewhere may slip unpunished.

corrupt the vote but that it is also a form of costly effort. Incumbents elsewhere are more or less likely to 'behave,' depending on how attentive they believe the liberal power is.

We use political business cycles (PBCs) in liberal democracies to illustrate variation in attention costs.[2] Paying attention to democratic violations abroad will be costlier close to a democracy's own elections, as such effort comes with an opportunity cost in terms of detracting effort from the campaign. We then focus on the case of the United States to study the model's predictions in an empirical setting. The United States is the most powerful liberal democracy. Either or both the President and Congress can punish other countries if they decide to. There are two types of American election cycles, a quadrennial general one (for both the Presidency and Congress) and a midterm one (for Congress alone, occurring midway through the general cycle). While both actors can threaten consequences over stolen elections, the Presidency can act swiftly whereas the path to Congressional action requires majority support to pass a bill in both chambers. Congress may be important in setting the overall tone of policy, but the President is more likely to matter with respect to concrete reactions to current events.

We next demonstrate that foreign elections coinciding with the US political business cycle - proximity to Presidential contests - feature more bias, a modest but consistent across-the-board effect. Our empirical contribution takes advantage of the tools of natural-language processing and the open nature of US government documents to produce a measure of attention to foreign elections.[3] Our measure includes discussion, and policies (sanctions). We

[2]Approaching polls can focus incumbents' attention on getting re-elected, impacting a range of policies, from 'printing money' (Alesina et al. 1997) to counter-terrorism operations (Aksoy 2018) – behavior loosely referred to as 'political business cycles' (PBCs). In a more general context, Durante and Zhuravskaya (2018) look at strategic timing of attacks in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to predictable events that will affect US news on the following day.

[3]See Baerg and Hallerberg (2016) for an example of a document-based approach to monitoring.

demonstrate that US attention wanes as Americans go to the polls, validating our assertion of a PBC effect on monitoring. Our measure of bias covers elections in 167 countries for 1945-2016,[4] and incorporates items such as restrictions on the opposition and media-bias in favor of the government. While the effect we find is modest in size, elections often represent a fragile equilibrium between forces of freedom and repression and even a small push in one direction may register bigger effects over time (Howard and Roessler 2006). We draw on the formal model to argue that in equilibrium foreign states have no incentives to deviate from their election dates to chase lower American monitoring. This is a counter-intuitive result, motivated by the strategic interaction between the principal and agent-government being monitored. We also see no clustering of foreign election dates by the US electoral calendar.

Employed as an illustration of attention costs, PBCs can help us identify the contribution liberal democracies make to the production of global public goods. If parochial domestic considerations, related to the domestic electoral calendar, are associated with lower levels of global public goods provision, we can be more certain that democracies are important providers of such goods in the first place (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021).

Conceptualizing Attention Costs

Scholarship on how the international community can help democracy started by noting the role of the European economic communities (EEC) in anchoring democracy in Spain and Greece (Coufoudakis 1977; Whitehead 1986). The end of the Cold War and the expansion of democratic government gave debate on the topic a substantial impetus. Scholars have looked at whether and how foreign aid can push countries to adopt and stick with free elections (Dunning 2004; Ziaja 2020). The endogenous allocation of aid and democracy has made identifying the effect challenging. Carnegie and Marinov (2017) rely on an instrumental variable approach to argue that the effects of EU aid on democracy are positive but short-lived. Work by Donno (2013) has argued that Western pressure for democracy only works when combined

[4]The Presidential coverage is for that period – Congressional coverage is for 1987-2016.

with local opposition capacity. Other work has shown that the Western threat of sanctions has helped bring down the number of coups around the world, a significant achievement considering that coups remain the primary way democracy dies (Koehler and Albrecht 2021; Goemans and Marinov 2014; Lachapelle 2020). Another debate has centered on the role of information, specifically, the information provided by international election monitors. Better information helps democracy take root. Over the last four decades, international election observation has become a norm, giving both domestic and international audiences credible warnings on when elections turn fraudulent (Kelley 2010; Hyde 2011b; Hyde and Marinov 2014).

The role of international involvement in democracy has not been uniformly positive. Promoting elections as a cure-all for ethnic conflict and civil war may have exacerbated violence in some cases (Birch et al. 2020; Donno et al. 2022). International institutions may help build local institutions capable of addressing grievances and stemming violence (von Borzyskowski 2019), but the concern remains. Another set of concerns deals with foreign partisan interest in elections (Levin 2016; Bubeck and Marinov 2017; Tomz and Weeks 2020). When foreigners promote candidates selectively, democracy is harmed. When Western powers show selective attention to democratic violations (Kavakli and Kuhn 2020), the effect is the same.

The rise of China as a super-power and factor in many elections has added to the negative role potentially played by autocratic states for democratic accountability (Ping et al. 2022). The propaganda war, unleashed by autocratic states, has now reached established democracies, helping extreme tickets win representation (Elshehawy et al. 2021). Scholars have wondered whether the future of democracy globally may not be at risk (Hyde 2020).

What causes variation in the availability and level of Western pressure for more democracy abroad? How can the answer to that question help establish the net effect of such pressure on democratic outcomes? We introduce the concept of *attention costs* as a novel explanation for what causes variation in the enforcement of democratic norms. We do so

in the context of a principal-agent monitoring game,[5] adding to other formal work on international monitoring of cheating incumbents (Luo and Rozenas 2018). The game is close in spirit to the "catch-me-if-you-can" dynamics described or envisioned by work on election-monitoring. In the election-monitoring literature, if incumbents know which sections will be visited and what types of fraud will be monitored, they switch cheating to other sections or types of fraud – which makes it paramount that observers do not reveal their plans perfectly (Hyde 2011a). We want to show that paying attention helps secure more clean elections, thus demonstrating that liberal states can make a tangible difference.

Model

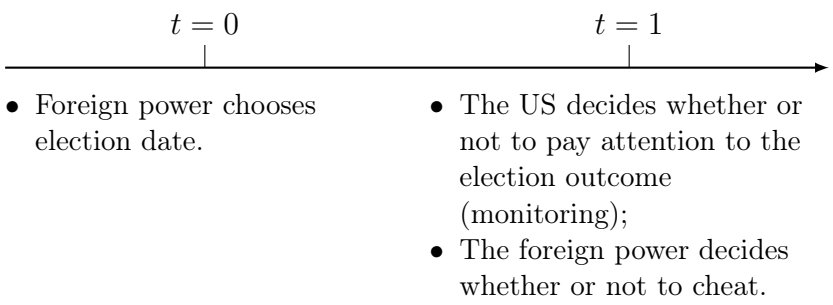
We set up a simple game-theoretic model with two actors: the US government and a foreign government about to conduct an election.[6] During the first stage the foreign actor can set the date of the election. In the second stage, both actors move simultaneously. The foreign actor chooses between "cheating" and not "not cheating" in the election. Cheating induces a biased election result with a higher vote share of the incumbent government. The US has to choose whether it will engage in a costly monitoring effort. By threatening to punish the foreign government with sanctions or reduced foreign aid in case of irregularities, the US can help motivate the incumbent in the foreign state to hold a freer contest.

For the principal, monitoring elections incurs a cost of c regardless of the election being fraudulent or not. If the US decides to pay attention, it will always catch and punish a potential fraud. Monitoring in this case implies US decision-makers following an election and being

[5]The game is well-known in game-theory and economics, where it has been applied to study problems in industrial organization or tax compliance. There is also a well-known game in the tradition of John von Neumann due to Lloyd Shapley (Leonard 2010, p. 340): The "hidden target model" concerns the problem of an atomic bomb arriving in one of two bombers – the opposing side has to choose which plane to attack first.

[6]See Ascencio and Rueda (2019) for a game-theoretic work on how parties decide which polling sections to observe subnationally.

Figure 1: Setup of the Game



ready to propose measures if malpractices are reported. However, being focused on foreign elections comes with an opportunity cost: other policies call for decision-makers' attention. Emphasis on this concept of opportunity cost of attention - as opposed to geo-strategic interests, the availability of leverage, or of merely having access to credible information,[7] is what sets our approach apart. The reason attention paid by political leaders is important is because any significant action against a cheating foreign state would require the direction of the political leadership.

We further assume that, in order to deter election fraud or other irregularities, the US threatens a reduction in something target cares about by f. We can think of this as aid, or some other resource. Being a liberal power, the US incurs a loss from a biased election (γ). The foreign actor chooses between cheating and not cheating: inducing a bias in the election increases the vote share of the incumbent government – it will derive utility $(1 + b)R$ from a biased election, and utility R otherwise.[8] If the foreign actor is caught cheating in incurs a cost of f.

[7]We assume that US bureaucracies – mostly notably the State Department – always do their job and monitor elections.

[8]We clarify that what we call cheating for purposes of the model refers to the various ways in which elections are gamed – usually by sitting incumbents or ruling parties – in order to gain an unfair advantage. Thus, intimidating opposition supporters or doctoring the voting register can be effective cheating per the model. See, for example, Schedler (2002).

Predictions

If the threat of sanctions $f > 0$ is sufficiently large, the game has no equilibrium in pure strategies. The intuition is the following: given that the foreign actor cheats, the US will always want to monitor the election. Similarly, if there is no monitoring the foreign actor will always prefer to cheat.[9]

The equilibrium probability of cheating ($p_c^* = c/f$) is increasing in the attention costs (c) because it is determined in a way that makes the US exactly indifferent between monitoring and not monitoring. For any given probability of monitoring the (expected) payoff of monitoring is reduced by increasing attention costs. The foreign power can "exploit" this and cheats more often thereby ensuring that the US is indifferent between monitoring and not monitoring. The degree to which foreign aid (f) can be withdrawn influences both the equilibrium probability of cheating and monitoring. From the perspective of the foreign actor, foreign aid determines the potential cost of cheating if the foreign actor is caught. This cost needs to be weighed against the potential gains of the foreign actor from a biased election (bR). The US anticipates this tradeoff and sets its monitoring probability accordingly (in equilibrium: $p_m^* = bR/f$). The US will weigh the costs of monitoring against the potential benefit of withholding foreign aid in order to make monitoring worthwhile and enforce fair elections. These parameters enter the decision problem of the foreign power since it anticipates US behavior in equilibrium (and hence $p_c^* = c/f$).

The first stage of the model allows the foreign power to endogenously determine the date of its elections and hence the "attention cost" for the US. By setting the date of the foreign election close to an election date in the US the foreign actor can increase the "attention cost" of the US government. However, the expected payoff of the foreign actor does not depend on the attention cost. Thus, the foreign actor is indifferent between election dates in proximity to US elections and election dates further away from US elections. Intuitively, if the country would hold its elections very close to the date of U.S. elections, the model predicts that in

[9]We report a payoff matrix and formally solve this model in the Appendix.

equilibrium the foreign actor would cheat more often and the U.S. would more often uncover an election fraud, which leads to a costly reduction in foreign aid. The foreign actor would therefore not be better off by cheating more in equilibrium as a response to higher attention costs.[10] Hence, the equilibrium in mixed strategies of our model does not predict any pattern for election dates in the foreign countries, for example 'bunching' of election dates in foreign countries around the dates of US elections. In the data, we do not see such bunching. There are alternative interpretations for this result, in which more cheating types predominate closer to US elections. While we cannot rule out such an expectation, if non-cheaters did not move strategically, while cheaters did, we would still expect to see bunching.

