## Strategic Replacements and Popular Support:

# Political Consequences of Authoritarian Replacement of Elected Officials<sup>\*</sup>

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#### Abstract

This paper presents a game-theoretic model to analyze a hybrid form of governance, combining competitive local elections with the central government's unilateral power to intervene and replace elected officials. The equilibrium analysis highlights the implications of the central government's trade-off between local officials' competence and their partisan affiliation. I show that the key consequences of this trade-off include 1) strategic retentions of underperforming opposition incumbents and 2) replacements of pro-regime incumbents, even when their expected competence exceeds that of their electoral replacements. I demonstrate, then, that this institutional framework induces a higher proportion of replaced opposition officials compared to co-partisans of the regime and encourages the population to electorally support candidates affiliated with the central government party in prior open-seat elections. The observed local electoral performance of the regime, under the influence of this hybrid institution, consistently surpasses its true popularity, even in the presence of competitive elections.

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Elections, when competitive and fair, offer voters the ability to hold officials accountable for substandard performance (Ferejohn, 1986; Manin, 1997), select more competent politicians for office, or accomplish both (Fearon, 1999; Ashworth et al., 2017; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2017). However, in non-democratic regimes, the electoral process, when introduced, is often plagued by practices that serve to disrupt and interfere with its proper functioning. This paper studies properties of a specific hybrid institution that combines competitive local elections with the power of the central government to replace local officials by direct appointment between elections. I demonstrate that the anticipation of these inter-election interventions can encourage the population, which might otherwise oppose the government, to electorally support the governing party's local candidates in the prior open-seat elections. This seemingly puzzling behavior enables voters to avoid the suboptimal – from the voter's perspective – government conduct that inevitably follows the selection of opposition officials.

Though the properties of this hybrid institution are new to the literature, inter-election unilateral replacements of local elected officials by the central government are standard in a number of non-democratic countries. In Turkey, the Interior Ministry has formal authority to intervene between elections and replace elected mayors with temporary trustees (*kayyum*). In 2020, the Ministry removed and replaced 47 democratically elected mayors – out of a total of 1,351. In Russia, the president, as per federal legislation (Federal Law N 414- $\Phi$ 3), can unilaterally remove elected governors and appoint temporary replacements. As a result, massive gubernatorial replacements take place every year. In 2017, for instance, presidential appointees replaced as many as 20 out of the total 84 governors, with a majority of the replaced governors belonging to the regime's co-partisan faction.<sup>1</sup>

This article employs a game-theoretical model to explore the properties of the hybrid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>For a detailed breakdown of the number of replaced Russian governors categorized by their respective party affiliations, see Online Appendix H. It is worth noting that officeholders in the examples above rarely run for election again once replaced. In Russia, Federal Law N 414- $\Phi$ 3 bar the ousted governors from competing again. In 2020 in Turkey, three deposed mayors were indicted on charges of terrorism, while eighteen were detained and imprisoned. In Venezuela, a similar approach is adopted. The governmentcontrolled Municipal Council (*Concejo Municipal*) holds power to replace district mayors and appoint interim office-holders until the next election. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor's report on Venezuela cites frequent detentions and unjust arrests of Venezuelan mayors.

institution combining competitive local elections and unilateral inter-election replacements by the central government. The critical feature of the model is that the government trades off the local officials' competence and their partisanship. The government, thus, intervenes in the electoral process not only to enhance the pool of competing candidates but also to increase the co-partisan officials' chances of winning the next election. I demonstrate that the central government's preference for local officeholders from their own party encourages strategic retentions of the low-performing opposition officials, bolstering the electoral prospects of the regime co-partisan challengers in the upcoming election. Consequently, the government tends to replace a higher number of local incumbents from their own party compared to opposition incumbents. Moreover, the regime's partisan motivations force the voter to strategically elect the regime's co-partisans in open-seat prior elections to prevent suboptimal retentions of low-performing opposition incumbents. The analysis presented below shows that when the local elections are competitive, the observed electoral performance of the regime under the described hybrid institution always overstates the true popularity of the regime.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. I start with a baseline model where I assume that the information available to the voter and the government regarding local officials' competence is symmetric and the election is competitive, but the government can intervene in the electoral process and install its candidate between elections. Next, I characterize the government's optimal strategy and specify conditions under which the government retains more opposition incumbents than co-partisan incumbents in equilibrium. After that, I analyse comparative static results for each of the different environments considered (benchmark, co-partisan incumbent, opposition incumbent). Then, I study the impact of the described hybrid institution on popular support for the regime. I identify conditions under which the voter elects the governing party co-partisan in an open-seat election. Finally, I establish conditions under which the voter would not oppose the government's inter-election interventions prior to their implementation. The latter, then, allows me to outline a potential mechanism through which the hybrid systems under study could emerge.

# Literature Review

This paper connects with and contributes to several literatures.

First, this paper contributes to the literature on the persistence of political systems. Extensive empirical scholarship highlights the remarkable robustness of non-democratic regimes (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Geddes et al., 2014; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Gerschewski, 2013). This project explores the extent of institutions' impact on regimes' sustainability. It suggests that even a minor change in the existing electoral procedures, such as the introduction of inter-elections governmental interventions, might bolster the non-democratic regime's stability.

Second, this paper demonstrates that voters can potentially derive benefits from the authoritarian interventions of the central government, as it enhances the electoral selection process. (However, it is important to note that it disappears when the government's bias becomes too high.) Among various (empirical and theoretical) papers that study electoral accountability, many acknowledge the potential welfare-improving effect of lower voters' attention to the electoral process, higher degree of delegation to the government, and higher levels of central government autonomy: Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014), Snyder Jr and Strömberg (2010), Canes-Wrone et al. (2001), Ferraz and Finan (2011) demonstrate that higher voter knowledge of officials' conduct creates perverse incentives to office-holders and might worsen electoral selection; Ashworth et al. (2017) and Landa and Le Bihan (2018) show that more demanding retention decisions can result in lower voter welfare; finally, Gordon et al. (2007) shows that although low barriers to enter an electoral race boosts the competition, they might worsen the electoral selection, as they distort voters' incentives to become politically informed and encourage the incumbent to conceal her type.

