

ELECTION QUALITY: JUDGEMENT AND MEASUREMENT CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

Judging and measuring the quality of elections has never been easy. Several electoral studies, election observer groups and democracy promoters have highlighted the difficulty associated with judging the quality of an election. For example, Jorgen Elklit and Andrew Reynolds (2005) in their seminal work – *“A framework for Systematic Study of Election Quality”* believed that every election has “some margin of errors” as it is almost impossible to get an election which is not being infected by “defective ballots, incomplete voter registers, inaccuracies in counting, impersonation” and other discrepancies (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002; Elklit & Reynolds, 2005). Also, increasing interests in election quality indicated that judging and measuring election quality face three major challenges. First, there are the inordinate complexities of electoral processes which made it difficult to find clear cut observable indicators. Second is the challenge of tracking and documenting various form of irregularities associate with the conduct of election. Lastly and very significantly, is whose recollection and narration is to trust: the electorate, electoral stakeholders or country experts’ judgements.¹

Any attempt at empirical assessment of election quality requires comprehensive criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the

selection of variables and methods. In other words, to achieve a reliable framework for the examination of election’s quality requires a concise definition of credible election, disintegrating same to clear observable indicators; explanation of what and whose voice to listen and consider;² and clear lenses for taking the patches, batches and hunches of the information collected into a whole for valid inferences. This is important as both experts in political science and election promoting organisations are in need of reliable framework within which to judge several elections.

This paper examines these theoretical and methodological challenges and proposes a concise criterion for gauging the credibility of elections. It focuses first, on the major conceptual challenges facing scholars of comparative politics particularly operationalising election integrity so as to ease empirical observations. Thereafter, it explores the myriad of difficulties associated with providing valid and accurate data for judging the credibility of elections, suggesting simple ways that could ameliorate election research difficulties. The penultimate suggests ways and methods for ensuring reliability and validity of inferences and concludes by indicating that the claim is not a calved in stone, but a step towards valid assessment.

¹ Some scholars favoured the perception of the electorates who are the major players in the field of voting (Kerr, 2013 ; Bratton, 2013) and others prefer an expert based perceptual surveys (Bland, Green, & Moore, 2013; Norris, 2013; Norris, Frank, & Martinez iComa, 2013; Norris, 2014; Norris, 2014).

² While using tested methods and protocols could be an easier option, few of existing techniques could fit the purposes and questions raised by the current research. The focus is on strategies of data gathering more than on particular techniques.

COMPLICATIONS OF OPERATIONALIZATION

Credible elections are prerequisites of democracy. This is not to fall into Terry Karl's 'fallacy of electoralism,' but election remains the defining tool of democracy (Katz, 1997). Indeed, almost all definitions of democracy symbolise the presence of free, fair and competitive elections (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Dahl, 1973; Diamond, 1999; Diamond & Morlino, 2005; Schmitter & Karl, 1991; Collier & Levitsky, 1997). Democracy is a political process which denotes self-government juxtaposed in freely elected representative institutions by supposedly equal individuals (Przeworski, 2010). It is a political process which empowers all adults with an equal right to participate in the entire processes of accessing and exercising the power to make binding decisions (Munck, 2007).

The literature on credible election or election integrity³ differs radically on the default approach to what constitute credible elections. Some scholars defined election quality by stating clearly the presence or absence of certain criteria that render an election either democratic or undemocratic. This group uses terms like "*free and fair*" (Elklit & Svensson, 1997), "*democratic election*" (Lindberg, 2006 & 2009), "*democratic and unfair election*" (Levitsky & way, 2010), "*democratic voting and or democratic inclusiveness*" (Munck, 2009; Birch, 2011), and "*election integrity*" (Norris, 2013 & 2014) to assess election's quality. Instances include Staffan Lindberg's assertion that an election needs to be participatory, competitive and legitimate to be democratic⁴ just as both

Gerardo Munck (2009) and Birch (2011) indicated that credible elections must satisfy four basic criteria - inclusiveness, respect for voters' preference, competitiveness, and main public office accessed periodically (Birch, 2011; Munck, 2009). Birch, further insisted that individual voter:

... must have access to adequate accurate information about the policy proposals and performance of the options on the ballot, ... must be able and willing to access and process that information to make a judgement on its basis, and ... must be able to vote according to their preference" (Birch, 2011, p.23).

