Blaming the Refs: How Governments Contest Election Observation Findings

Muhammet Özkaraca* Tyler Pratt†

March 26, 2026

Abstract

Governments accused of electoral misconduct often push back against the credibility of election observation missions (EOMs). When do these efforts succeed? This paper investigates the strategies governments use to contest critical EOM findings and their effectiveness in shaping perceptions of electoral integrity. We focus on two prominent contestation strategies: direct attacks on observer credibility and appeals to politically compliant "zombie" monitors that rubber-stamp elections. We test the effects of these strategies among two key audiences for EOMs: domestic citizens and foreign government elites. In a vignette experiment among Kenyan citizens, respondents evaluate a disputed Kenyan election in light of a critical EOM report and a randomly assigned government rebuttal. In a second experiment, U.S. foreign policy professionals participate in a simulated interagency deliberation over the contested Kenyan election. We find that critical EOM reports substantially reduce perceptions of election integrity among both Kenyan respondents and US policy officials. While government rebuttals fail to persuade Kenyan citizens, they increase perceived election integrity and diminish punitive responses such as aid suspension among US elites. Our findings suggest that credible monitors retain significant power to shape perceptions of election quality, but that this influence is vulnerable to government contestation among foreign elites.

*Ph.D. Student, Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. ozkaraca@unc.edu https://muhammetozkaraca.github.io

†Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. tbpratt@unc.edu https://tylerbpratt.com

‡We are grateful to Ashley Anderson, Cameron Ballard-Rosa, Lucy Martin, and participants at the UNC Methods and Design Workshop for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this project. We thank Elizabeth Marie Tomblyn for her valuable research assistance.

1 Introduction

International election observation has become one of the most widely adopted norms in contemporary politics. Since the early 1990s, the number of elections monitored by international observers has grown dramatically (Figure 1), and critical assessments from election observation missions (EOMs) often carry real political consequences — shaping citizen beliefs about election quality, informing foreign aid decisions, and occasionally contributing to the removal of incumbent leaders (Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Donno, 2013; Rosnick and Johnston, 2020).

As the role of EOMs has grown, governments increasingly chafe at their power. Incumbents accused of electoral misconduct do not passively accept criticism from international observers. They often fight back by publicly attacking observer credibility, questioning their motives, and invoking favorable assessments from politically friendly monitoring bodies (Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025; de Icaza, 2025). As election observation norms have spread, so too have the strategies governments use to neutralize their effects.

A large literature documents the influence of election observers on both domestic and international audiences (Hyde, 2007; Kelley, 2009; Hyde, 2011; Bush and Prather, 2017). Yet scholars have paid less attention to how incumbent governments rebut EOM criticism in an attempt to preserve their domestic legitimacy and their access to democracy-contingent international benefits. We argue that the post-election information environment is best understood as a strategic contest between incumbent governments and international election observers, who compete to shape perceptions of multiple audiences. We identify two distinct government contestation strategies. The first, which we call a credibility attack, involves public rhetoric designed to undermine the legitimacy or perceived capability of the monitoring body. The second leverages low-quality, politically-compliant "zombie" monitors (Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025) to introduce a competing institutional endorsement and foster ambiguity.

These strategies operate through distinct causal channels, and their effectiveness may differ across audiences. We consider two crucial audiences for electoral contestation. Domestic citizens, who have direct experience with electoral politics in a country and hold strong

Figure 1: *Source:* National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset. Data on internationally observed elections are based on the `NELDA45` variable. Data on electoral fraud concerns are based on the `NELDA11` variable.

partisan priors, filter government rebuttals through a motivated-reasoning lens. Political elites abroad, who often condition foreign aid flows on free and fair elections, lack firsthand knowledge but may be more skeptical of government cheap talk.

We test these arguments using two pre-registered experiments set in the context of a hypothetical disputed presidential election in Kenya. The experiments were fielded as part of a "sequential, non-harmonized meta-design" in which each study addresses different but overlapping features of our argument (Kertzer, Renshon and Xu, 2025). Study 1 is a vignette experiment conducted among roughly 1,000 Kenyan citizens. Study 2 is a novel policy simulation experiment fielded among approximately 200 current and former U.S. foreign policy officials. While both experiments share an underlying context and a similar treatment structure, each is adapted to the unique decision environment that often confronts domestic citizens and foreign elites as they respond to contested elections.

The results reveal both similarities and notable differences across audiences. International election observer reports are powerful signals for both: exposure to a negative observer assessment significantly reduces perceived election integrity among Kenyan citizens and U.S.

foreign policy elites. When governments fight back, however, the two audiences diverge. Among the Kenyan public, neither credibility attacks nor positive assessments from zombie monitors improve aggregate perceptions of election integrity. For U.S. elites, both rebuttal strategies partially restore perceived election integrity, though only the zombie monitor does so without inducing a backlash in downstream policy preferences.

The paper makes a number of contributions. First, and most directly, we advance scholarship on international election observation by embedding the monitoring process within a broader strategic environment in which observers and incumbent governments compete to shape electoral perceptions (Kelley, 2012; Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Bush and Prather, 2017). Rather than treating EOM reports as exogenous informational shocks, we theorize and test the effectiveness of government strategies designed to neutralize them. We also reveal heterogeneous effects across audiences. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to simultaneously examine how critical EOM reports and government contestation shape the responses of both domestic publics and foreign policy elites.

More broadly, our results contribute to research on the credibility of international organizations and the conditions under which their assessments carry weight (Bush and Prather, 2018; Nielson, Hyde and Kelley, 2019; Morse and Pratt, 2025). We demonstrate that government rhetoric can erode the informational value of institutional assessments, but that their ability to do so varies by audience.

Finally, our paper offers a methodological contribution by developing a multi-stage elite simulation experiment that incorporates theoretically-relevant aspects of the policy process, including interagency deliberation and the introduction of multiple, competing viewpoints. In addition to measuring foreign policy officials' beliefs about election integrity, this allows us to examine how these beliefs translate into policy recommendations in a more realistic institutional setting. This approach is useful for projects in which policy outputs are an important quantity of interest.

The next section develops our theory of strategic contestation between governments and election observers and derives our formal hypotheses. We then describe the research design for both studies, before presenting the results of the Kenyan citizen experiment and the U.S.

elite simulation in turn. The final section discusses our findings and outlines directions for future research.

2 Strategic Contestation of Election Observers

How do audiences form beliefs about the integrity of an election they did not directly observe? And how do those beliefs change when the actors providing information disagree? These questions are central to understanding both the power and the limits of international election observation. In this section, we develop a theory of strategic contestation between incumbent governments and election observers that explains how different audiences process competing claims about electoral integrity. We begin by describing the information problem that election observation is designed to solve: audiences who cannot directly verify what happened at the ballot box must rely on signals from others who claim relevant knowledge. We then articulate two distinct strategies that incumbents use to contest critical observer reports and the mechanisms through which they shape audience perceptions. Finally, we consider how the effectiveness of these strategies may differ across audiences.

Our starting point is that elections often generate information asymmetries. Key audiences, including citizens and foreign officials, cannot directly verify whether an electoral process was conducted in an appropriate manner. Instead, these actors rely on signals from bodies with relevant knowledge: incumbent governments, election observers, opposition parties, and media outlets. The pronouncements and claims from these diverse bodies shape perceptions of election integrity among domestic and international audiences (Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Kelley, 2012). These perceptions constitute the primary outcome variable in our theory. Because beliefs about election integrity cannot be formed through direct observation, they are often powerfully shaped by informational signals that audiences receive.

We focus our attention on this post-election information environment.[1] We conceptualize the environment as a strategic contest between incumbent governments and international

[1]We acknowledge that electoral contestation also occurs during the pre-election period, through campaign irregularities, voter suppression, media manipulation, and other strategies. We focus on the post-election phase when observation reports are released and governments respond because it is the primary locus for explicit contestation between EOMs and incumbent governments.

election observers, competing to influence the beliefs of audiences who seek to evaluate election integrity. We emphasize these actors because they are often the primary producers of competing claims about election quality. For incumbents, elections serve dual functions: they are the primary mechanism for gaining and retaining office domestically, and they signal democratic commitments to international audiences who provide "democracy-contingent benefits" such as foreign aid and diplomatic support (Hyde, 2011). Domestically, incumbents seek to reinforce their standing as legitimate rulers (Little, 2012; Williamson, 2021). Internationally, they aim to preserve access to democracy-contingent benefits by ensuring that any electoral misconduct does not provoke punishment from foreign actors.

EOMs, on the other hand, derive their influence from being perceived as credible and impartial (Bush and Prather, 2018). As a result, they are more likely to call out electoral deficiencies uncovered during the monitoring process. Traditional election observation bodies invest heavily in professional standards and methodological rigor, deploying large teams of trained observers and issuing detailed assessments of the electoral process (Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025). This investment reflects the core logic of election observation: because EOMs stake their organizational reputation on the accuracy of their findings, their reports function as credible signals about election quality (Hyde and Marinov, 2014). And there is considerable evidence that these signals carry weight. The presence of observers has been shown to reduce election-day fraud and depress incumbent vote shares at monitored polling stations (Hyde, 2007, 2010). Furthermore, positive EOM assessments help states signal democratic credibility to foreign audiences, facilitating access to democracy-contingent benefits (Hyde, 2011; Donno, 2013), while negative reports can trigger punitive responses (Donno, 2010). At the domestic level, critical reports can inform citizen perceptions of election quality and shape willingness to mobilize in response to suspected fraud (Bush and Prather, 2017; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014). They may further cause post-election violence eventually (Daxecker, 2012; Von Borzyskowski, 2019).

The 2019 presidential election in Bolivia illustrates how consequential EOM findings can be. The Organization of American States (OAS) was invited to monitor the election. In its post-election report, the OAS alleged serious irregularities in the vote count (Organization of

American States, 2019). Although subsequent analyses raised questions about the reliability of these claims (Curiel and Williams, 2020), the OAS assessment nonetheless provided opposition actors with a powerful resource for delegitimizing President Evo Morales, contributing to his removal from office (Rosnick and Johnston, 2020).