Third, this paper suggests a new explanation of popular support for non-democratic regimes. The most common explanations of this phenomenon in the existing literature include: (i) Control of information: either low political awareness in the population (Geddes and Zaller, 1989) or strict government control over the media and educational system

(Kennedy, 2009); (ii) Electoral unfairness: non-democratic governments can resort to violence to either deter opposition candidates (Levitsky and Way, 2010) or opposition voters. With this paper, I contribute to this literature by showing that even when information is symmetric and elections are competitive, the voter may strategically elect governing party candidates conditional on the government's (potential) forthcoming interventions.

Finally, this paper contributes to the vast literature on dynamic information acquisition, in particular to the papers that explore learning by trial-and-error mechanism (Callander, 2011a,b; Strulovici, 2010; Majumdar and Mukand, 2004; Zhong, 2022) where the actors initiate a series of experiments in their search for the best product or the best policy. Unlike the previous literature that studies the unraveling of dynamic nature of actors' learning, this model focuses on equilibrium decisions made in the anticipation of iterated replacements present in current mechanism.

## **Baseline Model**

My baseline model is a two-period game between a central government (it) and a representative voter (she). There is also a pool of nonstrategic *potential* local officials competing for office (each *he*). Every potential official *i* has a privately known competence  $\theta_i$ , where  $\theta_i$  is an independent draw from a normal distribution,  $\theta \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$ . Each official also has a publicly known political party affiliation; he belongs to one of many opposition parties or he is a regime's co-partisan. I assume that candidates with the same party affiliations do not run against each other in the election.

After local official *i* takes office, the voter and the government observe a signal  $s_i$  about his competence  $\theta_i$ . Every informative signal  $s_i$  is a sum of the official's competence and some random noise  $\varepsilon_i$ :  $s_i = \theta_i + \varepsilon_i$ , where  $\varepsilon_i$  is an independent draw from a normal distribution  $\varepsilon_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1/q)$ . I refer to informative  $s_i$  as the official's performance.

The variable  $q \in \mathcal{R}^+$  serves as a metric for the precision of the signal, which determines

the extent to which the government government and the voter can gauge the local officials' competence based on their performance. This variable is open to a wide range of interpretations. For instance, q can indicate the level of media transparency: when the government suppresses media freedom, it can impede the public's awareness of the legislator's capabilities (Egorov et al., 2009; Besley and Prat, 2006). Alternatively, q can indicate the extent of a local official's decision-making independence. If the central government imposes strict budget constraints and exerts tight controls over resource allocation, it can diminish the informational value of a local official's performance.

The model incorporates three distinct types of local officials: a current office-holder (the incumbent, I), a temporary official appointed by the government (the appointee, A), and an official who competes with either incumbent or, in the event of replacement, the appointee in the upcoming election (the challenger, C). To account for the potential differences in available information about the elected incumbent and the selected appointee, I assume that the voter and the government know the incumbent's performance, but learn about the appointee's performance with probability  $p \in [0.5, 1]$ .<sup>2</sup> With complementary probability, they observe nothing.

The sequence of events is as follows. *Timing*:

- 1. Nature determines random shocks  $(\varepsilon_I, \varepsilon_A)$  and the competence of every (potential) local official: the incumbent  $(\theta_I)$ , the appointee  $(\theta_A)$ , and the challenger  $(\vec{\theta_C})$ .
- 2. The government and the voter observe  $s_I = \theta_I + \varepsilon_I$ . The government decides whether to retain the incumbent (R = 1) or replace him (R = 0).
- 3. If the government replaces the incumbent, with probability p the actors see an informative signal about the selected appointee's competence:  $s_A = \theta_A + \varepsilon_A$ . With complementary probability they observe nothing:  $s_A = \emptyset$ .

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>The assumption that  $p \in [1/2, 1]$  implies that the voters (and the government) anticipate observing the appointee's performance if appointed. All the results remain robust to the assumption of  $p \in [0, 1]$ . Appendix C.2. relaxes this assumption to verify robustnes.

- 4. The voter decides whether to return the current local office-holder (the incumbent or the appointee, C = 0) to office or to elect the challenger (C = 1).
- 5. Nature determines  $\eta_E$ . The elected local official produces a policy:  $s_E = \theta_E + \eta_E$ , where  $\theta_E \in \{\theta_I, \theta_A, \vec{\theta_C}\}$  is the competence of the elected official.

### Payoffs:

The voter values only the policy outcome that the elected candidate implements. The voter's utility is

$$U_V(E) = \theta_E + \eta_E. \tag{1}$$

Note that the voter's utility does not depend on the partial partial of the elected official. This assumption guarantees that partial motifs do not drive the voter's actions, and she acts with the sole goal of maximizing the competence of the elected official.<sup>3</sup>

The government values the policy outcome: the local official's inferior performance may lower citizen satisfaction, which can trigger popular discontent. The government also benefits if a *co-partisan* assumes local office: local co-partisans deter potential challengers of the regime (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2002), convince the public of the government's competence (Guriev and Treisman, 2015), help the central government mobilize electoral support (Hale, 2003), and may commit electoral fraud, if needed (Magaloni, 2010). The government gains utility

$$U_G(E) = \theta_E + \eta_E + B \times \mathbf{1} \{ \text{Co-partisan} \},$$
(2)

where value B stands for a *partisanship benefit* and captures how much the government values the partisanship of the elected official over the population's satisfaction. Note that the government does not get an interim payoff upon selecting an appointee, nor does it get an intrinsic benefit when it replaces the opposition incumbent. Inter-elections governmental replacements frequently require a "snap" election to follow shortly after the appointment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>In the Appendix, I relax this assumption and consider the scenario where the voter receives partian benefit for voting for a particular party.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>For example, in Russia, as per federal legislation (Federal Law N 414- $\Phi$ 3) a snap election must be held

Because of this, the appointee's impact on the government's utility should be negligible. Two lines of reasoning can rationalize the second assumption. First, the introduction of the lumpsum benefit in an implication of an opposition incumbent's removal further encourages the regime to replace the opposition but does not eliminate the competence-partisanship tradeoff that drives the model's results. Second, the co-partisan benefit B can be interpreted as an opportunity cost of retaining the opposition. Unless the regime experiences animosity towards a particular party, the co-partisan benefit captures the utility the regime gets from not having an opposition candidate in office. Finally, co-partisan benefit B can measure the importance of a particular locale to the government and capture the utility the government receives when installs its candidate in a region.