Principal's Attention and Agent's Cheating: An Empirical Approach

The model offers a number of testable predictions. We will focus on attention costs since that is an area that has not been studied. We need a measure of attention to foreign elections for US leaders. Since both US Congress and the Presidency have a role to play in foreign affairs, we focus on both as relevant institutions. We want a measure that taps the agenda and preoccupation of political leaders. How leaders speak (Grimmer and Stewart 2013) and the policy measures they pass are candidates for such measures – they reflect the effort policy-makers devote to a specific issue. We take advantage of the open nature of US government documents and design our own measure by drawing on advances in Computational Social Science (Lazer et al. 2009; Windsor et al. 2019).

A Novel Measure of Attention to Foreign Elections

We use *The American Presidency Project (USP)* (UC Santa Barbara) to collect information about attention and policy responses around elections by the President. We look at

[10]This is formally shown in the Appendix.

Presidential Public Papers and Executive Orders. Public papers are a collection containing papers and speeches of the presidents of the United States that were issued by the White House Office of the Press Secretary. The series constitutes a special edition of the Federal Register. The time-span of this data is 1945 to 2016.

To web-scrape the collection of Congressional documents, we used THOMAS, the first comprehensive US Congressional database.[11] Thomas was a government database superseded by Congress.gov. The data time frame was dictated by the coverage of the THOMAS database which was discontinued after 2016. The time-frame of this data is 1987-2016. We look at speeches, bills and laws. Speeches are longer transcripts of discussions that usually sum different issues about different countries and long conversations about them. Speeches also contain various documents lawmakers chose to insert in the record. Bills in our context are propositions of legislation related to enactment to certain foreign policy measures against countries to promote human rights and democracy advancement before or after election time. Laws are usually shorter in nature than bills and speeches. Laws arise from of preceding attention to an issue, picked up by speeches and bills, and represent the resulting official US policy.

The type of task we need to accomplish can be done automatically in two different ways: by first preparing a list of keywords and then retrieving documents based on their presence, or by building a machine-learning system able to take this decision autonomously. While preparing lists of keywords is often time-consuming, they remain a widely-adopted solution, given their high reliability (King and Lowe 2003). We follow the keyword approach.

We look for US government responses by searching for mentions of countries alongside with salient language, identifying actions-reactions patterns. More precisely, we created two different pattern lists. The first one includes key-phrases, each one consisting of multiple words, e.g. "sanction", "prohibit the use of funds", "condemn", "foreign assistance." These are related to economic pressure and other policy responses. The second one includes

[11]See the Appendix for more on the web-scraping.

democratization-related goals, e.g., "democratic transition", "free and fair election." We call these, respectively, x and y, key-words, listed in Table 4 in the Appendix.

We conducted targeted searches for all combinations of x and y phrases in the relevant documents in each of our sources. Generally, for a document in a given year to be relevant, it has to mention the country under study, together with a combination of at least one of the key-phrases from each list (within a specified character-distance that varies by collection). We look at a window of time (3 years) surrounding a country's election to help eliminate noise, an important consideration in big-data approaches. We note that most countries hold elections in 4 to 6 year intervals, which means that a three year window is most likely to catch information about an upcoming election, and an election that 'just passed' - once the window elapses, we most likely catch information about the next one.[12]

We quote from a bill in the House of Representatives, caught for Haiti in 1994 - a period in which Haiti experienced sanctions over its democratic record:

x_1 c
x_1 x_1
y_1 y_2 c
y_3 c

> Governors Island Reinforcement Act of 1994 - Sets forth trade, assistance, and air transport **sanctions** against Haiti, and against other nations not cooperating with US or international **sanctions**. Terminates such **sanctions** upon the reinstatement of the **democratically elected** President of Haiti and the **military**'s meeting its obligation under the Governors Island Agreement. States congressional support for: (1) the return of **human rights** observers to Haiti; (2) the creation of a multinational border patrol between Haiti and the Dominican Republic; and (3) socioeconomic and peacekeeping assistance to Haiti.[Link]

For congressional bills, in a three-sentence window (sentences marked by brace) at least one x-trigger and y-trigger from the USC pattern lists have to come in combination with the country name for a bill to be caught.[13] The quote above puts focus on three sentences where attention was directed towards country c ="Haiti". This document was caught because the

[12]We take the actual midpoint between two elections to determine the window in each case.

[13]As bills can include several paragraphs about different countries, the three-sentence window is set to avoid catching irrelevant bills for some countries where measures were taken for instance for other reasons than democratic goals.

trigger-word *sanction* from the x-list comes in combination with the country name *Haiti* and three trigger-phrases *democratically elected*, *military* and*human rights* from the y-list of democratic violations. This document is relevant because it helps put pressure on Haiti to restore democracy, by holding elections.

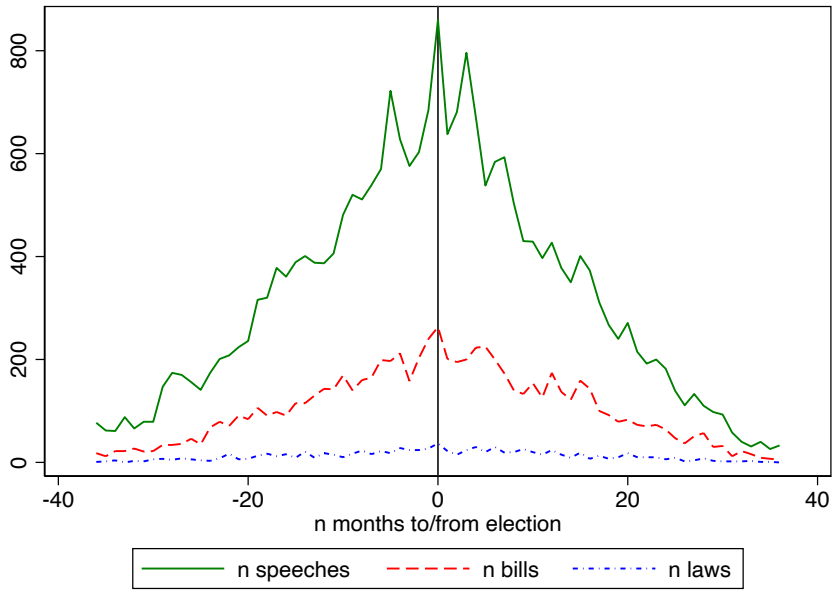
The most straightforward interpretation of our data is as a measure of attention. We catch discussion, proposed measures, and enacted policies. One could also say that our data taps into the notion of conditionality: if US decision-makers state that free elections will be rewarded, and unfree ones - punished, they are outlining a US strategy of conditioning cooperation on outcomes abroad. This is a strength of data, as compared to datasets of (imposed) sanctions (Morgan et al. 2014) or aid reductions and increases (Carnegie and Marinov 2017): discussion may convey warnings and foster compliance without the need to carry out any threats. We capture search yields relevant documents for the period 1987 to 2016 for Congress and for the period 1945 to 2016 for the Presidency. We provide access to an archived copy of each retrieved document, and note to the keyword combination that lead to a document's retrieval, to maximize the value of the repository for other researchers.

Figures 2a and 2b center the output we generate around the foreign countries' electoral calendar. At $t = 0$, when elections happen, we see a peak in speeches in Congress and, slightly after that, of Presidential public papers. Bills also inch up in numbers as elections near. Laws (subject to parliamentary procedure) are least responsive to third countries' electoral calendar. Executive orders react fast and impose sequences.[14]

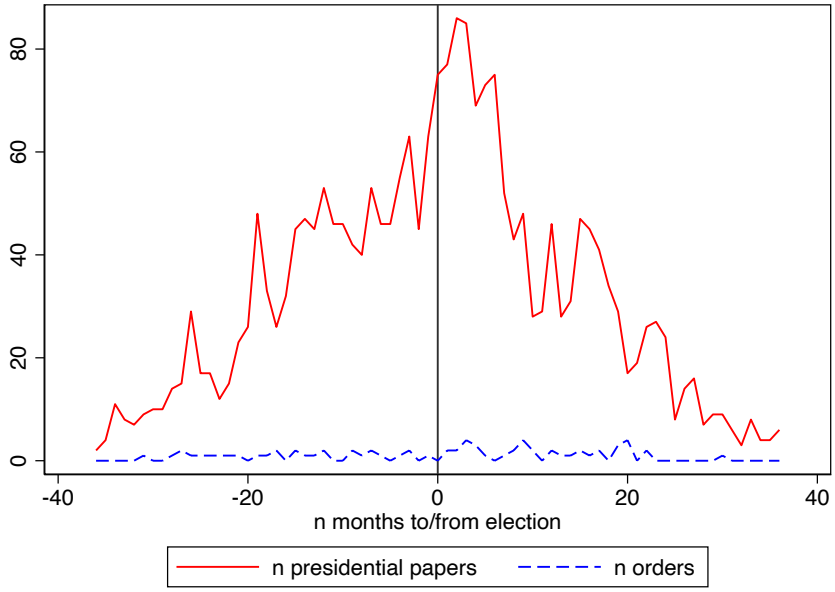
Looking through the keywords caught, we see, for the y-list keywords that the terms related to the military, liberalism, human rights, democratic transitions, repression, and coups predominate. We see in the x-list keywords, that the highest scoring policy response

[14]For each election, we took the midpoint between the most recent past election and most proximate future election. This means the number of included elections changes, there are more elections in the months close to 24 and fewer - close to month 36 (more elections have 4 than 6 year windows). We show in Appendix (Figures 6 and 7) a normalized version. In that version, documents found are divided by number of elections present in sample for month.

Figure 2: Number of Documents Critical of a Country's Election by Month +/− Country's Election Date (Sum All Elections in All Countries)



(a) Congress: 1987-2016



(b) Presidency: 1945-2016

is sanctions or threat thereof. Economic, military aid, embargoes, bans and blockades also occur very frequently.

The Appendix offers a formal evaluation of the quality of the created resource. While there is some noise across the collected documents, overall they catch what we need reasonably well.

PBC Effect on Attention

If attention costs go up in the US electoral cycle, we will see less discussion of a country's election in the record. And we can expect to see a decline in the democratic quality of such contests. We can test whether proximity to the US electoral cycle is systematically related to less US government attention paid to democratic practices abroad. We experiment with a 1.5/3/6 month windows around US elections (windows are two-sided, meaning 1.5 month covers 90 days), expecting the effects of distraction to dissipate in the longest window.

Since foreign incumbents are expected to react the most to US Presidential elections, we report here the PBC effect associated presidential elections (Figure 3). We find a significant dip in attention for the 3 month window (reported) and the 1.5 window, and we find less of an effect for the 6 month window. We do not report insignificant results on laws.