Yet the influence of observer reports is far from automatic. A growing body of research demonstrates that EOM assessments do not simply transmit information to passive audiences. Rather, their impact is moderated by several factors.[2] On the observer side, the effect of EOM findings may vary according to the perceived credibility of the monitoring body, including its institutional reputation, perceived degree of rigor, and local expertise (Kelley, 2009; Bush and Prather, 2018; Pratt, 2023). On the audience side, the processing of observer reports is shaped by prior beliefs and the informational environment in which the audience is embedded (Curtice and Crabtree, 2024). Domestic citizens who hold strong partisan commitments may interpret the same report very differently than foreign officials (Robertson, 2017; Bush and Prather, 2017; Brancati, 2014). These findings suggest that understanding the effects of electoral contestation requires attention not only to how incumbents rebut critical reports, but also to the prior beliefs and informational constraints of the audiences they are trying to persuade.

2.1 Government Rebuttals of Critical EOM reports

Incumbent governments facing critical election assessments have strong reasons to undermine election monitoring bodies. As a broader literature on contestation of international institutions suggests, government actors typically do not passively accept the reputational and political costs of an unfavorable institutional judgments. Instead, they seek to actively shape the information environment in which that judgment is received (Kelley, 2017; Adler-Nissen, 2014; Morse and Pratt, 2022, 2025).

We identify two principal strategies available to incumbent governments seeking to un-

[2]Beyond questions of impact, scholars have raised concerns about the unintended consequences of election monitoring, including negative effects on domestic institutions (Simpser and Donno, 2012), the political pressures that can compromise the quality of EOM assessments (Kelley, 2009; Kavakli and Kuhn, 2020), and increasing polarization (Bush and Prather, 2022).

dermine critical EOM reports.[3] The most direct approach leverages the incumbent's inherent advantages in setting the public narrative: access to state media, the ability to command press conferences, and the authority to speak on behalf of the nation (Entman, 2009; Hyde, 2011; Miskimmon, O'loughlin and Roselle, 2014). Governments can wield this power to publicly challenge the observer's credibility and motives. We call this strategy a *credibility attack*. We adopt a broad, inclusive understanding of the concept: any public remarks from the incumbent government that are designed to undermine the credibility, legitimacy, or perceived capability of international election monitors constitute a credibility attack. In practice, such attacks frequently involve accusations that monitoring organizations harbor political bias, apply double standards, engage in foreign interference, or lack the expertise to evaluate elections in the host country.[4]

Incumbents' credibility attacks are common in the wake of critical EOM reports. After the 2007 presidential elections in Russia, the Kremlin dismissed international observers' findings as "biased, groundless and unbalanced" (Harding, 2007). A similar case can also be seen following Cambodia's 2023 general elections, when National Election Committee (NEC) spokesperson Hang Puthea characterized criticism of the electoral process as "baseless and politicised" and urged them "to be more reasonable" (Sereyrath, 2023). Likewise, during Venezuela's 2021 local elections, then-President Nicolás Maduro branded EU observers as "enemies" and declared that "the delegation of spies from the European Union found not a bit of evidence to criticize the electoral system" (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

The logic of credibility attacks is straightforward: if the incumbent can reduce the perceived credibility of the election observer, audiences should place less weight on the critical signal and their perceptions of the election's integrity should increase. The success of this rhetorical strategy depends on whether audiences find the incumbent's claims plausible. Here incumbents confront a key hurdle: their incentives to cling to power and misrepresent

[3]Incumbent governments might also bar critical EOM bodies from monitoring elections altogether, thereby avoiding scrutiny. While some countries do pursue this strategy, we argue that such a move would immediately signal democratic deficiencies and risk forfeiting democracy-contingent benefits that governments might otherwise retain by allowing EOMs and contesting their findings. Moreover, countries that restrict observer access tend to be those already associated with significant electoral irregularities and are thus unlikely to benefit from the signaling dynamics we examine. We therefore exclude this strategy from our analysis.

[4]For a more detailed typology of rhetorical attacks on election observers, see de Icaza (2025).

the quality of elections are widely recognized. Accordingly, audiences may dismiss a government's rhetorical rebuttals as "cheap talk" (Kelley, 2009) and prioritize more credible signals from the election monitor.

Partially in response to this hurdle, a second rebuttal strategy has grown more common over the past two decades. Incumbent governments often invite a range of different international election monitors to observe their elections (Donno and Gray, 2023). While many observation missions are organized by established international organizations like the OAS, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the African Union (AU), an increasing number represent 'friendly' politically-compliant organizations that tend to rubber stamp even questionable elections (Morrison et al., 2025; Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025). These monitoring bodies tend to mimic the institutional form of more authoritative election observers, but lack their independence and methodological standards (Kelley, 2012; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017).

Following Bush, Cottiero and Prather (2025), we refer to these low-quality election observers as "zombie" monitors. Their proliferation has been substantial: by 2020, the number of elections observed by zombie monitors rivaled those observed by traditional high-quality monitors (Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025). In that regard, the 2010 Belarusian general election offers an illustrative example in which the assessments of a low-quality observer directly contradicted those of a high-quality organization. Following the election, the OSCE ODIHR, one of the most prominent monitoring bodies in international election observation, issued a statement concluding that the country had failed to meet OSCE standards, despite some improvement (OSCE ODIHR, 2010). This criticism was countered, however, when a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) observer mission, a notable low-quality monitoring body, declared the election that returned Lukashenko to power "legitimate" (Reuters, 2010).

Rather than directly attacking the credible observer, the zombie strategy works by introducing a competing institutional endorsement into the information environment. When audiences encounter conflicting assessments from organizations that share at least some superficial resemblance, they may experience improved perceptions of electoral integrity (com-

pared to the counterfactual of a single, critical EOM report). By invoking a positive report from a zombie monitor, governments are unlikely to persuade skeptical audiences that an election was conducted freely and fairly. However, they may be able to foster doubt and uncertainty. This matters because the political response to contested elections, including organized collective action by citizens or punitive policy responses by foreign aid providers, are more difficult to implement as uncertainty rises.

As with rhetorical credibility attacks, the use of zombie monitors also comes with potential constraints. If an audience draws strong distinctions among election observers – rank-ordering them by perceived rigor (Pratt, 2023) or local expertise (Bush and Prather, 2018), for example – then zombie monitors should have a limited ability to rebut signals from more authoritative EOMs. Audience perceptions of different monitoring bodies are thus crucial to understanding the impact of zombie monitors.

2.2 Dual Audiences for Government Contestation

The effectiveness of either rebuttal strategy may depend on the audience receiving it. We focus on two of the most prominent and important audiences for electoral contestation: domestic citizens and foreign policy elites in aid-providing countries.[5] These two audiences occupy fundamentally different informational and motivational positions, which may cause them to process government rebuttals in systematically different ways. Below, we briefly sketch the features of each audience that shape how contestation strategies are likely to be received.

Domestic citizens tend to approach questions of election integrity with a rich understanding of local political dynamics and strong political attachments. In contexts where elections are closely contested, voters have direct experience with electoral disputes and prior beliefs about the trustworthiness of different political actors. These beliefs are often structured by partisan and coalitional identification, and a large literature on motivated reasoning sug-

[5]Other audience, such as domestic elites, may also be important constituencies for incumbents and EOMs. We narrow our focus to these two audiences because they are the actors responsible for imposing the two primary costs of electoral manipulation in the literature: domestic political backlash and the termination of democracy-contingent benefits by foreign governments.

gests that individuals with strong group commitments evaluate political information through a directional lens (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). For incumbent supporters, a government's rebuttal may provide a convenient justification for discounting a critical EOM report (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). For opposition supporters, the opposite is true: the EOM report validates pre-existing suspicions of fraud and government's rebuttal is dismissed as self-serving rhetoric. The overall aggregate effects of EOM reports and government rebuttals may therefore depend on the distribution of beliefs and political attachments among the domestic public.

Policy elites in foreign countries occupy a fundamentally different position. Unlike domestic citizens, they typically lack firsthand knowledge of the electoral process and hold few partisan attachments to domestic political actors, though they may have strategic foreign policy incentives to support one actor over another. Their decision-making is more likely to be shaped by professional norms and bureaucratic identities. They may also exhibit a relatively high sensitivity to the costs of acting on uncertain information (Jervis, 1976; Kertzer, 2022) as they try to avoid policy errors. This could make policy elites *more* receptive to government rebuttals, which "muddy the waters" of the information environment. On the other hand, there are reasons to expect policy elites to be more discerning consumers of information. Research on susceptibility to misinformation suggests that individuals with greater analytical capacity and expertise are better equipped to distinguish credible claims from unreliable ones (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Guess, Nagler and Tucker, 2019). This feature of elites could help immunize them from credibility attacks and claims by zombie monitors. These logics pull in opposite directions, and which predominates is ultimately an empirical question.

While we do not develop formal expectations about how the effects of government contestation will differ across these two audiences, the above discussion underscores the importance of examining multiple audiences simultaneously. Existing empirical studies of election observation have focused overwhelmingly on domestic publics (e.g., Hyde and Marinov, 2014; Robertson, 2017; Bush and Prather, 2017, 2018; Morrison et al., 2025), with a smaller set of studies examining the responses and perceptions of international actors such as NGOs, for-

eign publics, and foreign aid providers (Hyde, 2011; Nielson, Hyde and Kelley, 2019; Heinrich and Kobayashi, 2020). To our knowledge, no existing study simultaneously tests the effects of critical EOM reports and government contestation strategies among both the domestic public and foreign policy elites.

To assess empirical support for the arguments described above, we test the following pre-registered hypotheses.[6] Each hypothesis is tested separately among domestic and international audiences.

- *H1:* Critical EOM reports reduce perceptions of election integrity.
- *H2:* Government credibility attacks mitigate the negative effect of a critical EOM report on perceived election integrity.
- *H3:* Government invocation of a zombie monitor report mitigates the negative effect of a critical EOM report on perceived election integrity.