In what follows, I refer to an official as *high-performing* (*low-performing*) if the signal about his competence exceeds (is lower than) the average competence of the candidates.

## Equilibria

I solve for perfect Bayesian equilibria. Every equilibrium consists of (i) a mapping from the incumbent's performance  $s_I$  to the government's decision to replace:  $s_I \rightarrow \Delta\{0, 1\}$  that is sequentially rational given the voter's strategy, (ii) a mapping from the current office-holder's performance  $s_I$  or  $s_A$  to the voter's electoral choice:  $\{s_I \text{ or } s_A\} \rightarrow \Delta\{0, 1\}$ .

### The Voter

The voter acts last and decides whom to elect. The baseline model is a game of incomplete symmetric information; thus, the government's actions do not affect the voter's information set. The voter makes her decision based on the signals  $(s_I \text{ and } s_A)$  she observes.

If she learns the office-holder's performance, she returns him to office if and only if the official's expected competence exceeds the average in the candidates' pool. Because  $s_j$  is an unbiased signal of the official's competence, the voter knows that low-performing incumbent within one year of the replacement.

(s < 0) is likely to be of low competence  $(\theta < 0)$ , and, thus, she follows a cut-off strategy and elects the challenger when the current office-holder is low-performing  $(s_j < 0, \text{ where} j \in \{I, A\})$  and elects the current official otherwise.

**Remark 1.** In all equilibria, the voter returns high-performing office-holders  $(s_j \ge 0)$  to office and replaces low-performing office-holders  $(s_j < 0)$ .

Conditional on the voter's lack of information about the appointee's performance ( $s_A = \emptyset$ ), the voter is indifferent between returning the appointee to office and ousting him. The voter's indifference gives rise to a plethora of sequential equilibria.<sup>5</sup> In what follows I assume that when the voter learns nothing about the appointee, she selects a regime's co-partisan with probability  $\beta$  and chooses an opposition candidate with probability  $1-\beta$ . The parameter  $\beta$  allows for a variety of interpretations. For instance,  $\beta$  might describe the local popularity or strength of the regime. Alternatively, it might capture the unfairness of the electoral process that benefits pro-regime candidates due to direct electoral fraud, partial media coverage of candidates, or voter oppression (Robie, 2014; Enikolopov et al., 2011; Wilson, 2006; Hartlyn et al., 2008; Rose and Mishler, 2009). When  $\beta$  is equal to one, a regime's co-partisan always wins the election when the voter learns nothing about the competence of the current office-holder. Conversely, when  $\beta$  converges to zero, the voter always elects the opposition candidate when she learns nothing about the office-holder.

#### The Government

The government knows the incumbent's performance  $s_I$  but not the incumbent's competence  $\theta_I$ . The government decides whether to replace the incumbent and, if so, selects either a co-partial appointee or an opposition appointee. The government's strategy depends on a signal about the incumbent's type  $(s_I)$ , a partial point (B), and the party affiliation of the incumbent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>I provide a formal equilibrium selection criteria in Appendix F where I characterize the unique payoff dominant equilibrium. Importantly, the voter's selection does not alter the results of the model (Fearon, 1999).

To begin, suppose that the government does not receive a partial sample benefit (B) or that this benefit is equal to zero. In what follows, I refer to such a government as *unbiased*. The unbiased government maximizes the expected winner's competence. It replaces the incumbent when

$$\underbrace{\stackrel{Informative}{Signal}}_{p} \underbrace{\stackrel{Voter Returns}{High-Performing Appointee}}_{if p low ernment Replaces Incumbent} \underbrace{\stackrel{Voter Replaces}{Pr[s_A \ge 0] \cdot E[\theta_A | s_A \ge 0]} + \underbrace{Pr[s_A < 0] \cdot E[\theta_C])}_{Government Replaces Incumbent}}_{if p low ernment Replaces Incumbent} \underbrace{Pr[s_I \ge 0] \cdot E[\theta_I | s_I]}_{if p low ernment Retains Incumbent}, (3)$$

and retains the incumbent otherwise. The left hand side of inequality (3) shows the government's expected utility following its decision to replace the incumbent with the appointee. It is important to note that the government cannot observe the appointee's performance prior to the appointing him, and the government does not intervene in the electoral process once the replacement occurs. Therefore, even though the government observes the appointee's performance after the replacement, it must rely on the voter to oust the low-performing appointee. The right hand side of inequality (3) shows the government's expected utility when it retains the incumbent.

Note that when the government does not benefit from the elected official's partisanship, its strategy weakly increases with the incumbent's performance (see Appendix A): the incumbent's competence improves the unbiased government's utility conditional on the retention decision and has no bearing on the government's utility following the incumbent's replacement. Consequently, in every potential equilibrium, the unbiased government adopts an interior switching strategy around some *performance threshold*. Incumbents who perform above this threshold are retained, while those performing below are replaced with the appointee. In the following proposition, I characterize the unbiased government's equilibrium strategy (see Appendix A for proofs). **Proposition 1.** In equilibrium, the unbiased government retains the incumbent if and only if the incumbent's performance  $(s_I)$  exceeds a performance threshold

$$s^* \equiv p \cdot \sqrt{\frac{1+1/q}{2\pi}} \tag{4}$$

Note that in equilibrium the unbiased government chooses a positive performance threshold. This selection stems from the expectation of high-performing second-period officeholder. Following every replacement, during the election stage, the voter elects high-performing appointees and ousts low-performing ones, opting, instead, for a challenger with an expected competence of zero. The competence of the elected official, thus, exceeds zero in expectation. Since the government replaces every incumbent whose performance falls below the expected performance of the potential victor, it not only replaces all low-performing incumbents but also those whose performance exceeds zero.

