

The Promise and Limits of Election Observers in Building Election Credibility

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Scholars and practitioners posit that election observers (EOs) affect local beliefs about the credibility of elections. Although these effects have important implications for democratization, they remain largely unexamined at the individual level. This article applies models of Bayesian opinion updating and motivated reasoning to illuminate the conditions under which EOs change beliefs about elections. Experimental evidence from a national survey fielded immediately following the first democratic parliamentary election in Tunisia tests the argument. Two important findings emerge. First, exposure to EOs' positive and negative statements produces a small but significant difference in individuals' perceptions of the election on average. Second, EOs' negative statements cause the election's main losing partisans—who may have had weak prior beliefs that the election was credible and were likely receptive to critical information—to believe the election was significantly less credible. These findings establish a baseline for future work on how third-party monitors shape local perceptions of political processes.

Elections are the bedrock of democracy, yet they often are associated with discrimination, instability, and violence. Whether elections advance democracy and stability—or lead to more negative outcomes—depends on the credibility of elections. Indeed, research shows that when people believe elections are credible, they are more likely to vote and to have higher levels of democratic engagement (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008; Birch 2010; Norris 2013*b*; Simpson 2014), whereas when they perceive elections as not credible, they are more likely to participate in post-election protests and violence (Beaulieu 2013; Daxecker 2012; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Norris, Frank, and Martínez i Coma 2015). Recognizing the importance of election credibility, states, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) send teams to monitor and report on countries' elections, making election observation a nearly universal phenomenon

(Hyde 2011; Kelley 2012). These same actors also support and train domestic observers drawn from civil society in countries holding elections. Both types of observers explicitly target public attitudes about elections in their activities (Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation 2005, 2; Merloe 2015), making it important to understand why and under what conditions they promote (or detract from) election credibility.

Although practitioners target public attitudes and recent scholarship on election observation argues that observers can affect local perceptions of elections (e.g., Hyde and Marinov 2014), we offer the first direct and experimental examination of the effects of election observers' (EOs') reports on local perceptions of election credibility. Practitioners and scholars have suggested that local beliefs about election credibility vary along with the positive or negative nature of observers' judgments, which EOs issue in the

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form of public statements and election reports. We argue, however, that their effects could be more limited. Drawing on a long-standing literature in American and comparative politics on opinion updating, we posit that EOs' reports will not, on average, affect most people's beliefs about elections. Instead, we suggest that the effects of EOs are contingent on factors such as the content and strength of individuals' prior beliefs about the election and their partisan biases.

Our study examines the effects of EOs' reports using data from an original, nationally representative survey in Tunisia fielded immediately following the October 2014 parliamentary election. At the end of 2014, commentators hailed Tunisia as "country of the year" and "the first Arab country to achieve the status of Free since Lebanon."¹ A crucial reason for that praise was that when Tunisia held its first post-revolution elections in the fall of 2014, a variety of observers issued reports stating that they were free and fair. Indeed, the content of observers' election reports is a well-known influence on the perceptions of international audiences (Donno 2010; Kelley 2012), but we know little about how it affects public attitudes in observed countries like Tunisia.

There are two central findings. First, election observers' reports exerted a modest but meaningful effect on attitudes on average. Specifically, a treatment highlighting positive information from observers' reports enhanced perceptions of election credibility relative to a treatment highlighting negative information from observers' reports, though neither treatment significantly changed perceptions relative to a control of no information.

Second, the reports' effects appear to have been conditional on individuals' vote choice. The reports' effects were strongest among voters of the main losing party, Ennahda. Among those losing partisans, positive reports did not enhance election credibility, whereas negative reports reduced it considerably. Meanwhile, among voters for the winning party, voters for niche parties, and nonvoters, neither positive reports nor negative reports caused updating. We suggest two possible interpretations of these conditional effects. First, the patterns could be consistent with a Bayesian updating logic, in which observers' effects are limited to cases in which their evaluations differ from people's initial beliefs and the strength of those initial beliefs is weak. Second, the patterns could be explained by a motivated reasoning logic, in which people reject information that is inconsistent with their priors or even become more extreme when exposed to it.

1. *The Economist*, "Hope Springs: Our Country of the Year," December 20, 2014, 18; and Arch Puddington, "Discarding Democracy: A Return to the Iron Fist," Freedom House, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2015/discarding-democracy-return-iron-fist> (accessed September 20, 2016).

This article has implications both for theory and practice. First, our findings shed light on a previously noted puzzle: the rise of so-called "zombie," or phony, election observer groups (Walker and Cooley 2013). We find that in a largely clean election, negative reports decreased election credibility among the main election losers. Thus, it may be important for autocrats to invite monitoring groups they know will not issue such reports. Moreover, and although the international community is unlikely to be persuaded by "zombie" groups' positive reports, such reports may be powerful domestically, as they are unlikely to galvanize losing partisans and may reassure those who suspect that fraud occurred but are not certain. Autocrats may therefore be able to highlight these reports while downplaying, or simply not inviting, organizations that would issue negative judgments.

Second, our findings contribute to the growing literature in international relations examining the rise of third-party monitors. These monitors are active in every major domain of international politics, not just elections. They observe states' compliance on issues related to peace and conflict, the environment, human rights, and more. In all of those issue areas, third parties are thought to influence political outcomes by providing credible information to domestic audiences. Despite growing interest in the ways that international actors influence public opinion in the developing world (e.g., Bush and Jamal 2015; Cloward 2014; Corstange and Marinov 2012; Marinov 2013), little research has directly examined the effects of monitors on public perceptions. Our theory, which uses insights from American and comparative politics on public opinion formation to understand EOs' perceptual effects, can be extended in the future to understand the effects of other types of monitors as well.

THE DETERMINANTS OF ELECTION CREDIBILITY

Credibility refers to "the quality of being trusted and believed in" or "the quality of being convincing or believable."² The primary task of an election is for the people to select a representative or representatives. Thus, an election is credible if people trust its results and believe that it produces an outcome that reflects the will of the people. Our definition of election credibility reflects the idea that a credible election is one in which the process is generally perceived as fair and in which any problems that do occur—since even elections in consolidated democracies have problems—are not perceived as changing the overall result. As studies of electoral integrity have become more common, a model of the

2. "Credibility." *The Oxford American College Dictionary*.

individual and contextual factors that influence election credibility has started to emerge.