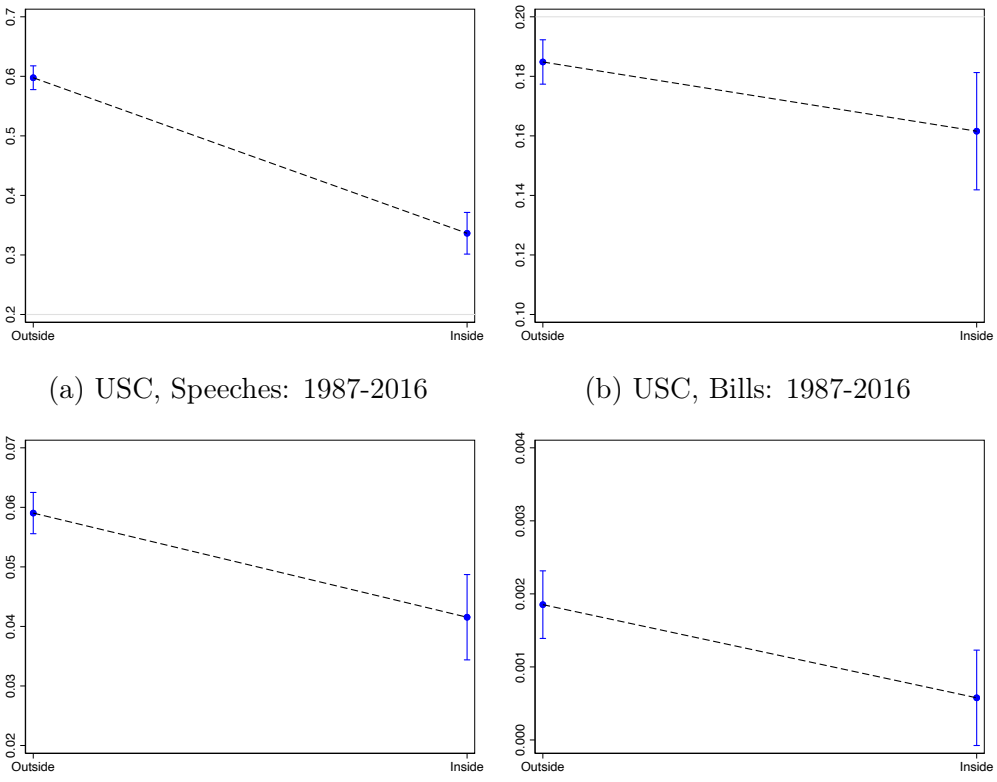
Executive orders only decline significantly within the narrower window of 3 months, surrounding Presidential elections. Based on this, one would expect the effect of declining attention to foreign democratic practices to be especially sharp very close to Presidential elections, and to be least noticeable for the 6 month window surrounding Congressional elections.

We have a plausible measure of probability of paying attention (the attention measures) and a source of variation in attention costs (the US domestic electoral calendar). We next test whether proximity to US elections translates in greater election irregularities.

PBC Effect on Election Bias

We expect a decreased in attention to lead to lower democratic quality of elections abroad. We need an indicator which tracks the concept of cheating and covers many elections.

Figure 3: Attention to Foreign Elections Close to the US Presidential Cycle



(a) USC, Speeches: 1987-2016

(b) USC, Bills: 1987-2016

(c) USP, Papers: 1945-2016

(d) USP, Orders: 1945-2016

Note: monthly mean of mentioned elections and 95% confidence interval, inside and outside of a +/− 3-month window around US Presidential elections, measures of attention capture mentions in the Congressional record or the Presidential public papers

Observer-reported fraud only captures the small (and non-random) set of observed elections so it is not appropriate. We use the NELDA dataset to create a 0 to 1 indicator of election bias (in favor of the incumbent) by summing the positive answers of five NELDA binary variables, representing positive answers to the questions: (1) before elections, are there significant concerns that elections will not be free and fair? (nelda11);[15] (2) was the incumbent or ruling party confident of victory before elections? (nelda12);[16] (3) were oppo-

[15]We assume allegations and concerns are generated by international election observers, local observers, local groups. Even with top US policy-makers distracted, there would be enough attention to report concerns with the election.

[16]We clarify that, while incumbents may be confident of victory because they are popular, in practice, their confidence has much to do with stacking the rules unfairly in their favor.

sition leaders prevented from running? (nelda13); (4) is there evidence that the government harassed the opposition?" (nelda15); (5) in the run-up to the election, were there allegations of media bias in favor of the incumbent? (nelda16). We divide the sum by 5. The resulting variable *bias* has a mean of 0.28, median of 0.2, standard deviation of 0.31, and is available for all 1945-2021 elections.

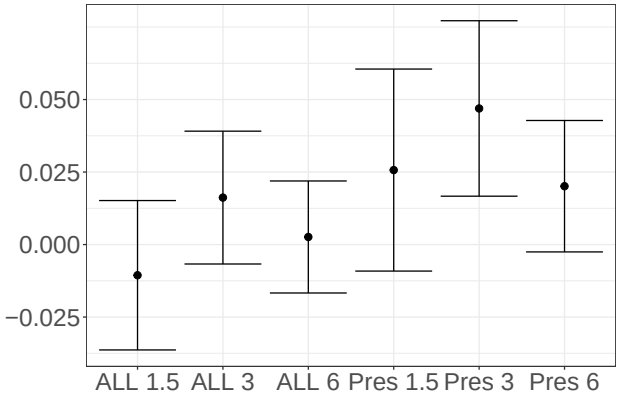
We next address the coverage of our data. Our measure of attention is based on a search for all countries with population of more than half a million. Also, in terms of the time-span of the resourced covered, we have data on Congress for 1987-2016 and on the Presidency for 1945-2016. The current version of NELDA – which is where we get our bias information – covers 4,219 elections for the period of 1945 to 2021, and includes micro-states. We want to test for the importance of attention costs, as measured by temporal proximity to US elections, on bias. Which observations should we include in the test?

Our tests should stay as close to the theory and measures we develop as possible. We have no real sense of how and whether micro-states are criticized by US leaders – since we did not search for their mentions. Given their minute size, it is likely that they are of limited or no interest to US leaders. This suggests they should not be included in our tests of attention costs and bias. Next, our Presidential measures span 1945 to 2016, and our Congressional measure pertains to 1987 to 2016. Our theory suggests that the President, who is able to act swiftly when faced with wrong-doing by foreign incumbents, is the most important US decision-maker. This is why we choose to test theory of the full temporal sample of 1945 to 2021 (we assume that the picture of attention we see would not change after 2016). This gives us some imprecision but also efficiency (we discuss how results change shortly). Finally, some elections do not feature what Hyde and Marinov (2012) call a 'minimal standard of competition'. This standard requires three things: that elections are multiparty, that opposition is allowed, and that more than one candidate is on the ballot. Elections such as those held by Communist states do not meet the standard. It is

This is why we use this variable in our index – but we show results for the components of our index, to show that findings are not driven by any single variable.

hard to see our theory applying to these cases: incumbents do not really need to cheat, in order to win an unopposed election. It could be that the US is exerting pressure to induce the country to open up its elections to political competition, but this is not the same as catching irregularities in an election that already has competition and the issue is holding the incumbent to their word that the contest will be clean. Thus, for most of our tests, we include the set of elections above the minimal threshold of competition (3,789 out of 4,219). To sum up, we have total elections 4,219 from NELDA, with data on 197 countries. Cases in which minimal competition obtains are 3,789. All countries minus micro-states are covered by our strategy, so we have information on 167 countries.

Figure 4: Voting Around the World: Increase in Bias #months to US Elections



(a) T-tests: All and Presidential only, 95% CI

	(1) 1.5 mos	(2) 3 mos	(3) 6 mos
US Pres. ele.	0.037*	0.035**	0.026**
	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.009)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Obs. (Elections)	4,162	4,162	4,162

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$

(b) OLS: Presidential only, robust SE

While we have made the argument for testing our theory on a more limited sample of elections, we start with the full sample – in which we expect the effects be less precisely-estimated and downward-biased (if micro-states are not impacted by approaching US elections). Two-way t-tests of difference show that approaching Presidential elections increase bias abroad (Figure 4a).[17] Confirming the importance of executive action, when we include

[17]Figure D8 in Online Appendix shows mean bias by month as we move out from a US Presidential election, for 18 months.

midterm contests, the bias-inducing effect of PBC weakens. We also estimate a regression of bias on proximity to Presidential elections, with country-fixed effects, linear time control and a control for 'whether elections were early or late' (nelda6, coefficient omitted). The table on Figure 4b shows a significant increase of 0.037 in bias. The effect decreases as we move away from American elections. Table 6 (Online Appendix) shows the effect is stronger if we look solely at the US pre-election period – suggesting it is the *campaigns* which distract the most.

Table 1: NELDA and V-Dem Bias – Impact of 3 months to US Presidential Elections (2-sided window)

	(1) bias index	(2) bias1	(3) bias2
US Pres. ele.	0.047**	0.27*	0.22*
	(0.015)	(0.12)	(0.11)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓		
Elections	3,119	3,119	3,119
Countries	163	163	163

bias1 - free&fair, 2 - confident

(a) OLS: Bias Index, Logit: Components

	(1) bias3	(2) bias4	(3) bias5
US Pres ele.	0.21	0.18	0.25*
	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.13)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE			
Elections	3,119	3,119	3,119
Countries	163	163	163

bias3 - opp.barred, 4 - opp.harass, 5 - med.bias

(b) Logit: NELDA Components

	(1) vdem1	(2) vdem2	(3) vdem3
US Pres. ele.	0.12**	0.16***	0.13**
	(0.043)	(0.046)	(0.045)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	2,958	2,958	2,958
Countries	158	158	158

vdem1 - irreg, 2 - intimidate, 3 - peace

(c) OLS: V-Dem Bias

	(1) vdem4	(2) vdem5	(3) vdem6
US Pres. ele.	0.0698	0.079	0.005
	(0.048)	(0.05)	(0.38)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	2,958	2,958	2,958
Countries	158	158	158

vdem4 - free&fair, 5 - opp.boycott, 6-media

(d) OLS: V-Dem Bias

Note: Robust standard errors. NELDA variables nelda 11-13, 14-15. V-Dem variables: v2elirreg, v2elintim, v2elpeace, v2elfrfair, v2elboycot, v2elfrcamp. Increase (positive coefficient) means more bias. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 1, model (1), shows our results when dropping micro-states and conditioning on minimal competition. The estimated effect of nearing Presidential elections increases in size and is more precisely estimated – model (1) in Table 1a. We also check which components of our bias index are driving the results. We run logit models on each of the five NELDA variables that constitute our bias index. With the exception of opposition barred and opposition being harassed, which are signed as expected but insignificant, the other three components are significantly predicted by approaching US elections. Thus, while the different elements of our index contribute differently to the aggregate result, it is not the case that a single component accounts for the picture we see.

We next look at the Variety of Democracy dataset – an alternative to NELDA. The V-Dem dataset also has information on elections and has some variables that can be used to check how biased these contests are. V-Dem has information on fewer elections than NELDA.[18] Tables 1c and 1d report findings on the six variables we found in V-Dem as close measures of unfair elections: a measure of intimidation, voting irregularities, election violence, free and fair contest, whether opposition boycotted (often provoked by a sense that the election is unfair) and a measure of whether the opposition is guaranteed free access to public media.[19] These measures range from 0 to 4, where 0 are the 'good' end of the scale. We reverse them, so that an increase means an increase in bias or a less even playing field. We do so in order to make the comparison with the NELDA results easier. We find that, with three exceptions – the free and fair variable, the opposition/parties boycotting elections variable and the opposition access to media variable, approaching US Presidential elections are associated with significantly more bias. The free and fair, boycotting elections, and 'access' variables have effects which are signed as expected but are insignificant. On

[18]Merging with V-Dem, we have data on 3,735 elections - difference is due mostly to lack of micro-states' coverage in V-Dem but also sometimes V-Dem does not provide election-level information – some events in Turkey, Iran, Japan, Czech Rep. – authors are in communication with the PI's of V-Dem to see why that is the case.

[19]Variables v2elirreg, v2elintim, v2elpeace, v2elfrfair, v2elboycot, v2elfrcamp.

balance, these findings suggest to us that our findings are not driven by the choice of NELDA as a dataset but by the presence of election irregularities in some contests.