In addition to these formal hypotheses, we explore potential differences in the effectiveness of these treatments across our domestic and international audiences. We also probe for heterogeneous effects among domestic citizens based on partisan attachment and differences arising from the election observer's identity. The following section describes our research design.

3 Research Design

To test the effect of EOM criticism and government rebuttals, we field two online experiments centered around a hypothetical disputed election in Kenya. This approach reflects a "sequential, non-harmonized" meta-design (Kertzer, Renshon and Xu, 2025), in which paired experiments test overlapping empirical predictions, building on one another to examine more aspects of a theory than a single study could address. The two experiments differ primarily by audience – one targets Kenyan citizens, while the other addresses U.S. foreign

[6]Pre-registration available at https://osf.io/bvg5x and https://osf.io/s8vp9.

policy officials – though, as we explain below, we also vary the structure of the experiments to mirror the decision environment faced by each set of actors.

There are several reasons why Kenya is a suitable context for our study. First, it is a competitive transitional democracy where election integrity is genuinely contested.[7] The country is classified as *Partly Free* by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2025), but the opposition retains a real opportunity to contest power. In the 2022 presidential election, for example, President William Ruto defeated opposition leader Raila Odinga by fewer than two percentage points. Furthermore, since Kenya's transition to multiparty politics in 1991, executive elections have been repeatedly disputed (Chege, 2018). Most dramatically, the Supreme Court nullified the 2017 presidential election results over allegations of electoral irregularities, making Kenya the first country in Africa to have a presidential election overturned by its judiciary (Gerzso, 2023; Otele, Kanyinga and Mitullah, 2025). Taken together, these features make Kenya a context in which electoral integrity is both salient and contested, ensuring that a hypothetical election dispute would represent a realistic and familiar scenario for our respondents.

Furthermore, multiple international and regional election observation missions have monitored Kenyan elections, and their findings have themselves become objects of political contestation. During the 2017 election, opposition leaders publicly challenged the credibility of several EOMs (Odhiambo, 2017; Campbell, 2017). Observer reports are thus politically salient signals in the Kenyan context, not merely technocratic outputs that voters ignore. This lends ecological validity to our experimental design, in which respondents evaluate a disputed election in light of competing claims from election observers and the government.

Finally, Kenya is a strategically important partner for Western aid-providing countries, particularly the United States. A close U.S. ally throughout the Cold War (Levitsky and Way, 2012), Kenya has long received substantial Western aid owing to its political and economic significance (Brown, 2001). More recently, Former President Biden designated Kenya as the United States' first Major Non-NATO Ally in Sub-Saharan Africa (Blanchard,

[7] As Bush and Prather (2022) argue, EOM reports are most likely to shape perceptions when there is substantial uncertainty about election integrity.

2026), underscoring its importance as a partner in U.S. security alliances, particularly in counterterrorism. These factors make Kenya an appropriate setting for our elite experiment as well. While U.S. foreign policy officials may not uniformly view a disputed Kenyan election as carrying identical policy stakes, Kenya's strategic significance makes it likely that most will perceive the scenario as consequential. Accordingly, we can test whether EOM reports and government rebuttals affect the country's access to democracy-contingent benefits such as foreign aid.

Both experiments share a common context: a hypothetical future Kenyan election in which the incumbent is declared the victor, and the opposition candidate alleges electoral irregularities. They also share a common treatment structure built around two primary levels of randomization. First, respondents are assigned to either a control condition or a critical EOM report condition, in which they learn that an international election observer has questioned the integrity of the election. At the second level, respondents who received the critical EOM report are further randomized into one of three conditions: no government response, a rhetorical credibility attack (in which the incumbent publicly challenges the observer's legitimacy), or a zombie monitor (in which the incumbent invokes a positive assessment from a separate, lower-quality monitoring body). We also randomly vary the identity of the critical election observer (the European Union or the African Union) to explore potential heterogeneous effects based on observer identity.

The two experiments diverge in how these treatments are delivered, reflecting differences in the decision environments that each audience naturally inhabits. Study 1 is a vignette experiment fielded among approximately 1,000 English-speaking Kenyan citizens, quota-sampled by gender and age to national demographic benchmarks. Respondents read a short passage describing the hypothetical Kenyan presidential election, and treatments are embedded in follow-up passages describing the EOM report and the government's response. The primary outcome is respondents' self-reported ratings of election integrity.

Study 2 is an elite simulation experiment fielded among approximately 200 current and former U.S. foreign policy officials recruited via LinkedIn. Rather than a traditional vignette structure, respondents participate in a simulated National Security Council meeting about

the disputed Kenyan election. The meeting includes an intelligence briefing as well as interventions from a range of U.S. government officials; we embed the experimental treatments within these remarks. This format mirrors the interagency deliberation process through which foreign policy decisions are actually made, increasing the realism of the scenario for our elite respondents. The primary outcomes are perceptions of election integrity and preferences over the U.S. foreign aid response to Kenya, including whether to pause, terminate, or maintain existing aid programs.

Together, the two studies allow us to trace how the same informational treatments generate potentially disparate reactions among the two core audiences. We begin with Study 1, which examines the effects of EOM criticism and government rebuttals among Kenyan citizens. After describing the survey design and findings, we present Study 2.

4 Study 1: Kenyan Domestic Public

4.1 Experimental Design

To test our hypotheses among the domestic public, we fielded an online survey experiment in Kenya in January and February 2026. We contracted the survey firm TGM Research to recruit 1,000 adult Kenyan respondents, quota-sampled to match national benchmarks for gender and age.

Our survey included a vignette experiment designed to estimate the effect of EOM criticism and government contestation on perceptions of election integrity. Following a pretreatment questionnaire measuring demographic characteristics and political attitudes, respondents were presented with the vignette. We asked each respondent to consider a hypothetical presidential election in Kenya set in 2032.[8] The scenario described an incumbent president competing against an opposition candidate. The incumbent was declared the winner, and the opposition candidate disputed the results.

Figure 2 summarizes our experimental design, including the two primary levels of ran-

[8]We set the hypothetical election in the future to to discourage respondents from anchoring on the current incumbent leader, allowing us to elicit more general assessments of election integrity.

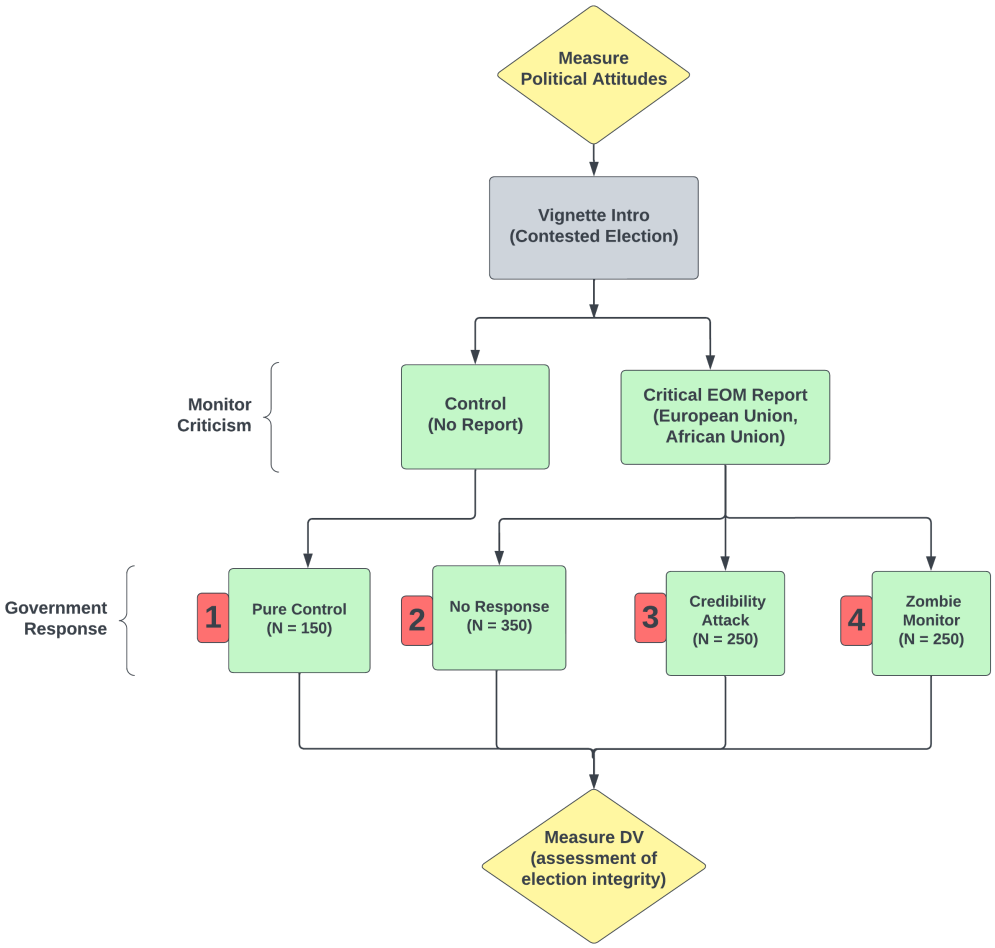

Figure 2: Consort Diagram for the Kenyan Public Vignette Experiment.

domized treatment. After reading the vignette intro, respondents are first assigned to either a Critical EOM Report condition, in which they learn that an election monitoring body has questioned the integrity of the election, or a control condition (`No EOM Report`). In the second level of treatment, those who received a Critical EOM Report are randomly assigned to either a control condition (`no additional information`) or one of two potential responses from the incumbent government (`credibility attack` or appeal to a `zombie election monitor`). The design produces four distinct treatment conditions, labeled 1-4 in Figure 2.[9]

In addition to the two primary levels of treatment, we also randomize a few background features of the vignette. We assign the identity of the critical election observer – either

[9]As Figure 2 shows, we employ an unbalanced treatment assignment across the four conditions. We do so in order to increase statistical power, since some treatment conditions are used repeatedly across our pre-registered hypotheses.

the African Union or European Union – to explore potential heterogeneous effects across EOM bodies.[10] We identify the zombie monitor as the East African Community, a regional organization which counts Kenya as a member and which Cottiero, Bush and Prather (2026) classify as a "low-quality" election monitor. Finally, we randomize the political coalition of the incumbent leader. While Kenya lacks stable political parties, it does have recurring electoral coalitions structured around ethnically defined regional bases (Horowitz, 2019).[11] Accordingly, we signal the incumbent's coalition by randomizing the region that provides the incumbent's base of political support.