First, a powerful factor highlighted in recent studies of beliefs about election credibility is individual vote choice. Vote choice matters for beliefs about elections primarily as it relates to the outcome of the election and the status of an individual's party in the election (e.g., Anderson et al. 2005; Cantú and García-Ponce 2015). Supporters of winning parties are more likely to have positive views of elections, and these views can persist across many elections. Conversely, supporters of losing parties tend to have more negative views of elections. These views are complicated by a party's history of wins and losses, which shapes how people react to future wins and losses. The mechanisms that underpin the winner-loser gap are generally psychological, with partisan media also playing an important role (e.g., Robertson 2015).

Second, and complementing the literature on winners and losers, is a stream of research that examines how beliefs about the electoral environment and institutions influence individuals' beliefs about elections. Institutions that level the playing field across candidates and parties, including the electoral system, campaign financing rules, and independent electoral management bodies, tend to increase citizens' confidence in the electoral system (Berman et al. 2014; Birch 2008; Erlich and Kerr 2016; Kerr 2013; Rosas 2010). Whether a person recognizes and understands problems with the electoral playing field depends, however, on the media he/she consumes and other characteristics, such as his/her cognitive skills and political knowledge (Norris et al. 2015, 6–7).

The informational role of election observers

The judgments election observers issue in their reports could affect beliefs about election credibility by providing information about the fairness of the electoral playing field. Before and during elections, observers attempt to deter and detect fraud through their presence, training, and support. They also observe the electoral management body, monitor political parties' campaigns, meet with political elites, examine the media environment, and evaluate the ballot-counting process and claims of misconduct. To effectively judge election quality, despite incumbents' efforts to evade detection, high-quality observers have begun to send longer and more comprehensive missions, as well as developing better professional standards (Hyde 2012). These costly efforts allow them to render a judgment not only about the level of fraud but also about the extent to which an election meets broader international standards, such as the secret ballot (Norris 2013*b*, 23–24).

In light of the efforts made by high-quality observers to report accurately on the electoral playing field, it is frequently assumed that domestic audiences update in response to observers' reports.³ Observers' initial judgments are typically issued in election reports during the few days following an election. When these reports contain critical evaluations and irregularities are widespread, post-election protests (Hyde and Marinov 2014) and thus violence (Daxecker 2012) are more common. The explanation given for those patterns is that credible information about the extent of fraud affects the ability of citizens and opposition parties to coordinate. In other words, positive reports inform people that an election was credible and deter protest and violence, whereas negative reports have the opposite effect.

Practitioners in the field of election observation hypothesize that EOs have precisely these informational effects. Writing about the challenge of combating authoritarian election narratives, Patrick Merloe (2015, 92), the director of electoral programs at the National Democratic Institute (a leading American election observation group), provides a representative quote about the reporting function of monitors: "Proper information can cut through the fog of disinformation. That information must be accurate and credible, and its circulation must be timely. Only then can the true nature of an election be illuminated. That is how public confidence is established and political volatility is reduced." Reflecting their belief about the important effects that their reports can have, observers sometimes write reports in ways designed to prevent citizen updating that they believe may be deleterious (Kelley 2010, 167). When an incumbent commits fraud or violence before or during an election, for example, observers sometimes worry that critical reports may galvanize the opposition after the election and result in further violence.

Thus, the literature implies that the information about the fairness of the electoral playing field contained in observers' reports will influence individual beliefs about election credibility. The observable implication is that when observers provide information that an election was free and fair, people will perceive that election as more credible than when observers provide information that an election was not free and fair. Although studies have demonstrated that patterns of post-election protests and violence are consistent with the idea that reports cause updating, testing their

3. Audiences could also update in response to observers' presence, not just their statements. Brancati (2014) provides mixed support for this proposition from an experiment in Kosovo.

arguments' microfoundations is important because beliefs about elections may not be the mechanism through which protests and violence occur. For example, people may be more likely to protest when EOs issue critical statements because they think the international community is paying attention and will support opposition groups—not because they have updated their beliefs about the election's credibility. Moreover, since EOs are more likely to observe elections of uncertain quality (Hyde and Marinov 2014, 340), it is difficult to identify whether the cause of protests is really their reports or some other factor, such as people personally witnessing fraud. Our study therefore helps clarify the mechanism by examining whether EOs' reports affect beliefs about elections.

H1. People will believe elections are more (less) credible when they hear EOs' positive (negative) reports.

Potential limits to the effects of election observers

Although it is intuitive that citizens would update their beliefs based on observers' reports, the vast literature on public opinion formation suggests that not all individuals will be receptive to new information about elections. One leading model of opinion updating draws on Bayes's theorem (e.g., Bartels 2002; Gerber and Green 1999). The basic logic is that people integrate credible new information into their beliefs efficiently and without biases—in other words, they update in a largely rational manner. That being said, the same information may affect individuals' opinions differently, since updating depends on individuals' prior beliefs regarding an issue or event, their confidence in (or the precision of) those prior beliefs, and the credibility of the information source. In general, the effect of credible new evidence is likely to be largest when it contradicts individuals' prior beliefs and when people have a low level of certainty in those prior beliefs (Bullock 2009).

This framework implies that the effects of election observers' reports on beliefs about election credibility will depend on the public's initial beliefs about election credibility, how sure the public is about those beliefs, and the credibility of election observers. According to this logic, the effects of EOs' reports will be limited to cases in which their content differs from individuals' prior beliefs, the strength of those prior beliefs is weak, and people view EOs as credible. Since these conditions may often not obtain, the Bayesian approach suggests that EOs may not have a significant effect on people's beliefs about election credibility.