Robustness Checks and Extensions

Fixed effects by year may help deal with year-level shocks hitting elections. In our specification, during a Presidential election year, the year FE covers the whole year - while the Presidential election proximity independent variable covers nearly half of the year. Setting the two against each other, we are relying for identification on a narrow set of observations. Table 2 shows that using year FE weaken the results: the coefficient of interest remains positive but insignificant. If we introduced decade FE (model 2), the result remains statistically significant. Alternatively, we account for non-linear trends in time by including the square and cube year, while also adding month fixed-effects (model 3). The result on proximity to US elections remains strong. Model 4 has standard errors clustered by country and also by year.

Table 2: Adjusting for Temporal Trends (3-month window around US Presidential elections)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
US Pres. ele.	0.020	0.033*	0.05**	0.051*
	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.020)
ctry FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
year FE	✓			
decade FE		✓		
year^1,^{2} ,^{3}+mo FE			✓	✓
cy clustered SE				✓
Obs. (Elections)	3,114	3,007	3,119	3,114
Countries	158	161	163	158

$^*p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

NT/T – non/transitional – whether US incumbent runs

Our argument envisions an importance for the political leadership in effecting monitoring and sanctions. We have checked the State Departments human rights reports – which include coverage of elections, and we see no variation in terms of the length of coverage in years with US elections. Thus, it is likely that the leadership is important and not the work of the relevant bureaucracies. We see an average of 7,380 words per year in 6,552 country-year reports for 1977 to 2013 and an insignificant increase in length during years with Presidential elections (Fariss et al. 2015).

Table 3: Increase in Bias in Elections Abroad: 3-month Window around US Presidential Elections (2-Sided)

	(1) CTRL	(2) T	(3) NT
US Pres. ele.	0.047**	0.026	0.048**
	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.018)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Obs. (Elections)	3,119	3,119	3,119
Countries	163	163	163

$^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$
NT/T – non/transitional – whether US incumbent runs

T and NT include an US Presidential election dummy split by whether US Presidential transition is certain (T: incumbent runs, NT: incumbent does not run); includes elections with min. competition, excludes microstates.

Our arguments also envisions campaigning as the principal source of attention costs for the incumbent. This means that when the incumbent does not run for re-election, we do not expect an effect on cheating abroad. An alternative argument may suggest that when US transitions are certain - i.e., incumbent has completed two terms in office or is not running, foreign leaders may rush to cheat just before, or just after the election, in order to capitalize on being friendly with one or the next administration. Thus, an additional test to verify whether our findings reflect the causal mechanism we argue for is to divide elections into

those in which an American sitting President is not running for re-election, and those in which they are running for re-election.

On Table 3, we find that only proximity to what we call non-transitional periods (when incumbent is running) drives election bias abroad. In case the incumbent is stepping down for sure, we see no effect. Thus, it is less likely that partisan considerations, related to an expected transition account for the results we see, and more likely that campaign-distractions and attention costs operate. It is important to recognize that there may be more than one explanation for our findings. We believe the attention costs explanation is most consistent with the evidence but we cannot definitively rule out other causal pathways.

Also, we find that approximately 12% of all foreign elections take place in the 3-month window around USP contests, which is close to the 12.5% expected if countries do not adjust polling dates to match the US calendar. This boosts our confidence in the results.

Conclusion

We identify the concept of attention costs, which refers to the idea that policy-makers need to monitor certain policy tasks and that when the costs of doing so increase, performance on that policy declines. Our example is from international affairs: the US needs to monitor foreign incumbents who may cheat during elections if they feel US elected incumbents are busy. US incumbents are likely to be busy when running for re-election which predicts more cheating abroad during such periods. Using a novel measure of attention, we find that attention to foreign elections declines close to US Presidential elections, as does cheating abroad.

Is the effect we identify causal? The short answer is, we cannot claim identification. We do not conduct a randomized control experiment. Our formal model gives us additional assurance that the mechanism we envision operates. The limits of working with observational data apply to our study.

Our results imply that US engagement has a modest but significant, across-the-board impact in terms of deterring cheating abroad. Our approach can be replicated for other important liberal actors, and for other events diverting attention from foreign policy concerns. Information helps but is not enough - powerful liberal actors should be paying attention as well. We show that they do - and when they do not, less of the global public good of democratic elections is provided. We thus speak to a debate that sometimes doubts whether global powers with complex agendas can ever be sufficiently motivated to exert a systematic, across-the-board effect on democracy abroad (von Soest and Wahman 2015). Our findings suggest that they can.

We should point out that the effect on bias we estimate is modest in size.[20] Still, in the trajectory of regimes it may make a difference – between an opposition victory and an incumbent digging in their heels. A level of bias on our index of 0.2 is the dividing line between democracy and autocracy – if the bias pushes to levels above or below, this means the regimes becomes democratic – or authoritarian, per the 0.5 standard accepted by V-Dem for counting electoral democracies.[21] Thus, even a modest effect of approximately 0.035 to 0.05 may play a substantial role, if it occurs at a critical juncture. In addition, a liberalizing outcome (Howard and Roessler 2006) or, conversely, an outcome with more bias, may set the country on a self-reinforcing spiral of moving towards or away from democracy, amplifying the effect of a one-time shock.

Future work can focus on other measures of electoral malpractice such as violence (Muchlinski et al. 2021), and can benefit from other uses of our attention measure – for example, with respect to protests in autocracies (Hellmeier 2021). Making elections cleaner is part of a much broader international agenda of promoting democracy (Ziaja 2020), preventing violence (von Borzyskowski 2019), facilitating development (Findley 2018) – objectives

[20]This is consistent with other findings of modest effects on democracy from foreign pressure, see, for example, Carnegie and Marinov (2017).

[21]See Figure 9 in Section D of online Appendix.

that may clash (Luo and Rozenas 2018). The model and document repository we provide can push research on this and other topics in democratization research further.

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Solution of the Formal Model

First, we formally show that there is no equilibrium in pure strategies in the second stage of the model if the US can threaten sufficiently large sanctions $f > 0$ such that $f > \max\{c, Rb\}$ (where $c, b, R > 0$). We also need the US to care about free elections i.e. $\gamma > 0$. In this case there exists no equilibrium in pure strategies due to: $R > (1+b)R - f$ and $(1+b)R > R$ from the perspective of the foreign power and $0 > -c$ and $f - c - \gamma bR > -\gamma bR$ from the perspective of the US.

Figure 5: Payoff Matrix of the Second Stage ($t = 1$)

		US government	
		Monitoring	No monitoring
Foreign	Cheating	$(1+b)R - f, f - c - \gamma bR$	$(1+b)R, -\gamma bR$
	No cheating	$R, -c$	$R, 0$

Second we solve for the equilibrium in mixed strategies of the second stage of the model. From the perspective of the US, given that the foreign actor cheats with probability p_c, The expected payoff of monitoring for the US will be:

$$p_c \cdot (f - \gamma bR) - c$$

And the expected payoff of not monitoring will be:

$$p_c \cdot (-\gamma bR)$$

Given that we solve for an equilibrium in mixed strategies where the US monitors with probability p_m, the expected payoff of the US will be:

$$\mathcal{L}_m = p_m(p_c f - c) + p_c(-\gamma bR)$$

In order to maximize $\mathcal{L}_m$ we need to choose p_m such that:

$$\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}_m}{\partial p_m} = p_c f - c \stackrel{!}{=} 0$$

We define:

$$p_c^* = \frac{c}{f}$$

Then $\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}_m}{\partial p_m}$ is positive if $p_c > p_c^*$ and negative if "<". The optimal strategy of the US is to set p_m to its minimum value of 0 if $p_c < p_c^*$ and to 1 if $p_c > p_c^*$. At p_c^* the US is indifferent between monitoring and not monitoring. We see that p_c^* increases in the attention cost c.

From the perspective of the foreign actor, given that the US monitors with probability p_m, the expected payoff of monitoring for the US will be:

$$(1+b)R - p_m f$$

And the expected payoff of not cheating will be R regardless of the actions by the US government. Given that we solve for an equilibrium in mixed strategies where the foreign actor cheats with probability p_c, the expected payoff of the foreign actor will be:

$$\mathcal{L}_c = R + p_c bR - p_c p_m f$$

In order to maximize $\mathcal{L}_c$ we need to choose p_c such that:

$$\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}_c}{\partial p_c} = bR - p_m f \stackrel{!}{=} 0$$

We define:

$$p_m^* = \frac{bR}{f}$$

Then $\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}_m}{\partial p_c}$ is positive if $p_m < p_m^*$ and negative if ">". The optimal strategy of the foreign actor is to set p_c to its minimum value of 0 if $p_m > p_m^*$ and to 1 if $p_m < p_m^*$. At p_m^* the foreign actor is indifferent between cheating and not cheating.

There is a mixed strategy equilibrium (p_m^*, p_c^*) at the intersection of the best response correspondences. We find that the probability of monitoring is lower if the threat f is high. At the same time see that p_c^* increases in the attention cost c. This is a proof of Hypothesis 1.

We can now solve the first stage of the model ($t = 0$). We plug (p_m^*, p_c^*) into the expected payoff of the foreign actor $\mathcal{L}_c$. This leads to $\mathcal{L}_c = R$ which is independent of c, i.e. in this case the payoff of the foreign actor is not dependent on attention cost, which are in our case determined by the election date. Hence the foreign actor is indifferent between election dates that are close to US elections and election dates that are further away.

In our model, foreign aid (f) is an exogenous parameter, while attention costs (c) are a parameter of choice in the first stage of our game. Considering an increase in foreign aid, which enters both the probability of cheating and the probability of monitoring, in equilibrium, the model would predict a decrease in the probability of cheating and hence, empirically, a decrease in the (expected) bias of an election.

Countries that are of strategic importance to the US usually receive substantial amounts of foreign aid. In these cases the mixed strategy equilibrium of our model predicts less cheating since the withdrawal of foreign aid is more costly. The "liberal mission" of the US becomes self-enforcing if allies are dependent on American foreign aid. Of course, for this to be the case the US should care about democracy ($\gamma > 0$) – more so than about some other, clashing geo-political objective.

Appendix for Online Distribution

A Web Scraping and Repositories **1**

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A Web Scraping and Repositories

With respect to *US Congress (USC)*, we followed a two-step strategy. At the beginning of 2016, we collected the transcripts of all the speeches on the House and Senate floors, together with the Extensions of Remarks, from THOMAS, a digital collection of the proceedings of the US Congress directed by the Library of Congress. This collection, which is no longer available online,[22] offered the official record of proceedings and debate since the 101th Congress (1989-1990). In 2016, THOMAS has been replaced by Congress.gov, which provides full-text access to daily congressional record issues (speeches) dating from 1995 (beginning with the 104th Congress). The corpus we obtained from THOMAS spans more than 26 years (1987-2016) and sums up to over 1.2 million documents. Next, we derived our collection of legislations from a dataset originally produced from the website of the Sunlight Foundation.[23]

From the American Presidency Project, we retrieved all Public Papers, which also include Signing Statements of the President, and the Executive Orders available on the website. This led to a total of over 72,851 documents. This was available from 1945 to 2016.