Suppose now that the government is biased and benefits from the elected official's partisanship. Conditional on the decided replacement, the biased government always prefers a co-partisan appointee over any opposition appointee regardless of the incumbent's party affiliation (see Appendix B.1):

#### **Remark 2.** The biased government always selects the co-partisan appointee.

The government, thus, replaces the co-partisan incumbent with the appointee when

$$p \cdot (Pr[s_A \ge 0](E[\theta_A | s_A \ge 0] + B) + Pr[s_A < 0]E[\theta_C])$$

$$+ \underbrace{(1 - p)}^{Not Inf.} \cdot (E[\theta_A] + \beta \cdot B)_{Voter \ elects} + \underbrace{(1 - p)}^{Voter \ elects} \cdot (E[\theta_I] + B) + \mathbf{1}[s_I < 0] \cdot E[\theta_C],$$

$$(5)$$

and retains him otherwise. Inequality (5) mirrors inequality (4), yet, given the government values the official's partial partial partial B when the voter retains the regimes' copartial candidate (either the appointee or the incumbent). Note that the assumption that the candidates from the same party do not run against each other ensures that the challenger who competes against the regime's co-partisan belong to the opposition, and the electoral defeat of a co-partisan candidate always implies the victory of the opposition candidate.

If the co-partisan incumbent is retained, the biased government's utility increases in his competence. The biased government, thus, retains the co-partisan office-holder if his competence exceeds some performance threshold and replaces him otherwise (see Appendix B.2). The next proposition characterizes the biased government's equilibrium strategy.

**Proposition 2.** In all equilibria, the government retains the co-partisan incumbent if and only if performance of the latter exceeds a performance threshold

$$s^{L} \equiv \max\{0, p \cdot \sqrt{\frac{1+1/q}{2\pi}} + B \cdot (1+1/q) \cdot (p/2 + (1-p) \cdot \beta) - B \cdot (1+1/q)\}$$

Similar to the unbiased government, the government that values partisanship never retains low-performing incumbents ( $s^L$  is non-negative). When the government is sufficiently biased ( $B > \hat{B} \equiv p \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{1+1/q}} \cdot \frac{1}{1-p/2-(1-p)\cdot\beta}$ ) having a co-partisan in office may outweigh the low competence of the elected official. However, this trade-off is never feasible as the voter always removes low-performing incumbents.

The biased government obtains a partial partial benefit (B) when a co-partial official wins the election. Consequently, the performance threshold set by the biased government for the co-partial incumbent is lower than the one the unbiased government. Furthermore, on average, the biased government replaces fewer co-partial incumbents than would the government that does not value partial (see Appendix B.3). The dashed line in Figure 1 depicts the share of the incumbents replaced by the unbiased government, and it lies above the solid line representing the share of the incumbents replaced by the biased government.

**Remark 3.** The biased government replaces fewer co-partisan incumbents than the unbiased government.

I now examine a scenario where the incumbent belongs to the opposition. To account

for a potential plurality of opposition parties, I assume that if the opposition incumbent participates in the election, he runs against a challenger who could either belong to another opposition party or be a government's co-partisan. The probability that the challenger is a co-partisan of the government is denoted by  $\gamma$ , which represents the local popularity or strength of the regime. The government replaces the opposition incumbent when

$$p \cdot (Pr[s_A \ge 0] \cdot (E[\theta_A | s_A \ge 0] + B) + Pr[s_A < 0][\theta_C]) + (1 - p) \cdot (E[\theta_A] \underbrace{+ \beta \cdot B}_{Voter \ elects})$$

$$> \mathbf{1}[s_I \ge 0] \cdot E[\theta_I | s_I] + \mathbf{1}[s_I < 0] \cdot (E[\theta_C] + \gamma \cdot B),$$
(6)

and retains the opposition incumbent otherwise. Because the opposition incumbent's electoral defeat with probability  $\gamma$  results in the victory of the regime's co-partisan, the government can exploit the forthcoming election to install its co-partisan. The voter always ousts the low-performing incumbent in the election, and the government might strategically retain the low-performing opposition incumbent in anticipation that his electoral defeat will result in its co-partisan's victory. Therefore, the sufficiently biased government's strategy depends on the opposition incumbent's performance non-monotonically (see Appendix B.4).

### Lemma 1.

1. When the voter is sufficiently likely to select the government's co-partisan out of pool of competing challengers

$$\gamma > \gamma^* \equiv (1-p) \cdot \beta + p/2,$$

and the partisanship benefit B that the government receives when a co-partisan wins the election is sufficiently high

$$B > B^* \equiv p \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{1+1/q}} \cdot \frac{1}{\gamma - p/2 - (1-p) \cdot \beta},$$

the government retains low-performing  $(s_I < 0)$  opposition incumbents and its optimal

strategy depends on the opposition incumbent's performance non-monotonically;

2. Otherwise, the government always replaces the low-performing incumbent, and its optimal strategy weakly increases in the opposition incumbent's performance.

In the following analysis, I impose  $\gamma$  to be equal to  $\beta$  to simplify exposition.<sup>6</sup> I characterize the government's equilibrium strategy in the following proposition.

## Proposition 3.

1. If a partial penefit B is below the threshold  $B^*$  or local regime's strength  $\beta$  is below 1/2, the government retains the opposition incumbent if and only if performance of the latter exceeds a performance threshold

$$s^{O} \equiv p \cdot \sqrt{\frac{1+1/q}{2\pi}} + B \cdot (1+1/q) \cdot (p/2 + (1-p) \cdot \beta);$$
(7)

2. Otherwise, the government retains the opposition incumbent both when he is lowperforming and when his performance exceeds the threshold  $s^{O}$ .

Partisan consideration encourage replacements of high-performing opposition incumbents and the government, thus, sets a higher performance threshold than the unbiased one for the high-performing opposition incumbent. In Figure 2b the dotted line representing the performance threshold for the opposition incumbent lies above the dashed line showing the threshold that the unbiased government sets.

However, a government's inclination to replace high-performing opposition does not necessarily result in a higher rate of the opposition incumbent's dismissal.