On the one hand, the public may already have strong priors about election credibility. The finding that public and expert perceptions of election integrity are often sim-

ilar supports the idea that citizens often have good information about the electoral playing field (Norris 2013a). That information can come from a number of sources, including personal experiences, the media, the history of fraud in the country, and the election outcome.⁴ There may be little room for EOs' reports to have an effect among these competing influences. On the other hand, if people hold weak priors about election credibility despite these other information sources, then learning about credible EOs' reports will lead some to update their beliefs.

Among those people with weak priors, however, the content of their priors is important for predicting EOs' effects. For example, assuming every person is similarly uncertain in their prior belief, positive information will have a stronger effect on people who initially believed that the election lacked credibility. In other words, people who suspected that fraud occurred, but were not certain, will be reassured by a positive evaluation by EOs. In contrast, people who already believed the election was clean, but were not certain, will not change their assessment of the election's credibility as the new information from EOs is consistent with their prior beliefs (though they may grow more certain).

Beyond the Bayesian model, a second leading model of opinion updating—motivated reasoning—also suggests that not all people may be receptive to new information about election credibility. This framework emphasizes that people are often biased information processors (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006). Whereas the Bayesian model assumes that individuals' information processing is motivated by “accuracy goals,” motivated reasoning proposes that individuals are driven by “partisan goals,” which lead to biased information processing in defense of individuals' prior beliefs. In defending their prior beliefs, individuals may ignore information that is inconsistent with their priors or even become more extreme when exposed to it. Previous studies of perceptions of election fraud suggest that biased information processing significantly shapes individuals' attitudes (Ansolabehere and Persily 2008; Beaulieu 2014; Robertson 2015). If people engage in motivated reasoning, then EOs' reports could have muted effects or even the opposite of their intended effects. For example, among election losers, who as discussed above tend to hold more negative beliefs about election credibility, positive reports could have little

4. For example, supporters of the incumbent party, which has a history of winning at least one election, may have very strong priors that elections are credible if their party wins again. As Cantú and Garcí-Ponce (2015) note, however, when incumbents lose, incumbent partisans may have very strong priors that the election is not credible.

positive effect or even lead to more negative beliefs about election credibility as people hold more firmly to their prior judgment of the election when exposed to information that contradicts their partisan goals. In contrast, election winners may be more resistant to negative information about the election.

Both the Bayesian and motivated reasoning frameworks imply that EOs' reports may not significantly affect perceived election credibility on average. Again, there are multiple reasons why this could be so: locals and observers may agree on their judgments of the election, people may already have good information that gives them strong priors, observers themselves may lack credibility, and partisan attachments may make people resistant to new information. Regardless of the mechanism, these insights suggest that EOs' reports may have a more modest and conditional effect than anticipated in the literature as well as the practitioner community.

THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT

We examine how EOs' reports affect election credibility using evidence from Tunisia. Popular protests in Tunisia led to the replacement of the long-ruling president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, and initiated the country's democratic transition. A transitional government—led by the National Constituent Assembly and its “Troika” coalition government comprised of three pre-revolution secularist and Islamist parties—oversaw the writing of a new constitution and the formulation of new electoral laws. Tunisia held its first post-revolution parliamentary election on October 26, 2014. We examine citizens' perceptions of the credibility of that contest. Below we discuss our rationale for studying Tunisia and then provide background about the election.

Why Tunisia?

Tunisia is an excellent case with which to begin understanding the perceptual effects of election observers. The election that we examine afforded an unusual opportunity to examine how EOs affect beliefs about election credibility without having to account for citizens' prior experiences with observers. In effect, Tunisia represented a relatively clean slate, as the 2014 parliamentary election was Tunisia's first democratic election for parliament and thus the first election of this type at which EOs were present. It was an important case, since Kelley (2012, chap. 8) found that observers often observe multiple elections in one country across many years and that observers' past assessments can linger in the public consciousness in ways that may make citizens more or less trusting of their reports.

It is important to note that—as the first regular election for parliament in the country's short democratic history—Tunisia's parliamentary election can be described as “transitional,” and uncertainty in transitional environments can lead individuals to have weak priors about election credibility (Hyde and Marinov 2014, 340). That being said, and as we discuss in more detail below, the election results were widely accepted, suggesting that Tunisia may have had a relatively good information environment for a country holding a transitional election, which could have led to stronger priors that the election was credible. The election was also highly polarized, with the central political cleavage arising between secularists and Islamists (Tavana and Russell 2014, 2). Yet, as will be discussed below, many of the parties—though not the leading Islamist party Ennahda—were fairly new.

Tunisia is also a substantively important case. The international community has given major support to Tunisia's democratic transition, including via supporting election observers (Bush 2015, 196). Thus, Tunisia is precisely the sort of case where observers would want their reports to enhance local perceptions of election credibility in the event of high-quality elections. Moreover, experiences in Tunisia will likely serve as a reference point, whether positive or negative, for the future of democracy and democracy assistance in the Arab world.

Who won the parliamentary election?

The 2014 parliamentary contest elected members to five-year terms using a closed-list proportional representation system. Although many small parties proposed lists,⁵ the election was primarily a competition between Ennahda, the largest Islamist party, and Nidaa Tounes, the largest secular party. Among the secular parties, Nidaa Tounes—which was formed following the revolution—was mostly distinguished by its inclusion of many former members of Ben Ali's government. In contrast, Ennahda existed well before the revolution and was a leading voice of opposition to Ben Ali. In a competitive election with 66% turnout, Nidaa Tounes captured a plurality of seats (86 out of 217), with Ennahda coming in second (69 out of 217). No other party secured more than 16 seats. In February 2015—four months after the election—Nidaa Tounes formed an unexpected unity government with Ennahda.

5. The small parties included several leftist parties and center-left parties, as well as other parties across the political spectrum. More than 9,500 candidates competed for the 217 seats in the Tunisian parliament. In fact, in one electoral district, Kasserine, as many as 69 electoral lists were proposed by parties or coalitions. See Tavana and Russell (2014, 6).

What did election observers do and say?