The text of the vignette is reproduced below, with randomized treatments in brackets.

> Imagine it is the year 2032. Kenya has just held a presidential election between an incumbent president and an opposition candidate. The incumbent draws heavy support from the [Mount Kenya / Nyanza] region. The opposition candidate draws heavy support from the [Nyanza / Mount Kenya] region].
>
> The incumbent president was declared the winner on election night. However, the opposition candidate challenged the outcome, claiming that the election process was flawed.

Respondents in the pure control condition are then routed to the outcome questionnaire. Those in the critical EOM report treatment see the following passage:

> An election observation mission from the [European Union / African Union] monitored this election. The [European Union / African Union] concluded that the election was not free and fair. The mission revealed irregularities in the counting of votes and uneven conditions for voters in some areas.

Finally, respondents who are further assigned to a government rebuttal view one of the following treatments:

[10] Bush and Prather (2018), for example, find that audiences consider geographically proximate observers (here, the African Union) to have greater local expertise and credibility than more distant observers (the European Union).

[11] In the 2022 election, William Ruto's Kenya Kwanza coalition drew its base from the Kalenjin community and won decisively in the Mount Kenya region. Raila Odinga's Azimio la Umoja coalition was anchored in the Luo community of Nyanza, with additional support from Kamba and coastal voters. The coalitions exemplify Kenya's recurring pattern of political alliances organized around ethno-regional blocs that tend to be reconstituted across election cycles.

Credibility Attack: In response, the government rejected the [European Union / African Union] findings and claimed the election followed national and international standards. The president attacked the [European Union /African Union]'s credibility, saying that "these observers misunderstand our electoral process and rely on biased sources. They should respect Kenya's sovereignty instead of criticizing our country."

Zombie Monitor: In response, the government rejected the [European Union / African Union] findings and pointed to a report from another election observer, the East African Community. The East African Community concluded that the election was free and fair, contradicting the [European Union / African Union].

After completing the vignette, respondents answer an outcome questionnaire. Our primary dependent variable, perceived election integrity, measures agreement with the statement that the election was conducted properly, recorded on a 0-10 sliding scale. Using the same scale, we also measured the following outcomes: whether respondents (i) would protest the election results, (ii) consider themselves less likely to vote in the next election, and (iii) consider the critical EOM body (either European Union or African Union) to be a credible organization.

4.2 Results

We begin by examining the effect of critical EOM reports on Kenyan citizens' perceptions of election integrity (*H1*). Figure 3 presents the average treatment effects (ATEs) of a critical report from the African Union or European Union, relative to the pure control condition. We report the ATE across the full sample as well as a range of subgroups. The results provide strong and consistent support for H1. Across the full sample (top estimate), exposure to a critical EOM report reduces perceived election integrity by approximately two points on the 0–10 scale ($p < 0.01$). Substantively, this represents a 36% decrease in the average baseline election integrity rating of 5.1.

Notably, the effect of EOM criticism holds regardless of which body observed the election: critical reports from both the African Union and the European Union produce comparably sized negative effects on perceived election integrity. The effect is also robust across partisan subgroups. Respondents who reported supporting the Kenya Kwanza coalition in the last

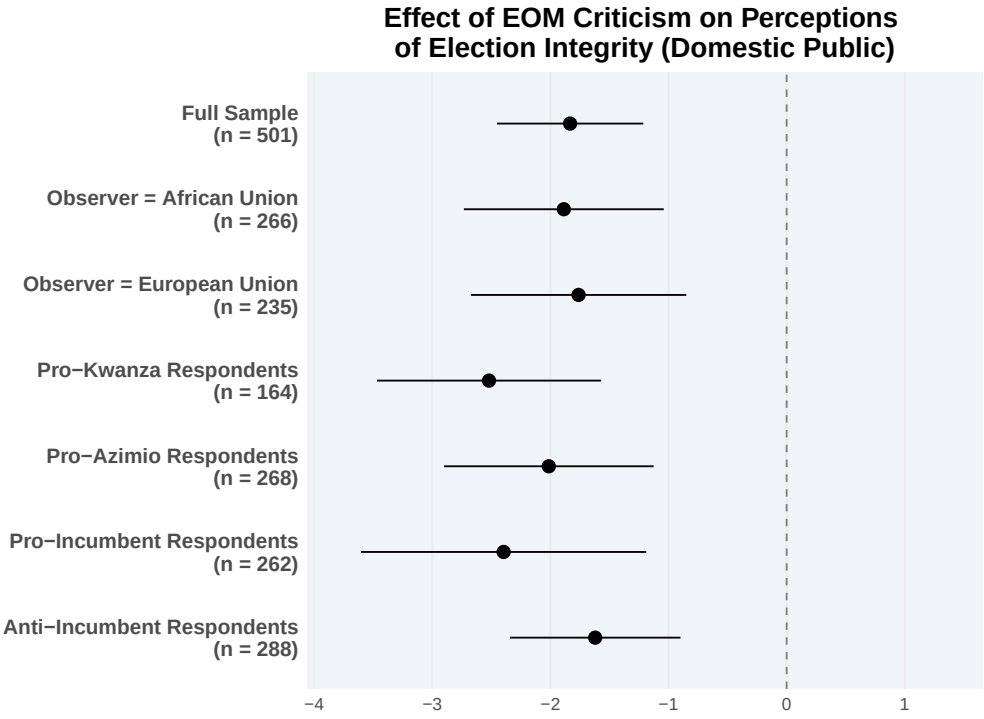

Figure 3: *Treatment Effect of Election Monitoring Report.* We display the ATEs of a critical report from an international Election Observation Mission on Kenyans' perceptions of election integrity, along with 95% confidence intervals, for a range of conditions and respondent samples.

election experienced diminished perceptions of election integrity, as did those who support the opposing Azimio la Umoja coalition. Similarly, the negative treatment effect persists regardless of whether respondents are classified as co-partisans or opponents of incumbent in our vignette.[12] Together, these results suggest that the informational signal from a credible election observer is powerful enough to cut across partisan predispositions.

Next, we consider the ability of government contestation to mitigate the power of international election observers (H2 and H3). Figure 4 presents the average treatment effects of the two government rebuttal treatments, rhetorical credibility attacks and invocations of zombie monitors, compared to the baseline of an uncontested EOM report. We report the effects of these rebuttal strategies on the main outcome of perceived election integrity (top panel) as well as the three supplementary outcome measures, namely willingness to protest, likelihood to vote in future, and credibility of the critical EOM body.

[12]We infer pro- or anti-incumbency by matching the incumbent's randomized regional base to respondents' self-reported coalition support in the 2022 election.

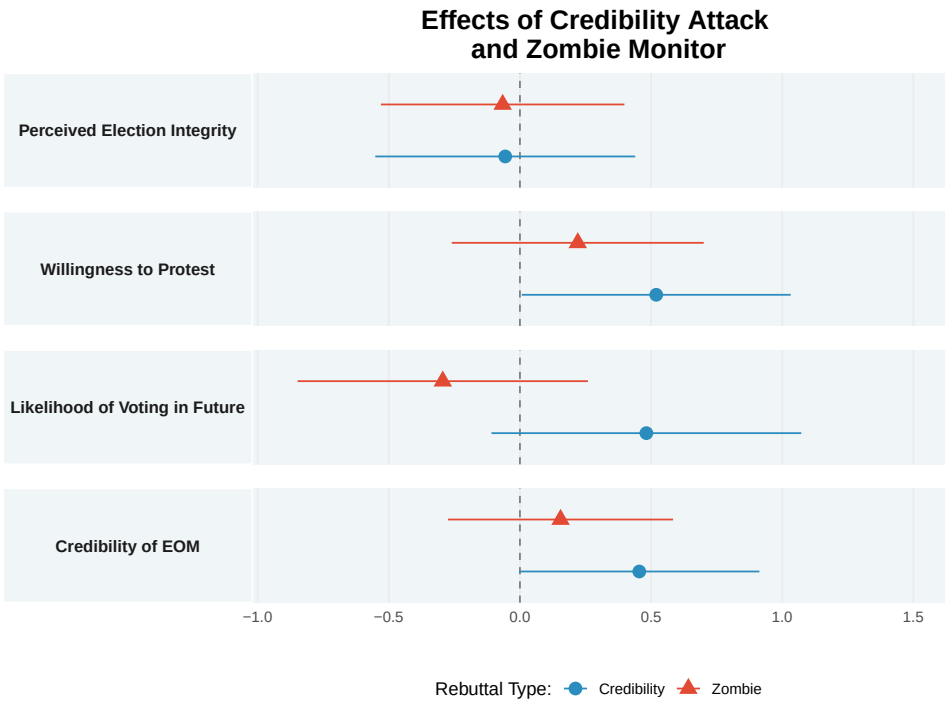

Figure 4: *Treatment Effect of Election Monitoring Contestation.* The figure shows ATEs and 95% confidence intervals for government credibility attacks (circle) and supportive reports from a 'zombie' election monitor (triangle), compared to the control condition (an uncontested EOM report). Panels are distinguished by outcome variable.

The results provide clear evidence against H2 and H3 among the Kenyan public: neither the credibility attack (blue circle) nor the zombie monitor (red triangle) produces a statistically significant improvement in perceived election integrity among the Kenyan public. Point estimates for both strategies are close to zero and precisely estimated, indicating that government efforts to rebut critical observer findings fail to move the needle on domestic citizens' beliefs about electoral quality.

