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The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition

The literature on authoritarian institutions points to nationwide elections as a mechanism for learning about the preferences of citizens. In using elections in this way, however, authoritarians face a trade-off between gathering reliable information and guaranteeing electoral victory. In this article, we explore how single-party regimes manage this trade-off and the particular types of information available to them. Using candidate-level data from Vietnam, we demonstrate that single-party regimes, in particular, forsake information on overall regime support and strength of opposition in favor of information on the popularity of local notables and the compliance of local officials with central mandates. In addition, we show that *ex ante* electioneering is less risky than *ex post* fraud at achieving these goals.

The blossoming literature on authoritarian regimes has highlighted a wide variety of information types that are associated with regime strength and longevity. First, authoritarian leaders desire knowledge of the level of support for themselves and their regime. Awareness of their popularity allows them to ask more of their citizens in terms of taxes and military service, while declining public support may require changes in national policy and public goods provision (Wintrobe 1998). Second, authoritarian leaders seek to identify potential opposition to their rule from both inside and outside the regime. All authoritarian regimes must depend on the support of insiders (i.e., military, police force, bureaucracy) for basic security and day-to-day activities. Because insiders can easily damage the regime through defection, it is essential to share limited power to keep them satisfied, especially if these insiders enjoy support from citizens (Boix and Svolik 2010; Magaloni 2006, 2008). Information on the strength of opposition from outside the regime, such as party, regional, or ethnic leaders, can be useful for eliminating or co-opting potential threats (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Wright 2008). Finally, authoritarian elites want to assess the performance of their

LEGISLATIVE STUDIES QUARTERLY, XXXVI, 4, November 2011 491
DOI: 10.1111/j.1939-9162.2011.00025.x
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subordinates, especially of subnational officials who operate far from their direct oversight (Geddes 2006; Gehlbach and Keefer 2010). Incompetent or corrupt local officials can quickly undermine performance and regime legitimacy.

According to Wintrobe, however, authoritarian regimes face a Dictator's Dilemma, whereby leaders desire the above information, but have no mechanism by which to objectively gather it. "Dictators," Wintrobe writes, "cannot—either by using force or the threat of force, or by promises, even of vast sums of money or chunks of their empires—know whether the population genuinely worships them or worships them because they command such worship" (1998, 20). Because rational citizens fear punishment for expressing criticism of the authoritarian regime, they conceal their true opinions, especially from regime leaders. No public opinion poll or intelligence service can overcome this self-imposed veil of secrecy.

An exciting literature points to nationwide elections as a helpful method of obtaining these vital types of information and thereby solving the Dictator's Dilemma (see Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009 for a review). The logic can be traced back to Sartori, who described the benefit of simulated pluralism through electoral competitions as "a means of providing the elite with a flow of information or, at any rate, with more information than the one party is generally able to gather" (1976, 232). Theories of elections as information conduits, however, only tangentially address how authoritarian regimes are also constrained in their ability to gather information through elections by their other overriding concern, which is to guarantee victory. In essence, authoritarians still face a "Dictator's Electoral Dilemma," which is how to use an election to gain information and guarantee victory at the same time.

Despite this important literature, little work has systematically addressed the trade-off between information and electoral victory, as well as the strategies necessary to resolve it in the context of national-level elections in single-party systems, where competition is between copartisans rather than between opposing parties. Filling in this gap is important. As Hyde and Marinov asked in a recent article reviewing authoritarian elections, " . . . why do countries like Cuba, Laos, Albania before 1990, Kuwait and Vietnam hold regular elections without allowing even minimal electoral competition?" (2010, 19). The importance of this puzzle is augmented when we realize that single-party systems without legal opposition stand out as the most durable form of authoritarianism (Dimitrov forthcoming (a), forthcoming (b); Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). As information provision by elections has been linked empirically to regime longevity (Geddes 2006), it appears that such

regimes get more out of electoral contests than it seems at face value. We answer these queries by showing that even in regimes where formal opposition is not allowed, elections can provide both critical information and evidence of regime strength.

One possible reason why there has not been more focus on national-level elections in single-party systems could be because the theories developed to explain information acquisition in hegemonic regimes (sometimes called single-party dominant or competitive authoritarian systems; Levitsky and Way 2002) cannot be applied seamlessly to single-party contexts. Using elections as a way to identify opposition or to co-opt them into the ruling coalition would seem impossible in an election where opposition parties are proscribed. However, we suggest that the failure to clearly distinguish the wide array of information types, which authoritarian leaders desire, has obscured the benefits single-party regimes can gain from national elections. Consequently, in this article we delineate the different types of information an election grants to authoritarians. We then use this typology to show that although single-party regimes cannot gain information on organized opposition, by increasing the openness of the elections, they can learn about quality of individual cadres, the popularity of local notables who could be provided with limited power sharing, as well as information on geographical patterns of compliance with regime diktats. Given these potential benefits, we expect that single-party regimes should have the same incentives as other authoritarian types to open up competition while using institutionalized forms of *ex ante* manipulation to limit the uncertainty of victory.

Using a unique dataset of candidate-level electoral results in Vietnam, we show empirically that regime leaders did not appear to commit outright electoral fraud, but instead relied on two subtle electoral manipulations that might be familiar to some western politicians. These included placing favored candidates in districts with weaker competition and lower candidate-to-seat ratios. Such choices served the dual role of ensuring a strong showing for top leaders, while providing detailed information on the performance of lower-level officials and the popularity of local notables.

The guarantee of electoral victory for preferred candidates came at an informational cost. By favoring high-level regime candidates with electioneering, the regime sacrificed some knowledge of the true popularity of these officials, who received a healthy vote bonus. We emphasize *some* knowledge, however, as electoral engineering is not a perfect strategy, allowing room for uncertainty about the intentions of voters. This uncertainty reveals critical information about geographic divisions in Vietnam over redistribution and its consequences for the compliance of

local leaders with central directives. We show empirically that central officials performed much better in provinces dependent on central transfers and lost almost exclusively in provinces that were net donors to the provincial budget.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 develops our typology of the information available through elections more explicitly, while Section 2 discusses alternative motivations for elections. Section 3 outlines the Dictator's Electoral Dilemma in the specific single-party context of Vietnam. Sections 4 through 6 explore the choices made by Vietnam, as a single-party regime, during its 2007 election, using regression analysis to demonstrate the mechanisms used to allow the ruling Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) to simultaneously ensure victory for preferred candidates, signal the popularity of the ruling elite, and acquire information on individual candidates and the geographic distribution of popular support for the party.

1. Elections and Types of Information

What types of information can elections provide and how is such information useful to leaders? Depending on the way they are structured, elections have the ability to provide information on underlying support for three types of actors (regime leaders, opposition/potential opposition, and regime subordinates), across three different levels of analysis (national, subnational, and individual candidates). Scholars in the literature have stressed different forms of information, based on their particular research agenda.[1]

Information on Popular Support for Regime and Regime Leaders

At its most fundamental, the Dictator's Dilemma stresses the importance of aggregate information on national-level support for the regime (Wintrobe 1998), which helps the leadership calibrate policy adjustments, permitting them to retain power and maximize their gains from office without risking unrest or conflict. In large and diverse countries, disaggregated data on regional support for the regime may even be more valuable, allowing the regime to head off ethnic, territorial, and distributional squabbles through policies targeted at particular localities. Finally, elections shed light on the support for individual members of the top leadership. In personalist systems, there may be little difference between the regime and a particular individual, but in single-party and military systems, a strong showing by an individual member of the ruling clique may require adjustments in power-sharing arrangements among

elites (Boix and Svolik 2010), which include the additional allocation of powers to ministerial or regional jurisdictions where popular elites reside or promotion of individuals to higher levels of authority in a Politburo or National Assembly Standing Committee (Sheng 2005).

Information on Opposition/Potential Opposition

Secondly, authoritarian leaders require knowledge on the strength of the regime's opposition. In cases where organized opposition is allowed, national and regional information can be highly accurate and important. The strength of organized opposition is most important for theorists concerned with the prospect of violent overthrow (Cox 2009; Wintrobe 1998). For these leaders, internal security forces and other surveillance mechanisms may not provide enough credible information to accurately assess the strength and location of potential challenges to their rule. Elections that provide some level of fairness and openness to opposition forces give leaders a better sense of the organizational capacities and popularity of such groups. If opposition groups are extremely popular and will inevitably seek greater authority, elections may facilitate a peaceful transition in lieu of a military struggle (Cox 2009). Other theorists are concerned with the electoral showing of opposition groups, as they may be placated with seats in a parliament that provides them with a limited say in policy, but in a manner that does not threaten overall regime security (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007; Wright 2008). Thus, co-optation scholars argue that representation in a National Assembly for these groups helps defuse future discontent and rebellion, as well as protecting property rights which encourages domestic investment (Wright 2008). While most co-optation analysis focuses on the national and regional levels of analysis, co-optation can also apply at the individual level, as elections may identify popular local notables (often local leaders or entrepreneurs), who could provide the kernel of a potential opposition. These individuals might also be mollified with limited power or access to national rents (Blaydes 2006; Lust-Okar 2006).

Information on Subordinates

Finally, elections can be used to discipline regime subordinates (Geddes 2006; Gehlbach and Keefer 2010), as vote tallies will reveal popular support for the local leaders and bureaucrats, who must do the regime's bidding. Many scholars stress how competitive elections allow authoritarian regimes to cull venal, corrupt, or incompetent officials

(Geddes 2006), while promoting and extending the tenure of successful cadres (Gehlbach and Keefer 2010). Scholars studying village elections in China have this third type information in mind when explaining the reasons behind the initiation of low-level democratic elections (Birney 2010; Landry, Davis, and Wang 2010; Manion 1996, 2006). In such contexts, the leaders are not concerned with imminent overthrow as they are with discontent over corruption and incompetence at the local and central levels of government. Providing acceptable performance is necessary for the long-term stability of the regime and to induce cooperation from citizens (White 1986). Cooperation from the population is also necessary to increase the rents available to the ruling elites.