The lesson here is that credible election should offer individual voters the chance to access accurate information about policy options of contestants. Accordingly, an election "... must offer the electorate an unbiased choice among alternatives" (Munck, 2009, p. 88). This viewpoint sounds workable as it eases conceptual and methodological difficulty of studying elections. However, the requirement that voter should have equal and accurate information about policy options seem inappropriate especially when examining elections in transitional societies. For example, in such communities citizens could mix up good policy goals with personal, tribal or group interests, making individual

turnout signifies people's exercise of political power, while opposition participation confirms contestation, and its absence portends a significant threat to the overall electoral processes. Similarly, when existing autocrats decide to quit and observe the rules of the game, electoral processes assume a considerable measure of integrity. Competition as an attribute has four components: the winner's share of the votes, the largest party's share of seats, the second party's share of seats and power alternation. A legitimate election is one in which losers accept defeat, peace characterises the process, electoral rules are observed and the electoral regime survives (Sani, Ibrahim. 2015. Electoral Governance: Understanding the Democratic Quality of Elections in Nigeria. PhD Diss., The University of Edinburgh).

³ Although there are efforts at separating or making election integrity an independent concept, here we use it interchangeably with others like credibility, quality, and democratic to refer to the same as good election.

⁴ Lindberg measures participation by the extent of voter turnout, presence of opposition, and absence of autocratic guards. The understanding is that a large

choices dependent on other factors. Also, the political orientation of ruling elites is much more inclined to adapting strategies to hold on to power, including the use of ethnic and clientele politics as against good policy proposals (Bratton, 2013; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009).

For Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, a credible election is free from various forms of frauds, voter intimidations, and fair when oppositions are not subjected to any form of repression or harassment (Levitsky & way, 2010, p. 7). Although helpful, operationalising this view to empirical components appears problematic for Levitsky and Way. For example, instead of providing the elements that constitute “free and fair” elections, they classified unfair elections, seeing it as tools in the hands of autocratic incumbents.⁵ Consequently, indicators of unfair elections such as coordinated electoral abuse and formal and informal impediments appeared to conflate one another. In fact, each has issues of voter intimidation or disruption and violence against opposition party activists and candidates as empirical elements,⁶ making it difficult to distinguish which act represents electoral abuse or violence against opposition. Such inconsistency in classification would obscure delineation of effects, and conclusions could be presumptuous as each could be mistaken with another.

To The Election Integrity Project⁷ good elections must correspond to:

... international conventions and universal standards about elections reflecting global norms applying to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath (Norris, 2014, p. 21).

The argument is there are certain internationally shared standards and acceptable principles which could serve as suitable instruments for judging electoral credibility. These norms reflect some sort of global consensus governing political actions of either individuals or institutions⁸ which when properly considered in electoral processes could help in justifying some minimum democratic requirements. The integrity scholars argued that international norms could be seen as binding on all the countries that have ratified them either at regional or international fora. Consequently, “[e]lectoral contests are evaluated as legitimate, according to this notion ... if they respect international and regional conventions, principles, and treaties that governments have endorsed” (Norris, 2014, p. 23). Table 1 summarizes some of these principles and the relevant citation of each.

⁵ Similar view was expounded by Gandhi, Jennifer & Lust-Okar, Ellen (2009). Elections under Authoritarianism, *Annual Political Science Review*, pp. 403-422.

⁶ See Levitsky & Way, (2010) appendixes I, 1; 3.2.; and 3.3., pp. 366-367.

⁷ The Electoral Integrity Project focuses on why elections fail and what can be done about this. For detail about the project visit: <https://sites.google.com/site/electoralintegrityproject4/about-this-project>.