A.1 Data Repositories

We report obtained results in multiple formats. First of all, we offer direct access to the entire collections we scraped for conducting our study, in the form of textual (.txt) documents. This guarantees the reproducibility of our findings and permits that other researchers can directly use these resources in their work. Next, we release the produced sub-collections both in the form of textual documents and through three datasets (.csv), which present *a)* given an election, all relevant documents (named "elections-based-repository"), *b)* given an election, the summary of documents captured on a monthly basis (named "month-by-month-

[22]THOMAS remains available on the Internet Archive: `https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://thomas.loc.gov`

[23]We are able to distinguish between bills and laws. See: `https://github.com/unitedstates/congress/wiki`

repository") and finally *c)* given a relevant document, all elections that are involved (named "doc-by-doc-repository"). The outputs include identification to each document we caught, this is for the purpose of easily locating a certain document and being able to view its whole content. In the latter output, we report all relevant combinations of X and Y keywords detected in the document; this way, researchers can easily browse and select documents related only to a specific topic (e.g., "human-rights" or "democratization").

B Keyword Combinations

To create the pattern lists, we investigate the language employed in each type of document we are interested in on the American Presidency Project and the Congressional Sources, as well as the sentence structure. We identified then 10 country cases[24] from different regions, where it was established in the literature that the US has been showing attention in the promotion of elections, democratization and human rights. The cases also differ in regard to the employed foreign policy measures of the US and the democratic violations. We manually examined all documents from each source of interest and extracted all of the key-phrases that are related to either to foreign policy measure or democratization-goals.[25]

For each election-interval of interest, we processed all potentially relevant documents through the use of a sentence tokenizer. Next, for each document we grouped the obtained sentences in windows of n sentences and we kept all the windows with at least one mention of the name of the country under study.[26] As a final step, we looked in each window of n sentences for the conjunct presence of at least a trigger phrase from the democratic violation Y category and from the policy response X category. When a positive combination of these triggers was found, we halted the search process and the document was extracted and labeled as relevant. We noticed that sentence style and structure is very different across collections. We therefore decided to consider different window sizes: three-sentence windows for speeches,

[24]The countries are: Haiti, Egypt, Belarus, Zimbabwe, Iran, Burma (Myanmar), Cuba, Columbia, Angola and Ethiopia.

[25]We ran experiments on the sample of the 10 countries to examine if the key-phrase combinations from each list and the country names have yielded to catching the same documents we have manually identified. After we were able to retrieve the same results through our approach in comparison to the manual document selection, we ran experiments on all countries. We used this to further expand our trigger lists.

[26]For example, having five sentences (A, B, C, D, E), the first window will be $A-B-C$, the second $B-C-D$, and so on.

bills and laws, five-sentence windows when studying public papers and the entire content as a single window when studying executive orders. Also, as our sources differ in the language employed, we construct different customized pattern lists for Congress and the Presidency.

Table 4: Positive occurrences of trigger phrases

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
Y: Democratic Concern		
military	illiberalism	124709
human right	HR	79432
democracy	democracy	66655
democratic	democracy	54518
violence	violence	27913
election	election	23861
abuse	HR	23325
transition	transition	18545
suppress transition	transition	18545
repressive	repression	14233
rule of law	governance	12523
coup	coup	8590
arrest	repression	8143
persecution	repression	7086
democratically-elected governments	democracy, governance	6968
democracy act	democracy	6640
dictator	illiberalism	6390
democratic transition	democracy, transition	6226
intimidation	repression	5893
democratic government	democracy, governance	5241
democratization	democracy	4847
free and fair election	election	4699
religious freedom	HR	4361
freedom of speech	HR	4153
oppression	repression	2947
restore democracy	transition, democracy	2753

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
democratic processes	democracy	2209
fraud	election	1966
aggression	repression	1881
democratic change	transition	1786
democratic opposition	opposition	1767
fundamental freedoms	HR	1683
toward democracy	democracy	1432
good governance	governance	1368
support of terrorism	terrorism	1361
democratic governance	democracy, governance	1311
undermining the democratic process	illiberalism	1261
human dignity	HR	995
election results	election	942
ousted	coup	932
democracy promotion	democracy	923
democratic values	democracy	909
respect rights	HR	833
universal right	HR	830
release of political prisoners	HR	561
human suffering	HR	494
freedom act	democracy, HR	480
elected government	democracy	448
democratically elected	democracy	412
democracy solidarity act	democracy	401
electoral fraud	election	368
democratic institution	democracy	299
violence against opposition	violence, opposition	294
renounce violence	violence	278
free and fair presidential elections	election	203
free and fair parliamentary elections	election	167
equal opportunity	HR	156

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
prevent violence	violence	150
political and economic reform	reform	145
disappearances of opposition	repression, opposition	126
political reform	reform	124
support a transition government	transition	120
democracy and freedom act	democracy, HR	117
United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights	HR	108
disrupt the legitimate exercise of power	coup	108
free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections	election	99
withdrawal of pol. motivated legal charges against all opposition	repression, opposition	98
democratic outcome	democracy	90
electoral violence	violence	84
free and democratic society	HR, democracy	79
suppressing freedom	repression, HR	75
support economic and democratic transition	transition, reform	73
impede transition	transition	66
repression of democratic opposition	repression, opposition	66
help democracy	democracy	62
human rights advancement	HR	57
political oppression	repression	52
democratic resistance	democracy	49
refuse to engage in med. efforts to end political crisis in country	transition	45
hold democratic free elections	election	44
honest elections	election	42
encourage unconditional negotiations	transition	41
humane treatment of prisoners	HR	41
democratic solidarity	democracy	36
government harassment	repression	31
forced labour	HR	28
relinquish power	transition	22
undemocratic election	election	22

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
lacking legitimate presidential and parliamentary leadership	democracy	20
restore constitutional government	coup	20
submit to civilian control	transition	20
democratic goal	democracy	20
eliminating apartheid	HR	17
rigged election	election	17
support for reform	reform	12
democratic evolution	democracy, transition	12
promote election	election	12
assault on democracy	illiberalism	10
foster the growth of civil society	democracy	9
democratic path	democracy	8
refusing to accept the results of the democratic election	election	6
crackdown against opposition	repression, opposition	4
exploitative rule	governance, illiberalism	4
constitutional negotiations	governance	4
restoration of a democratic process	transition, democracy	2
elections were postponed	illiberalism	2
electoral freedom	election	2
unfair election	election	1
eliminate slavery	HR	1
end detention of political opponents	repression	0
normalization of government	transition	0
intimidation of opposition	repression, opposition	0
respect of the opposition	opposition	0
coup risk	coup	0
ignore opposition demands	opposition	0
government sponsored violence	violence	0
multi-party election	election	0
undermine reform process	reform	0
unconstitutional accession	illiberalism	0

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
recruitment, hiring, and promotion of minorities and women	HR	0
pro democracy	democracy	0
obstructing democracy	illiberalism	0
opening up political arena	transition	0
political, economic, and social deterioration	illiberalism	0
multi-party democracy	democracy	0
commitment to democratize	democracy	0
resolution of human rights abuses	HR	0
meet established international standards	democracy	0
support economic transition	transition, reform	0
freedom and individual initiative	HR	0
X: Policy Response		
sanction		111050
foreign assistance	mil aid, econ aid	82546
condemns		80757
ban		47904
embargo		41577
blockade		20269
expressing the sense of congress		14681
prohibit the use of funds	mil aid, econ aid	14253
Expresses the sense of senate		13485
decree		10843
restraint		9660
prohibits the use of any funds	econ aid, mil aid	8633
vote against		8600
restrict assistance	mil aid, econ aid	8382
boycott	trade	8140
block property	assets	6789
prohibits foreign military financing	mil aid	6100
penalty		5533
cash transfer assistance	financial	4906

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
prohibits assistance	mil aid, econ aid	3781
pressure the		3600
stand up for		3434
sanctions act		2994
asset freeze	assets	2937
import restriction	trade	2758
withhold funding	mil aid, econ aid	2732
isolation		2617
visa ban	smart	2395
prohibition		2311
Limits the amount of funds	econ aid	2098
oppose the extension of loans	financial	1786
financial sanctions	financial	1509
bars funds	econ aid, mil aid	1353
government assistance	mil aid, econ aid	1196
express our deep concern		1093
withhold assistance	mil aid, econ aid	976
travel ban	smart	872
termination of assistance	econ aid, mil aid	827
prohibit import	trade	820
prohibited from receiving such assistance	mil aid, econ aid	755
prohibit sale	trade	742
suspend all assistance	mil aid, econ aid	725
restrict aid	mil aid, econ aid	704
none of the funds appropriated in this Act shall be oblig.	econ aid, mil aid	675
proh. making any of the funds appropr. by this Act avail. for assist.	econ aid, mil aid	666
prohibit export	trade	629
limit assistance	mil aid, econ aid	522
travel and financial sanctions	smart, financial	487
condition assistance	mil aid, econ aid	478
travel sanctions	smart	471

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
prohibits military assistance	mil aid	456
financial and travel sanctions	smart, financial	441
block asset	assets	398
Withholds specified amounts of loans	econ aid	375
transactions prohibited	financial	366
trade sanctions	trade	364
prohibits foreign assistance	mil aid, econ aid	358
ban import	trade	320
suspension of aid	mil aid, econ aid	317
trade war	trade	303
deny entrance	smart	272
bars assistance	econ aid, mil aid	237
aid reduction	mil aid, econ aid	218
termination of all military assistance	mil aid	191
prohibits such financing	financial	190
economic measure		190
prohibit arms transfer	arms	189
increase pressure		183
freezing of funds	financial	181
reduction of assistance	econ aid, mil aid	180
Export-Import Bank	trade	168
export sanctions	trade	163
export restriction	trade	158
aid cutoff	mil aid, econ aid	147
suspend visa	smart	144
no assistance may be provided	econ aid, mil aid	142
withhold aid	mil aid, econ aid	140
assist. to any of the indep. states conditional	econ aid, mil aid	126
restrict the international travel	smart	114
prohibits economic support assistance	econ aid	113
eligibility for benefit		103

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
block on loans	financial	102
restrict foreign assistance	mil aid, econ aid	100
trade is prohibited	trade	97
take all available measures		90
economic isolation	trade	83
restrict travel	smart	74
reexamine its current policy		74
prohibit the entry	smart	71
Prohibits issuance of a visa	smart	66
investment sanctions	financial	63
prohibit humanitarian aid	econ aid	63
deny license	smart	61
payment prohibition	financial	60
prohibit sales or supply	trade	58
stoppage		57
blocked account	assets	52
commitment to progress		48
stifle independent voices		48
deny highranking officials of the regime entry	smart	46
block property of the government	assets	44
deny visa	smart	42
block any funds	econ aid, mil aid	42
urge all members of the intern. community to join us in condemn.		42
restricts military assistance	mil aid	41
suspend entry	smart	32
prohibiting investment	financial	25
suspend all cooperative agreements		24
speak out for democracy		19
increasing international pressure		18
may not furnish any assistance	econ aid, mil aid	14
suspend air transportation	smart	12

Continued on next page

Table 4 – continued from previous page

Trigger Phrase	*Category*	*n*
unlicensed financial transaction	financial	12
economic and political isolation	trade	10
freezing property	assets	8
limit the ability		8
certain restriction		6
harder to sell American products	trade	2
blocking government	assets	2
prohibit Export-Import Bank	trade	0
prohibit any contribution		0
cut economic benefit	trade, econ aid	0
modify the bilateral relations		0
prohibition against the provision of US assistance	mil aid, econ aid	0
withhold trade	trade	0
review assistance	mil aid, econ aid	0
restricts direct gov. to gov. economic and military assistance	econ aid, mil aid	0
review of bilateral arrangements		0
end economic agreement	trade	0
modify relations		0
suspend the eligibility for benefit		0
modify political relations		0
restricting all non-essential assistance	econ aid, mil aid	0
reviewing foreign assistance	mil aid, econ aid	0
prohibit the extension of benefits		0
freeze financial resources	assets	0
end trade agreement	trade	0
modify economic relations	trade	0
suspend military training	mil aid	0
modify military relations	mil aid, arms	0
importance to the United States of fostering		0
limit the ability to accumulate foreign exchange	financial	0
government-to-government contracts		0

Examples of Retrieved Documents

One caught document expresses "... the sense of Congress that: ... (3) the Egyptian military has exercised restraint and professionalism during the unrest in Egypt over the last two years and hopefully will remain a key mechanism through which the United States can support the people of Egypt in achieving a representative and democratic political system; and ... Directs: (1) the Secretary to submit a plan for US military assistance and cooperation with Egypt, and (2) the CG to submit a follow-up report." We also catch resolutions "....to support democracy and self-determination in the Baltic States and the republics within the Soviet Union", declaring that "it is US policy to: (1) support democratization within the Soviet Union and support self-determination and independence for all Soviet republics which seek such status; ... (3) shape foreign assistance and other programs to support republics whose governments are democratically elected; ... condemn the use of force to suppress democracy and self-determination, and view the use of force for such purposes as an obstacle to fully normalized US-Soviet relations. Directs the Secretary of State to report to the Congress on actual and threatened uses of force against the Baltic States ... Requires such report to be included in the Department of State's annual country reports on human rights practices."