Results for the secondary outcomes are also instructive. Neither rebuttal strategy substantially reduces respondents' stated willingness to protest, future electoral paricipation, or perceived credibility of the critical EOM body. In fact, government credibility attacks produce a pattern that is directionally consistent with backlash. When incumbents justify election results by challenging the legitimacy of election monitors, domestic citizens are somewhat *more* willing to protest the government ($p = 0.047$) and consider the attacked election observer to be *more* credible ($p = 0.052$).

Finally, we explore the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects. We first investigate whether the effect of government contestation systematically varies with respondents' par-

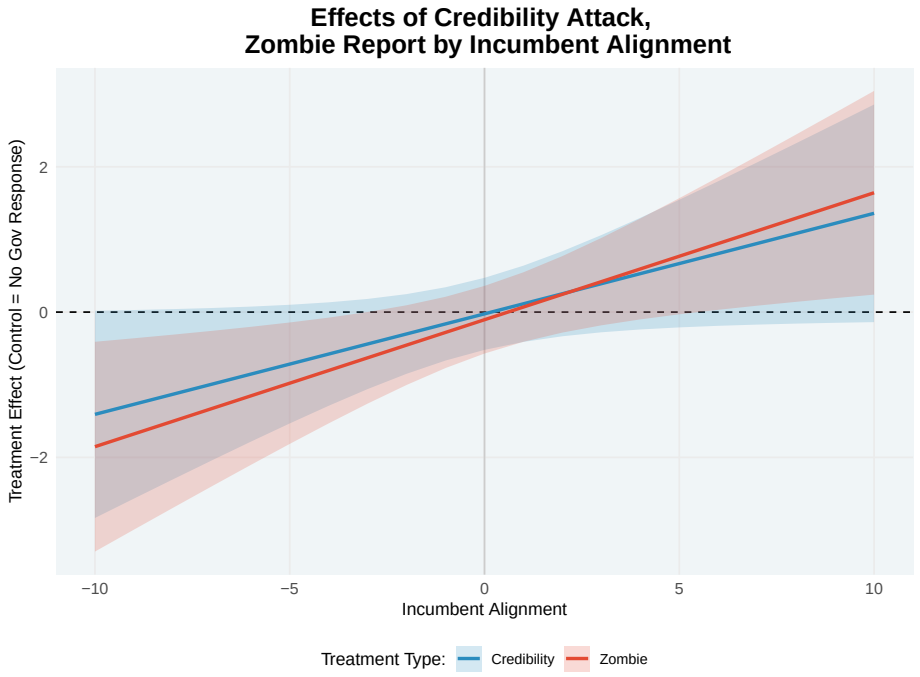

Figure 5: *Marginal Effect of Election Monitoring Contestation by Incumbent Alignment.* The figure visualizes the estimated treatment effect of government credibility attacks (blue) and 'zombie' monitoring reports (red) across levels of respondent support for the incumbent government.

tisan alignment. To infer each respondent's alignment with the incumbent in our vignette, we draw on pre-treatment questions in which subjects rated their opinion of the two dominant coalitions in the last presidential election (the Kenya Kwanza Alliance and Azimio la Umoja) on 0–10 scales. We construct an overall coalition alignment score by subtracting the Kenya Kwanza rating from the Azimio rating, yielding a measure ranging from -10 (strongly pro-Kwanza) to +10 (strongly pro-Azimio). We then orient this score relative to the randomly assigned incumbent: for respondents whose vignette incumbent draws support from the Mount Kenya region, higher pro-Kwanza scores indicate pro-incumbent alignment, and vice versa for incumbents who draw support from the Nyanza region.

Figure 5 plots the estimated treatment effect of each rebuttal strategy as a function of incumbent alignment. The results highlight some meaningful variation among respondents. For strongly pro-incumbent subjects, the government rebuttal strategies appear to successfully increase perceived election integrity. This suggests that the government's messaging resonates with citizens who are already favorably inclined toward the incumbent. For anti-

incumbent respondents, however, both the credibility attack and the zombie monitor *reduce* election confidence relative to the baseline. These opposing effects largely cancel out in the aggregate, producing the near-zero treatment effect reported in Figure 4. These findings suggest that EOM reports and government counter-messaging are filtered through partisan lenses in manner consistent with motivated reasoning.

Overall, the results among the Kenyan public are quite favorable for international election monitors. When authoritative monitoring bodies issue reports that are critical of national elections, these signals resonate with Kenyan citizens. A range of domestic audiences update their beliefs about election integrity to reflect the information provided by the election observer. When governments contest observer reports via rhetorical attacks or by leveraging low-quality alternative monitors, their efforts tend to fall on deaf ears (at least in the aggregate), or even induce backlash among segments of the public. We now turn to the second crucial audience for election observers.

5 Study 2: US Policymakers

Study 1 establishes that critical EOM reports powerfully shape the perceptions of domestic audiences, while government rebuttal strategies largely fail to counteract them. Study 2 turns to a second and theoretically distinct audience: U.S. foreign policy elites. We choose the United States because it is a major strategic partner and foreign aid provider to Kenya. Kenya has historically ranked among the top recipients of U.S. foreign assistance globally, and the two countries maintain a deep security partnership: Kenya hosts one of the largest U.S. embassies in Africa and is a key U.S. counterterrorism partner in the region. Democracy, human rights, and governance concerns feature prominently in the bilateral relationship, and successive U.S. administrations have linked their engagement with Kenya to progress on these issues (Congressional Research Service, 2026). Accordingly, U.S. foreign policy elites are an important audience for EOM reports on Kenyan elections, as their assessments of electoral integrity can directly shape decisions about democracy-contingent benefits.

As discussed in Section 2, the decision environment of foreign officials differs fundamen-

tally from that of domestic citizens. Foreign officials typically lack firsthand knowledge of the electoral process and hold few partisan attachments to the domestic actors involved. At the same time, they may face professional incentives to avoid costly policy responses based on incomplete or contested information (Jervis, 1976; Kertzer, 2022). Crucially, the theoretically relevant quantity of interest for this audience, foreign policy responses to electoral contestation, is not directly captured by individual elite attitudes. Instead, these attitudes are filtered through interagency deliberation, bureaucratic hierarchies, and institutional constraints that can dampen or amplify individual-level reactions to new information.

For these reasons, we adopt a novel experimental design for Study 2. Rather than a traditional vignette survey, we field an elite simulation experiment that immerses respondents in a hypothetical interagency policy deliberation. This design is intended to capture not only what foreign officials believe about election integrity, but how they would translate those beliefs into policy recommendations when confronted with competing signals in a realistic institutional setting. The resulting estimands are thus more directly policy-relevant than standard survey measures of opinion.

5.1 Experimental Design

To recruit participants in our experiment, we use the social media platform LinkedIn. As a widely used professional social network, LinkedIn provides a practical and scalable mechanism for recruiting elite participants.[13] We identify potential respondents using LinkedIn's advertising platform, which allows us to send direct messages to users whose profile indicates current or past employment in relevant U.S. government agencies.[14] Our recruitment campaign targets a wide range officials with experience working at the Department of State, USAID, Department of Defense/War, relevant Congressional committees, and the White House.[15]

[13]Several recent studies, including Clark (2021); Morse and Pratt (2025); Clark and Pratt (2026) have similarly employed LinkedIn to recruit elite survey respondents.

[14]Several recent studies, including Clark (2021); Morse and Pratt (2025); Clark and Pratt (2026) have similarly employed LinkedIn to recruit elite survey respondents.

[15]We specifically target officials employed at the U.S. Department of State, Agency for International Development, U.S. Embassies, Department of Defense/War, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, Department of the

This recruitment strategy produced a sample of 205 foreign policy officials. Among those in our sample, 58% report current or prior experience at the Department of Defense, 26% at the State Department or USAID, and 13% in the intelligence community. Compared to the U.S. public, our elite sample skews older, male, and more highly educated.[16] A majority report holding positions of significant responsibility, with 42% serving as supervisors or managers and 16% in executive leadership or senior official roles.[17]

The experiment takes the form of an online simulated policy deliberation focused on the same hypothetical Kenyan election crisis in Study 1. Respondents participate in a U.S. National Security Council meeting called to coordinate the U.S. response to the contested election. As in Study 1, we randomly vary the information provided in the meeting, including i) the existence of a critical report from an international election monitor and ii) the rebuttal strategy from the incumbent government. As the simulation progresses, we measure respondents' perceptions of election integrity and recommendations regarding the appropriate U.S. policy response.

The experimental design is visualized in Figure 6. After completing a pre-treatment questionnaire, respondents begin the simulation. The two primary levels of randomization mimic the treatment structure of Study 1. As before, we also randomly assigned the identity of the critical election observer (European Union or African Union). We continue to use the East African Community as the zombie monitor.

The simulation appears to respondents as an unfolding transcript of remarks delivered by other (fictional) U.S. government officials. We present a full description of the simulation in the appendix and summarize its three basic stages here. In Stage 1, respondents receive an intelligence briefing from an intelligence officer describing the contested Kenyan election.

Air Force, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), United States Senate, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, United States House of Representatives, House Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. National Security Staff, and the White House. We sent over 12,000 direct messages and received 205 responses to the survey, a response rate of approximately 2%.

[16] 63% hold post-graduate degrees, 57% are over age 45, and 71% are male.

[17] We take two steps to validate that our sample possesses genuine policy expertise. We first administer a 6-question Global Political Knowledge questionnaire (Crescenzi et al., 2025), finding that our respondents answered 5.4 questions correctly on average, compared to 3.65 in a public sample. Second, we assess the lexical complexity of respondents' open-ended answers using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level metric; our elite respondents wrote at an average grade level of 11.5, compared to 6.6 in a public sample.

