

Blaming the Refs: How Governments Contest Election Observation Findings

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- We study **the power of international election observers** to shape **perceptions of domestic and international audiences**.
- We are particularly interested in **whether incumbent governments can successfully rebut findings** from election observers.
- Empirically, we implement **two paired/parallel surveys**, one in Kenya and one among US policymakers.



- The last decade has seen governments increasingly push back against EOMs.
- Governments frequently **rebut negative EOM reports** by
 - **Credibility Attacks** ⇨ Offering countervailing signals to key audiences
 - **“Fake” / “Zombie” Monitors** ⇨ Contesting critical EOM findings



U.S. MISSION TO THE ORGANIZATION
FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN
EUROPE

REPLY TO THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S STATEMENT FALSELY CLAIMING ODIHR'S ELECTORAL METHODOLOGY

is a Means of Interference in the Internal Affairs of OSCE

By **U.S. MISSION OSCE**

SEPTEMBER 26, 2024



ARGUMENT *An expert's point of view on a current event.*

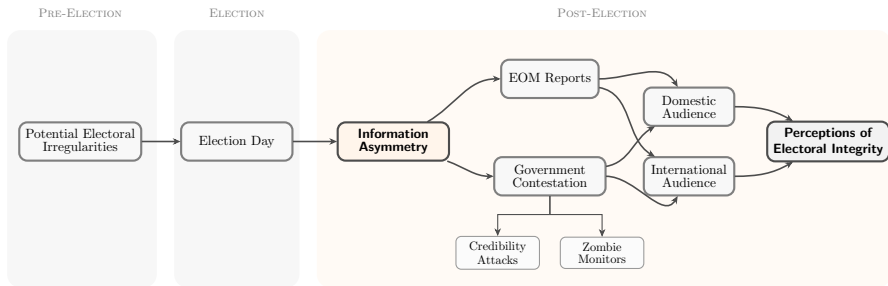
Fake Monitors Endorse Cambodia's Sham Election

Dubious electoral endorsements are becoming normal for dictators worldwide.

By Lee Morgenbesser

Source: Foreign Policy - 2018

Theoretical Framework





Research Questions

1. Can government strategies to contest EOM findings successfully **shape perceptions** of domestic and international audiences?
2. Are there differences in the effect of **credibility attacks** vs. **“zombie” monitors**?
3. How do **different audiences** (domestic citizens, foreign aid providers) respond to these strategies?



- ▶ Two paired experiments centered on a hypothetical **presidential election in Kenya** fielded to assess the causal effect of EOM criticism + Government Contestation among two core audiences (**Domestic Citizens** and **Foreign Audience**).

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- ▶ Kenya is a convenient case because of it is a **transitional democracy** with a **history of election observers**.
- ▶ **Shared Features**

Setting

Randomized Treatments

Hypothetical contested future
election in Kenya

- Presence of a critical EOM report (yes/no)
- Government rebuttal (Cred. Challenge/Zombie)

▶ Main Hypotheses

- 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.

▶ Secondary Outcomes - By Audience

- Kenyan Citizens
 - Likelihood of Voting in a Future Election
 - Post Election Mobilization
 - Credibility of the Critical EOM Body
- US Officials
 - Policy Response