We catch resolve to provide aid for democracy: "Urges that specified funds should be made available to Libya for: (1) democracy promotion and the rule of law..."

We also catch this document on Haiti's Democratic Transition: "The Congress congratulates– (1) the Haitian people for accomplishing Haiti's first transition to democracy; ... (b) United States Assistance: It is the sense of the Congress that the United States should provide significant and sustained assistance to the Government of Haiti so long as it abides by the Haitian Constitution and respects freedom of expression and human rights, ... (c) Amounts of Economic Assistance: It is the sense of the Congress that, for each of the fiscal years 1992 and 1993, the United States should provide a total of at least $100,000,000 in economic assistance for Haiti under title I of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, including at least $35,000,000 in economic support assistance and at least $40,000,000 in development assistance. (041-1990 Results/041-1990/Speeches/19910619%3.txt, date: 19910619) We also catch instances of support, that communicate resistance to threats to democracy: "Brave citizens in Lebanon and Afghanistan and Iraq have made the choice for democracy, yet the extremists have responded by targeting them for murder. This is not a show of strength, it is evidence of fear. And the extremists are doing everything in their power to bring down these young democracies. The people of Lebanon and Afghanistan and Iraq have asked for our help, and every civilized nation has a responsibility to stand with them. Every civilized nation also has a responsibility to stand up for the people suffering under dictatorship." (Results/700-2009/Papers/75848, date 2007-09-25.)

An enacted law in December 2001 shows the development of US foreign policy with respect to Zimbabwe:

y_1 Zimbabwe **Democracy** and Economic Recovery Act of 2001 - Declares it is US

y_2 policy to support the people of Zimbabwe in their struggles to effect peaceful,

y_3 **democratic change**, achieve broad-based and equitable economic growth, and

x_1 restore the **rule of law**. (Sec. 4) Directs the Secretary of the Treasury to review, and **expresses the sense of Congress** that the Secretary should instruct US executive directors to multilateral development banks and international financial

> institutions to propose review of, the cancellation or reduction of indebtedness owed by, or the extension of loans, credit, or guarantees to, the Government of Zimbabwe upon the President's certification to the appropriate congressional committees that: (1) the **rule of law** has been restored in Zimbabwe; (2) certain **election** or pre-**election** conditions have been met; (3) ... (4) ... (5) the Zimbabwean Armed Forces, the National Police of Zimbabwe, and other state security forces have become subordinate to the elected civilian Government. Directs the Secretary to instruct such US executive directors to oppose such assistance to Zimbabwe until such certification is made. Authorizes the President to waive such requirements if it is in the national interest of the United States. (Sec. 5) Authorizes the President to provide certain **foreign assistance** funds to Zimbabwe to support the establishment of **democratic institutions**, free press and independent media, and the **rule of law**. Authorizes appropriations for FY 2002. (Sec. 6) Urges the President to consult immediately with the governments of European Union member states, Canada, and other appropriate foreign countries on identifying and imposing **travel and economic sanctions** against individuals responsible for the breakdown of the **rule of law, politically motivated violence**, and **intimidation** in Zimbabwe.[27]

This law was caught because of the window of the last three sentences. These sentences include the country name Zimbabwe twice in combination with foreign policy measures from the USC x-list: *"foreign assistance"* and *"travel and economic sanctions"*, and the democratic violations and goals from the USC y-list: *"democratic institutions"*, twice *"rule of law"*, *"politically motivated violence"* and *"intimidation.*

This is an Executive Order by Barack Obama regarding the human rights situation in Burma (Myanmar) in 2012:

> Executive Order 13619 **Blocking Property** of Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stabilization of **Burma** I, Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, hereby modify the scope of the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13047 of May 20, 1997, as modified in scope in Executive Order 13448 of October 18, 2007, and relied upon for additional steps taken in Executive Order 13310 of July 28, 2003, Executive Order 13448 of October 18, 2007, and Executive Order 13464 of April 30, 2008. The Government of **Burma** has made progress towards political reform in a number of areas, including by releasing hundreds of political prisoners, pursuing ceasefire talks with several armed ethnic groups, and pursuing a substantive dialogue with the **democratic opposition**. Recognizing that such reform is fragile, I hereby find that the continued

[27] https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/senate-bill/494?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22s494%22%5D%7D&r=2

detention of political prisoners, efforts to undermine or obstruct the **political reform** process, efforts to undermine or obstruct the peace process with ethnic minorities, **military** trade with North Korea, and **human rights abuses** in **Burma** particularly in ethnic areas, effectuated by persons within or outside the Government of **Burma**, constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States. Accordingly, I hereby order: Section 1. (a) All property and interests in property that are in the United States, ... any person determined by the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with or at the recommendation of the Secretary of State: (i) to have engaged in acts that directly or indirectly threaten the peace, security, or stability of Burma, such as actions that have the purpose or effect of undermining or obstructing the **political reform** process or the peace process with ethnic minorities in **Burma**; (ii) to be responsible for or complicit in, or responsible for ordering, controlling, or otherwise directing, or to have participated in, the commission of **human rights abuses** in **Burma**; (iii) ... (iv) to be a senior official of an entity that has engaged in the acts described in subsection (a)(i)-(iii) of this section; (v) to have materially assisted, sponsored, ... in support of, the acts described in subsection (a)(i)-(iii) ... [28]

B.1 Corpus Evaluation

For corpus evaluation, we retrieve a randomly-drawn sample of 1000 documents. In our 'elections-based-repository' file. We observe that the entire repository is about 73k documents, and that the proportion of documents is as follows: speeches 71%, bills 20%, laws 2.26%, papers, 7.1% orders 0.2%. We stratify our sample so that of the 1000 documents, we have 500 speeches, 200 bills, 100 laws and 100 papers, 100 orders.

In the sample we draw, we have documents pertaining to 109 countries and 365 elections. We check whether the documents pertain to the case - election, country and relevance to democracy. We verify that the following number of documents are relevant: 245 of 500 speeches, 108 of 200 bills, 47 of 100 laws, 51 of 100 papers, and 74 of 100 orders. We report results Table 5.

Precision is defined as the number of relevant documents caught, divided by the total number of documents caught. Table 5 reports the obtained precision of each type of document. In addition, we report the Mean Average Precision (MAP): this will offer a glance

[28] http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=101361

Table 5: Precision and Mean Average Precision (MAP)

		Precision	**MAP**
USC	Speeches	0.48	0.71
	Bills	0.56	0.65
	Laws	0.48	0.80
USP	Presidential Papers	0.50	0.82
	Executive Orders	0.70	1.0

on the quality of the ranking of documents that our method considers relevant.[29] We can see that for the Congressional documents the speeches and laws score the lowest in terms of precision (0.48), however they have a higher MAP compared to bills. This means that the way documents are ranked is generally correct. Note that bills and speeches are usually longer in nature, and - frequently - sum the same policy measures of different countries in the same sentence. This causes us to lose some precision by catching more irrelevant documents.

For the Presidential documents, orders show a higher precision than presidential papers (0.70 vs 0.50), but in both cases we achieve an extremely high MAP, meaning that on top of our ranking we almost always have relevant documents. Executive orders usually only give attention to one country and specifically state the policy measure and the violation.

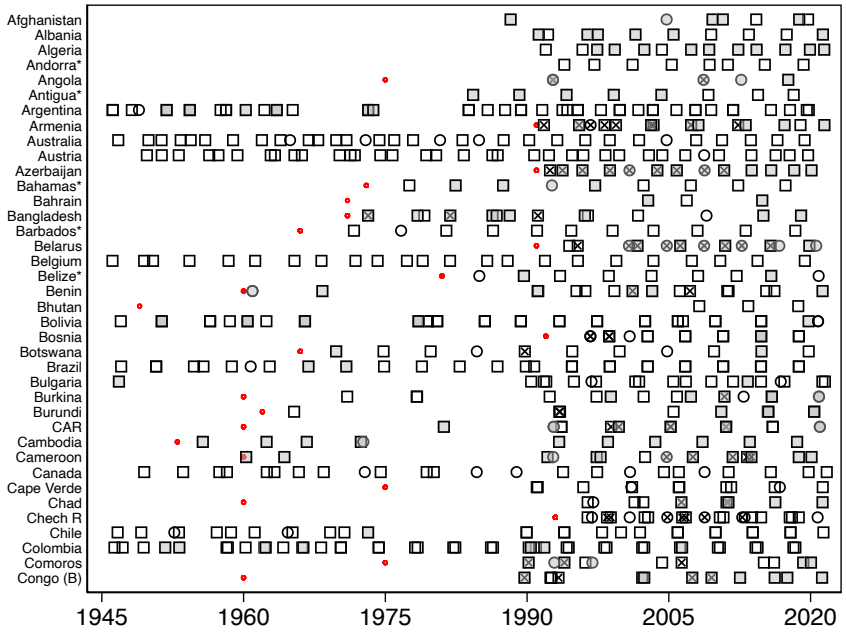
We also check our data against a different repository, containing all US economic sanctions over human rights since 1987 (Elshehawy et al. 2021). When we divide the attention data into lower three quartiles and an upper-quartile, we see that – on average – observations in the top quartile are three times more likely to be subject to American economic sanctions. For Congressional attention, the probability of economic sanctions increases from 2.7% to 12%, and for the President, from 1.7% to 5.7%.

[29]MAP is a popular metric in information retrieval that highlights how well the ranking of documents that are considered relevant by our method correlates with the labels.