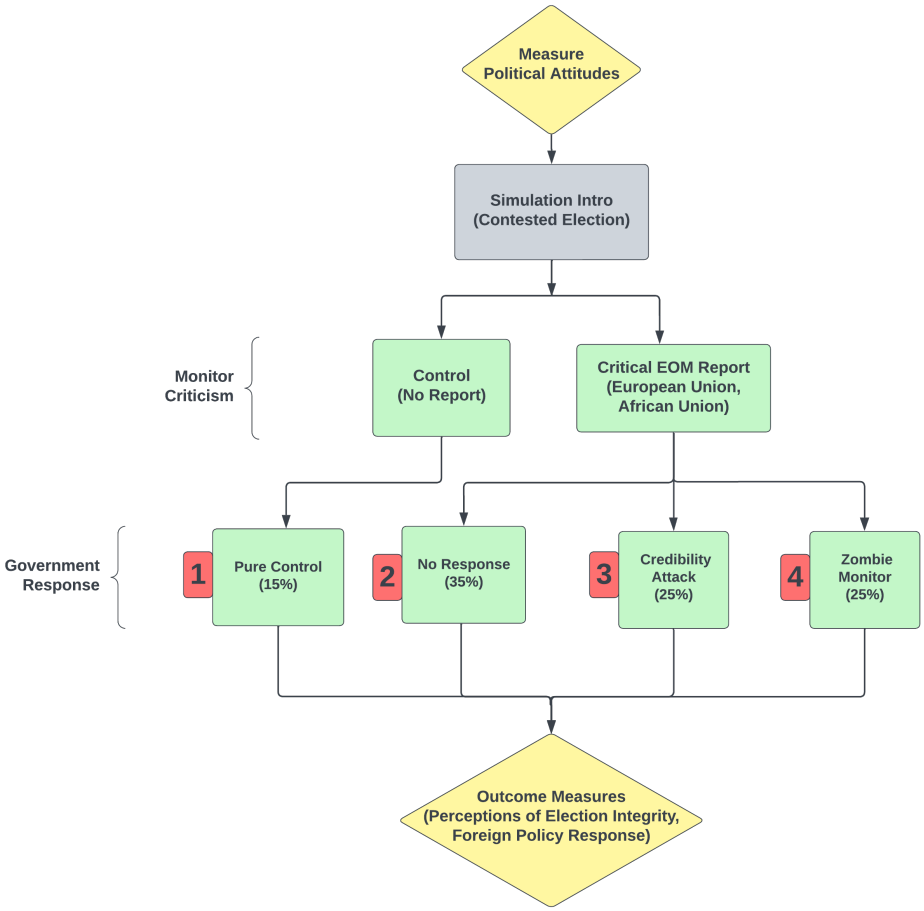

Figure 6: Consort Diagram for the survey experiment on US Elites

Our main experimental treatments (a critical EOM report and potential Kenyan government rebuttal) are embedded within this briefing. After receiving the briefing, respondents rate their confidence in the election's integrity. In Stage 2, respondents participate in a simulated interagency deliberation chaired by an NSC Senior Director, hearing divergent recommendations about whether to pause or suspend U.S. aid to Kenya from representatives of the State Department, Department of Defense, and Department of Justice. They then report their own preferred U.S. foreign aid response. In Stage 3, the meeting concludes and the NSC Director invites the respondent to explain their reasoning in a private "pull-aside" conversation. To implement this stage, we embed a pre-trained large language model (LLM) into the simulation. The LLM prompts respondents to answer a series of questions and elaborate on their reasoning as needed.[18]

[18]Specifically, the LLM is trained to extract answers to the following questions: 1) Why did you arrive

The simulation produces three outcomes we use to test our hypotheses. *Confidence in Election Integrity* reflects respondent agreement, measured during Stage 1 on a 0-100 sliding scale, that the Kenyan election was conducted in a free and impartial manner. *Support for Foreign Aid* is measured in Stage 2 when respondents recommend a U.S. foreign aid response to the electoral crisis. We record a 4-point measure that corresponds to terminating U.S. aid (1), temporarily pausing aid (2), leaving aid programs in place (3), and increasing U.S. aid to Kenya (4). Finally, we construct a set of exploratory measures from the open-ended LLM chat transcripts in Stage 3. We hand-coded each transcript to construct three variables: a binary indicator of whether respondents expressed reservations about policy action due to uncertainty (*Uncertainty*), a second dichotomous measure of whether subjects invoked principles of democracy and good governance as a motivating factor (*Democracy*), and an ordinal measure of the severity of any additional punitive action subjects recommended (*Punitive Response*).[19]

5.2 Results

We first assess whether critical EOM reports influence U.S. foreign policy elites' perceptions of election integrity (*H1*), and whether these perceptions in turn affect their preferred policy response. Figure 7 presents the average treatment effects of the critical EOM report condition on these outcomes (top two estimates). Consistent with expectations, exposure to a critical EOM report significantly reduces elite perceptions of election integrity ($p < .01$). Criticism from African Union or European Union monitors reduces perceived election integrity by approximately 1.3 standard deviations, or 25.3 points on the 0-100 scale. As with the Kenyan public, we find strong evidence that credible election observers can powerfully shape elite beliefs about election quality.

at the decision you did regarding US aid to Kenya? 2) What was the most important factor shaping your decision? 3) Is there any other information you would want to know about the crisis in Kenya to make a better informed decision? 4) Beyond US aid, do you think the US should take any additional actions toward Kenya in light of the crisis?

[19]The Punitive Response measure is coded on a 0–5 scale capturing the most punitive additional action toward Kenya that the respondent endorses. It ranges from no additional action (0) to information gathering (1), private diplomatic engagement (2), public pressure or multilateral coordination (3), coercive measures such as sanctions (4), and extensive disengagement or severance of the US-Kenya relationship (5).

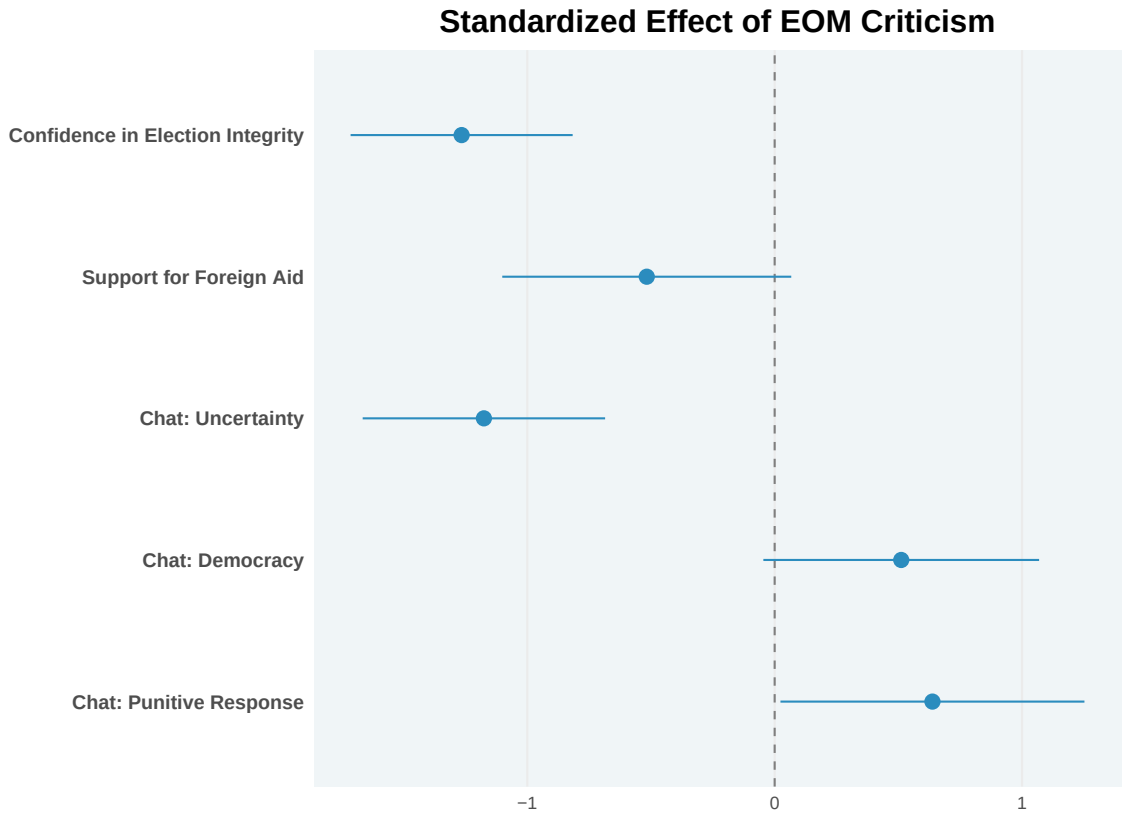

Figure 7: *Treatment Effect of Critical EOM Report on U.S. Foreign Policy Elites.* The figure displays standardized average treatment effects of the critical EOM report condition on elites' perceptions of election integrity and preferred U.S. foreign aid response, with 95% confidence intervals.

We also find evidence that EOM monitoring affects more than just perceptions. Exposure to the critical EOM report shifts elites' policy preferences in a punitive direction, reducing support for US foreign aid to Kenya ($p = 0.09$), though we note that this estimate does not meet conventional standards of statistical significance. Additionally, the EOM report has significant effects on several of the exploratory outcomes derived from the post-meeting chat transcript. Foreign policy officials were significantly less likely to express concerns about uncertainty over the contested election ($p < 0.01$) and significantly more likely to recommend additional punitive action ($p = 0.05$).[20]

We next examine whether government rebuttal strategies mitigate these effects among U.S. foreign policy elites ($H2$ and $H3$). Figure 8 presents the ATEs of the credibility attack

[20]The effect of the critical EOM report on respondents' invocation of democracy and good governance is positive, but not significant at the 0.05 level ($p = 0.08$).

