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# Regional assemblies and executives, regional authority, and the strategic manipulation of regional elections in electoral autocracies

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## ABSTRACT


In this introduction, we set out to analyse the relationship between regional elections and regional authority and the extent to which regional elections are held free and fair. We hypothesize that the incentives to interfere increase when regions exercise more authority but the possibilities to interfere decline when the regional executive is elected. A quantitative analysis confirms that directly elected and stronger regional bodies make them more attractive for central meddling, but the presence of elected executives makes central interference less likely. We zoom-in on nine electoral autocracies that have featured in the past five annual reviews of regional elections to explore how regional elections become less free and fair. We identify six strategies to manipulate regional elections which are applied in at least two electoral autocracies: simultaneity between regional and national elections, limiting party entry, gerrymandering, nationalizing regional election campaigns, party switching, and centralization of authority.

**KEYWORDS** Regional election; regional assembly; regional executive; electoral autocracy; democratic backsliding

## Introduction

This annual review of regional elections features one election article on Venezuela and seven election reports for Bolivia, Columbia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Finland, Ukraine, and Uruguay. The article examines elections held in 23 states (*estados*) in Venezuela and the election reports cover contests held in nine departments (*departamentos*) in Bolivia, in 32 departments (*departamentos*) in Columbia, in 13 regions (*kraje*) in the Czech Republic, in

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Åland Islands for 1979–2019 in Finland, in 13 regions (*periphereies*) in Greece, in 22 regions (*oblasts*) and one capital city in Ukraine, and in 19 departments (*departamentos*) in Uruguay. This and the previous four annual reviews collectively cover elections held in a total of 973 sub-state units in 40 countries which include a total population of approximately 3.25 billion people (Schakel and Romanova 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

The main objective of the annual review is to systematically and comparatively report on regional elections across the globe. Through the accumulation of annual reviews, we seek to increase our understanding of the factors that drive regional voters, regional election outcomes, and regional electoral dynamics (Schakel and Romanova 2018, 233–236). In each introduction, we draw comparative lessons and discuss the implications of the findings for our understanding of regional elections. With the series of introductions to the annual reviews, we aim to identify several crucial topics for the understanding of regional election outcomes. Hence, we focus on one or more themes derived from our own reading while adopting a multilevel system perspective. A multilevel election system perspective brings together nationwide and regional elections and considers the vertical and horizontal interactions between and the integration of national and regional electoral arenas (Schakel and Romanova 2020).

One main theme that is addressed in several articles and reports is democratic backsliding and its impact on (or how it is impacted by) subnational elections. This is not surprising considering that several scholars have noticed, since the 1990s and 2000s, a ‘democratic recession’ (Diamond 2015), a ‘third wave of autocratization’ (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), and some even speak of autocratization going viral (Hellmeier et al. 2021). Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg (2017) reveal that most change over the past four decades has occurred among authoritarian countries which used to be overwhelmingly closed autocracies but have become electoral autocracies. Closed autocracies do not hold (meaningful) elections for the chief executive whereas electoral autocracies hold multiparty elections to choose the chief executive, but these fall short of democratic standards due to, among other factors, irregularities or limits on party competition (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). In addition, electoral autocracy has developed in countries where democratic traditions and institutions were relatively strong (Levitsky and Way 2020). In these countries, authoritarian leaders resort to strategies that are more subtle than blatant election fraud to tilt the playing field in their favour. Hence, processes of democratic backsliding have inspired a scholarship that aims to identify the factors that advance or inhibit democratic and authoritarian resilience (Sinkkonen 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018).