Most scholars concerned with the use of elections to monitor bureaucratic compliance stress the importance of subjecting individuals to popular competition, so that the monitoring device is the bottom-up assessment of voters. Bottom-up information places a premium on unvarnished and fair elections to reveal a clear signal of constituent support. Nevertheless, rigged elections can also allow regime elites to monitor bureaucratic competence and allegiance, but in a very different way. In these cases, the signal that regime leaders read is not the vote share of a particular bureaucrat. Indeed, the bureaucrat under surveillance may not even be a candidate. Rather, the regime monitors regional compliance by assessing how well the local bureaucrat manipulates the election to assure victory and supermajorities for candidates favored by the regime. Such knowledge is most important for countries characterized by severe political and ethnic cleavages that map onto geographic boundaries. Thus, a state may have difficulty enforcing its policies or influence in a region, even where there is no organized, formal opposition challenging its rule. Monitoring the performance of central officials competing in national elections, in those regions, however, provides valuable insight on local compliance, as it sheds light on the principal-agent problem that central authorities have with local officials, who must implement central policies and reflect central strength. Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin offer an excellent description:

> Absent the usual signals that a true democracy, imbedded in a market economy, provides, the Kremlin needs ways to judge the loyalty and competence of those outside its walls, and elections serve that purpose. A weak showing, relative to the past, on the part of Putin, Medvedev, or United Russia in some oblast, rayon, or precinct signals a governor or local apparatchik who needs replacement if not outright incarceration. (2009, 136)

As we discuss in more detail below, leaders in Vietnam are able to garner this information by sending centrally nominated candidates to compete against local nominees in all of Vietnam's 64 (now 63) provinces. Central nominees are expected to win seats, as they are designated for leadership responsibilities in the National Assembly. Leaders can ascertain the level of local bureaucratic compliance by assessing the electoral performance of Central Nominees. In areas where they perform poorly, there is a high probability that local officials did not perform their jobs properly.

In practice, it may be difficult to differentiate regional support for the regime from the compliance of regional electoral officials. The key distinguishing feature is the level of *ex ante* electoral manipulation demanded by central authorities. The more electoral manipulation such as electioneering, coercion, and side-payments is expected of local bureaucrats, the less the election tells about underlying popular support in the region, and the more it informs elites about the willingness and/or capacity of local bureaucrats to ensure regime victory.

For leaders to gain any of the types of information discussed above, they must allow for some degree of openness in the elections, and therefore some uncertainty. Even the assessment of local bureaucratic compliance with regime wishes requires competition; otherwise the victory of regime candidates is a foregone conclusion. The freer and fairer the election is, however, the greater the possibility that the regime could suffer an embarrassing loss at the polls. Thus, there is a trade-off where an increase in manipulation increases the certainty of victory while decreasing the amount of information provided by the election. Managing this trade-off is the Dictator's Electoral Dilemma.

Dangers of Ex Post *Electoral Fraud*

One option for gaining information and still demonstrating regime strength is *ex post* fraud: simply hold the election, calculate the true results, but reveal them only to top leaders while publically advertising fraudulent results that demonstrate supermajorities for regime candidates. This approach is highly risky. When fraud is suspected, leaders risk the chance of creating a collective-action focal point for latent opposition in society to coalesce and take to the streets, as happened in the East European Color Revolutions (Tucker 2007).

Even when *ex post* electoral fraud is less obvious (such as targeted ballot box stuffing or destroyed ballots), it can be dangerous, as the fraud must be implemented by lower-level officials. When a regime is forced to rely on this type of internally visible fraud, it may signal its weakness to

lower-level cadres, especially when such manipulation has not taken place before. In particular, when low-level cadres have information about the relative weakness at the top they could be bolder in resisting the demands of the center or attempt to tilt the balance of the autocratic bargain further in their favor (Boix and Svolik 2010). Even more worrisome, they could be induced to desert the regime or organize against it. Because of these large costs, Magaloni (2006, 235) demonstrates formally that electoral fraud is most likely when it is needed to push results above the threshold required to demonstrate strength to regime outsiders. Regimes that can guarantee themselves large victories by other means will not employ *ex post* fraud.

To avoid the use of fraud at the ballot box, an authoritarian regime may resort to electioneering in order to garner information, while simultaneously guaranteeing victory. Previous analyses of authoritarian elections in Mexico under the PRI, Malaysia under UMNO, and Taiwan under the KMT have in fact found that authoritarian leaders rely on such *ex ante* manipulation wherever possible.[2] The analyses of Mexico are particularly interesting, because in addition to the threat of force and the distribution of selective goods, the PRI also relied on manipulation of electoral institutions to continue winning elections without using fraud (see Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001; Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003).[3]

The specific path toward managing this dilemma is determined in large part by the regime's electoral institutions and what form of manipulation it uses prior to and during the election.

2. Alternative Theories of Authoritarian Elections

Aside from the information theories, other accounts exist for why authoritarian regimes hold elections.[4] Some suggest that elections strengthen authoritarian rule by signaling regime strength and thereby deterring defection of elite politicians to and investment in real or potential opposition (Geddes 2006; Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2005). Elections can also ward off the possibility of violent leadership transition by allowing opposition forces an opportunity for peaceful victory (Cox 2009).

Other scholars focus on the use of elections as delivery mechanisms for rents (Blaydes 2006; Lust-Okar 2006) or limited power sharing (Boix and Svolik 2010; Magaloni 2008). These arguments highlight the way elections impact the efficiency of the rent and power allocation, rather than the information generated. Instead of appointing elites to positions of authority, which might be perceived as unfair, elections reward the politicians who work the hardest to "buy and persuade voters"

(Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 3). For Magaloni (2008) elections serve to enforce the power-sharing arrangement worked out between dictators and regime elites, by allowing a regularized, nonviolent interaction that allows regime elites to check the authority of the dictator. Magaloni shows this is especially true in hegemonic regimes with competitive elections, as party elites can threaten to defect to the opposition (2008, 740). For single-party regimes, like Vietnam, the sanctioning effect of defection is less credible, but elections still play a role in facilitating the promotion of rank and file cadres, who are rewarded for their service to the regime (724).

A third group touts the ability of elections to increase the legitimacy of authoritarian rule, particularly in times of economic stagnation (White 1986). Some see legitimacy as primarily domestic oriented, aimed at citizens to justify the authority of the particular leaders in power (Alagappa 1995). A different group of scholars think that elections are more about international legitimacy, conveying to a world audience and particularly donor countries that the regime meets the minimal conditions of democracy and good governance (Taylor 1996; Zakaria 1997). The legitimacy argument carries most weight in competitive authoritarian regimes, where there is at least a chance of leadership turnover. It weakens, however, after several years of flawed elections and little change in top leadership (Taylor 1996; Huntington 1991). Citizens and the international community are far less likely to take these elections seriously. The legitimacy argument is weakest of all in the case of single-party elections—elections the regime cannot lose. The international community almost uniformly views these elections as rubber-stamp elections and evidence of sham democracy, as evidenced by the Non-Free score attached by Freedom House to all such regimes.[5] Less empirical evidence is available on how citizens view these elections, but Gainsborough notes of the Vietnamese elections, " . . . informal, off-the-record conversations would reveal a less satisfied stance on the part of voters" (2005, 69). In short, single-party elections are very expensive for the minimal amount of legitimacy they provide.[6]

It is important to note that many of these scholars do not pitch their arguments as mutually exclusive, often suggesting that regimes could derive several benefits all at once. Because of the opaque nature of authoritarian regimes, the literature has been less accomplished at showing how regimes achieve these diverse goals, particularly when the techniques used to achieve can be countervailing.

We focus on elections as information delivery mechanisms in this article, because this line of questioning has the broadest implications for other theories in the authoritarian institutions literature. For example, our

assessment of elections as information-gathering devices affects the ability of the regime to use elections to signal. That is, if the regime allows a great deal of openness in the election in order to gather information, it is naturally weakening its ability to win supermajorities and thereby signal strength to potential opposition. Rent distribution and power sharing also depend heavily on precise information obtained in the election. While scholars don't emphasize it, implicit in their arguments is that regimes reward the correct cadres through promotion and access to spoils of office by depending on precise information, gleaned from their performance in the election, their popularity and their service to the regime. Regarding the legitimacy theories, if the regime is truly interested in using elections to generate legitimacy, they must allow some degree of competition. While the original purpose of the election may not have been to generate information, the competition will nonetheless have this effect.

Focusing on the information provision of elections does not obviate the above theories; it simply helps us understand more precisely how they operate.

3. Dictator's Electoral Dilemma in a Single-Party State

VCP officials, as leaders of a single-party state, want to know about their level of control over lower-level officials and how citizens feel about local officials and other local notables. They also want the delegates to transmit the opinions and criticisms of voters to the parliament, so the VCP can gauge the popularity of certain policies. Competitive elections provide a useful way for it to achieve all of these goals.

Nevertheless, the VCP is also constrained in its ability to increase competition. As a single-party state, increased competition does not increase the risk of an opposition party deposing the VCP's majority in parliament in the same way that it would in a hegemonic party system. Yet, increased competition does allow for the possibility that the current balance of the top leadership could be destabilized or overthrown by critical, out-of-favor groups. An overly competitive election could also eventually lead to the election of delegates who criticize the regime once elected. As others have noted, in single-party regimes, fragmentation at the top can be disastrous for the stability of the regime (Shirk 2007). Finally, increased competition could jeopardize seats "reserved" for the regime's most important leaders. This section explores in more detail motivations and constraints for the VCP to increase competition.