**Remark 4.** When the government is sufficiently biased  $(B > B^*)$  and its local strength is high  $(\beta > 1/2)$ , it replaces more co-partial incumbents than opposition incumbents.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Note that  $\gamma$  does not affect the government's conduct following the replacement decision. Therefore, this assumption affects the government's incentives to retain low-performing opposition incumbents but has no impact on the subgame that follows this decision.  $\gamma$ , thus, does not affect the thresholds the government sets for the opposition incumbent.

When the government's bias exceeds the threshold  $B^*$ , and it is confident in its popularity or strength ( $\beta > 1/2$ ), it retains low-performing opposition incumbents in an attempt to utilize the forthcoming election and bolster the electoral chances of its co-partisan, while replacing all low-performing co-partisan incumbents. Such government, thus, on average, replaces fewer opposition incumbents than co-partisan incumbents (see Appendix B.5).



Figure 1: The dashed line shows the share of the incumbents whom the unbiased government replaces depending on the officials' true competence. The solid line shows the share of the co-partisan incumbents replaced by the biased government (B = 0.5,  $\beta = 1$ ). Dash-dotted lines represent the share of the opposition incumbent replaced by the biased government (B = 0.5 and B = 0.15,  $\beta = 1$ ).

## **Comparative Statics**

In this section, I study how clarity of information (q), the government's bias (B), and the probability to learn about the appointee's performance (p) affect the equilibrium properties.

The following series of propositions and remarks summarizes the main findings, and the subsequent discussions provide general intuition behind the results.

**Proposition 4.** When the government does not value partial partial of the local office-holder, the performance threshold it sets  $(s^*)$  decreases in clarity of information (q) and increases in probability to learn about the appointee's performance (p).

Note that the quality of information q has a two-fold impact on the government's strategy. On one hand, higher clarity of available information (higher q) improves the government's precision when it draws inferences about the incumbent's competence from the incumbent's performance. In Figure 2a, the dashed line depicts the posterior distribution of the incumbent's competence after the government observes his performance. The solid line shows the posterior for the numerically identical but more *informative* signal. These two curves illustrate that the government's expected utility from retaining *high-performing* incumbents increases in clarity of information, other things being equal. On the other hand, as transparency grows (higher q), a chance that the voter will mistakenly return to office an appointee who, in fact, is of low competence ( $\theta_A < 0$ ) decreases. Because of that, the government's utility from *replacing* the incumbent increases in the clarity of information.

Therefore, higher clarity of information simultaneously encourages the government to retain high-performing incumbents and encourages it to replace them. However, every replacement has a chance to result in the appointment of an incompetent official. Therefore, the former effect will always dominate the latter, and the government sets a performance threshold that decreases in the clarity of information, as illustrated by the dashed line in Figure 2b.

Similarly, the higher the probability to observe the appointee's performance, the more the government can rely on the voter to oust the low-performing candidates in the forthcoming election. Therefore, the higher the government utility from replacing the incumbent, which results in a higher performance threshold  $s^*$  that the government set.

Finally, when the information is complete, and the incumbent's competence is public

knowledge (as q approaches infinity), the government knows that every high-performing  $(s_I > 0)$  incumbent is simultaneously highly competent  $(\theta_I > 0)$ . Yet, under the assumption of complete information, the government continues to replace some high-performing incumbents. It sets a performance threshold  $s^*$  to be equal to  $(p\sqrt{\pi/2})$  that exceeds zero; thus, the unbiased government replaces some evidently competent officials with appointees of lower expected competence. Although such stringency might seem counterintuitive at first, this unbiased government's strategy secures the high expected competence of the electoral victor. When the high-performing incumbent's competence is sufficiently low, there is a high probability that the appointee will outperform this incumbent, while the forthcoming election mitigates risks associated with such replacement.

Suppose the government values the partial partial of the elected official. I begin by considering the scenario where the incumbent is the government's co-partial.

**Proposition 5.** If the incumbent is the regime's co-partisan, the performance threshold that the biased government sets weakly decreases in the government's bias (B) and depends on the clarity of information non-monotonically.

The effect of the government's bias on the performance threshold is straightforward. The higher the partisanship benefit, the less willing the government is to trade the partisanship of the incumbent for a chance of better policies. Therefore, higher bias encourages the government to retain more high-performing co-partisan incumbents regardless of potential policy benefits associated with the replacement. The solid arrow in Figure 2b indicates how the performance threshold  $(s^L)$  changes as the bias (B) decreases.

Higher clarity of information improves the government's inferences about the incumbent's type, encouraging the government to retain more co-partisans as it boosts the government's confidence in their competence. However, higher clarity of information also lowers the partisanship's relative value and, thus, increases the opportunity cost of retaining the co-partisan. When the quality of information is low, the latter effect overrides the former. As clarity of information improves, the former effect begins to prevail. In Figure 2b, the solid curve

represents the performance threshold that the biased government sets for the incumbent.



Figure 2: Government's strategy

(a) Posterior distribution of the incumbent's competence following the signal  $s_I = 4$ . The dotted line represents the prior distribution of the incumbent's competence. The dotted vertical line indicates the signal  $s_I$ . The dashed curve illustrates the posterior when clarity of information is q = 0.5. The solid curve shows the posterior when clarity q is equal to 4.



(b) The dotted green line indicates the performance threshold that the unbiased government sets. The solid line shows the performance threshold that the biased government  $(B = 0.15, \beta = 1)$  sets for the co-partisan incumbent. The dotted line represents the threshold for the opposition incumbent. The solid arrow shows how the threshold for the co-partisan changes as *B* decreases. The dashed arrow demonstrates how the threshold for the opposition changes as the bias decreases.

Suppose that the incumbent is a member of an opposition party.

**Proposition 6.** When the incumbent belongs to an opposition party

- the performance threshold s<sup>O</sup> that the government sets is decreasing in clarity of information and increasing in a co-partisanship benefit;
- 2. the biased government is more likely to strategically retain low-performing opposition incumbents as clarity of information (q) deteriorates.