C Visualization of Data Coverage

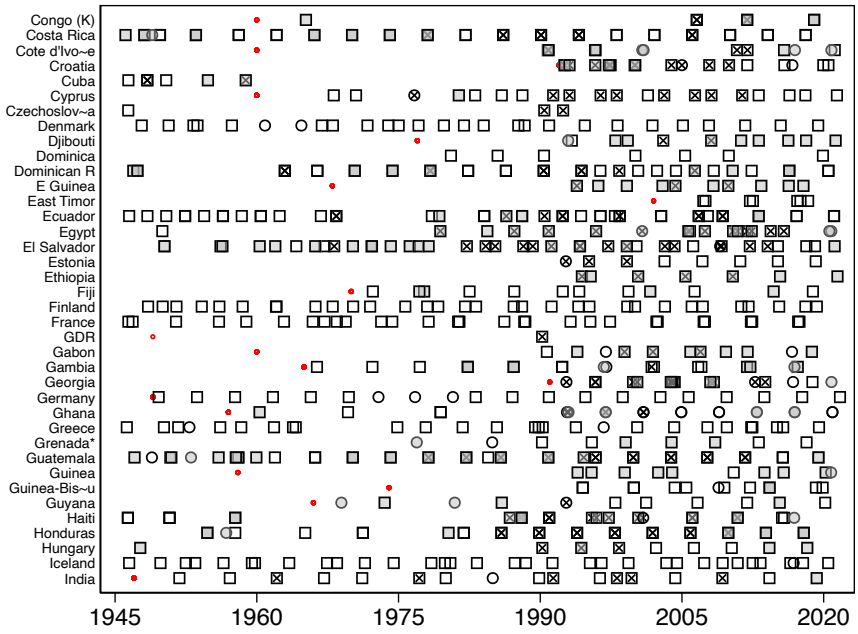
The graphs on Figures 1-4 include all election-holding countries covered by NELDA. They show independence dates, as well as whether elections featured any bias (defined as, the bias indicator scoring more that 0.2 on the 0 to 1 scale), whether they were subject to US attention (we define this as 'the election is in the top three quartiles of elections which generate one more critical document from the US government' – in terms of number of critical documents). The Figures also mark whether an election took place within 3 months to/from a US Presidential vote. We only include here elections with minimal competition (opposition allowed, more than one party, more than one candidate = nelda 3/4/5 are 1), for reasons we clarify shortly. The graphs show that there is reasonable variation when it comes to countries, elections and years experiencing attention and bias and that our results are unlikely to be driven by a very specific set of countries.

Figure 1: Elections *(part 1/5, continued on Figure 2)*



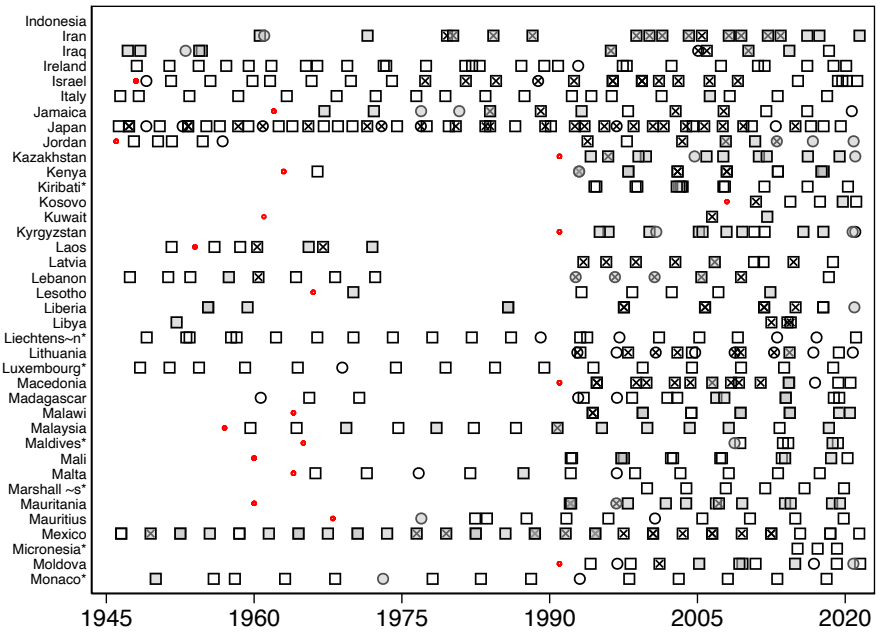
Note: □ election does not coincide with US Presidential cycle, ○ election does coincide with Presidential cycle, box/circle filled if election was biased for incumbent; if election got attention from US - × inside; red dot, independence year.

Figure 2: Elections *(part 2/5, continued from Figure 1)*



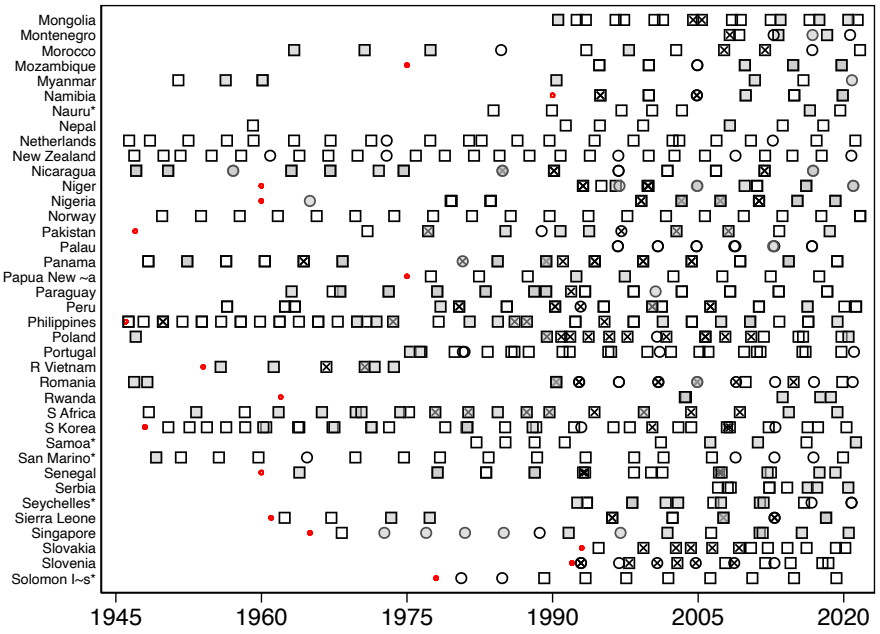
Note: □ election does not coincide with US Presidential cycle, ○ election does coincide with Presidential cycle, box/circle filled if election was biased for incumbent; if election got attention from US - × inside; red dot, independence year.

Figure 3: Elections *(part 3/5, continued from Figure 2)*



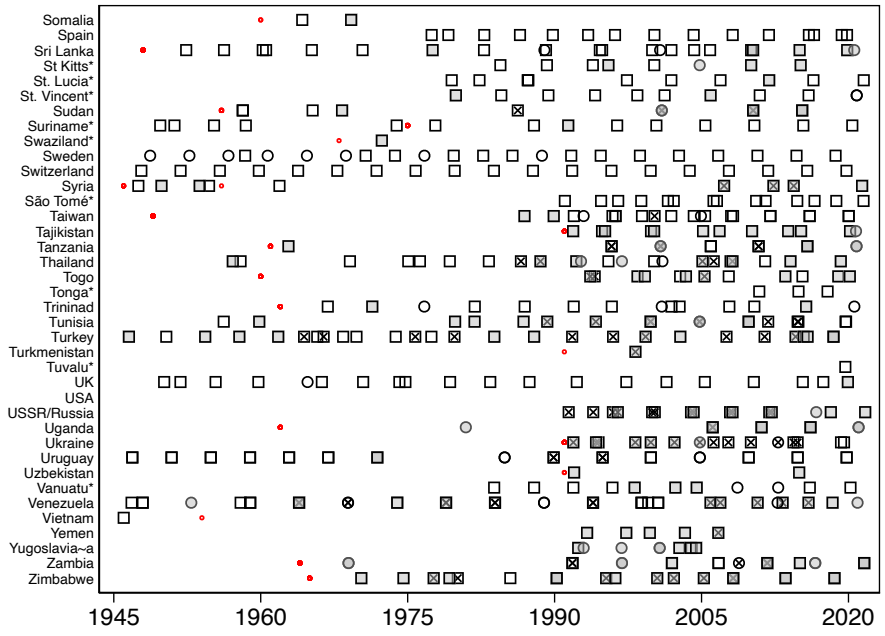
Note: □ election does not coincide with US Presidential cycle, ○ election does coincide with Presidential cycle, box/circle filled if election was biased for incumbent; if election got attention from US - × inside; red dot, independence year.

Figure 4: Elections *(part 4/5, continued from Figure 3)*



Note: □ election does not coincide with US Presidential cycle, ○ election does coincide with Presidential cycle, box/circle filled if election was biased for incumbent; if election got attention from US - × inside; red dot, independence year.

Figure 5: Elections *(part 5/5, continued from Figure 4)*



Note: □ election does not coincide with US Presidential cycle, ○ election does coincide with Presidential cycle, box/circle filled if election was biased for incumbent; if election got attention from US - × inside; red dot, independence year.

D Additional Graphs

[316]Includes elections with minimal competition (opposition allowed, more than one party, more than one candidate = nelda 3/4/5 are 1.

Figure 6: Discussion of Elections in Congress Normalized Per Election[30]