The VCP has clear incentives to generate information and increase the accountability of delegates to their voters. Former Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) Chairman and member of the Politburo, Nguyen Van An, recently wrote that VNA delegates must more closely represent the views of their constituents.[7] He lamented that most delegates, particularly high-ranking party and government officials, rarely challenge government policy and often do not publicly raise constituent concerns. Research has shown that almost 70% of delegates never speak during the public query sessions (Malesky and Schuler 2010).

Former VNA Chairman Nguyen Van An and others have expressed an interest in bringing the voice of voters into the legislative arena in order to craft better policy. Recent unpopular decisions and media revelations of corruption are partly behind this push for increased capacity in the VNA. The VCP has come under fire for bypassing the assembly to allow a Chinese company to bring its own workers to Vietnam's Central Highlands to mine a massive and environmentally harmful bauxite mine. Advocates for increased delegate assertiveness hope that by improving the quality of the delegates, delegates will highlight these issues before they become public relations fiascoes (see Nguyen 2007).

The VCP also has a great incentive to gather information about the popularity of lower-level leaders. They are especially sensitive to corruption at local levels, which has in the past sparked mass protests requiring the regime to send in security forces. The most significant conflagration flared up in Thai Binh in 1997, when thousands of peasants flooded the streets protesting arbitrary fees, taxes, and land seizures perpetrated by local-level officials. The VCP was forced to send in extra police personnel to the areas to quell the violence (Abuza 2001, 84). There have been other allegations of local-level corruption and mismanagement since then, including most recently in Dong Nai Province, where a Taiwanese MSG producer pumped untreated wastewater into the local river for nearly a decade, rendering a local river almost devoid of life. In query sessions, VNA delegates questioned the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment on whether local or central officials were to blame.[8]

There is also evidence that the VCP uses information on the popularity of its more high-ranking officials. The VCP requires that candidates who fail to win more than 60% of the vote and are also on the VCP Central Committee must undergo self-criticism (Salomon 2007).

In addition to information on the popularity of individual officials, the VCP also needs information on how much control they have over local bureaucrats. First, the regime wants to ensure that local officials abide by central directives, something they have been known to flout. Indeed, provincial governments stray from the reservation to such a

degree that Vietnamese have even invented a term, "fence breaking," to describe this action (Fforde and de Vylder 1996; Malesky 2008). In addition to ensuring that local leaders abide by central decisions, the regime is also interested in spatial patterns of control in order to maintain stability in sensitive border regions. Another series of riots in the Central Highlands in 2004 highlighted these concerns. Local ethnic minorities agitated by restrictions on religious freedom, land seizures, and also potentially outside agents, rioted for several days, again prompting the VCP to send in security forces.

This discussion highlights the main types of information the VCP requires. As other theorists have noted, and our framework above suggests, increasing competition through elections can serve exactly this purpose. In fact, Vietnam has taken steps to increase competition for seats in recent years (Gainsborough 2005). In terms of our framework, this allows it the possibility of gathering information on general regime support, potential opposition, and subordinate performance through the electoral process. They have also toyed with the possibility of increasing the number of non-Party members and self-nominated candidates to provide a challenge to lower-level leaders (Nguyen 2006). Finally, and most importantly for this study, the VCP has increased the number of candidates competing for seats. In 2007, party leaders for the first time required that all election districts have at least two more candidates than available seats (Bui Ngoc Thanh 2007), raising the number of candidates-to-seats to its highest ever level. The current candidate-to-seat ratio is 1.77 compared to 1.52 in 2002 and 1992, the first election under the current constitution.

However, these steps have come at the cost of decreasing the level of control the VCP has over the election process, and ultimately, who wins election. The increased number of candidates has caused headaches for officials tasked with running the election and ensuring a favorable outcome for the central party leaders and the Central Nominees, who are designated to fill positions of leadership in the VNA. Bui Ngoc Thanh, the secretariat of the Central Election Board, sums up the challenge of increasing competition perfectly:

> Increasing the number of candidates so that there are at least two more candidates than seats available in an election district is a new element compared with any other National Assembly election in the past. On the positive side, this means voters have more choice. On the other hand, this also means that votes are not concentrated on certain candidates, especially around those candidates with certain skills and qualities. This is a problem we must carefully study (2007, Section 2).

A further difficulty of increasing competition in Vietnam is that more open elections could jeopardize some of the regime's top leaders, including the General Secretary, Prime Minister, and other members of the CCOM and the Politburo. In the most recent election, 75 CCOM members ran, of which 10 were also on the Politburo. Unlike monarchs, who derive their legitimacy from divine mandates or tradition, VCP leaders cannot so easily make the claim that they have an inalienable right to rule. Therefore, if lower-level officials have to stand election for national office, so too then should higher-level officials. With the increased number of candidates-per-seat, these leaders theoretically have a 40–50% chance of losing depending on the district. More likely, however, they risk winning election by embarrassingly low margins.

In the last election, however, the VCP went to lengths to ensure that this did not happen. In the most recent election, all 75 CCOM members were elected, and only one Politburo member won with less than 80% of the vote. The question then becomes: how did the regime manage to increase competition and secure victory for favored candidates, while at the same time generating valuable information and improving the quality of the candidates?

In the section below we show that Vietnam used two *ex ante* mechanisms to manage the increased competition in a way that generated information on regime support and bureaucratic compliance while managing risk. First, Vietnam divides candidates into two groups: (1) Candidates nominated by central party and government institutions (Central Nominees) and (2) Candidates nominated by local electoral commissions, chaired by provincial leaders, and organized by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) (Local Nominees). By stacking the electoral deck in favor of Central Nominees through districts with higher candidate-to-seat ratios and less-competent challengers, the regime can assure that regime favorites, designated for leadership in the VNA, have a high probability of election. However, the 165 Central Nominees are obligated to run throughout the country, in one of the 182 electoral districts, which are organized by the provincial electoral commissions. By monitoring how Central Nominees perform in their local electoral districts, the regime receives excellent information on provincial-level compliance with central initiatives.

In addition, Central Nominees compete against Local Nominees in every district. Since Central Nominees can only win one slot, and all electoral districts have at least one and sometimes two other seats allocated, the leadership also receives information on the popularity of local officials and other local notables, such as entrepreneurs, lawyers, and doctors who are nominated by their local electoral commission. The

popularity of local notables is distorted somewhat as an indirect effect of the manipulation in favor of Central Nominees, but it is still revealing as a means to identify underperforming local officials and, alternatively, local notables, who can plausibly be co-opted.

In the following sections, we provide rigorous empirical foundation for these mechanisms, through an analysis of candidate-level data. We do not suggest that all authoritarian regimes will structure elections in exactly this way; rather we simply demonstrate how these goals can be accomplished in a unique and understudied setting, without resorting to electoral fraud. Interestingly, the particular electioneering mechanisms highlighted in our discussion will be immediately recognizable to students of advanced democracies.

4. Empirical Evidence of Mechanical Solutions to the Dictator's Electoral Dilemma

To establish these arguments, we use a rich set of candidate-level data from the 2007 National Assembly election as empirical evidence for the efficacy of these measures. Our data contains a full list of the candidates running for office, as well as their biographical information, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, which was gathered from Vietnamese newspapers and government documents. The dataset also includes occupational information and nomination background, which are important in terms of distinguishing which types of candidates were able to benefit from these manipulations. Before delving into the analysis, we step back to introduce the Vietnamese electoral system and discuss the possibility of *ex post* fraud in the election.

Vietnam's Electoral Institutions

Vietnam has held elections with some level of competition since at least 1981 and has slowly increased the amount of candidates-per-seats. Prior to the 2007 election, the National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC) passed a resolution requiring that each electoral district have at least two more candidates than the amount of seats available in the district. Each district in Vietnam is allotted two to three seats.

Vietnam, like other present and former Communist nations, adheres to the Leninist conception of the vanguard party, which is enshrined in Article 4 of the Vietnamese Constitution. It states that the Communist Party "is the force leading state and society." As such, no other parties are allowed to compete in elections.[9] In recent elections Vietnam has allowed independent candidates and self-nominated

candidates to compete, but these candidates should not be viewed as a *de facto* opposition party. Neither of these groups meets conventional definitions of a party, which is an organized attempt to take control of government (Schattschneider 1942) through free or nonfree elections (Sartori 1976). These candidates are not only prohibited from organizing in order to compete for election as a group, but they are also subjected to the same vetting procedures that the party-backed candidates have to go through. As such, the competition in the elections is not between organized parties, but between individuals selected or approved by the party.

A unique feature of the Vietnamese election is that the demographic, political, and functional composition of the next VNA body is planned in some detail by the NASC prior to the nomination of actual candidates. This blueprint is submitted to the provincial election boards, who then nominate candidates to fill the slots. Column 1 of Table 1 provides the stated targets for a variety of political and demographic characteristics of VNA delegates. After targets are announced, the NASC and the Central Election Board, which share many members, then coordinate with the separate election commissions within provinces to ensure that enough candidates fulfilling these characteristics are elected.

In the managing of the elections on the ground, the Central Election Board and the NASC delegate authority to Vietnam's 64 provincial officials.[10] First, provincial authorities decide which candidates will compete against one another in each election district. With each province having at least two districts and some as many as nine, this translates into a great deal of discretion in how competitive the provincial authorities want to make each district. Second, provincial party leaders have the power to nominate and vet most of the candidates that will run in the provinces. Although the Central Election Board distributes a framework for what descriptive characteristics the eventual provincial delegation should have, the provinces have the ability to nominate and vet specific individuals who will fill those roles. This local nomination process allows for the selection of local notables, providing information on the quality of local officials.