⁸ For detail discussion of global norms and behaviour of political actors see for instance (Norris, 2013 & 2014 cf. Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

Table 1 Some International norms of Election Integrity

Global Norm	Principles
Article 21(3) universal declaration of Human Rights (1948)	Government authority shall flow from elections; held at periodic intervals; where people have universal and equal suffrage; ballot are confidential and secured.
Article 25 of the United Nations International Covent for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR of 1966)	Periodic elections at regular intervals; universal suffrage that includes all sectors of society; equal suffrage, in the idea of one-person, one-vote; the right to stand for public office and contest elections; the rights of all eligible electors to vote; the use of secret balloting; genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of the people.
Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (2002)	Universal, equal, free, secret, and direct suffrage
UN Resolution 63/163	Stressed the importance of fair, periodic and genuine elections
Chapter 7 Article 17 of the African Union (AU) Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance	Transparent, free and fair elections; managed by an independent and impartial electoral commission and electoral dispute resolution mechanism; and fair media houses.

Source: Authors' Compilation

The expectation is the basic necessities of good elections are embedded in the extent to which these principles are judiciously applied. Thus, credibility in elections is dependent on the extent to which the processes involve in it conduct are transparent, genuine, manage by impartial and reliable electoral body, and all contestants and electorate are given equal chance to participate and express their preferences.

The volume of the requirements as stipulated by each norm (the principles column) appears biased as contextual factors with substantial effects could be downplayed. For example, Shaheen Mozaffar has established the relevance of institutional legacies of colonial rule, political legacies of postcolonial authoritarian regimes, ethno political cleavages, and political negotiations as explanatory factors to the impartiality of African electoral bodies (Mozaffar, 2002).

In short, the development of practical conception for measuring transitional

elections has proven to be quite difficult and yet to be sufficiently addressed. While authoritarian elections⁹ are seen as elections that violate key democratic standards (Schedler, 2006), scholars differ as to what kind of violation to excuse. For some, any violation marginal or deliberate which tilted the playing field excludes a regime no matter its successes. This seems the treatment Bostwana received from Levitsky & Way (2010) despite its long history of freedom which begun from 1969 to 2013 (Bogaaards, 2013; FH Report, 2014). Perhaps as any disregard of basic characteristics of democracy will only succeed in ranking as democratic, regimes that fail to institute procedural integrity which is the safety-valve of democratic uncertainty (Schedler, 2006,

⁹ This is a type of elections that do not appear to have met democratic standard of freeness and fairness which recycled incumbents and frustrate democratisation (Morse, 2012, p. 162).

p.10).¹⁰ Yet, Schedler was compassionate to label Tanzania as democratic which, for Levitsky & Way, is an autocratic state.¹¹ Perhaps this tension explains the description of electoral authoritarianism as a 'familial concept that lacks unity of members' (Collier & Mahon, 1993 cited in Morse 2012), and illustrates that the problems associated with assessing the quality of elections have not been sufficiently addressed. Indeed, Munck advocated for a return to Dahlian notions of regime type and measure election quality using contestation and participation. He, however, indicated that "... the development of scales of participation and contestation hinges on complex methodological choices" (Munck, 2006, p. 35).

Notwithstanding, these contradictions and complications could be blessings in two ways. One, each indicates the need for a more robust intellectual engagement that, it is hoped, would yield some clear empirical indicators for assessing election integrity. Equally, they provided some areas of caution for novice researchers no election and voting behaviour, including how and what type of data to use and from whom to acquire or which to accept or reject.¹² The next section takes this on.