Tunisia invited a host of short- and long-term international observers to its parliamentary elections, including three American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—the Carter Center, International Republican Institute, and National Democratic Institute—and four intergovernmental organizations—the African Union, Arab League, European Union, and Francophonie. In addition, a number of domestic groups monitored the election, often with considerable international financial and technical support. Several political parties as well as local nonpartisan NGOs—the largest of which was Mourakiboun, with approximately 4,000 citizen observers—participated.

EOs were united in their overall praise of the parliamentary election. This fact, combined with a robust media, means that it was a relatively good information environment for a transitional election. Specifically, the observers agreed that the election was transparent and reflected the will of the people. Yet, as is typical, the observers were also united in their citations of room for improvement. The most-noted criticisms of the election related to illegal campaigning outside of polling stations and violations of Tunisia's campaign finance rules. Moreover, several groups noted rumors of vote buying, though those reports were unconfirmed. On the whole, observers characterized the infractions as fairly insignificant, since they did not affect the election outcome (e.g., National Democratic Institute 2014, 1). That EOs delivered mixed—though undoubtedly positive—reports about the election gave us ample opportunity to create ecologically valid treatments about observers' reports.

Intriguingly, although election observers were mentioned in the Tunisian media and generally viewed positively in our study, they were not widely discussed. As such, the public's pre-existing knowledge about observers' presence and activities was somewhat limited. Only 17% of the articles published by a leading Tunisian news agency about the election mentioned observers, according to our searches.⁶ These articles sometimes (though not always) referenced specific groups of observers, but they did not reference any group more or less than others, with the exception of the Carter Center, which was referenced slightly more often than average. Similarly, when we conducted focus groups in Tunisia with 48 political science students at a local university within a week of the parliamentary election, only about half

of the students (whom we might expect to be relatively informed about and interested in politics) had heard about observers at the election, and few knew what the observers did or said. Finally, a minority of survey respondents (34%) reported that they had heard something about EOs' judgments of the election in the news.⁷ The implication is that it should have been possible to experimentally study the effect of providing new information about EOs' reports on public opinion, which is what our experiment was designed to do.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research draws on evidence from a nationally representative survey of Tunisian political attitudes.⁸ A Tunisian survey firm, ELKA Consulting, fielded the survey on our behalf, with local interviewers conducting the interviews face-to-face and in Arabic. The survey took place during the week following the parliamentary election on October 26, 2014.

The survey contained an experiment designed to isolate the effects of election observers' reports on local perceptions of election credibility. In the real world, citizens' knowledge about EOs is not distributed randomly, either across elections or across individuals around the same election. Individuals who support the losing party, for example, may be more likely to hear—or seek out—critical reports by EOs as reported by partisan media outlets than individuals who support the winning party (Robertson 2015). Thus, observational studies of the effects of election observers' reports on public perceptions are likely to face endogeneity problems. Our experiment helps ameliorate those problems.

The experiment informed randomly selected respondents about the content of EOs' reports. The experiment was preceded by a series of general questions, including ones designed to measure key pre-treatment covariates, such as vote choice. The experiment was followed by questions designed to measure perceptions of election credibility. Our randomization procedure involved interviewers rolling dice at the start of interviews to determine treatment assignment. This process generated experimental groups that were balanced both in terms of size and most individual characteristics, including income, gender, employment status, religiosity, partisanship, and marital status. Balance tests examining differences in means of pre-treatment covariates across treatment groups indicate, however, that the

6. The news agency was *Tunis Afrique Presse*. We searched the newspaper's online archive around the parliamentary election (i.e., between October 19 and November 2, 2014) and identified 47 total articles.

7. This question was asked after the experiment described below.

8. The relevant portions of the survey questionnaire are included in the appendix, along with summary statistics of the core variables used in our analyses.

randomization process failed to achieve balance on age, education level, political knowledge, and rural location (see the appendix, available online). Because those variables could be correlated with perceptions of election credibility, we control for them in the regressions below.

The experiment involved two treatment groups (each $N \approx 400$) and a control group ($N \approx 200$) that did not receive information about EOs.⁹ One treatment provided information about the positive content from EOs' reports; the other treatment provided information about the negative content of EOs' reports. We randomly varied the EOs' nationalities, using both American and Tunisian observers. Interviewers read the following aloud:

- *Preamble* (to both treated groups): As you know, voters took to the polls on October 26th to cast their vote for the parliament. You may not be aware, however, that election observers from organizations in [the United States OR Tunisia] monitored the election after receiving an invitation from the Tunisian government. The [American OR Tunisian] observers monitored the political situation before and during the election, and they stationed themselves throughout the country to monitor voting and vote counting on Election Day. The [American OR Tunisian] observers planned to evaluate the elections for compliance with standards for free and fair elections and report on incidences of manipulation, undue partisan interference, voter intimidation, and voter fraud.
- *EOs' Positive Reports* (positive group only): After the election, the [American OR Tunisian] observers released their preliminary evaluation of the recent election. In their report, the monitors assessed many aspects of the election and cited several areas of success. One of the [American or Tunisian] observers' important findings was that the legal foundation for the election was strong and created a fair and secure environment for competition. Moreover, the [American or Tunisian] observers noted that the election campaigns were clean, transparent, and vibrant.
- *EOs' Negative Reports* (negative group only): After the election, the [American OR Tunisian] observers released their preliminary evaluation of the recent

election. In their report, the monitors assessed many aspects of the election and cited several areas of needed improvements. One of the [American OR Tunisian] observers' important findings was that the improper source and use of campaign funds undermined the fairness of the competition. Moreover, the [American OR Tunisian] observers noted that there have been allegations of vote buying and illegal influence from parties.

In addition to reading this text, interviewers gave respondents fliers to reinforce the treatments (see the appendix for an example). The fliers included the EOs' national flag and a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" symbol to summarize their reports. Because the information was rather technical, we asked respondents to tell us whether they thought the evaluation that they heard was positive, negative, or both. As the appendix shows, their assessments were highly correlated with treatment assignment, which indicates that the treatments worked as designed.