Similar to the situation with the co-partisan incumbent, higher clarity of information improves the government's inferences about the incumbent's true competence and encourages the government to reevaluate the partisanship-related component of its utility. However, when the incumbent belongs to an opposition party, both effects are co-aligned and motivate the government to retain the opposition incumbent. In Figure 2b, the dotted line representing the opposition incumbent's performance threshold decreases in clarity of information (q). At the same time, the higher the government's bias, the more likely it is to replace a high-performing opposition incumbent, and the performance threshold increases in a partisanship benefit. In Figure 2b, the dotted arrow demonstrates how the threshold shifts if the bias declines.

The second part of Proposition 6 studies the impact of transparency on the government's decision to retain the low-performing incumbent. When the incumbent belongs to the opposition, the government's ability to draw better inferences about his type is redundant – the low-performing incumbent will not win the election. Nevertheless, the higher the clarity of information, the lower the chance that, after the government replaces the incumbent, the voter will return to office a high-performing  $(s_A > 0)$  but low-competent  $(\theta_A < 0)$  appointee. Accordingly, higher transparency encourages the government to avoid strategic retention – the partisanship benefit's threshold  $(B^*)$  increases in information clarity.

The central government's authority to unilaterally intervene between elections and replace current officeholders significantly alters the pool of candidates competing in the election. Consequently, this authority has implications on the officials' incumbency advantage, formally defined as the probability of winning the election based on the incumbent status in contrast to the probability of winning as a challenger. The following remark characterizes the electoral prospects of the incumbents surviving the replacement stage, assessed at the moment immediately preceding the election.

### **Remark 5.** Conditional on surviving the replacement stage

- 1. the regime co-partisan incumbents always enjoy the incumbency advantage, while
- 2. the opposition incumbents enjoy the incumbency advantage when the government's bias is sufficiently low ( $B < B^*$ ) or its local strength is sufficiently low ( $\beta < 1/2$ ) and experience the incumbency disadvantage otherwise.

One substantial implication of Remark 5 is that the incumbents competing in the election

might experience both the incumbency advantage and the incumbency disadvantage depending on their party affiliation, the regime's bias, and the regime's local strength. In particular, the opposition incumbents experience an incumbency disadvantage when the government is sufficiently biased or enjoy high local strength. This implication aligns with the recent empirical literature that frequently detects incumbency *disadvantage* in developing democracies (Klašnja and Titiunik, 2017; Aidt et al., 2011; Uppal, 2009; Roberts, 2008; Ferraz and Finan, 2008).

# Hybrid Replacement Institution and Popular Support

In non-democratic countries, observed popular support for the government is typically thought to result either from preference – when the public supports regimes that represent their values (Mishler and Rose, 2002) – or from coercion – when the population fears the regime or lacks information and choice (Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Kennedy, 2009; Levitsky and Way, 2010). However, as I demonstrate in this section, even population that disapproves of the regime may strategically endorse candidates from the governing party without being directly coerced.

The mechanism I suggest relies on the voter's expectations of forthcoming government interventions. Specifically, I demonstrate that voters ex-ante (during the open-seat election that precede the timing of the baseline model) endorse the regime's co-partisans to avoid excessive replacements of high-performing incumbents and excessive retentions of lowperforming incumbents, which would be likely to occur if they were to select a member of the opposition. Thereby, I show that even when elections are competetive, under the hybrid system that authorize central government's unilatteral inteventions between elections, the electoral performance of the regime must overstate the government's true popularity.

Let us consider a larger game where the voter selects either a regime's co-partisan or an opposition candidate in an open seat election before the baseline model's timing. Once the voter makes her choice, the selected candidate becomes an incumbent, and the baseline model's timing continues. Thus, the voter's decision results in one of two subgames: the one with an opposition incumbent and the one with a governing party incumbent. Both subgames are studied above.

To begin, let us note that the government's replacements – unlike a lack thereof – supplement the candidates' pool with new, potentially highly qualified officials. Therefore, other things being equal, the voter should prefer excessive replacements to insufficient replacements (see Online Appendix C.4). In Figure 3a, the dashed curve representing the voter's expected utility with excessive replacements lies above the dashed line that shows utility with insufficient replacements. However, the preference for excessive replacements over insufficient ones does not imply the voter will favor opposition candidates over the regime's co-partisans in the open seat election. The next proposition specifies conditions under which the opposite will hold.

### Proposition 7.

- 1. There exists a unique threshold p<sup>\*</sup> such that when the probability of the voter's learning of the appointee's performance is less than this threshold, the voter ex-ante favors the regime's co-partisan over the opposition candidate.
- 2. There exists a unique threshold B<sup>\*</sup> such that when the government's bias B exceeds this threshold, the voter ex-ante favors the governing party incumbents.
- 3. There exists unique thresholds  $p^{**} < p^*$  and  $B^{**} \in (\hat{B}, B^*)$  such that the voter prefers the regime's co-partisan over the opposition when  $p > p^{**}$  and  $B > B^{**}$ .
- 4. The voter favors the opposition incumbent over the regime's co-partisan otherwise.

Two factors divert the voter from supporting the opposition candidate in the open seat election: low probability of the voter's learning of the appointee's performance (p) and high regime bias (B).

The following represents the impact of the voter's learning on the performance threshold the government sets for the incumbents<sup>7</sup>

$$\frac{\partial s^O}{\partial p} = \frac{\partial s^L}{\partial p} = \sqrt{\frac{1+1/q}{2\pi}} + B \cdot (1/2 - \beta) \cdot (1+1/q) \tag{8}$$

Suppose the voter is likely to elect the regime's co-partisan when she learns nothing about the incumbent ( $\beta > 1/2$ ). In this case, the government's bias mitigates the learning probability impact on the government's strategy: the lower the probability that the voter returns the regime's co-partisan to office, the less likely the government to replace the incumbent. In contrast, if the voter is unlikely to elect the regime's co-partisan ( $\beta < 1/2$ ), the bias aggravates the impact of the voter's learning. Therefore, when  $\beta > 1/2$ , the lower the probability of voter's learning, the closer the government's strategy with the co-partisan is to the voter's first best ( $s^*$ ) and, thus, the higher is the voter's utility with the regime's co-partisan as an incumbent, and the further is the government's strategy with the opposition incumbent to the voter's first best ( $s^*$ ) and, thus, the lower the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent to the voter's first best ( $s^*$ ) and, thus, the lower the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent; the opposite is true when  $\beta < 1/2$ .