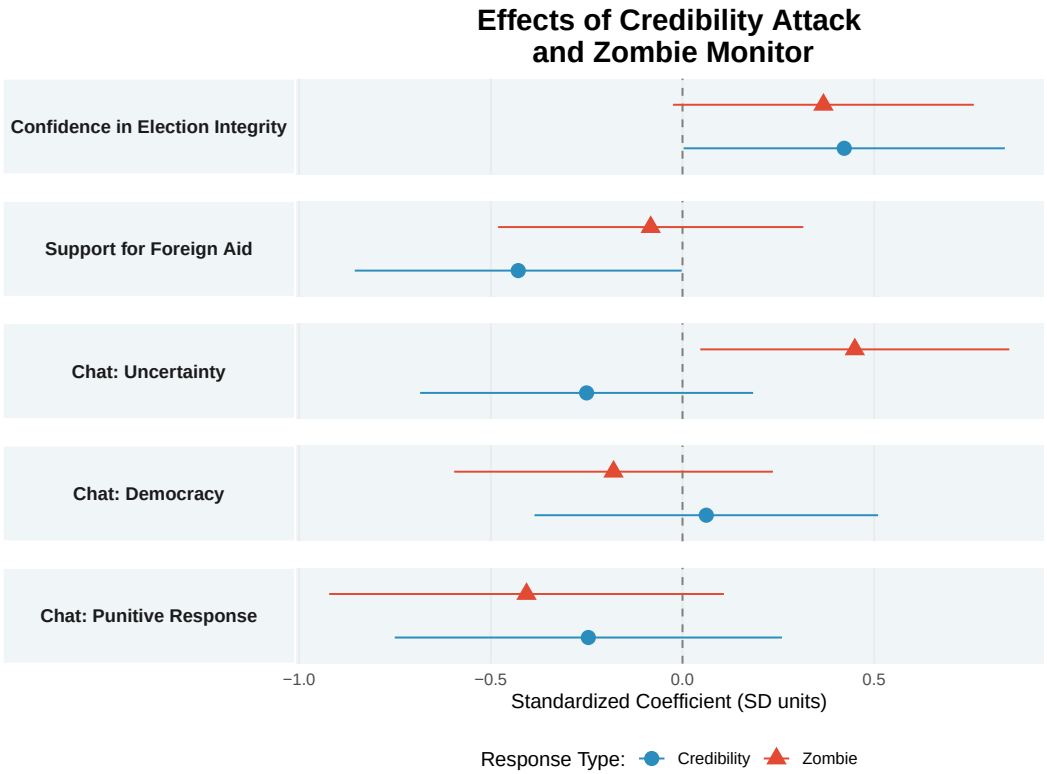

Figure 8: *Treatment Effects of Government Contestation Strategies on U.S. Foreign Policy Elites.* The figure displays ATEs of government credibility attacks and zombie monitors on elite perceptions of election integrity and preferred U.S. foreign aid response, relative to the uncontested EOM report condition, with 95% confidence intervals.

(cicle) and zombie monitor (triangle) treatments, relative to the uncontested EOM report baseline. We show the effects of government contestation for each of the five outcome measures. As in Figure 7, we report standardized coefficients to facilitate comparison across outcomes.

In contrast to the null results observed among Kenyan domestic citizens, we find that government rebuttal strategies can meaningfully shift the perceptions of foreign policy elites. The credibility attack increases reported confidence in election integrity by around half a standard deviation, or 8 points on the 0-100 scale ($p = 0.06$). Substantively, this means that a government's rhetorical attack on the legitimacy of the EOM reduces the impact of critical EOM reports by around a third. Invoking a favorable ruling from a zombie monitor has a similar effect size ($p = 0.09$) on perceived election integrity.

These findings suggest that U.S. foreign policy officials are *more* receptive to the govern-

ment's rebuttals than its own domestic citizens. This is somewhat surprising in light of prior work documenting a "hometown bias," whereby domestic publics tend to be more persuaded by their government's rhetoric compared to foreign audiences (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Xu, 2025). One possibility is that U.S. elites' greater informational distance from the election leaves more room for ambiguity to shape their beliefs, while domestic citizens hold stronger priors that cause them to dismiss government rebuttals as self-serving. We note, however, that informational distance alone cannot fully explain the pattern. Kenyan citizens update powerfully in response to critical EOM reports, suggesting their beliefs about election integrity are malleable. The two audiences diverge specifically in their reaction to government attempts to discredit international monitors.

The other outcome measures shed further light on the effects of the two rebuttal strategies. The credibility attack, while effective at increasing perceived election integrity, simultaneously *reduces* respondents' support for continued U.S. foreign aid – a backlash effect suggesting that the government's delegitimizing rhetoric may alienate U.S. policy officials even as it casts doubt on the EOM. The zombie monitor strategy, in contrast, does not produce this same backlash. Invoking a zombie monitor assessment also successfully increases reported uncertainty, as measured in the open-ended chat transcripts. From the perspective of a government seeking to protect its access to foreign aid, the zombie monitor strategy may therefore be more effective than a credibility attack precisely because it avoids the backlash that confrontational rhetoric can provoke.

Taken together, the two studies reveal a nuanced picture of the strategic contest between election observers and incumbent governments. The clearest finding is that critical EOM reports are powerful signals. They substantially reduce perceived election integrity among both the Kenyan public and U.S. officials, and they also prompt U.S. officials to recommend a more punitive policy response. Government efforts to contest these signals, however, land very differently across these audiences. Among domestic citizens, neither credibility attacks nor zombie monitors improve aggregate perceptions of election integrity. Among foreign policy elites, both strategies partially restore perceived election integrity, but only the zombie monitor does so without triggering a backlash in downstream policy preferences.

6 Conclusion

This paper argues that understanding the role of international election monitors requires attention to the strategic contest that follows their observations reports. Incumbent governments do not passively accept critical EOM findings; they actively shape the information environment in which those findings are received. We identify two distinct government rebuttal strategies (rhetorical credibility attacks and the invocation of politically compliant monitors) and test their effects on two crucial audiences: domestic citizens and foreign policy elites in aid-providing countries. To our knowledge, this is the first study to simultaneously examine how critical EOM reports and government contestation strategies shape how these audiences respond to contested elections.

A core finding is that critical EOM reports are powerful informational signals. Across both studies, exposure to a critical report significantly reduces perceived election integrity. Among Kenyan citizens, this effect is large, consistent regardless of the observer's identity, and robust across partisan subgroups. Among U.S. foreign policy elites, critical reports not only reduce confidence in the election but also increase uncertainty more generally and shift policy recommendations in a punitive direction. These findings affirm that credible election observers can meaningfully shape the beliefs and preferences of the two key audiences that determine the political costs of electoral manipulation.

Notably, we find sharply diverging responses when governments fight back against critical election observers. Kenyan process government contestation through a partisan lens consistent with motivated reasoning, with the aggregate result that rebuttals produce no shift in domestic perceptions. Among U.S. foreign policy elites, in contrast, both rebuttal strategies partially succeed in restoring confidence in the election's integrity.

Our findings also speak to the relative effectiveness of the two rebuttal strategies. Among U.S. elites, credibility attacks reduce support for continued foreign aid, suggesting that confrontational rhetoric induces a backlash with real political costs. The zombie monitor strategy, by contrast, achieves comparable gains in perceived election integrity without triggering this backlash. By introducing a competing institutional endorsement, zombie monitors raise

uncertainty in a less politically costly manner. This distinction has implications for the growing literature on the proliferation of low-quality election monitors (Bush, Cottiero and Prather, 2025; Donno and Gray, 2023; Morrison et al., 2025). Our findings suggest that zombie monitors pose a subtler and potentially more durable threat to the election observation regime than overt rhetorical contestation, because they can muddy the waters for international audiences without provoking the kind of backlash that accompanies more confrontational strategies.

Overall, our results provide mixed news for the election observation regime. The news is encouraging for domestic audiences. Critical EOM reports powerfully shape citizen beliefs about election quality, and government efforts to discredit those reports are ineffective and even counterproductive. On the international front, however, the ability of government rebuttal strategies to partially neutralize EOM signals is more concerning. If governments can reduce the likelihood of punitive responses from foreign aid providers, the expected costs of electoral manipulation decline.

These findings leave important questions open for future research. Our experiments focus on a single country, Kenya, where contested elections are familiar and election observation is politically salient. Future work can examine whether the patterns we identify generalize to settings with different media environments, relationships with aid-providing countries, or levels of democratic experience. Our framework could also be applied to domestic election observers, who increasingly play a role comparable to international observers in shaping perceptions of electoral integrity (Grömping, 2017; Barker, Samet and Hyde, 2024; Asunka et al., 2019). Whether domestic monitors can send credible signals to international audiences, and whether governments contest their findings using similar strategies, are important unanswered questions. Finally, future work should disaggregate the credibility attack strategy. While we treat government rhetorical challenges as a single category, incumbents' specific claims about observer bias, foreign interference, or lack of expertise may vary in their persuasive force.

References

Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. 2014. "Stigma management in international relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society." *International organization* 68(1):143–176.

Asunka, Joseph, Sarah Brierley, Miriam Golden, Eric Kramon and George Ofosu. 2019. "Electoral Fraud or Violence: The Effect of Observers on Party Manipulation Strategies." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(1):129–151.

Barker, Jennie, Oren Samet and Susan D. Hyde. 2024. "Citizen Election Observation and Public Confidence in U.S. Elections.".

Blanchard, Lauren Ploch. 2026. Kenya: Current Issues and U.S. Relations. Technical Report R48072 Congressional Research Service. Updated March 6, 2026.
URL: *https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R48072*

Brancati, Dawn. 2014. "Building Confidence in Elections: The Case of Electoral Monitors in Kosova." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1(1):6–15.

Brown, Stephen. 2001. "Authoritarian leaders and multiparty elections in Africa: How foreign donors help to keep Kenya's Daniel arap Moi in power." *Third World Quarterly* 22(5):725–739.
URL: *https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590120084575*

Bush, Sarah Sunn, Christina Cottiero and Lauren Prather. 2025. "Zombies Ahead: Explaining the Rise of Low-Quality Election Monitoring." *The Review of International Organizations* 20(2):261–291.

Bush, Sarah Sunn and Lauren Prather. 2017. "The Promise and Limits of Election Observers in Building Election Credibility." *The Journal of Politics* 79(3):921–935.