However, the central Party leadership does not abdicate all nomination and vetting duties to the provinces. During the run-up to the election, the Central Election Board works closely with the NASC and the Standing Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) to draw up a list of candidates and vet them. The vetting process occurs in parallel with the vetting in provinces, where each province also sets up an election commission to draw up lists of candidates. In the most recent election, of the 875 candidates finally nominated to run, 165 were centrally nominated (meaning that their names were put forward by central party,

TABLE 1
Proposed Structure of the Standing Committee and Final Results

Candidate Type	Standing Committee's Proposed Structure	Nominees after Third Negotiation	Elected	Deviation from Planned Structure
Total Delegates	500	875	493	–1.40%
Centrally Nominated[a]	167	165	153	–8.38%
Party	10	11	11	10.00%
Office of the NA[a]	84.5	81	75	–11.24%
Government	15	20	20	33.33%
Fatherland Front	31	33	27	–12.90%
Judiciary	1	2	2	100.00%
Office of President	3	2	2	–33.33%
Military/Police	18	16	15	–16.67%
Locally Nominated[b]	331	715	343	3.63%
Ethnic Minorities	90	168	83	–7.78%
Women	150	290	127	–15.33%
Nonparty	50	150	43	–14.00%
Delegates Under 40-years Old	70	230	68	–2.86%
Incumbents	160	146	138	–13.75%

Notes: Possibly because the structure was up for debate, the breakdown of the centrally nominated candidates does not exactly equal the 167 (one-third of 500) set aside for central nominees. Table 1 was compiled by numbers taken from Hồng Khánh, "Sẽ giảm thành viên Chính phủ là đại biểu Quốc hội" [The National Assembly Will Reduce the Delegates from the Government].VnExpress 2/23/2007. Available at http://vietbao.vn/Xa-hoi/Se-giam-thanh-vien-Chinh-phu-la-dai-bieu-Quoc-hoi/10997169/157/ (accessed 8/15/2011). Bùi Ngọc Thanh, "Cuộc Bầu Cử Đại Biểu Quốc . . . "; Nhân Dân, "Tăng đại biểu chuyên trách, giảm đại biểu là thành viên Chính phủ" [The National Assembly Will Increase the Full-time Delegates and Decrease the Government Delegates], 24/2/2007. Available at http://www.nguoidaibieu.com.vn/Trangchu/VN/tabid/66/CatID/1/ContentID/8155/Default.aspx (accessed 11/25/2007). VN Election Website. "Thông kế về Ứng Cử Viên [Statistics About the Candidates].

[a]Actual structure listed 84 to 85.

[b]Plus two alternates.

government, and military organizations and they were vetted by the Central Election Board) and 710 were locally nominated (meaning that they were nominated by local agencies and were subject to vetting by a provincial election board). Local Nominees are always residents of the provinces in which they compete, while Central Nominees can reside anywhere but are generally high-ranking officials living in Hanoi, the national capital.

Once the nomination process is complete, the centrally nominated candidates are sent to provinces, where they compete with the locally

nominated candidates for the same seats. When the Central Nominees are assigned to a province, the provincial election officials, in coordination with the central election commission, place the candidates in specific electoral districts. In 2007, only two districts out of 182 had two centrally nominated candidates competing directly against each other.

This mechanism of geographically distributed central candidates provides an ideal mechanism for evaluating how well local officials deliver votes for the regime, as provinces can be judged on how many of the Central Nominees made it through. The system is particularly ideal because only a handful of the 167 Central Nominees ran in the electoral district (or even the province) for which they previously served. Thus, low performance of a Central Nominee in a particular district is never a referendum on their previous performance or competency. In every case, citizens have little direct experience with the Central Nominee, though they may be familiar with the most famous through the news media. As a result, the electoral results of a Central Nominee can rarely reflect citizen satisfaction with an individual leader. By contrast, the performance of local government officials (predominantly Local Nominees) is an opportunity to monitor the performance of officials with whom a large number of citizens have interacted or at least experienced the effects of their initiatives. When Local Nominees are nongovernment notables, such as lawyers or businessmen, it provides information on possible targets for co-optation.

Information on local bureaucratic compliance is derived from how well provincial electoral commissions performed in hitting regime targets for delegate types. In Table 1, we detail the results of the vetting processing in Column 2 and the electoral results for each targeted demographic in Column 3. What is remarkable is how close the electoral boards came to actually achieving their stated goals. For example, the blueprint for the 2007 Election called for 150 women, 90 ethnic minorities, and 70 delegates under 40 years of age. The election returned 127 women, 83 ethnic minorities, and 68 delegates under the age of 40.

Thus, Table 1 provides three interesting facts about regime control over elections in Vietnam. First, central authorities obviously believe they have some degree of influence over electoral outcomes, which is why they can be so bold about directly targeting such narrow demographics. Second, the fact that the final numbers roughly parallel projected proportions indicates that the regime's levers of manipulation work. But third, these results are achieved imperfectly, reflecting, as Gainsborough (2005) suggests, a degree of electoral risk due to unpredictable voters that cannot be entirely stage managed and thus provides useful information. Sharp electoral losses for candidates nominated by the VFF and Office of

the National Assembly (which is similar to the U.S. Congressional Research Service) offer evidence to this effect.

Evidence of Ex Post *Electoral Fraud*

How did the Vietnamese central authorities manage to so neatly replicate their pre-election structural objectives? When analyzing an authoritarian electoral system, the first cut into empirical analysis should always begin with the most obvious explanation—outright electoral fraud. Testing for fraud is critical for assessing the information-signaling trade-off as well. As noted above, a regime that can manage to successfully engage in *ex post* electoral fraud is able to garner information with minimal *ex ante* manipulation, but still convey regime strength by publishing the fraudulent results. This could have been accomplished by barring voters from voting or by coercing them to support certain candidates. More insidiously, they could also resort to ballot box stuffing or lying about the results. As noted above, such measures are potentially destabilizing and regimes try to avoid using them, but they still take place relatively frequently around the world.

In this section, we show that fraud is not widespread in Vietnam, or at least it is low enough that there is some level of competition for the candidates that are allowed to run. While one can never know for certain, there is little evidence that the regime resorts to systematic violence or coercion against voters. Vietnam does require all citizens to vote, which is responsible for the 99% turnout figures (although many voters have their relatives fill out their ballots for them, a process known as "proxy voting"), but there are few reports of outright coercion by scholars allowed to observe and media outlets. Koh (2006) and Gainsborough (2005) write in their VNA election observations that the process was relatively peaceful, compared to neighboring Cambodia, but that proxy voting may have had a great impact on the level of turnout.

Another form of manipulation of great concern is ballot box stuffing or outright fabrication of the results. Evidence of such manipulation is obviously difficult to observe directly. While we cannot definitively discount that any fraud existed (this is difficult to do in any election!), we have reason to believe that its practice was limited. First, we have firsthand accounts from election officials expressing their disappointment with some of the results. While all members of the CCOM and Politburo were elected in 2007, an unprecedented 12 centrally nominated candidates lost. As noted above, this caused problems for election and regime leaders who had tabbed some of these

candidates for important roles in the assembly (Bui Ngoc Thanh 2007). This implies that there was uncertainty in the outcome of the election, which suggests that the results cannot be completely driven by ballot stuffing or fraud.

As further evidence, we use the electoral forensics approach proposed by Beber and Scacco (2008). Their method of final digit analysis suggests that if an election is free of fraud, the final digit should be uniformly distributed, with each digit from 0 to 9 having an equal chance of being selected. This means, that each digit 0–9 should occur with a probability of 10%. They take advantage of the fact that humans do not randomly generate numbers, even when they are trying. In particular, subjects prefer to select small numbers over higher numbers and zero.

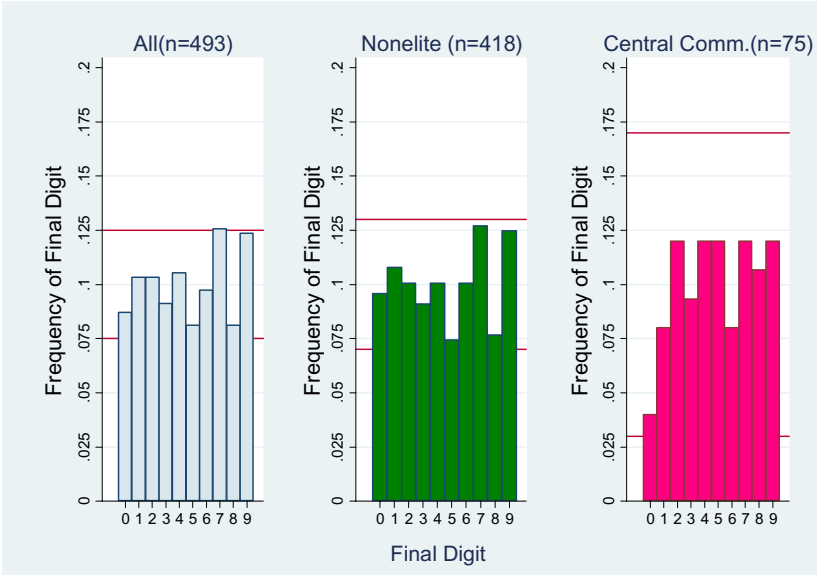
To conduct this analysis, one should use the data at the level the fraud is presumably committed. Therefore, Beber and Scacco assess the returns from Nigerian polling stations. In Vietnam, we do not have the actual returns from the polling places. The only data that is released is the final percentages for the winning 493 delegates. However, if the data was fabricated, the regime would most likely fabricate the data made public. For information purposes, the regime should conduct a genuine election, but then report phony percentages for the media. If this is the case, we should see evidence of the fraud in the published winning percentages, which were given to the level of hundredths of a percent.