In the former case, the voter preference for the governing party candidate over the opposition candidate strengthens as p decreases. In Figure 3b, the dashed curve that indicates the voter's expected utility with the governing party incumbent and p = 1/2 lies above the dotted curve that indicates the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent and p = 1/2for all B. When  $\beta > 1/2$ , the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent always exceeds the voter's utility with the governing party incumbent. To see that, assume  $\beta = 1/2$ . The government's bias does not affect the impact of the voter's learning and because the voter prefers excessive replacements to the lack thereof (see Appendix C), the voter prefers the opposition candidate to the regime's co-partisan. The threshold set by the government decreases in  $\beta$  for all p. Therefore, when  $\beta < 1/2$ , the voter prefers the opposition to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>When  $B > \hat{B}$ , the probability of the voter's learning does not affect the threshold the government sets for the co-partian incumbent.

regime's co-partisan in the open seat election.

As I have just demonstrated, when the government's local popularity or strength is sufficiently low ( $\beta < 1/2$ ), the voter will always prefer the opposition to the regime's copartisan. Only when the government's local strength is high enough might the voter have incentives to ex-ante support the regime's candidate in the open seat election. The first reason to encourage this support is a low probability to learn the appointee's performance. The second reason is high government bias.

When  $\beta > 1/2$ , first, higher co-partisanship bias encourages the government to retain low-performing opposition incumbents. The disadvantage produced by an inferior pool of competitors immediately overrides the benefits of excessive replacements associated with the selection of opposition candidates in open seat elections. Second, higher co-partisanship bias encourages the government to constantly raise the performance threshold it sets for the opposition candidate. At the same time, the forthcoming election introduces a limit on the government's strategy concerning the co-partisan incumbent, contraining its ability to retain low-performing co-partisans. Thus, when the co-partisanship benefit is sufficiently high, the forthcoming elections will eliminate the under-replacement-related disadvantage while not affecting the over-replacement-related one, encouraging the voter to support the regime's co-partisan in the open seat election.

To summarize, when the voter is unlikely to learn about the appointee's performance or when the government's bias is high, the voter's utility with the governing party incumbent is strictly greater than that with the opposition incumbent. It is important to note that the strictness of this result implies that it remains robust even when the voter exogenously benefits from selecting an opposition candidate, as long as this benefit is low enough. As I demonstrate in Online Appendix E, there exists a unique voter's partian benefit threshold, below which the voter, who prefers opposition candidates to the government's co-partians, supports the government's co-partian in an open election and only begins to follow her partian preference when the benefit becomes sufficiently large.



(a) The solid curve represents expected voter welfare with the opposition incumbent and the government that strategically retains lowperforming opposition incumbents. The dashed curve indicates expected voter welfare when the government retains low-performing incumbents. The dash-dotted curve shows expected voter welfare with the governing party incumbent. The dotted curve indicates expected voter welfare when the voter cannot affect the incumbent's electoral perspectives and the government retains low-performing co-partisan incumbents. The dashed line represents expected voter utility in the case of non-interference. The vertical dotted line demonstrates the partisanship benefit threshold above which the biased government retains low-performing opposition incumbents.



a = 0.5

0.

(b) The dotted curves indicate the expected voter's utility when the probability of the voter's learning of the appointee's performance p = 1/2. The solid curve shows the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent. The dash-dotted curve demonstrates the voter's utility with the governing party incumbent.

osition Incumbent, p=1

p1

# Impact of Hybrid Replacement Institution on Voters

Figure 3: Incumbent's partial partial partial and voter welfare

Every regime must constantly balance the interests of the people and those of the elites: although the latter may help the regime to "obtain principality," revolutionary threats by the former can quickly undermine the state's authority (Machiavelli, 2008; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). Within the current model, a partial partial benefit (B) exogenously captures the relative weight of the voter's satisfaction and partian interests in the government's objective function, balancing the government's conduct: the higher the value of B, the less the population's satisfaction concerns the regime.

However, so far, the model provides little insight into the robustness of the hybrid systems to the potential backlash from the population. If the voter were to assume that the government's interventions will inevitably have a detrimental impact on her, why would she not actively oppose those interventions? One possible explanation is that it might be costly to protest against the regime. But in this section I will demonstrate that even when there is no cost associated with forbidding the government's interventions in the electoral process, the voter does not necessarily rebel against them. I will specify conditions under which the voter, from the *ex-ante* perspective, prefers the government's interventions to the lack thereof.

Note that I am referring to ex-ante (before the voter learns the incumbent's performance but after she votes in the open seat elections) utility benefits associated with the government's interventions. From the *ex-post* perspective, the biased government's actions are always suboptimal for the voter: While the government values partisanship, it is tempted to improve a co-partisan candidate's chances. As a result, upon seeing the incumbent's performance, the voter will favor the response opposite to the one the government adopts. However, the hybrid system's *ex-ante* impact on the voter is less apparent.

For instance, when the incumbent is the regime's co-partisan, the voter always prefers the government's interventions to a lack thereof, regardless of the government's bias.<sup>8</sup> In Figure 3a, the solid curve representing the ex-ante voter's expected utility with the governing party incumbent and the government's interventions lies above the dashed horizontal line that shows the expected utility subject to non-interference. Intuitively, when the incumbent is the regime's co-partisan, the government's interventions are always beneficial when the voter is likely to learn the appointee's performance as the forthcoming election and the value of the official's performance restrain the government from actions that can harm the voter.

In Figure 3a, we can also note that regardless of the incumbent's partianship, the voter's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>This result is a direct implication of the assumption that  $p \in [1/2, 1]$ . When p ranges from 0 to 1, for every  $\beta$  there exists a unique threshold such that the voter prefers the regime's interventions when p exceeds this threshold and prefers a lack thereof otherwise. For characterization of this threshold see Appendix C.2.

utility always decreases in the government's bias.