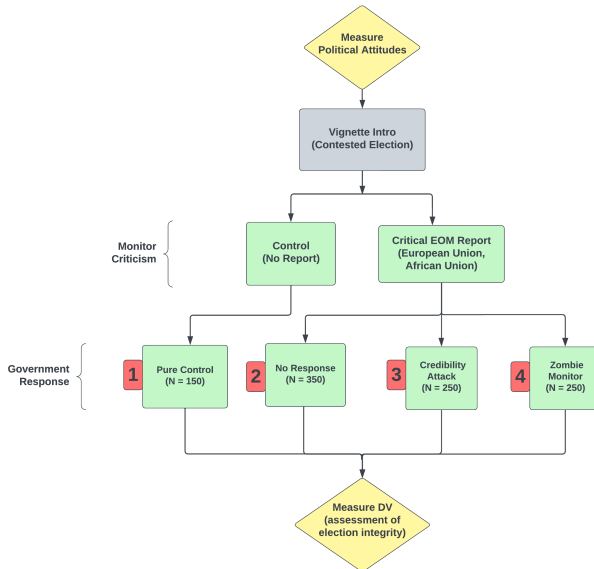
Study 1: Kenyan Vignette Experiment

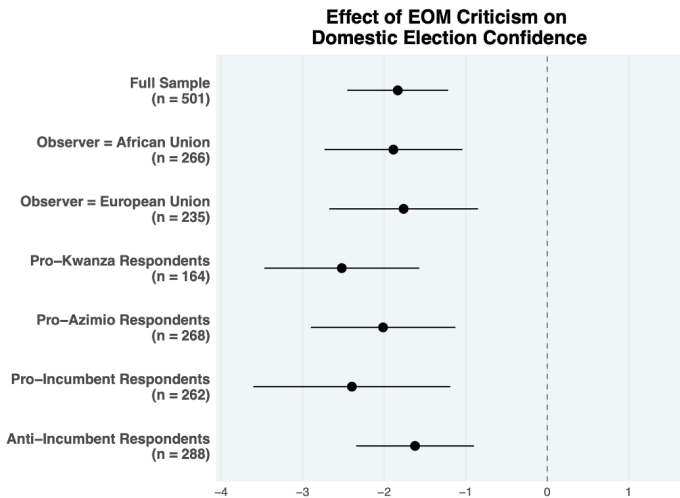
- Kenyan nationals ($N = 1,034$) recruited by TGM survey firm
- Vignette: hypothetical disputed Kenyan election

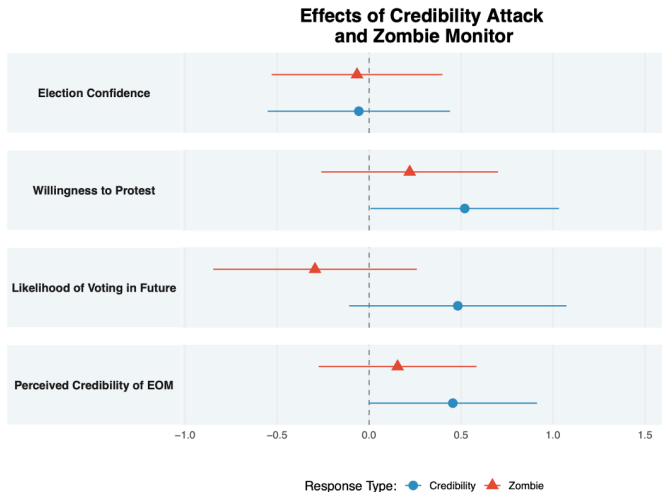
Study 2: Elite Simulation Experiment

- U.S. foreign policy professionals ($N \approx 200$)
- Simulated interagency deliberation over Kenyan election

Study 1: Experimental Design







► Primary Findings

H1 : Critical EOM reports \rightsquigarrow ↓ Perceived Election Integrity ✓

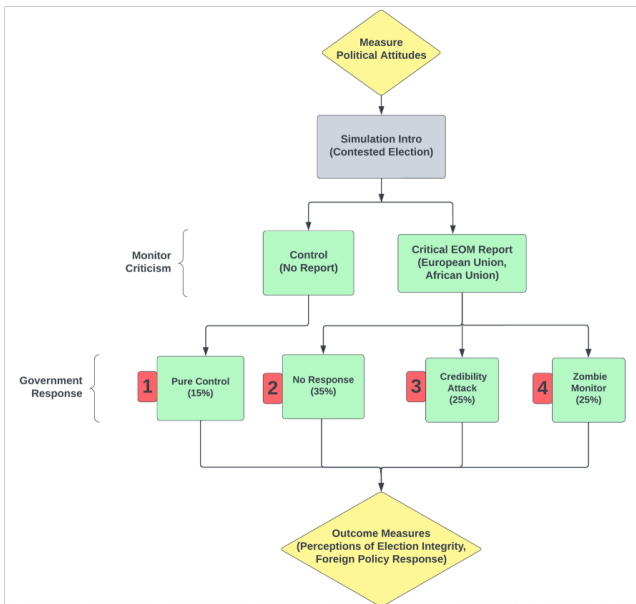
H2 : Gov. Cred. Attacks \rightsquigarrow Fail Persuading Domestic Audiences ✗

H3 : Gov. Zombie Monitor \rightsquigarrow Fail Persuading Domestic Audiences ✗

► Secondary Findings

Outcome	Credibility Attack	Zombie Monitor
Willingness to Protest	↑ Increases ($p = 0.047$)	No Impact
Likelihood of Voting	↑ Increases ($p < 0.10$)	No Impact
EOM Credibility	↑ Increases ($p = 0.052$)	No Impact