As in any experiment, we faced difficult choices when designing our treatment. From an ethical standpoint, it was important to convey truthful information. For that reason, we focused on EOs that were present at the election and highlighted issues that EOs' reports mentioned.¹⁰ At the end of our project, we debriefed participants about the complete content of EOs' reports. From an inferential standpoint, it was important to convey information in a way that mimicked how information from EOs' reports is conveyed in the real world. As people often hear about observers' overall evaluations as well as some evidence that supports observers' evaluations, we referenced both the overall verdict (reinforced with the flier) as well as some specific information.¹¹ As such, we cannot differentiate how people might have reacted to hearing just the overall judgment or just the contextual information. Moreover, and because we were committed to using truthful information from EOs' reports, we could not reference completely symmetrical positive and negative content. Still, both the positive and negative treatments contained a piece of information that related to the competitiveness of the pre-election environment as well as

9. The control group only heard the first sentence: "As you know, voters took to the polls on October 26th to cast their vote for the parliament."

10. See the appendix for quotes from EOs' reports, which substantiate this point.

11. For an example of how EOs were covered in the media, including references to both EOs' overall verdicts and their specific assessments, see Louis Bonhoure, "International Observers Commend Tunisia's Election: An 'Extraordinary Achievement,'" *Tunisia Live*, October 27, 2014. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/10/27/international-observers-commend-tunisias-elections-an-extraordinary-achievement/> (accessed September 20, 2016).

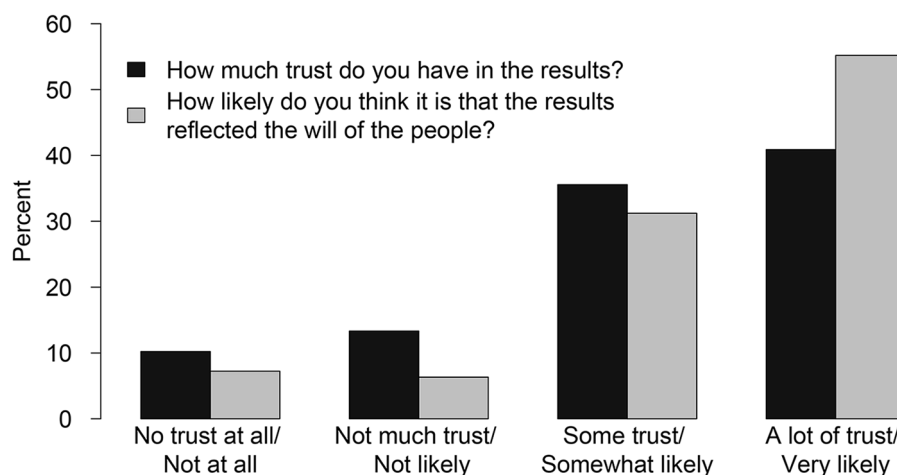


Figure 1. Respondents' beliefs about the election's credibility (control group)

a piece of information that related to the campaign.¹² Furthermore, the highlighted issues—electoral laws, the presence of competition, vote buying, and campaign finance—were all emphasized by previous surveys as important for people's views about electoral malpractice (Norris 2013a, 587–88).

FINDINGS

The key outcome in our study is *Credibility*, which we defined as trust in the outcome of the election and belief that the election reflected the will of the people. We measure Credibility using responses to two questions asked immediately following the experiment. The first question asked, “How much trust do you have in the results of the recent election?” The second question asked, “How likely do you think it is that the results of the recent election reflected the will of the Tunisian people?” Our intention in using these two measures was to capture the possibility that people might lack trust in the exact results of the election due to problems with the process while still thinking that the overall outcome—Nidaa Tounes winning the most seats—reflected the will of the people. EOs also frequently make this type of distinction (Kelley 2010). Both questions were answered on four-point scales (coded from 1 to 4), and the answers were strongly correlated (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$). We average the responses together to create our measure of credibility. The resulting variable ranges from 1 to 4, with a mean of 3.2 and a standard deviation of 0.8. Although combining multiple survey indicators is recommended in the literature on measuring electoral integrity

(Norris 2013a, 579–80), we also analyze responses to the questions separately in robustness checks.

Figure 1 plots the distribution of responses to the two questions for the control group, which did not receive information about election observers.¹³ As it shows, Tunisians generally thought the parliamentary election was credible, with 76% of respondents having some trust or a great deal of trust in the election and 86% of respondents thinking it was somewhat or very likely that the results of the election reflected the will of the people. Intriguingly, some individuals did not trust the election results but still believed that the outcome reflected the will of the people. This conclusion is similar to that of the election observers, who noted some problems with the election but did not believe that fraud altered the outcome. Unfortunately, due to resource constraints, we were unable to assess which subcomponent(s) of electoral integrity some people questioned, such as the voter registration process, electoral management body, or counting process. The appendix does contain, however, an analysis of perceptions of one subcomponent of electoral integrity, which is how fair people thought the electoral process was to Tunisian citizens. As expected, since the fairness of the electoral process is related to election credibility, we find similar results when we look at the treatment's effect on this variable.

What role do observers play? Average treatment effects

Hypothesis 1 posited that people will believe elections are more credible when they hear EOs' positive reports and less

12. The pre-election environment and campaign are the first two stages of the electoral cycle discussed by Norris (2013a, 579–80).

13. The appendix also plots the distribution of Credibility by treatment group and party.

Table 1. The Average Effects of EOs' Reports on Beliefs about Election Credibility

| | Positive versus Negative (1) | Positive versus Control (2) | Negative versus Control (3) |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Positive reports | .10* (.056) | .03 (.070) | |
| Negative reports | | | -.06 (.069) |
| Age | .01*** (.002) | .01*** (.002) | .01*** (.002) |
| Level of education | -.00 (.023) | -.00 (.026) | .01 (.027) |
| Rural resident | .06 (.061) | .11 (.069) | .16** (.069) |
| Political knowledge | .05 (.036) | .09** (.040) | .05 (.042) |
| Constant | 2.58*** (.148) | 2.55*** (.183) | 2.57*** (.185) |
| Observations | 762 | 571 | 627 |
| R ² | .05 | .06 | .05 |

Note. This table reports the coefficients from OLS regression models of Credibility. Heteroskedastic-consistent robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

credible when they hear negative reports. In contrast, we argued that EOs' reports may not significantly affect perceived election credibility. Table 1 summarizes the average effects of EOs' reports. We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions that control for age, education, rural status, and political knowledge, which our balance checks suggested should be included.