We conducted the analysis for all candidates and then divide them into Central Committee members and other members to see whether the regime manipulated the results for preferred candidates. The results in Figure 1 do not allow us to reject the null hypothesis that the percentages were uniformly distributed. Among all candidates and non-CCOM members, results are within a 95% confidence interval. In short, fraudulent electoral returns for the whole sample appear unlikely.

The results for the CCOM members, however, could raise some suspicions. In particular, there are few zeroes reported, which is consistent with the patterns suggested by Beber and Scacco. However, because of the relatively small-n of the Central Committee membership, the percentage of zeroes still falls within the 95% confidence interval. Thus, the low number of zeroes could simply result from normal sampling error.

In sum, while we cannot completely reject the possibility of fraud in the election, the evidence from the results, observers, and our analysis of the final digit suggests that if fraud did occur, it was not to such a level that the election was stolen or analysis of electoral returns is meaningless.

FIGURE 1
Analysis of Fraud in Electoral Returns Using Final Digit, by Candidate Status



Note: Figure 1 presents the distribution of the final digit in the reported vote totals for each candidate. Analysis is divided into three panels: 1) All Candidates; 2) Nonelite Candidates; and 3) Members of the Central Committee, the country's top leaders. Solid gray lines denote a 95% confidence interval around the distribution. Notice that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of a uniform distribution.

Subtle Manipulation: Ex Ante *Electioneering for Favored Candidates*

If Vietnam does not resort to fraud to achieve its targets, it must resort to other methods of *ex ante* manipulation if it hopes to mitigate risk. Our analysis of the structure of the electoral system and the composition of districts and candidate placement reveals several observable opportunities to influence election results. First, and most obviously, the regime bars opposition parties from running and has control over vetting independents, self-nominated candidates, and party members.

Nevertheless, in the interest of creating competition to generate information, some candidates must be placed at risk of defeat. As noted above, the regime has two additional mechanisms at its disposal to ensure its preferred candidates do not lose out to other locally nominated candidates, while still permitting competition. First, the Central Election

Board can alter the candidate-to-seat ratio to ensure that its favored candidates face easier districts. Although the regime requires that each district have at least two more candidates than seats, they can still tinker with the size of the districts in order to make certain districts easier to win. Mathematically, the candidates in districts with a 5-to-3 candidate-to-seat ratio have a 10% greater chance of winning seats than candidates in districts with 6-to-3 or 4-to-2 ratios.

Secondly, the Central Election Board could, in cooperation with provincial electoral commissions, also limit competition by placing preferred candidates in districts with weak opponents. Because provincial commissions control the composition of electoral districts, they can decide to shield preferred candidates by running them against opponents with no political background or education. Or, they could choose to run all candidates in districts with strong competition. In short, regime leaders can limit competition even within an ostensibly competitive system by controlling the quality of the opponents faced by elite candidates. Both of these mechanisms have been discussed by Vietnamese political analysts and academics (see Gainsborough 2005), but they have never been subject to systematic, quantitative analysis.

Empirical Analysis of Manipulation

Our first empirical test is to construct variables that allow us to determine whether the regime demonstrated a pattern of favoring candidates using these two mechanisms.

Accounting for the candidate-to-seat ratio is a straightforward ratio of the candidates in an election district to the seats available. Nine out of ten Politburo members ran in safer districts. The bias in district seating appears to reach further, however, to all elite VCP members. Seventy-nine percent of the members of the CCOM were in low-ratio districts compared to only 69% of the other candidates. This difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.[11]

Assessing the competitiveness of a district is more complicated, as an objective measure of candidate quality is difficult to operationalize. Our second-best alternative is to rank districts based on the *ex ante*, observable political importance of the candidates a particular candidate will face in the electoral district. To do this, we created an additive index of individual candidate power rankings, which is the number of officials holding visible and powerful political positions, in each electoral district.[12] A score of one was given for each candidate in a district that was an incumbent (I), member of the Politburo (P), VCP Central Committee (CCOM), the provincial People's Committee Chairman (or Mayor,

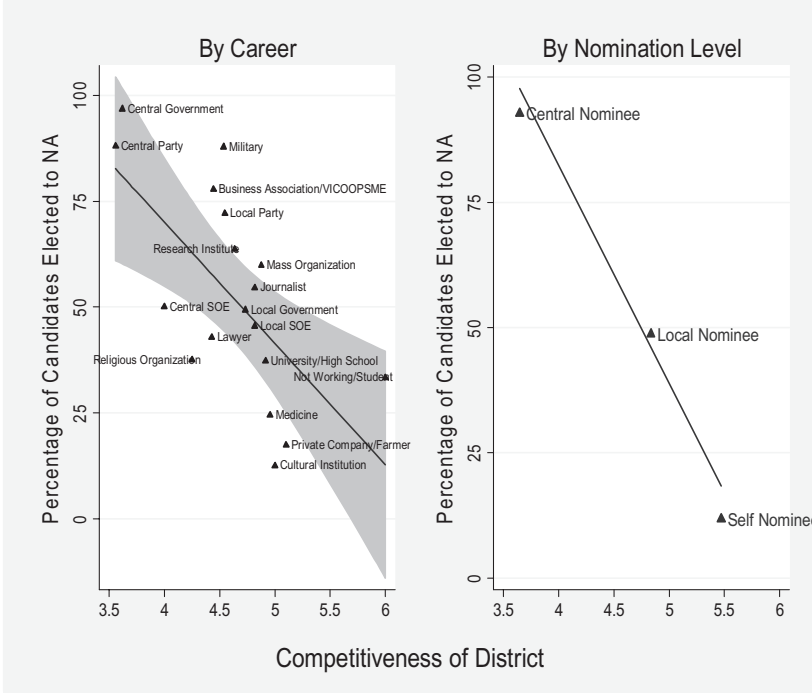
PCOM), and the provincial People's Council (the local legislature, PC), and a Central Nominee (CN). An individual's power ranking is subtracted from the total power ranking of the candidates in district, so that the District Competitiveness Index is a measure of the difficulty of the competition faced by each candidate.[13]

Weighting for the importance of each of these characteristics is built automatically into the index construction, as the categories are not mutually exclusive. Members of the Politburo, who are individually more well-known and powerful than a candidate who only serves only on CCOM, must also serve on the CCOM in addition to the Politburo. As a result, they would receive a power ranking of 2, compared to the CCOM member, who would receive a score of 1. The same is true of local notables who compete against Central Nominees: People's Committee Chairmen with Central Committee seats and those without. District Competitiveness Index scores range from 1, implying that candidate *i* is the most important candidate in a weak district, to 11, meaning the candidate is the weakest candidate in a highly competitive environment.

Figure 2 assesses whether district competitiveness (on the x-axis) plausibly enabled higher voter percentages (on the y-axis) for certain candidates. The figure is divided into two panels. The first panel disaggregates candidates by career type, the second level by nomination level. It is immediately obvious that there is a strongly significant negative bivariate correlation (−.78) between district competitiveness and election results across candidate types. Candidate types facing easier competition unsurprisingly had better election results. Central nominees and high-ranking government and party officials (with power ratios of about 3.5) had much easier pathways to victory than locally nominated candidates (who faced power ratios of 5 on average), local government officials, and especially self-nominees and professionals such as lawyers and entrepreneurs (average power ratio of 5.5). Focusing on the elite leaders in Vietnam, the average district power ranking faced by a CCOM member was 3.7, compared to 4.7 for other candidates. This difference is strongly significant with a t-statistic of 4.89.

The above analysis, however, is subject to problems of unobserved heterogeneity. Perhaps a low power ranking does not demonstrate that elite candidates were favored directly, but that elite candidates possess qualities that allowed them to achieve high levels of success in government (experience, education, talent) that their competitors do not have. Differences in the power rankings themselves could be a function of candidate backgrounds. Alternatively, the unobserved heterogeneity could be at the local level, as provincial election boards have a lot of

FIGURE 2
Relationship between District Competitiveness and Vote Totals, by Career Type and Nomination Level



Note: Figure 2 presents the relationship between District Competitiveness, a 1–11 point scale gauging the prestige of the competition a candidate faces in his/her district, and performance in the 2007 election. Panel A disaggregates scores by Career Type and Panel B by Nomination Level. The shaded region of Panel A represents a 95% confidence interval around the predicted relationship ($r = -0.78$). In Panel B we can see clearly that Central Nominees receive an easier road to victory.

discretion over candidate placement. Perhaps the bivariate results are being driven by a handful of conservative provinces.

To address these issues, we use our two measures of manipulation as dependent variables to determine whether certain preferred candidates were placed in easier-to-win districts. Our key independent variables are whether or not a candidate was a Central Nominee, the delegates expected to serve on the NA Standing Committee or head legislative committees, and whether they are members of the Politburo.