INORDINATE SOURCES

What and whose information to listen and consider in judging the quality of an election is another difficulty. In their seminal work, Mozaffar & Schedler (2002) point, as did others,¹³ to the propensity of data collected using either the comprehensive, selective,

subjective or indirect approach¹⁴ to judge election's quality to be doubtful. First, the comprehensive approach is seen to be unrealistic and unsustainable as attention is on all electoral activities from pre-election to post-election periods. Accordingly, a battery of issues are captured by the data collection instruments, covering almost all aspects of an election. For example, Elklit and Reynolds had 12 steps, with 47 elements which they modified to 11 steps with 54 elements covering the entire electoral cycle. Birch, also, developed a 15 questions index of election quality as did Gary Bland, Andrew Green, & Toby Moore in their 48 Election Administration System Index (EASI) which covers three basic dimensions – participation, competition, and integrity of electoral quality. While, as the name suggest, the comprehensive approach, provides an encompassing method to data collection, it faces empirical difficulty as "... implementation becomes burdensome, too costly, and ultimately unsustainable" (Bland, Green, & Moore, 2013). Judith Kelly & Kiril Kolev, for instance, admitted this challenge in an effort to develop a Dataset on International Election Monitoring (Kelley & Kolev, 2010).

Second, the selective approach seems biased to other aspects of elections, restricting attention to few aspects of elections. For example, Carolien van Ham examined 11 data sets and found six to have measured election's quality based one single indicator which could lead to sytematic biases in overall scores as it is difficult to tell which aspect of the electoral process is considered or neglected (van Ham, 2014, p. 7). Indeed, the use of single or smaller

¹⁰ For more about procedural certainty and uncertainty see Mozaffar & Schedler (2002).

¹¹ Details of this divergence are provided by (Morse, 2012, pp. 168-172, Table 1 and 2).

¹² Ibrahim's PhD Thesis (2015) provided a way out of this dilemma and could be access upon request.

¹³ (Darholf, 2011; Lopez-Pintor, 2010; Vickery & Shein, 2012; Bland, Green, & Moore, 2013).

¹⁴ These are electoral data collection strategies employed by different scholars design to gather enough evidence to determine election's quality. For details about these methods see (Mozaffar & Schedler, The Comparative Study of Electoral Governance: Introduction, 2002; Bland, Green, & Moore, Measuring the Quality of Election Administration , 2013).

sets of indicators might discriminate data scope and enhance measurement error by neglecting other fraudulent acts taking place prior to or after election day (van Ham, 2014, cf. Anglin, 1998; Eisenstadt, 2002).

The subjective and indirect approaches are not in anyway different. The former constructs evidence from the perception of oppositions and other partisan observers, trusting it to provide information about electoral credibility or otherwise. While oppositions do not condone electoral excesses, stand gain when voting is credible, and are not likely to under-report profound violations, the sloppiness of their perception should not be overlooked. Evidence has it that many opposition parties are equally involved in electoral rigging. In fact, in Nigeria, it is argued that : “[t]he only political parties that could complain of election rigging are those parties that lack the resources to rig. There is ample evidence that rigging [and] thuggery were relative to the resources available to the parties.¹⁵ Also, weak parties who could not compete well might discredit an election they stand to lose. In addition, information from nonpartisan sources such as newspapers or media houses requires extra caution too as different media houses have different ideological and political linkages. Moreover, sources such as legal, police, and media accounts might only skim the surface of the problem (Norris, 2014, p. 40).

The latter approach which concentrate on evidences from election results is not helpful either as election results are product of various activities which could influence and alter electoral margins (Geddes, 1999, p. 116). To crossover these hurdles, we suggest the use of either a combination of two or more of these approaches. The use of selective and

subjective approaches, for example, could be a manageable approach as it will limit areas of concern and help the researcher to remain focused. Also, the selective approach provides an opportunity to focus on the specific issues that are most critical to the entire electoral cycle, easing data collection and enhancing data validity and reliability. Equally, there is a need to give a voice to partisan electoral stakeholders – Election Observation Groups (both domestic and foreign) as these groups are ready to expose fraud, repression, and impartiality of either the electoral commission or security officials on election duty. While concentrating more on activities on election day, election observers have helped to cross-check information reliability. The role of these bodies in uncovering and preventing electoral fraud, supporting and strengthening electoral administration is well acknowledged (Cathorers, 1997; Kew, 1999; Dorman, 2006; Bratton, 2013). Indeed, it is argued that there are strong data on the quality of elections from numerous sources, including election observers that can allow researchers to make better judgements about election integrity (Morse, 2012).