As model 1 in table 1 indicates, positive reports enhanced credibility relative to negative reports ($p = .08$). The substantive effect was modest, with perceptions of credibility increasing from around 3.1 to 3.2, or 0.1 points, for a variable that ranges between 1 and 4, holding all else equal. To put that effect size in context, consider the effect of winning the election on beliefs about election credibility. In analyses described below, we find that Nidaa Tounes voters—the winners of the election—had views of election credibility that were about 0.5 points higher on average than all other respondents. This finding suggests that although the effect of EOs' reports was significant, it was small when compared to other plausible factors that influence perceived credibility, such as vote choice. Moreover, although respondents in the positive and negative treatment groups had different beliefs about election credibility in the way hypothesis 1 predicts, models 2 and 3 in table 1 show that the positive and negative treatments produced small and insignificant

changes in Credibility relative to the control group, though the effects are in the expected, opposing directions.

If we break our dependent variable into its constituent parts, we find that positive reports enhanced people's trust in the results of the election relative to negative reports (coefficient = 0.13; $p = .06$).¹⁴ The effect appears stronger than the effect of reports on individuals' beliefs that the election reflected the will of the people (coefficient = 0.09; $p = .15$). This pattern suggests that EOs may have played a more important role in improving people's trust in election results than in changing their overall impression (which was already quite favorable) about whether the outcome reflected the people's wishes.

The robustness of the treatment effects

We performed several tests to assess the robustness of the results in table 1. All results from our robustness checks are available in the appendix.

Political knowledge. First, we find that the effect is similar if we exclude respondents with the most political knowledge—who may have already learned about EOs' reports or had

14. For the associated tables, which use both ordered probit and OLS, see the appendix.

strong priors about election credibility—and the least political knowledge—who may not have understood the reports or had weak priors about election credibility. We would have liked to instead use a measure of whether respondents had heard about EOs in the news. However, we had to ask this question after our experiment so as not to prime respondents about EOs. Unfortunately, respondents in the treatment groups were much more likely to report having heard about EOs than respondents in the control group ($p = .02$), suggesting that the treatments affected how people answered this question. Excluding respondents who reported having heard about EOs would therefore undermine our experiment, making the political knowledge test a good substitute since political knowledge was highly correlated with having heard about EOs' reports in the news in the control group ($p < .001$ according to a t -test).

Spatial dynamics. Second, we examine spatial dynamics. To begin, we include fixed effects for the 24 governorates (i.e., electoral districts) in Tunisia. In the absence of sub-national indicators of election credibility, governorate fixed effects help us account for the possibility of district-level variations in actual or perceived election credibility. The results are similar. Next, we introduce an interaction between the treatment and an indicator variable for districts where Nidaa Tounes won the most seats. The rationale is twofold. First, if election irregularities were clustered by area of party dominance, then people living in Nidaa Tounes districts may have differed from people living in districts where other parties won in their experience of Election Day. Second, a number of individual traits that could have moderated the treatment, including partisanship and cosmopolitanism, were likely clustered geographically. We do not find notable spatial variations in the effects of the treatments.

The identity of EOs. Third, we consider whether the treatment effect varies by EO nationality. We introduce an interaction term that took the value of 1 if the EOs in the treatment were American and 0 if they were Tunisian. This analysis does not reveal a significant effect of EO nationality. This nonfinding runs somewhat contrary to the conventional wisdom that local observers might be more effective, since they can mobilize more monitors and local audiences may find them more legitimate (Bush 2016, 367–68; Carothers 1997, 26). It is also striking since Tunisia is an Arab country, where anti-Americanism is prevalent and where distrust of international EOs might be high (Benstead, Kao, and Lust 2015). However, both American and Tunisian EOs had similar—and relatively high—levels of credibility in Tunisia. We assess EOs' credibility through responses to questions about

how biased and capable people thought the observers referenced in the treatment were. These questions were asked after our measures of election credibility. We find no evidence that people thought the American EOs were more or less capable or biased than the Tunisian EOs.

In a second survey fielded two months later in Tunisia (Bush and Prather 2016), we further investigated the issue of EO identity, asking people about their perceptions of the capabilities and biases of EOs from the African Union, the Arab League, the European Union (EU), Tunisia, and the United States. This study also found that Tunisians did not perceive American and Tunisian EOs in notably different ways, although it did find that EOs associated with the Arab League (and to a lesser extent the EU) had significantly higher levels of credibility in the eyes of Tunisians. As a consequence, we anticipate that the effects of EOs' reports may have been larger if the reports in our study had been issued by EOs from the Arab League.

Vote choice. Finally, we examine the robustness of the treatment effect across the winners and losers of the election. Specifically, following Robertson (2015), we examine differences in beliefs about election credibility between Nidaa Tounes voters, Ennahda voters, other parties' voters, and nonvoters.¹⁵ We refer to these groups as the “voting categories.” We do not disaggregate “other parties' voters,” because there are too few individuals from each small party to make sound inferences. Closely matching observed turnout and vote choice in the election, 62% of our respondents reported voting in the election and, of those who voted, 39% said they voted for Nidaa Tounes, the ultimate winners of the election.

Because we only observed vote choice and self-reported voting behavior, we first build regression models of election credibility to assess the effects of these variables, limiting the analysis to control group respondents. This analysis controls for demographic variables (e.g., the respondent's age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, and geographic location), as well as for the respondent's political interest and knowledge. The regression results demonstrate that the winners of the election—Nidaa Tounes voters—thought the election was significantly more credible than everyone else ($p < .001$ when compared to all other categories). That election winners in our study perceived the election as significantly more credible than both election

15. As nonvoters may also have party preferences that shape their perceptions of election credibility, the appendix contains a further analysis of their beliefs about election credibility according to which party they would have voted for.

losers and nonvoters is consistent with the literature on perceptions of election integrity (e.g., Kerr 2013, 828–29).