In Table 2, we test to see whether our findings about manipulations in favor of elite candidates are robust to adding provincial-level fixed

TABLE 2
Determinants of Favored Candidates:
Who Ran in Easy Districts?
(robust standard errors in parentheses)

	A. Candidates Per Seat (Marginal Probability of Easy District)			B. Power Ranking (1–11 Point Scale)		
Independent/Dependent	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Centrally Nominated	0.00927	0.0764*	−0.0478	−1.161***	−0.990***	−0.996***
	(0.0406)	(0.0439)	(0.0362)	(0.139)	(0.162)	(0.147)
Politburo	0.202**	0.198*	0.286**	−0.688	−0.670	−0.809*
	(0.100)	(0.101)	(0.128)	(0.455)	(0.492)	(0.471)
Constant			0.575***	4.850***	5.776***	6.291***
			(0.110)	(0.0644)	(0.324)	(0.382)
Provincial Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Demographic Variables (Yes/No)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	875	875	875	875	875	875
(Pseudo) R^2	0.00216	0.0286	0.481	0.0741	0.087	0.360
Root Mean Squared Error			0.346	1.682	1.676	1.457
Log Likelihood	−528.9	−528.9				
χ^2	1.944	29.21				

Notes: Models 1–2: Marginal effects of probit implemented using STATA (Dependent Variable: Candidates-Per-Seat measured as binary: 1 if 5/3 District and 0 if other); Models 3–6: OLS Regression in STATA (Dependent Variable: Power score measured 1 (easy district) to 11 (hard district)); Demographic variables include: Gender, Age, Ethnicity, Education, and Birthplace of Candidate; Provincial fixed effects include all 64 provinces. Model 3 employs OLS, as several provincial fixed effects perfectly predict 1, causing a loss of many observations.
***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

effects and controlling for individual candidate-level characteristics. Demographic controls include dummy variables for whether the candidate is male, a member of an ethnic minority, and practitioner of any religion (predominantly Buddhist or Catholic), as most candidates do not list a religion and most voters are not explicitly motivated by it. Age and the educational level of the candidate (1. high school; 2. undergraduate; 3. master; 4. doctorate) are used to capture skill level. Education is an imperfect proxy, however, because of the ideological nature of higher-level education in the 1960s and 1970s. It is not clear that education level is closely correlated with skill. Finally, not all candidates run in the provinces where they are from. In a country such as Vietnam where birthplace is viewed as important, we could expect candidates running in their *home districts* to win higher percentages.[14]

Panel A of Table 2 presents the marginal probability of being placed in a high candidate-to-seat district and includes six models. In Model 1, we use the baseline test of Central Nominee and Politburo without the demographic variables. Model 2 includes demographic variables. Finally, Model 3 uses provincial-level fixed effects in a linear probability model to isolate candidate-level factors from provincial determinants.[15] For each model, the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable for the district type. The variable was coded 0 if the ratio was 1.67 candidates per seat (a 5/3 district) and coded 1 for all others. Confirming our predictions above, we find consistent evidence that the regime systematically places more important candidates in mathematically easier-to-win districts. Controlling for demographic variables, we find that Central Nominees were 7.6% more likely to be placed in the mathematically easier 5/3 districts.

Once provincial fixed effects are added, however, only the Politburo bias survives, where we learn Politburo members are 28% more likely to be placed in easier districts. This reveals two important findings. First, Politburo members are treated differently than other elite members of the Communist Party. Secondly, once we add provincial fixed effects, the bias shown to Central Nominees becomes insignificant, meaning that the important variation in the placement of elite central leaders takes place across provinces and not within them. This finding reveals important evidence of the variation in provincial-level compliance with electoral objectives that authoritarian officials care deeply about. We return to this issue in the final section of this article.

In Panel B, we test whether regime leaders were systematically placed in districts with weaker opposition candidates. Here, we use an OLS specification for the 11-point scale to ease interpretation, but all results are robust to using a *poisson* distribution. These models are laid out in the exact same way as Panel A. We find that centrally nominated

candidates are placed in districts that are almost a full point easier than other candidates. Politburo members receive an additional 0.8-point advantage. Bias shown in favor of competition survives the addition of provincial fixed effects in Model 6. The results of these tests are suggestive of qualitative interviews conducted alongside the data collection—the regime did indeed place elite candidates in districts with weaker competition, and to a lesser extent, districts with more seats compared to candidates.

5. Electoral Implications of Regime Manipulation

Did Vietnam's electioneering have an impact on candidate performance? Figure 2 offered some evidence of a relationship; however, a simple bivariate model could mask other variables that are also impacting percentages and correlated with the competitiveness of a district, biasing the size of the effect. Therefore, we introduce a set of control variables to rule out omitted variable bias on the impact that the candidates-per-seat and the power ranking have on the likelihood of winning election and the percentage vote share received by the candidates.

We use the following model: $y_i = \beta_1 C / S_i + \beta_2 DC_i + \phi_1 X_2 + \phi_2 X_2 + u_i$, where y is one of the two dependent variables and C/S and DC represent the *candidate-to-seat ratio* and *district competitiveness* faced by a particular candidate *i*. These are the key causal variables in the analysis, as they capture the marginal impact of authoritarian manipulation of election results. X_1 is a matrix of candidate-level political control variables, and X_2 is the matrix of demographic control variables used above. The dependent variables (y) for the analysis are: (1) whether or not a candidate was selected to the VNA, which we assess using a *probit* specification; and (2) the vote total for winning candidates that we assess using OLS.

Unfortunately, the regime did not present the results of the losing candidates, so we are forced to rely on the relative differences in voting percentages among candidates who won. This fact is in itself an indication of the attempt by the regime to simultaneously garner information and project regime strength. To measure political status we employ five variables.[16] *Party* is a dummy variable, taking a value of 1 if a delegate is a member of the VCP. *Incumbency* indicates how many times the candidate has been elected to the VNA before. The more times the candidate has been elected, the more well-known s/he is, and the more likely the candidate is to win with a high percentage. Alternatively, Lust-Okar (2006) argues that incumbents are disadvantaged in terms of the amount of pork they can offer, while new candidates are not constrained by the

regime or recent history and can therefore offer the moon. *Local Legislature* is a dummy variable, coded "1" if the candidate is a member of the provincial People's Council (the provincial legislature). *Local Government* is a dummy measuring whether the candidate is a member of the provincial People's Committee or other provincial government bodies. We use these two measures of local positions to test whether voters are likely to reward or punish candidates, who they know intimately and whose performance they have been able to monitor closely. *Central Committee* equals one if the candidate is a member of the Party CCOM, the most important political institution in the country. Because of their high standing within the VCP, they should receive higher vote percentages. Finally, we add a dummy if the candidate is a *Businessperson*. There is a rich literature linking democratic transition to the development of middle-class voters, who represent the propertied classes (Barro 1999). Tsai (2006) has challenged these arguments in the case of China based on survey evidence, but election of entrepreneurs to the halls of power may offer another test of the revealed preferences of voters.

The results are organized into two panels in Table 3. Panel A displays the marginal probability of election for each independent variable based on a probit model, while Panel B displays the impact on vote shares, analyzed using OLS, of the 492 winning candidates for which data is available.[17] Each panel contains four basic models. Models 1 and 5 are the baseline models containing only the possible electioneering interventions. Models 2 and 6 and Models 3 and 7 add the demographic and political variables, respectively. Models 4 and 8 retest the previous models using provincial-level fixed effects to control for unobserved variation across provinces that cannot be measured directly.

In all specifications, the mechanisms of manipulation suggested above had significant effects on the likelihood of victory and the winning vote total. Candidates-per-seat had the predicted effect; candidates facing fewer opponents had a greater likelihood of winning and won by higher margins. Being in a 5/3 district increased the chance of election by 23% and the predicted vote percentage by 5.2% in the fully specified models. This finding was robust across different specifications. District competitiveness also had the predicted effect across all three models. Each additional point on the ranking reduces a candidate's probability of victory by about 10% and reduces vote percentage among winning candidates by 1.5 points.

Other control variables are revealing. All else equal, voters favored older candidates, education, incumbency (each previous term increases the probability of election by 40% and 1.7% higher vote share), and members of their local legislature, who have some policy experience.

TABLE 3
Effectiveness of Manipulation on Probability of Election and Vote Share
(robust standard errors, clustered at province level, in parentheses)

Independent/Dependent Variable	A. Marginal Probability of Election to National Assembly				B. Vote Shares				
	Baseline	Demographic	Political	Provincial FE	Baseline	Demographic	Political	Provincial FE	Elites
Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
District Competitiveness Index	–0.109***	–0.0959***	–0.0835***	–0.100***	–1.593***	–1.393***	1.388***	–1.526***	–1.167***
	(0.0108)	(0.0113)	(0.0115)	(0.0134)	(0.306)	(0.300)	(0.296)	(0.263)	(0.247)
Placement in Easy (5/3) District	0.234***	0.250***	0.257***	0.231***	9.261***	8.111***	8.352***	5.217***	4.824***
	(0.0379)	(0.0397)	(0.0426)	(0.0567)	(1.072)	(1.079)	(1.078)	(1.156)	(1.077)
Male Dummy		0.0474	0.0390	0.0351		2.983***	2.476**	1.629*	1.241
		(0.0408)	(0.0431)	(0.0447)		(1.148)	(1.127)	(0.921)	(0.900)
Minority Dummy		0.0913*	0.0344	0.0203		3.672***	2.500**	–2.475*	–2.790**
		(0.0472)	(0.0509)	(0.0662)		(1.261)	(1.245)	(1.311)	(1.271)
Religious (Dummy)		–0.190*	–0.115	–0.108		–8.728***	–7.071***	–2.465	–1.635
		(0.106)	(0.124)	(0.134)		(2.058)	(2.093)	(1.971)	(2.053)
Age (Years)		0.0159***	0.00926***	0.0101***		0.235***	0.182***	0.169***	0.116**
		(0.00242)	(0.00268)	(0.00282)		(0.0596)	(0.0602)	(0.0506)	(0.0476)
Degree (1 HS to 5 Professor)		0.150***	0.140***	0.155***		0.327	0.272	0.236	–0.324
		(0.0272)	(0.0291)	(0.0309)		(0.537)	(0.521)	(0.419)	(0.413)
Candidate Ran in Home District		0.0429	0.0269	0.0145		3.357***	2.888***	1.144	2.755***
		(0.0389)	(0.0408)	(0.0488)		(0.974)	(0.979)	(0.977)	(0.987)
Member of Communist Party			0.0799	0.0911			0.524	2.891**	2.716*
			(0.0641)	(0.0675)			(1.660)	(1.423)	(1.440)
Incumbency (Previous Terms in NA)			0.392***	0.396***			1.748***	1.752***	0.653
			(0.0649)	(0.0667)			(0.611)	(0.522)	(0.514)