### **Remark 6.** The voter's utility weakly decreases in the government's bias (B).

Even the voter does not suffer any direct disutility associated with higher government's bias; higher government's bias indirectly lowers the expected voter's utility, as the voter anticipates a more biased government to employ a suboptimal (from the perspective of the voter) replacement strategy.<sup>9</sup>

If the incumbent belongs to the opposition and the government is unbiased, the voter always prefers the government's retention to a lack thereof. However, the higher the government's bias, the more likely the government is to, first, excessively replace high-performing officials and, second, strategically retain low-performing incumbents. In Figure 3a, the solid line that demonstrates the voter's utility with the opposition incumbent and the government's interventions decreases in the government's bias; the downward arrow indicates the impact of the strategic retentions on the voter's utility. When the incumbent belongs to the opposition and the government's bias is sufficiently high, the voter ex-ante prefers noninterference to the government's interventions (Appendix C.3).

### Proposition 8.

- 1. If the incumbent is the regime's co-partisan, the voter (ex-ante) always prefers the biased governmental intervention to non-interference.
- 2. If the incumbent belongs to the opposition, the voter prefers the biased governmental interventions to non-interference if the government's bias is sufficiently low ( $B < B'(\beta, p)$ ) and favors non-interference otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>To see the consequences of direct voter's disutility associated with the government's selection of copartisan candidates, please see Appendix E.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>The threshold  $B'(\beta, p)$  is characterized in Appendix C.

# Discussion

Although the analysis thus far has focused on non-democratic regimes, similar tendencies are noticeable in democratic countries. For example, beginning in 1917, the national government of Argentina - which had fully transitioned to democracy by then - began to frequently employ an old practice known as "federal interventions" (*intervención federal*), which allowed the federal government to intervene between elections and appoint temporary officials (*interventor*) in the interior provinces of Argentina.<sup>11</sup> Former Radical President of Argentina Hipólito Yrigoyen frequently used this power to replace elected opposition local officials with his co-partisans (Rock, 1975). Similarly, in some states in the US, governors have the formal and unilateral power to remove prosecutors and appoint a replacement prosecutor to serve until the next election cycle. In 2022, Governor DeSantis of Florida removed the elected state attorney and replaced him with an appointee on the pretext of neglect of duty, which was generally perceived as being politically motivated.

However, before applying the model's predictions to democratic regimes, it is necessary to consider its scope conditions. First, the model assumes that the removed office-holders no longer compete in future elections. This assumption is reasonable in non-democratic countries where removed officials are frequently unjustly imprisoned or formally prohibited from seeking reelection (as observed in Turkey and Russia). In contrast, in democratic countries, removed officials can compete alongside challengers and appointees. Second, the model assumes that voters' decision-making power is restricted to participation in local elections. Therefore, the government does not bear any cost when it intervenes between elections. In the online appendix (see Online Appendix G), I relax this assumption and introduce the cost associated with the unilateral replacement of the elected official. I show that the model's outcomes remain robust even after the introduction of the replacement cost, and a higher replacement cost can further exacerbate voters' ex-ante support of the regime's co-partisan.

 $<sup>^{11}\</sup>mathrm{I}$  express my gratitude to an onymous reviewer 2 for recommending this example.

This paper investigates a particular mechanism by which a nondemocratic regime might nurture local electoral support. In order to elucidate this mechanism, certain aspects are explicitly assumed away. For instance, the local officials have no agency and cannot choose whether to participate in the election. One, however, can imagine a candidate entry mechanism similar to the one that Gordon et al. (2007) employ, where the candidates first choose whether to participate in the election, and their decision conveys their private information about their type to the voter. In the context of the model I study it is possible to contemplate what might happen to the composition of the competitor if they were to act strategically. Because a sufficiently biased government retains low-performing opposition incumbents, the low-competent opposition has higher incentives to enter the race than the low-competent regime's co-partisans, whom the government always replaces. Therefore, when the government is sufficiently biased, the pool of competing opposition candidates is less competent than a pool of the competing regime's co-partisans. This should further encourage the voter to support the regime's co-partisans in the open-seat election, as the voter must expect the competence of the opposition to be lower.

# Conclusion

This paper examines an institution that combines elections and federal appointments. I show that in the presence of this hybrid procedure, high government bias toward co-partisan local officials forces voter support of governing party candidates in the open seat election, even when the election is competitive and the information available to the government and the voter is symmetric. This finding speaks to a broader question of local robustness for non-democratic regimes. It suggests that voters who might otherwise oppose the regime can unwillingly contribute to its sustainability as they pursue the selection of high-type local officials in office.

I analyze two channels by which the voters' support for non-democratic regimes arises.

The first one emphasizes the heterogeneity in how the forthcoming elections affect the government's optimal actions depending on the incumbent's partisanship. The government's bias encourages it to *excessively replace* opposition incumbents and *excessively retain* co-partisan incumbents even though this results in worse-performing local officials in office. I demonstrate that when the incumbent is the regime's co-partisan, the forthcoming election constrains the biased government for the voter's benefit, forbidding it to retain low-performing candidates. However, the forthcoming elections cannot prevent excessive replacements of opposition as the election comes after the replacement occurs. The second channel concerns the strategic use of the forthcoming election by the central government: a sufficiently biased government retains low-performing opposition incumbents to ensure the co-partisan challenger's victory. Combining these two effects forces voters to elect the governing party's incumbents in the open seat election.

Additionally, the government's interventions are detrimental for the voter only when multiple factors are combined. Namely: (i) the government is sufficiently biased, (ii) the incumbent belongs to the opposition, and (iii) the probability of the voter's learning about the appointee's competence is sufficiently low. Therefore, if given the chance, a rational representative voter is unlikely to protest against introduction of the hybrid institution that combines elections and appointments.

I show that the clarity of information non-monotonically affects the government's decision to replace co-partisan incumbents, as information clarity switches the opportunity cost of partisanship to the biased government, encouraging it to value candidates' competence differently. Finally, I also demonstrate that the biased government will replace fewer opposition incumbents than co-partisans in equilibrium, which seems counterintuitive but results from the government's intention to install co-partisans in office. To pursue this, the government must retain opposition incumbents destined to lose, to fortify the co-partisan's electoral chances.

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