Now we turn to examining the robustness of the effects of observers' reports by vote choice. To do so, we interact our treatment assignment variables with the respondent's voting category. This analysis allows for the closest consideration of the Bayesian and motivated reasoning frameworks, although we are not able to directly test the empirical implications of these theories using our survey data both because our N is insufficient to test complex conditional hypotheses and because our survey did not measure peoples' prior beliefs or attempt to randomly prime partisan biases. Nevertheless, the patterns we discuss below offer some suggestive insight into the conditional effects of EOs' reports.

When we interact the treatment with voting category, we find that only for Ennahda voters—the main losing partisans in the election—was there a significant difference in beliefs about election credibility across the positive and negative treatment groups. We explore this conditional effect more deeply by examining the effects of each treatment relative to the control. When we do so, we find no evidence that positive reports had a significant effect on beliefs about election credibility relative to the control for any of the four voting categories. As shown in figure 1, most individuals in Tunisia (as measured by our control group) believed the election was credible, so positive reports may not have affected individuals' already positive beliefs because they contained information that was already consistent with individuals' priors. Recall that according to the Bayesian framework, new information is likely to have the strongest effect when the information is significantly different from individuals' prior beliefs. Thus, if most of the individuals in our sample already had positive beliefs about election credibility, then the positive reports ought to have only had a small, insignificant effect, which is what we find.

Some of these noneffects are also consistent with motivated reasoning. For example, election losers—Ennahda voters and other parties' voters—may have reacted in a partisan way when they heard EOs' positive reports. Consequently, they could have discounted the information contained in the positive reports, which may be why we find that positive reports had no effect on credibility among election losers. In contrast, motivated reasoning suggests that election winners could have become even more positive about the election when exposed to the positive reports since positive reports are consistent with their partisan goals. We do not find such an effect, although Nidaa Tounes voters were already so positive about the election that there may have been ceiling dynamics in play.

If the positive reports had no effect on any voting category, then it must be the case that the significant difference between positive and negative reports among Ennahda voters was driven primarily by their reaction to the negative reports. Indeed, we do not find that negative information had an effect on Nidaa Tounes voters, other parties' voters, or nonvoters, relative to the control of no information. Negative information from observers' reports only significantly depressed Ennahda voters' beliefs that the election was credible relative to the control condition of no information ($p = .05$). The mean shift in Credibility among Ennahda voters is substantial at -0.38 for a variable that ranges between 1 and 4.

The treatment effect among Ennahda voters could again be consistent with either a Bayesian updating framework or a motivated reasoning framework. On the one hand, Ennahda voters may have updated their beliefs downward when they received new information that was inconsistent with their prior beliefs. After all, even though the election's losers thought the election was less credible than the election's winners, most Ennahda voters still thought the election was somewhat credible. However, the strength of their priors may have been relatively weak. On the other hand, Ennahda voters may have responded to EOs' reports according to their partisan goals. Ennahda was the major losing party in the election and the party with the worst views of the election winners, Nidaa Tounes.¹⁶ As such, the negative reports would have been consistent with Ennahda voters' partisan goals, and they could have updated their beliefs downward accordingly. Since the election was fairly polarized and Ennahda was “one of Tunisia's oldest and most well-organized parties” (Tavana and Russell 2014, 6), we might expect its voters to be susceptible to motivated reasoning.

Overall, the modest but significant average treatment effect of EOs' reports is consistent with scholars' and policy makers' assumption that election observers affect beliefs about election credibility. As noted above, however, the assumption that reports affect public confidence in elections fails to take into account the models of updating that are available in the literature on public opinion. We demonstrated that although the effects of EOs' reports are robust to a number of factors, some effects appear conditional on individuals' vote choice, which is a powerful factor shaping beliefs about election credibility. Although we are unable to test whether the Bayesian or motivated reasoning framework is more appropriate for interpreting the pat-

16. See the appendix for an analysis of peoples' views of Nidaa Tounes.

terns we find, the conditional results nonetheless show the limits of EOs' reports on beliefs about election credibility for some respondents. In what follows, we further discuss the effects of EOs' reports by theorizing about the external validity of the findings and their generalizability to different countries and electoral contexts.

External validity

As Hyde and Marinov (2014) suggest in research on EOs' informational role, observers are most likely to affect citizen perceptions at elections of uncertain quality. These elections are typically held in democracies that are not yet institutionalized, including those holding transitional and founding elections. The election we study in Tunisia was one such transitional election. Transitional elections, while less common than other types of elections, are not infrequent. According to the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) database (Hyde and Marinov 2012), 288 transitional elections (9% of the total number of elections in the world) occurred between 1960 and 2012. In addition, 477 elections followed the previous suspension of elections, and 241 elections were the first multi-party elections in the country.¹⁷ These other types of "founding" elections tend to also be of uncertain quality. Although transitional and founding elections are not as common as other types of elections, the role of EOs in them is critical for scholars to understand, as these elections affect the likelihood of future democratization and elect leaders who make crucial decisions about the economy and society post-transition (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 71–74). Thus, we consider how our findings might generalize to elections of these types, while noting that the Bayesian and motivated reasoning frameworks can help explain the likely effects of EOs' reports in any electoral context.

Recall that we find a modest but significant effect of EOs' reports on beliefs about election credibility. For transitional and other types of founding elections, we consider the effects we identify in Tunisia to be a lower bound on the potential effects of EOs' reports for two reasons. First, although we do not have a measure of the strength of priors about elections across countries or in Tunisia, we argue that Tunisians likely had strong priors that their election was credible, even though it was a transitional election. Most observer groups were united in their overall praise of the

election, suggesting that the election was for the most part clean. Also, optimism after the Arab Spring regarding the democratic potential of Tunisia fueled enthusiasm about the election. Moreover, Tunisia had a relatively free media and educated public. Thus, we consider it likely that most Tunisians would have had strong priors that the election was credible. The stronger individuals' priors about the credibility of an election are, the less likely it is that EOs' reports will change beliefs according to the Bayesian framework. In other elections where priors about election credibility are weaker—for example, where information about the election is of lower quality or unavailable, or where the election itself is of middling quality—the effects of EOs' reports are likely to be greater.