(continued on next page)

TABLE 3 (continued)

Independent/Dependent Variable	A. Marginal Probability of Election to National Assembly				B. Vote Shares				
	Baseline	Demographic	Political	Provincial FE	Baseline	Demographic	Political	Provincial FE	Elites
Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Member of Local Legislature (Dummy)			0.186***	0.176***			2.946***	2.917***	3.938***
			(0.0397)	(0.0420)			(0.945)	(0.742)	(0.763)
Private Business Owner			−0.254***	−0.266***			−8.033***	−8.158***	−7.235***
			(0.0791)	(0.0817)			(2.449)	(2.586)	(2.632)
Member of Politburo									6.988***
									(2.348)
Member of Central Committee									2.966***
									(0.999)
Central Nominee									3.338***
									(0.994)
Constant					73.19***	57.08***	58.36***	58.12***	59.8***
					(1.368)	(3.191)	(3.514)	(3.633)	(3.521)
Provincial Fixed Effects	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	875	875	875	875	492	492	492	492	492
Clusters	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64
R^2/Pseudo R^2	0.0973	0.190	0.280	0.295	0.142	0.227	0.264	0.617	0.648
Log Likelihood	−541.3	−485.6	−431.9	−422.8	−1839	−1813	−1801	−1641	−1620
χ^2	113.6	189.9	22.7	274.7					

Notes: Dummy = Dichotomous Variable; LN = Natural Log. For Models 1–4, Dependent Variable is whether candidate was elected to Vietnamese National Assembly or not. Marginal effects of probit implemented in STATA. For Models 5–9, OLS implemented in STATA coefficients

***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

They were significantly unlikely to vote for private entrepreneurs, who on average received 8% fewer votes and were 25% less likely to be elected than the average candidate.

In sum, results of this analysis show that even controlling for candidate-specific attributes, an increased candidate-to-seat ratio and a higher district-power ranking greatly reduces the probability of election and predicted election percentages for winning candidates.

6. Administrative Control over Provinces

Thus far, our analysis has privileged individual candidate characteristics, explicitly holding provincial-level characteristics constant through the use of fixed effects. This provided confirmation that there are patterns of manipulation that are consistent throughout the country. Nevertheless, as we highlighted in our theoretical section, authoritarians may also require information on regional patterns of compliance by local officials with central directives. Knowing this information will allow them to adjust redistribution policies to assuage malcontents or head off threats of localized unrest preemptively using more direct means.

For Vietnamese authorities, the most important indicator of spatial support for the regime is the performance of Central Nominees, comprising high-ranking government and party officials. As we noted above, top Vietnamese officials fretted publicly about the defeat of 12 of these candidates and the poor performance of another 12 who barely surpassed the 50% threshold.

One of the key factors debated by Vietnamese analysts about support for or against the regime is the level of central transfers. For 50 provinces, the provincial government budget exceeds their local revenue stream, which means they are net recipients of central funding. For 14, including HCMC, the country's economic powerhouse, the local revenue is greater than actual budget expenditures, because these provinces are required to remit revenues to the center for redistribution to poorer areas.[18] Malesky (2008) found that provinces with high local revenue in the 1990s were more likely to fence break, violating central laws in favor of local economic reform initiatives, while Malesky and Taussig (2009) have shown that war damaged provinces tend to be high transfer recipients and therefore less market-oriented in their local economic policies. Following Magaloni's (2006) work in Mexico and Blaydes' (2006) in Egypt, we hypothesize that provinces that receive fewer resources from the center as a percentage of total local revenue should demonstrate more independence from the center and therefore are more likely to force Central Nominees to face greater electoral challenges.

A second factor often highlighted by students of Vietnam are regional factors, particularly the idea that citizens of provinces below the 17th parallel (and therefore part of the former Republic of Vietnam) during the country's civil war may exhibit more independence from Hanoi's initiatives. In Vietnam, the North and South's very different histories with capitalist business activity is a particular concern. It has been argued that citizens and local politicians in the South may have had greater experience with entrepreneurial activity and therefore were more likely to resist ideologically motivated interventions from Hanoi (Turley and Womack 1998; Nguyen et al. 2004), though this argument has been disputed by Gainsborough (2010, chap. 2), who argues that there is little direct evidence of differences in the business climate or leader backgrounds and ideology. The Southern uniqueness hypothesis appears to be confirmed by a descriptive reading of the data; 10 of the 12 Central Nominees lost in southern provinces, and no Central Nominee lost in one of the 22/64 provinces where 2006 budget transfers were equivalent to 200% of local revenue.

To capture these effects, we restrict our analysis of electoral performance in Table 4 to only Central Nominees. As our key causal variables (central transfer dependence and location in the South), do not vary within provinces, we drop provincial fixed effects, but supplement our analysis with provincial covariates to address omitted variable bias. Transfers as a percentage of local budget revenue are calculated from the 2006 Annual Budget. We also control for: (1) local wealth, measured by the natural log of GDP per capita; (2) education, measured by the percentage of secondary school graduates in the province; (3) infrastructure quality, proxied by telephones per capita,[19] and (4) a measure of corruption derived from a survey of entrepreneurs that asks whether provincial leaders use compliance with local regulations to extract rents (Malesky 2007). This fourth indicator tracks the possibility that constituents may favor Central Nominees, because of dissatisfaction with their local authorities.[20]

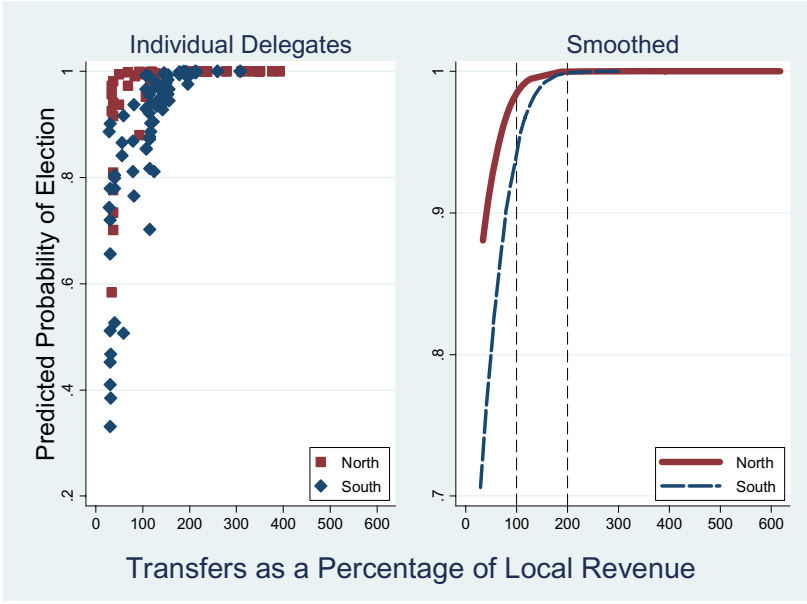
Models 3 and 6 of Table 4 demonstrate the independent effect of transfers and southern location, after controlling for a full set of candidate-level characteristics. Here, we see that both variables are in the hypothesized direction and statistically significant. Marginal effects are relatively small, but this is because the baseline probability of election for a Central Nominee is 93%. Independent variables change probabilities above and beyond that incredibly high base. Southern provinces are 1% less likely to elect a Central Nominee, increasing transfers as proportion of revenue by 10% and increasing the likelihood of election by 0.14%. The vote share of Central Nominees in Southern provinces is 6.5% less

TABLE 4
Determinants of Central Nominee Elections (Provincial Covariates)
(robust standard errors, clustered at province level, in parentheses)