Election observers can be biased and endorse bad elections as good. Moreover, their over reliance on polling day activities, relative autonomy, political linkages and the influence of host state have led many of them to pass questionable judgements on integrity. For example, during the 1999 elections in Nigeria, member states of both the Commonwealth of Nations and the European Union required observation teams to “... endorse the elections and restore normal relations with Nigeria” (Kelly, 2010, p.166). The USA maintained that the election is “the most important election in the world [that] year” (Kew, 1999, p. 30). So, “... the process of observing [is] as political as the election itself” (Dorman, 2006, p. 172).

¹⁵ Excerpts from the Maiden National Broadcast by the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Major General Buhari on the 1st of October 1984 (from Usman, 2002, p. 93).

To reduce the infiltration of such predispositions, we advocate for consultation of multiple accounts. In this way, data could be triangulated by cross matching domestic, regional and foreign observations reports with governmental, media, police reports and courts proceedings on the one hand and experts and stakeholders¹⁶ on the other. This provides a two-way form of data validation as generated data is corroborated by observational data.¹⁷ Equally, this takes into cognisance the relative role of context as individuals are interviewed in their semi-natural settings.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Validity and reliability questions in political science revolve around two major issues: (a) The extent to which assigned scores/classifications and indicators/components relate effectively to the systematised concepts; (b) and that the sources consulted adequately provide the required evidence for making valid inferences. Responding to the latter concern, political scientists adopt consistency as the best measure of reliability as efficient collaboration from at least three or more perspectives is reasonable to substantiate a claim (Pierce, 2008). On this basis and to run away from the fallacy of duplication, we felt that the concentration given to data sources and collection above responds adequately to reliability. While an attention on how data is analysed especially in qualitative studies is imperative to reliability and validity, we think this is beyond this current effort, but is another virgin area in electoral scholarship.

¹⁶ These are people who occupied or participated in an election in a country as electoral officials, contestants, party officials, civil society activists, tribunal or electoral court judges/lawyers.

¹⁷ Generated and observational data is used based on Roger Pierce (2008) understanding.

On the other hand, the test of validity is passed when a researcher either of quantitative or qualitative inclination, adequately build solid concepts or measures. In qualitative research:

Each part is necessary and all the together are jointly sufficient. Operationally this means taking the minimum (necessity) or the maximum (sufficiency) of the parts (Goertz, 2010, p. 99).

In the quantitative on it part:

... some additive procedure, either the sum or the mean [are necessary]. When presented with a bunch of indicators of a concept the natural first move is to add them up or take their mean (Goertz, 2010, p. 99).

In both cases, the essence is to ensure that concept construction techniques are appropriate and provided better option compared to others. One good attempt towards this direction, especially in electoral studies, we believed is to adopt Robert Adcock and David Collier's content, criterion and construct techniques (Adcock & Collier, 2001). This criterion captures all the necessary elements of credible elections as it makes easy the utilisation of first: The expanded procedural minimum definition of democracy. The definition not only focuses on electoral results but also on the context and processes that generate the result. This is an effort to ensure theoretical embedment as "we need a good theory to arrive at the proper concepts" (Kaplan, 1964, p.53 cited in Adcock & Collier, 2001). Therefore, a democratic election could be seen as one that is participatory, not for the three indicators highlighted by Lindberg (2006) but for several other measures that could affect political participation such as the presence and quality of an accurate national voter list, among other things. In short, the reworking of Lindberg's conception of democratic elections is necessary for it to fit a

particular case of interests by researchers. This is because content validation is situated within a broader conceptual agreement and adjusted to fit specific cases. Moreover, specific case concept formation can be a productive tool in content validation (Adcock & Collier, 2001).