Second, Tunisia may have been a transitional or founding election in which motivated reasoning was especially strong, which is another reason why our effects might represent a lower bound on EOs' influence in these types of elections. We expect motivated reasoning to be a factor conditioning the effect of EOs' reports in most elections, particularly as it pertains to vote choice. After all, the winner-loser gap in beliefs about election credibility has been shown to be pervasive across countries (Anderson et al. 2005). Although there will always be winners and losers of elections—and thus incentives for individuals to be biased information processors—the strength of parties and party loyalties as well as the polarization of the electoral environment can augment partisan biases in information processing (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). We do not have data on how common it is for elections in less institutionalized democracies to be polarized. We can say, however, that even absent an incumbent party, Tunisia's parliamentary election was widely viewed as an intense struggle between Islamists and secularists (Tavana and Russell 2014, 2). This dynamic may have made the winning secularists more resistant to negative information about the election and the losing Islamists particularly resistant to positive information. In transitional and founding elections that lack strong polarization and involve weak party loyalty (Lawson and McCann 2005), partisan biases may be weaker and lead EOs' reports to have stronger effects on beliefs about election credibility.

CONCLUSION

Election observation is a nearly global pursuit, and a large and expanding literature has examined its causes and consequences. Our research departed from most previous studies by examining the effects of EOs on local perceptions of elections. Perceptions of election credibility, particularly in new and unconsolidated democracies, have important effects on voter turnout, government legitimacy, and protest

17. One potentially important feature of the Tunisian election we study—the absence of a true incumbent party—is common for elections of this type. According to NELDA, 71% of first multiparty elections, first elections after a suspension, and transitional elections do not involve incumbents.

and violence. Thus, the research presented here filled a crucial gap in the literature. We observed that scholars and practitioners suggest that EOs' reports affect public perceptions about election credibility and drew on intuitions from the public opinion literature to explain why EOs' effects might be more limited.

We tested the effects of EOs' reports in an important new democracy: Tunisia. EOs' statements had a modest but meaningful effect on Tunisian perceptions on average. That EOs' reports did not move people in a larger way makes sense given our relatively modest treatment and what we have learned from previous research about how attitudes are formed. The average treatment effects we identified were robust to a number of model specifications and interactions, though notably we discovered that a significant result obtained only among Ennahda voters when we examined our results by voting category. We suggested that the strong beliefs of winners in the election's credibility as well as their partisan commitments may have made them resistant to the effects of negative statements. In contrast, negative statements depressed credibility among supporters of the main losing party, Ennahda, suggesting that people may update in response to the new information in EOs' reports if it is consistent with their partisan goals. Although we cannot test these propositions using our data, future work can build on these results to test the Bayesian and motivated reasoning frameworks more specifically either by measuring the direction and strength of individuals' priors or explicitly giving partisan cues to prime partisan-based information processing.

Our theory and findings have a number of implications for the literature on EOs and for practitioners. First, they encourage researchers and practitioners to keep in mind the cognitive processes and competing sources of information that lead individuals to form opinions about elections. The theories we outline here could lead EOs' statements to have different effects in different contexts depending on factors such as the extent of political polarization in a society and the level of information available to citizens.

Relatedly, our theory and findings suggest that in a polarized environment, EOs' reports may be susceptible to politicization and thus have even stronger partisan effects. As we discovered, EOs' negative reports significantly affected supporters of the main losing party—Ennahda—who held the least favorable views of the winning party, Nidaa Tounes. This pattern obtained even in the context of our experiment, with its neutral presentation of the information. Yet, in the real world, it is possible for political elites to wield observers' reports for their own partisan purposes and in more dramatic and salient ways (Merloe

2015), which could cause observers' reports to have stronger polarizing effects on election credibility.

Finally, although we find that EOs' negative reports affected Ennahda supporters' beliefs about election credibility, our evidence points to them having more modest effects on most individuals' perceptions. Although it is possible that larger effects would obtain in a different context or using a different research design, it is important for EOs, and for the people who fund them, to recognize that EOs' perceptual effects may often be limited and conditional on individuals' partisanship. Instead of focusing on how to transmit information from reports to the public in observed countries where the public may be difficult to sway, EOs' resources may be better directed toward their other goals, such as detecting and deterring fraud and providing information about election integrity for international audiences.

There are a number of ways for future research to build on this study to further understand the effects of EOs on individual attitudes. We discuss some of the most fruitful below. First, scholars can extend our analysis to new contexts, including ones with more contentious or fraudulent elections, presidential elections, elections with different rules such as winner-takes-all systems, or elections in which there are incumbents or where parties have different histories of wins and losses. We expect the Bayesian and motivated reasoning logics to be applicable in these contexts and to help guide scholars in their predictions about the effects of EOs' reports.

Second, scholars might adapt our framework to capture over-time dynamics in opinion formation. For example, perceptions about election credibility could vary before and after election results are known. In some cases, election results are not announced immediately, and EOs' reports may have a larger effect in such environments. In addition, repeated exposure to EOs' reports via the media could strengthen the effects identified in this paper.

Third, a study could use a similar design to identify how different elements of EOs' reports influence attitudes. This research would shed light on whether particular types of violations of electoral integrity matter more to citizens and whether observers' overall evaluations are more significant than their contextual reporting. It would also contribute to a broader literature that seeks to understand the conditions under which outside actors' "naming and shaming" of countries' human rights violations works (e.g., Hafner-Burton 2008).

Finally, researchers could develop a research design that incorporates the competing sources and content of frames contained in EOs' reports more explicitly. Such a research design would be valuable since in some elections citizens

receive conflicting information from different EOs and other sources. We hope the present study is only the start of the research agenda on election observers' perceptual effects.

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