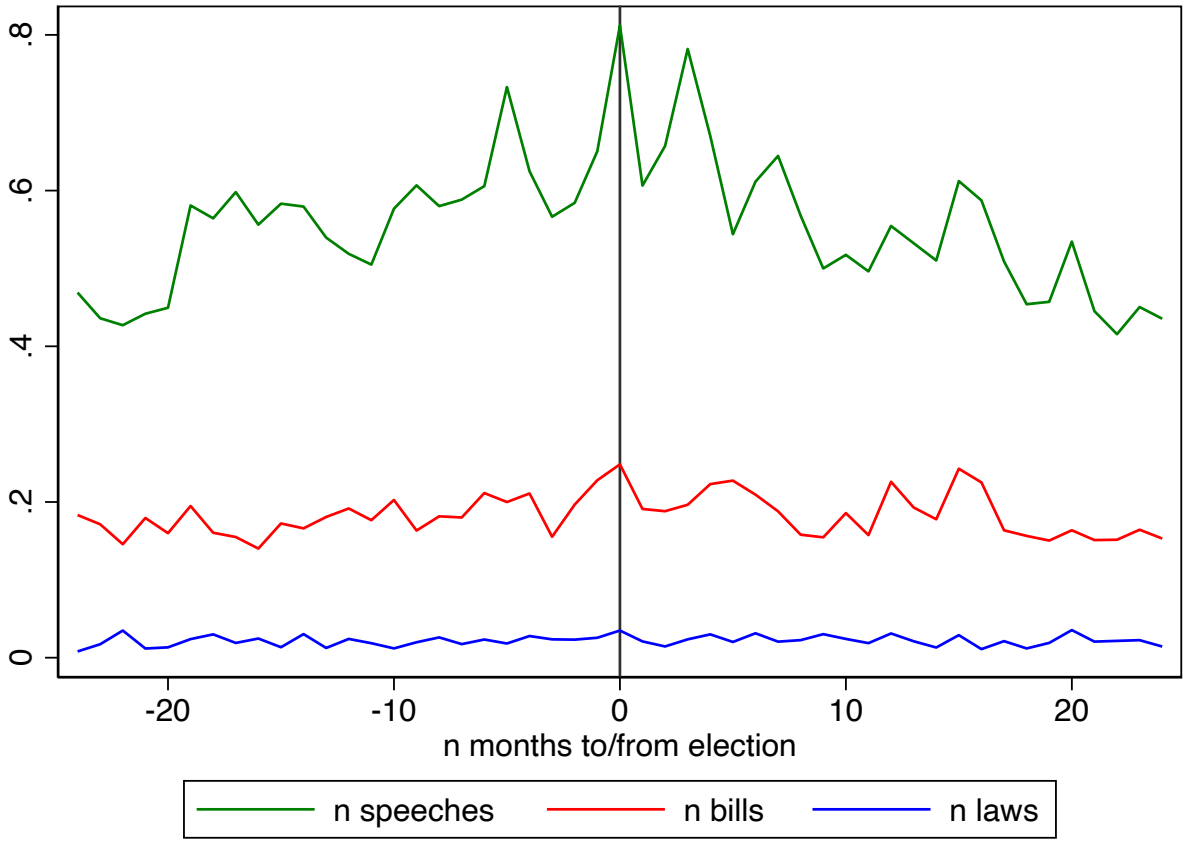
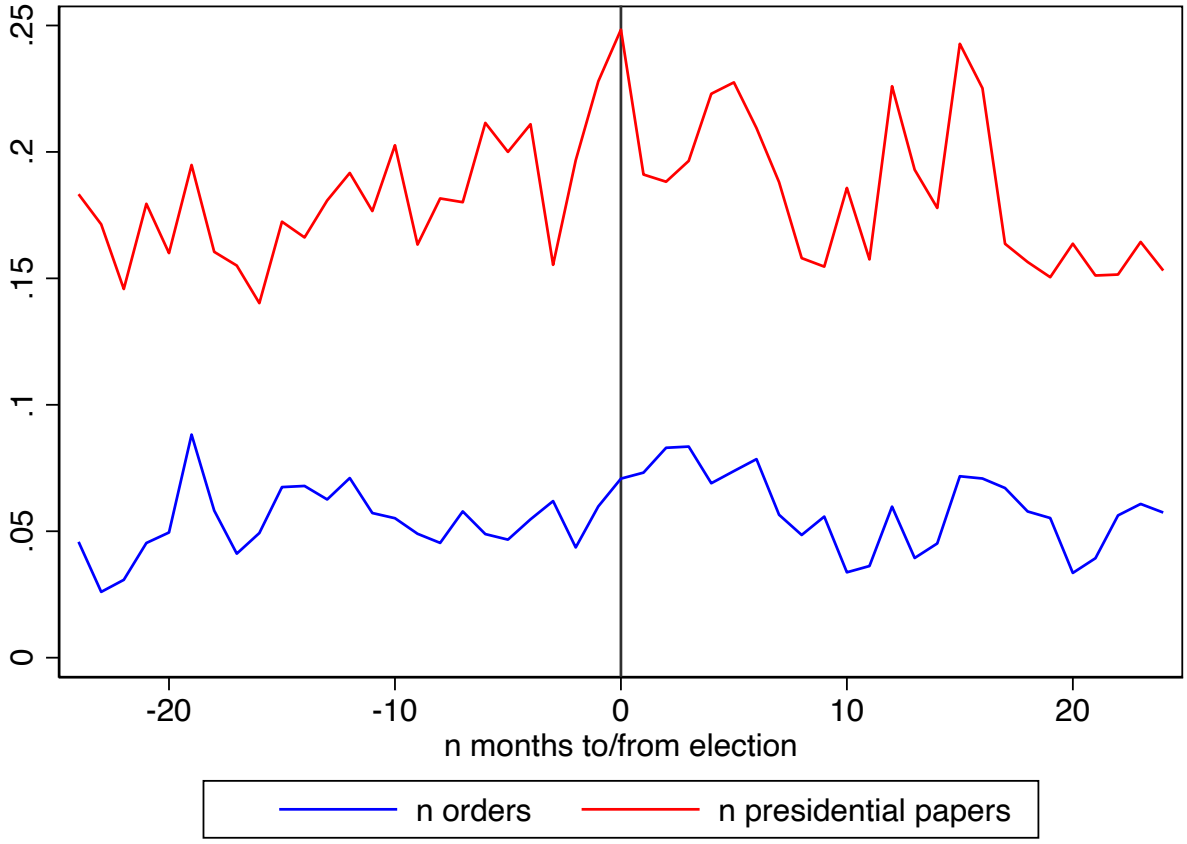


Figure 7: Discussion of Elections by President Normalized Per Election[31]



E Additional Results

Table 6: Voting Around the World: Increase in Bias #months to US Elections (2-sided window is pre- and post-, 1-sided is pre-US elections)

	(1) 1.5 mos	(2) 3 mos	(3) 6 mos
US Pres. ele.	0.037*	0.035**	0.026**
	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.009)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	4,162	4,162	4,162

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$

(a) OLS: **2-sided** window, robust SE

	(1) 1.5 mos	(2) 3 mos	(3) 6 mos
US All ele.	0.014	0.013	0.015
	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.008)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	4,162	4,162	4,162

(b) OLS: **2-sided** window, robust SE

	(1) 1.5 mos	(2) 3 mos	(3) 6 mos
US Pres. ele.	0.051*	0.046*	0.027*
	(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.012)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	4,162	4,162	4,162

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$

(c) OLS: **1-sided** window, robust SE

	(1) 1.5 mos	(2) 3 mos	(3) 6 mos
US All ele.	0.017	0.019	0.005
	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.010)
year ctrl.	✓	✓	✓
country FE	✓	✓	✓
Elections	4,162	4,162	4,162

(d) OLS: **1-sided** window, robust SE

Figure 8: Elections, bias level as a function of distance from Presidential elections[32]

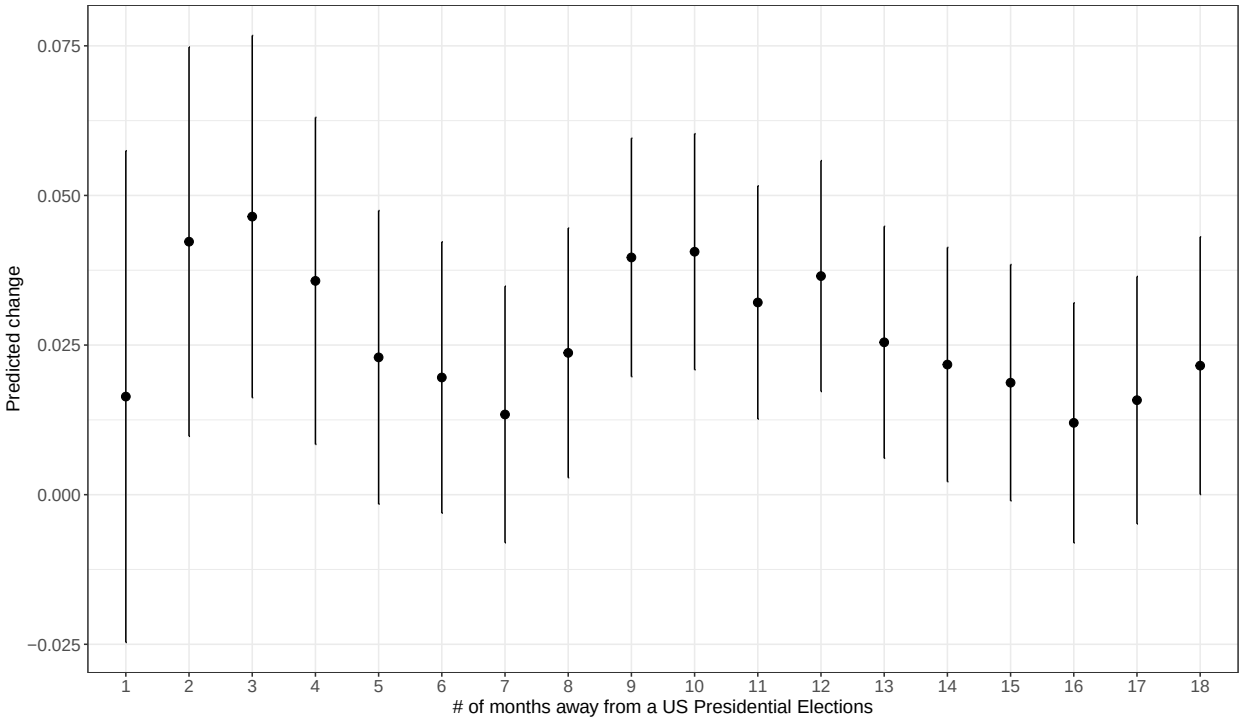
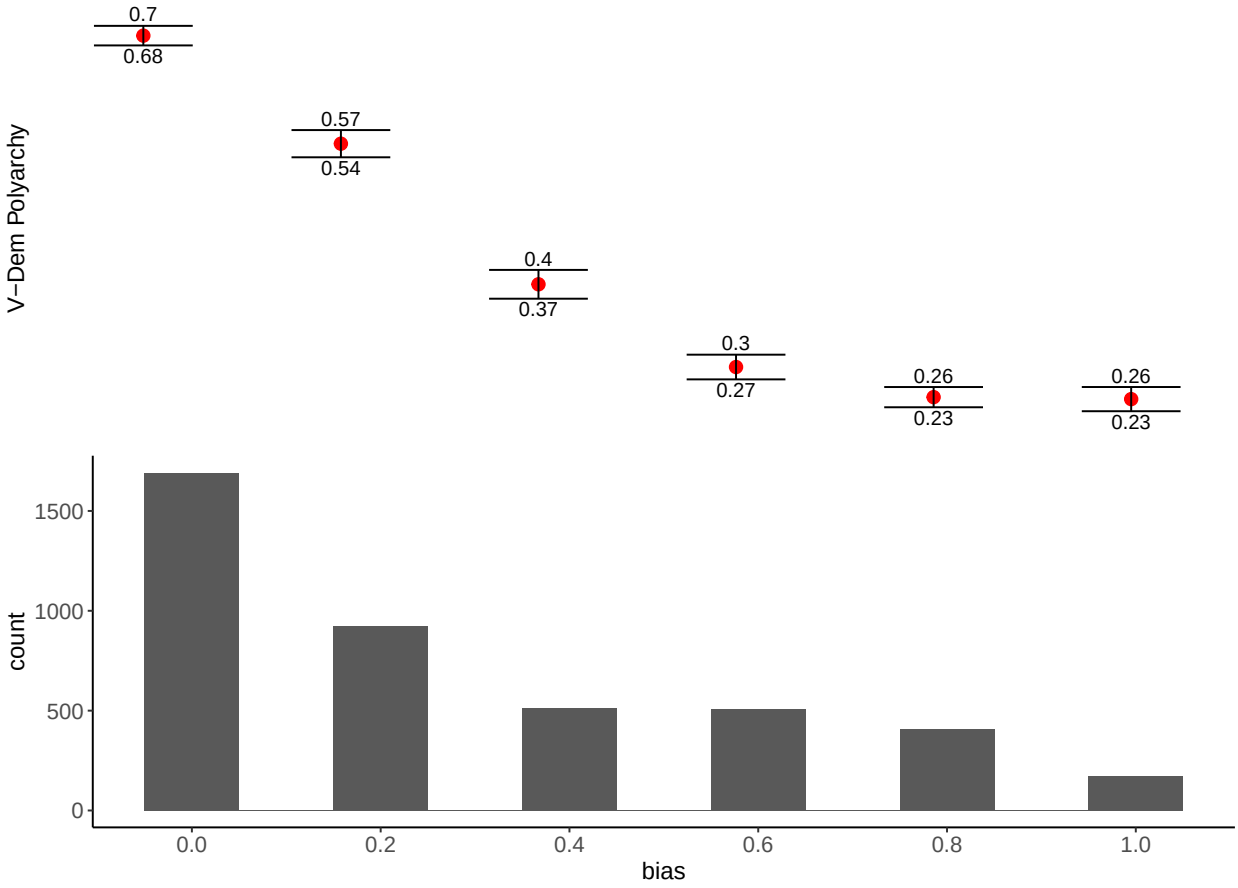



Figure 9: Elections, bias level in NELDA against V-Dem PolyarchyScore[33]