Second, the technique pays attention to the degree to which indicators of quality election relate empirically with the indicators of other possible variables that could influence the process such as electoral governance. The advantage of this is if the classification fits, then it provides a basis for “interpreting indicators as measuring the same systematised concept – thus providing convergent validation.” Where the relationship appears weaker, it serves as an indication that the dimensions measure different issues and therefore provide discriminant validation (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 540). In this regard, the empirical analysis indicates that the quality of the elections requires that the citizen’s right of participation is guaranteed and a level playing field is necessary for effective political competition among electoral rivals. Equally, evidence shows that democratic election requires a functional and successful management of electoral cycles. For example, it is found that there is a clear connection between the maladministration of the electoral logistics and the violation of the freeness and fairness of elections. The study further confirmed that the use of voter turnout, for instance, left much to be desired and justifies the need for more robust and specific measures that are theoretically linked to an explanatory variable.¹⁸

Lastly, the argument about validity relates to how interpretations generated from a specific context could be generalised. Notwithstanding, its contextual limitations,

the applicability of this framework and its possible explanations are promising as the conceptual framework and methodological design are not carved in stone, and other research studies can add further information. Moreover, explanations in political science as in other social sciences are “based on a particular set of cases, and a validity claim should be made, at least initially, with reference to this specific set” (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 535). Indeed, a valid case study has to be sensitive to the domain of the application of the operationalised concept as equivalent observation may require some repositioning. For instance, while scholarship has highlighted the relevance of policy voting in judging the quality of elections, such analysis will be difficult in many developing nations where political parties and candidates rarely promote policy voting.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a simple and more enhanced examination of the challenges facing research in electoral politics. The paper indicates that while good multiparty elections are very significant to democratisation, the literature is yet to come up with concise and rigorous indicators of what constitutes a good election. The most common efforts concentrate on democracy measures not elections. It was not until 1999 when Robert A. Pastor examined the role of electoral administration in democratic transition that interest in election quality began to crystallise. The first systematic method of analysis was put forward by Jorgen Elklit and Andrew Reynolds (Elklit & Reynolds, 2005; Elklit & Reynolds, 2002). A closer look at this and others that followed (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002; Norris, 2013; Norris, Frank, & Coma, 2013) reveals overconcentration on electoral administrative performance. These efforts provide a robust foundation for this study, but their failure to openly discuss the observed

¹⁸ Sani, I. Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2015.

conceptual and methodological challenges of electoral study necessitates this effort. Also, while interest in electoral authoritarianism has brought numerous insights about hybrid regimes, still it aggravated the difficulties associated to electoral studies, complicating conceptual and methodological stances.

Consequently, this paper bridges this gap by exposing the difficulties and offering possible ways out. For instance, we highlighted the challenge of operationalising what constitutes democratic elections and what matters in studies on this area. Drawing from extant literature on democracy and elections, the paper puts forward a number of operational challenges of elections quality including the view that electoral authoritarianism seems more of a 'familial concept that lacks unity of members'. Equally, we propose for the consultation of multiple accounts so as to balance the inherent subjectivity that characterised data in electoral studies. This way, data could be triangulated by cross matching domestic, regional and foreign observations reports with governmental, media, police reports and courts proceedings on the one hand and

experts and stakeholders on the other. This provides a two-way form of data validation as generated data is corroborated by observational data. Equally, this takes into cognisance the relative role of context as individuals are interviewed in their semi-natural settings.

Lastly, while we appreciate the utility of using experts' viewpoints to assess election quality, we recommend that these ideas be cross matched with other available sources. This we believe will enhance the validity and reliability of the conclusions reached, as experts' views could be partisan and nonpartisan; and, unless this is balanced there is a tendency for subjectivity to intrude into the evidence provided. Moreover, an expert reporting on election in for example India, Nigeria, Indonesia, or Ghana, and indeed in any country depends on other sources as none could be everywhere before, during and after every election. In this regard, getting robust evidence for valid inferences would require consulting other sources such as asking electoral stakeholders in an interview or a focus group discussion with candidates and voters from diverse political dispositions.

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