Study 2: Experimental Design I



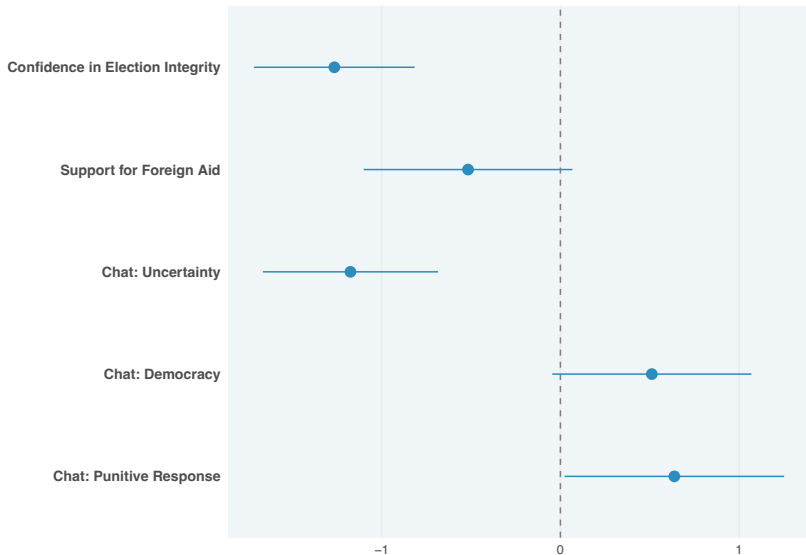
- ▶ The simulation includes 3 stages

Measurement

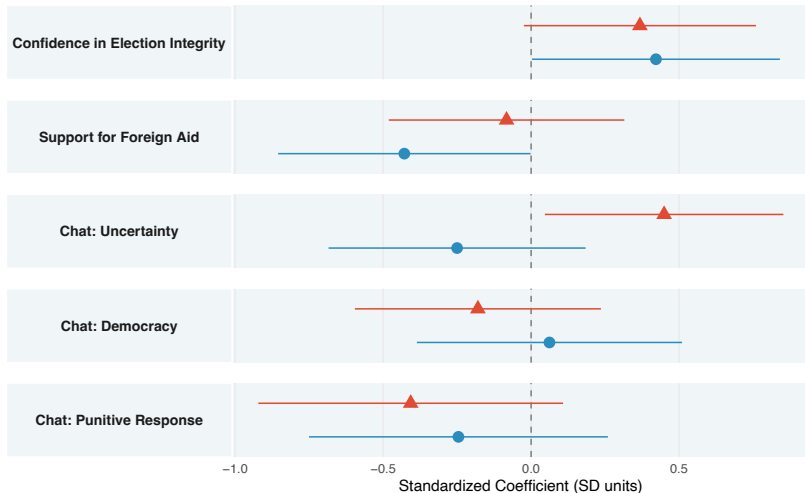
Stage 1	↔	Briefing: Intelligence officer delivers treatments	Perceptions of Election Integrity
Stage 2	↔	Deliberation: Officials from State, Defense, Justice departments deliberate	Policy Recommendations
Stage 3	↔	Pull-Aside: NSC director asks personal opinion after the meeting	Open-ended Responses



Standardized Effect of EOM Criticism



Effects of Credibility Attack and Zombie Monitor



Response Type: ● Credibility ▲ Zombie

▶ Primary Findings

- H1: Critical EOM reports \rightsquigarrow Perceived Election Integrity \downarrow ✓
- H2: Gov. Cred. Attacks \rightsquigarrow Confidence in Election Integrity \uparrow ✓
($p = 0.06$)
- H3: Gov. Zombie Monitor \rightsquigarrow Confidence in Election Integrity \uparrow ✓
($p = 0.09$)

▶ Secondary Findings

Outcome	Credibility Attack	Zombie Monitor
Support for Foreign Aid	\downarrow Decreases ($p \approx 0.08$)	No Impact
Chat: Uncertainty	No Impact	\uparrow Increases ($p < 0.05$)
Chat: Democracy	No Impact	No Impact
Chat: Punitive Response	No Impact	No Impact



Kenyan Citizens

U.S. Policy Elites

EOM Report

↓ Election Integrity ✓

↓ Election Integrity ✓

Credibility Attack

No effect on Election
Integrity
Backlash: ↑ Protest, ↑ Voting, ↑
EOM Credibility

↑ Election Integrity ✓
But: ↓ Support for Foreign Aid

Zombie Monitor

No effect on Election
Integrity
No impact on secondary
outcomes

↑ Election Integrity ✓
Also: ↑ Uncertainty



- ▶ To our knowledge, **our study is the first:**
 - Analyzing different government **rebuttal strategies'** effectiveness
 - Examining how **different audiences** respond to these contestation strategies
 - **Methodological contribution** \rightsquigarrow LLMs and simulations
- ▶ We show that
 - Domestic audiences are **resilient** to contestation & Foreign elites **ARE NOT !**
 - Reveals **a strategic rationale for zombie monitors**: mitigate harm from domestic/foreign officials without inducing backlash.
 - **Why are government officials more persuadable?** In-group bias? Informational distance? Ambiguity as strategic cover for inaction?



Thank You!

Questions and Comments Welcome

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