Independent/ Dependent Variable	A. Election to National Assembly (Probit)			B. Vote Share (OLS)		
Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
South	–0.696**	–0.530	–0.563*	–7.512***	–6.266**	–6.538**
	(0.307)	(0.352)	(0.341)	(1.749)	(2.878)	(2.916)
Transfers	0.0135***	0.0181***	0.0149**	0.0216**	0.0241**	0.0242**
	(0.00361)	(0.00605)	(0.00584)	(0.00840)	(0.0107)	(0.0106)
District Competitiveness Index	–0.138*	–0.138*	–0.148*	–1.032*	–1.044*	–1.049*
	(0.0750)	(0.0808)	(0.0869)	(0.537)	(0.547)	(0.580)
Placement in Easy (5/3) District	0.247	0.254	0.345	5.682***	5.617***	5.576***
	(0.351)	(0.348)	(0.387)	(1.835)	(1.832)	(1.881)
Member of Communist Party	0.250	0.289	0.278	2.012	2.132	2.049
	(0.365)	(0.369)	(0.373)	(5.367)	(5.244)	(5.223)
Incumbency (Previous Terms in NA)	0.292	0.277	0.465	0.636	0.623	0.594
	(0.260)	(0.268)	(0.421)	(0.786)	(0.785)	(0.796)
Male Dummy	0.369	0.414	0.536	0.296	0.512	0.477
	(0.612)	(0.658)	(0.706)	(2.510)	(2.503)	(2.527)
Religious (Dummy)	0.0145	–0.000304	0.412	–1.446	–1.657	–2.037
	(0.455)	(0.460)	(0.487)	(4.687)	(4.759)	(5.040)
Age (Years)	–0.0119	–0.0153	–0.0197	–0.0133	–0.0152	–0.0120
	(0.0212)	(0.0221)	(0.0245)	(0.125)	(0.127)	(0.128)
Degree (1 HS to 5 Professor)	–0.125	–0.132	–0.0582	–1.365*	–1.36*	–1.342*
	(0.183)	(0.185)	(0.199)	(0.693)	(0.701)	(0.725)
GDP per Capita (LN)		0.232	0.344		–0.299	–0.645
		(0.555)	(0.474)		(1.743)	(1.634)
Secondary School Graduates		0.0331	0.0513		0.135	0.137
		(0.0212)	(0.0373)		(0.183)	(0.201)
Corruption			–0.611			–3.017
			(3.814)			(124.5)
Telephones per Capita			–1.601			1.659
			(1.275)			(6.786)
Constant	1.152	–5.935	–8.306	77.44***	68.35**	74.67**
	(1.601)	(9.086)	(7.538)	(12.11)	(29.94)	(32.24)
Observations	164	164	164	152	152	152
Clusters	64	64	64	64	64	64
R^2	0.339	0.348	0.367	0.374	0.377	0.378
Log Likelihood	–28.37	–27.97	–27.19	–539.9	–539.5	–539.5
χ^2	51.20	111.8	99.94			

Notes: Dummy = Dichotomous Variable; LN = Natural Log. For Models 1–3, dependent variable is whether candidate was elected to Vietnamese National Assembly or not. Probit implemented in STATA, probit coefficients displayed. Marginal probabilities were too small in many variables and obscured ease of presentation. For Models 4–6, OLS implemented in STATA coefficients displayed.
***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

FIGURE 3
Relationship between Transfers and Central Nominee Electoral Performance, by Region



Note: The left panel depicts the marginal probabilities from Table 4 (Model 3) for each candidate type. Diamonds depict values for centrally nominated candidates from the South. Squares represent northern Central Nominees. The figure shows that centrally nominated candidates in provinces with transfers equal to 100% of total revenue have a perfect probability of election in the North and a 96% probability in the South. Those from provinces with transfers equal to 200% of total revenue have a 100% probability of election in both regions.

than in Northern locations, and a 10% increase in the transfer ratio increases vote share by 0.2%. This is robust to adding provincial-level control variables, including average wealth, education, infrastructure, and measures of corruption—none of which are significantly different from zero.

Figure 3 calculates the marginal probabilities from the fully specified Model 3 in order to make this point more clear. In the first panel, we display the predicted probabilities for each Central Nominee, based on individual-level and provincial characteristics, while in the second panel, we present the smoothed probabilities for Northern and Southern provinces. The results are striking; Central Nominees in the North (the solid line) become undefeatable when transfers are equal to only 110% of local

revenue. In the South (dashed line), however, Central Nominees still are at risk of electoral defeat until transfers are equal to 200% of local revenue.

Our analysis gives us a very good sense of the information available to national authorities from the election. They may not have had the same level of precise estimation techniques that we employ in this article, however, through the institution of centrally nominated candidates, the regime can also gain more information on which provinces are more resistant to central control, and in this case, how helpful central transfers can be in restoring support.

Strategic selection of locations for Central Nominees, however, remains a possibility that we cannot definitively rule out. It is possible that through repeated elections, central authorities know where Central Nominees will confront the most electoral difficulty. To make sure the most important candidates win, only weak Central Nominees are sent to difficult electoral locations. There is some anecdotal evidence for such foresight. Our discussions with VNA delegates revealed that Central Nominees almost universally select poor Northern provinces for their placement when they are asked on a preliminary survey. Very few ask to be posted in the South unless they were originally from there.

If this is true, the substantive effects for our results regarding the South and transfer-dependent provinces may be biased upward. Nevertheless, if it occurs, the presence of strategic selection offers compelling evidence for our more general hypotheses that elections provide important knowledge of delegate compliance, as authorities could only know about the most difficult districts through previous elections.

7. Conclusion

This article contributes to the growing literature on authoritarian institutions by arguing that regimes can use elections to gain information about support for the ruling party, opposition, and regime subordinates throughout the country. We theorize that their ability to access these forms of information is constrained by another overriding incentive: the desire for certain victory. Exactly what types of information the regime can access and what the quality of the information will be depends on the type of manipulation they use. Based on this, we conclude that single-party regimes may eschew information on the opposition in favor of ensuring victory, but that information on popular support for the regime itself and the competency of subordinates remain viable.

Using Vietnam as an example, we show how the leaders in single-party regimes can address, to varying degrees, the Dictator's Electoral Dilemma—the trade-off between protecting preferred leaders while generating information. In Vietnam, in particular, the VCP appears to run preferred candidates in districts that are mathematically and qualitatively easier to win, while lower-level officials are forced to compete against a more level playing field. In this way, the regime can generate information without placing higher-level leaders at great risk. Such *ex ante*, institutionalized manipulation is preferable for the regime because it limits the possibility that the regime will have to resort to *ex post* electoral fraud, which we argue is a highly risky strategy.

These findings have important implications for the study of elections in other authoritarian regimes. We show how microlevel mechanisms can be applied, even in a single-party system, to manage the trade-off between gathering information about the quality of lower-level officials, while at the same time ensuring an outcome favorable to the regime. Indeed, we find that the mechanisms used in Vietnam—candidate-to-seat ratios, manipulating the level of district competition, and transfer dependence—would not be surprising to politicos in many developed democracies.

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NOTES

1. Lorentzen (2008) emphasizes that institutionalized protest plays a similar role in China, allowing top officials to sanction lower cadres who are the targets of such protests. This is fascinating finding, but it actually points to China as an anomaly, as it is one of the few countries in the world without universal elections. Why would Chinese elites prefer the more dangerous and volatile information provided by protests over elections?

2. See Magaloni (2007), Pepinsky (2009), Brownlee (2007), and Langston (2006) for detailed studies of electoral politics in other authoritarian contexts.

3. Cross-national tests by Geddes (2006) and Wright (2008) do not distinguish between hegemonic parties and single-party regimes, coding them both as single-party systems.

4. For a comprehensive review, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009).

5. Puddington, Arch. 2010. "Freedom in the World: Erosion of Freedom Intensifies." *Freedomhouse.org.* http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW_2010_Overview_Essay.pdf (accessed January 23, 2010).

6. In 2007, Vietnam spent approximately $22 million to organize and administer its National Assembly elections, almost exactly the same amount that the government spent on national poverty reduction programs and that Thai Binh, a poor agricultural province with population of 1.8 million citizens, received in central transfers that year.

7. See Nguyen (2007).

8. Le Nhung. "Complications and Quarrels Continuing in Vedan Case." *Vietnamnet*. 29 October, 2008. http://english.vietnamnet.vn/tech/2008/10/810860/ (accessed January 24, 2010).

9. In the run up to the 2007 election, an attempt to organize into a party by civil society activists called Block 8406 was actively discouraged by authorities and its leadership arrested. Vietnamese officials argued the group was involved in subversive activity and connected to terrorist organizations (Thayer 2009).

10. Now 63 provinces, after the merger of Ha Tay with Ha Noi.

11. See Appendix 3 for statistics on each Politburo member.

12. $$District_Competitiveness_Index = \left[\sum_{i=1}^{n} CN_i + \sum_{i=1}^{n} I_i + \sum_{i=1}^{n} P_i + \sum_{i=1}^{n} CCOM_i + \sum_{i=1}^{n} PCOM_i + \sum_{i=1}^{n} PC_i\right] - \left[CN_i + I_i + P_i + CCOM_i + PCOM_i + PC_i\right],$$

where i indexes individual candidates and n is all candidates in that election district.

13. The subtraction is critical, as it ensures that the inclusion of Central Nominee is not mechanically correlated with our dummy for Central Nominees. To prove this point, we used a computer simulation to randomly allocate delegates to electoral districts in each province. After random allocation, Central Nominees receive no benefit from candidate-to-seat ratio or weak competition. See Appendix 7 for details of the random assignment.

14. See Web Appendix 1 and 2 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of these variables.

15. We employ a linear probability specification for these models because, in some cases, provincial fixed effects perfectly predicted the seat ratios. In Models 1, 2, 4, and 5 probit and linear probability models yield roughly the same results.

16. For descriptive statistics of these variables, along with bivariate correlations, please see Web Appendix 1 and 2.

17. We had to drop one observation because of insufficient biographical information.

18. See Web Appendix 3 for a map showing transfer dependence across provinces.

19. Other controls, such as percentage of asphalted road, distance from major cities, level of urbanization, and dependence on agricultural production were available, but these were highly correlated with other provincial-level controls. Their inclusion had no impact on our key causal variables.

20. Measures of whether the candidate served in the local legislature, is an ethnic minority, and owns a business were also dropped as too few Central Nominees are represented in any of these categories.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix 1: Descriptive Statistics on Key Variables
Appendix 2: Bivariate Correlations of Key Variables
Appendix 3: Transfers-Dependence by Province in 2006
Appendix 4: Vote Totals and Seat Competitiveness for Elite Candidates
Appendix 5: Provincial Determinants of Candidate Placement
Appendix 6: Actual and Simulated District Competitiveness Scores
Appendix 7: Determinants of Favored Candidates: Replication through Random District Assignment