Bush, Sarah Sunn and Lauren Prather. 2018. "Who's There? Election Observer Identity and the Local Credibility of Elections." *International Organization* 72(3):659–692.

Bush, Sarah Sunn and Lauren Prather. 2022. *Monitors and Meddlers: How Foreign Actors Influence Local Trust in Elections*. Cambridge University Press.

Campbell, John. 2017. "International Observers and the Kenya Election." Council on Foreign Relations.

Chege, Michael. 2018. "Kenya's Electoral Misfire." *Journal of Democracy* 29(2):158–172.

Clark, Richard. 2021. "Pool or Duel? Cooperation and Competition Among International Organizations." *International Organization* 75(4):1133–1153.

Clark, Richard and Tyler Pratt. 2026. "The Art of Imitation: IO Legitimacy and Strategic Treaty Design." Working Paper.

Congressional Research Service. 2026. Kenya: Current Issues and U.S. Relations. Technical Report R48072 Congressional Research Service.
URL: *https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R48072*

Cottiero, Christina, Sarah S. Bush and Lauren Prather. 2026. "After Zombies Attack: How Low-Quality Monitors Affect Credible International Election Observers." *International Studies Quarterly* . Accepted for publication.

Crescenzi, Mark, Bailee Donahue, Anthony Lindsay and Eric Parajon. 2025. "Global Political Knowledge in Survey Responses." Working paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Curiel, John and Jack R. Williams. 2020. Analysis of the Quick Count in the 2019 Bolivia Election. Technical report Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR).
URL: *https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Bolivia*$_{r}$*eport*$_{J}$*ack*$_{J}$*ohn.pdf*

Curtice, Travis and Charles Crabtree. 2024. "Democratic Erosion, Partisanship, and Election Observers: Evidence from a Survey Experiment." *International Interactions* 50(4):567–592.
URL: *https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2024.2349922*

Daxecker, Ursula E. 2012. "The cost of exposing cheating: International election monitoring, fraud, and post-election violence in Africa." *Journal of Peace Research* 49(4):503–516.

Daxecker, Ursula and Gerald Schneider. 2014. Election Monitoring. In *Advancing Electoral Integrity*, ed. Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank and Ferran Martinez I Coma. Oxford University Press pp. 73–93.

de Icaza, Gerardo. 2025. "Why Election Observers Are Human-Rights Defenders." *Journal of Democracy* . Online Exclusive.
URL: *https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-election-observers-are-human-rights-defenders/*

Debre, Maria J. and Lee Morgenbesser. 2017. "Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation." *Contemporary Politics* 23(3):328–347.

Deutsche Welle. 2021. "Maduro brands EU observers of elections as 'enemies'." Deutsche Welle (DW). Accessed: 17 March 2026.
URL: *https://www.dw.com/en/venezuela-maduro-says-eu-observers-of-elections-are-enemies-and-spies/a-59963881*

Donno, Daniela. 2010. "Who Is Punished? Regional Intergovernmental Organizations and the Enforcement of Democratic Norms." *International Organization* 64(4):593–625.

Donno, Daniela. 2013. *Defending Democratic Norms: International Actors and the Politics of Electoral Misconduct*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Donno, Daniela and Julia Gray. 2023. "Institutional Crowding in the International Electoral Monitoring Regime." Working Paper.

Entman, Robert M. 2009. *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy*. University of Chicago Press.

Freedom House. 2025. Freedom in the World 2025: Kenya. Country Report Freedom House.

Gerzso, Thalia. 2023. "Judicial resistance during electoral disputes: Evidence from Kenya." *Electoral Studies* 85.

URL: *https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379423000756*

Grömping, Max. 2017. "Domestic Election Monitoring and Advocacy: An Emerging Research Agenda." *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 35(4):407–423.

Guess, Andrew, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker. 2019. "Less Than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook." *Science Advances* 5(1):eaau4586.

Harding, Luke. 2007. "Russian election unfair and biased towards Putin, observers say." *The Guardian* .

URL: *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/dec/04/russia.lukeharding*

Heinrich, Tobias and Yoshiharu Kobayashi. 2020. "How do people evaluate foreign aid to 'nasty'regimes?" *British Journal of Political Science* 50(1):103–127.

Horowitz, Jeremy. 2019. "Ethnicity and the Swing Vote in Africa's Emerging Democracies: Evidence from Kenya." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(3):901–921.

Hyde, Susan D. 2007. "The Observer Effect in International Politics: Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *World Politics* 60(1):37–63.

Hyde, Susan D. 2010. "Experimenting in Democracy Promotion: International Observers and the 2004 Presidential Elections in Indonesia." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2):511–527.

Hyde, Susan D. 2011. *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hyde, Susan D. and Nikolay Marinov. 2014. "Information and Self-Enforcing Democracy: The Role of International Election Observation." *International Organization* 68(2):329–359.

Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics.* Princeton University Press.

Kavakli, Kerim Can and Patrick M. Kuhn. 2020. "Dangerous Contenders: Election Monitors, Islamic Opposition Parties, and Terrorism." *International Organization* 74(1):145–164.

Kelley, Judith. 2009. "D-Minus Elections: The Politics and Norms of International Election Observation." *International Organization* 63(4):765–787.

Kelley, Judith G. 2012. *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails.* Princeton University Press.

Kelley, Judith G. 2017. *Scorecard diplomacy.* Cambridge University Press.

Kertzer, Joshua D. 2022. "Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(3):539–553.

Kertzer, Joshua D, Jonathan Renshon and Weifang (Victor) Xu. 2025. "Cross-National Survey Experiments." *Working Paper* .

Kunda, Ziva. 1990. "The Case for Motivated Reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin* 108(3):480–498.

Levitsky, Steven R. and Lucan A. Way. 2012. "Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(4):869–889. **URL:** *https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/beyond-patronage-violent-struggle-ruling-party-cohesion-and-authoritarian-durability/2A29AD2633C9A2D699F8A7A13C405DBE*

Little, Andrew T. 2012. "Elections, Fraud, and Election Monitoring in the Shadow of Revolution." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7(3):249–283.

Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'loughlin and Laura Roselle. 2014. *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order.* Routledge.

Morrison, Kelly, Daniela Donno, Burcu Savun and Perisa Davutoglu. 2025. "Competing Judgments: Multiple Election Observers and Post-Election Contention." *The Review of International Organizations* 20(2):293–321.

Morse, Julia C and Tyler Pratt. 2022. "Strategies of contestation: International law, domestic audiences, and image management." *The Journal of Politics* 84(4):2080–2093.

Morse, Julia C and Tyler Pratt. 2025. "Smoke and Mirrors: Strategic Messaging and the Politics of Noncompliance." *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–19.

Nielson, Daniel L, Susan D Hyde and Judith Kelley. 2019. "The elusive sources of legitimacy beliefs: Civil society views of international election observers." *The Review of International Organizations* 14(4):685–715.

Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2010. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32(2):303–330.

Odhiambo, Morris. 2017. "The Future of Election Observation after Kenya's Supreme Court Judgement." Freedom House.

Organization of American States. 2019. Electoral Integrity Analysis: General Elections in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, October 20, 2019. Final Report. Technical report OAS Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy Washington, D.C.: . Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation (DECO).
URL: *https://www.oas.org/fpdb/press/Audit-Report-EN-vFINAL.pdf*

OSCE ODIHR. 2010. "Belarus still has considerable way to go in meeting OSCE commitments, despite certain improvements, election observers say.".
URL: *https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/74656*

Otele, Oscar M., Karuti Kanyinga and Winnie Mitullah. 2025. Kenya's Resilient Democracy: Balancing Power and Accountability. Research report The Brookings Institution. Africa Growth Initiative, Global Economy and Development Program.

URL: *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kenyas-resilient-democracy-balancing-power-and-accountability/*

Pennycook, Gordon and David G. Rand. 2019. "Lazy, Not Biased: Susceptibility to Partisan Fake News Is Better Explained by Lack of Reasoning Than by Motivated Reasoning." *Cognition* 188:39–50.

Pratt, Tyler. 2023. "Value differentiation, policy change and cooperation in international regime complexes." *Review of International Political Economy* 30(6):2206–2232.

Reuters. 2010. "Russia-led observer mission says Belarus election legitimate." *Reuters* . Accessed: 2026-03-17.

URL: *https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/russia-led-observer-mission-says-belarus-election-legitimate-idUSTRE6BJ1LF/*

Robertson, Graeme. 2017. "Political Orientation, Information and Perceptions of Election Fraud: Evidence from Russia." *British Journal of Political Science* 47(3):589–608.

Rosnick, David and Jake Johnston. 2020. Observing the Observers: The OAS in the 2019 Bolivian Elections. Technical report Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR).

URL: *https://cepr.net/publications/observing-the-observers-the-oas-in-the-2019-bolivian-elections/*

Sereyrath, Sok. 2023. "NEC and Justice Ministry's Dismay at Politicised Judgement of Cambodia's Election." *(Cambodian People's Party)* . Accessed: March 17, 2026.

URL: *https://www.cpp.org.kh/en/details/353632*

Simpser, Alberto and Daniela Donno. 2012. "Can International Election Monitoring Harm Governance?" *The Journal of Politics* 74(2):501–513.

Taber, Charles S. and Milton Lodge. 2006. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3):755–769.

Von Borzyskowski, Inken. 2019. "The Risks of Election Observation: International Condemnation and Post-Election Violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 63(3):654–667.

Weiss, Jessica Chen and Allan Dafoe. 2019. "Authoritarian audiences, rhetoric, and propaganda in international crises: Evidence from China." *International Studies Quarterly* 63(4):963–973.

Williamson, Scott. 2021. "Elections, Legitimacy, and Compliance in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from the Arab World." *Democratization* 28(8):1483–1504.

Xu, Weifang. 2025. "Pride and prejudice: the dual effects of "wolf warrior diplomacy" on domestic and international audiences." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 69(5):839–867.