In this introduction, we focus on the relationship between regional electoral democracy and democratic backsliding which is ambiguous. On the

one hand, the competitiveness of subnational electoral arenas has been linked to increased accountability and improved democratic responsiveness (Beer 2001). The opposition can retain a foothold by first winning subnational elections and challenge dominant parties in national elections later. On the other hand, as pointed out by Jakli and Stenberg (2021), subnational politics may contribute to autocratization – i.e. the *de facto* decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). By winning subnational elections, dominant parties not only close off a subnational avenue for the opposition to challenge them, but they can also use subnational office to extend their appeal to the electorate and change rules to solidify their control (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2021). Hence, it is important to identify the conditions under which authoritarian leaders intervene in electoral processes at the subnational level because they may not just be a byproduct of national institutional change and they may support the longevity of illiberal institutions at the national level (Jakli and Stenberg 2021). Furthermore, subnational authoritarianism can co-exist with democracy at the national level and *vice versa* which suggests that autocratization and democratization can unfold differently and separately at the national and sub-national levels (Gibson 2005; Gilley 2010; Harbers, Bartman, and van Wingerden 2019).

We argue that the extent to which dominant parties can and will interfere with regional electoral processes depends on the method of (s)election of regional assemblies and executives and the authority they exercise. Interference in regional electoral processes is more likely when the *incentives* and *possibilities* for authoritarian leaders to interfere are larger. That is, when regional governments have directly elected assemblies, exercise significant authority, and have centrally appointed executives. The incentives to interfere increases further, but possibilities to interfere decline, when regions have executives which are powerful and which are elected in the region. In sum, directly elected and stronger regional bodies make them more attractive for central meddling, but the presence of elected executives makes central interference less likely. We test our hypotheses against a dataset that merges V-Dem expert evaluations (Coppedge et al. 2022) with the Regional Authority Index (RAI) (Hooghe et al. 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2021).

The quantitative analysis focuses on expert judgments who evaluate the extent to which subnational elections are held 'free and fair' while taking 'the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account'. It is likely that the experts mostly focused on blatant election-day vote fraud whereas processes underlying backsliding democracy often involve strategies for electoral manipulation that take place well before election day (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). To gain more insight into processes of democratic decline at the regional level, we draw upon nine

electoral autocracies that feature in the annual reviews of regional elections to identify six strategies to interfere with regional electoral democracy: simultaneity between regional and national elections, limiting party entry, gerrymandering, nationalizing regional election campaigns, party switching, and centralization of authority.

In the next section, we develop hypotheses on how regional representation and regional authority impacts on the incentives and possibilities for dominant parties to interfere in regional electoral processes. Data and methods for the empirical analysis are discussed in the third section and the results are presented in the fourth section. In the fifth section, we proceed with an in-depth qualitative exploration of the strategies employed by electoral autocracies to interfere in regional electoral democracy. The final section concludes and discusses the implications of the findings.

### **Regional representation, regional authority, and regional electoral democracy**

Following Polga-Hecimovich (2022) we start from the premise that subnational elections can serve to both solidify democracy as well as consolidate authoritarianism. We hypothesize that regional authority increases the opportunities for opposition parties to use regional electoral arenas as a stepping stone to challenge dominant parties in national elections which, in turn, intensifies the incentives for authoritarian regimes to interfere with the regional electoral process. However, whether opposition parties or authoritarian regimes will prevail depends on whether the regional assembly is indirectly or directly elected and whether the regional executive is appointed by the central government or is elected. Interference is more likely when the incentives and possibilities for authoritarian leaders to interfere are large, i.e. when assemblies are directly elected and exercise significant authority combined with centrally appointed executives. The incentives to interfere increase further to the extent regional executives are powerful, but possibilities to interfere decline to the extent regional executives are elected in the region.

Regional electoral arenas provide opposition parties with opportunities to demonstrate political competence and holding subnational office may help to cultivate public support. This in turn may generate confidence in the electoral apparatus and provide opportunities for opposition candidates to challenge the dominant party in national elections. These possibilities for the opposition provide incentives for authoritarian regimes to win subnational elections as to ‘erode opposition parties’ organizational bases, frustrate the emergence and consolidation of opposition leaders, and to constrain the emergence of bottom-up political pressure’ (Polga-Hecimovich 2022, 2). In addition, a dominant party that wins subnational elections can use the

perks of subnational office to extend its appeal to the electorate and to increase its public support (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2021). Furthermore, by holding subnational elections, dominant parties may increase public support for the authoritarian regime because it can claim that it is voted into office at the subnational and national levels by voters. Hence, it is difficult to theorize beforehand whether subnational electoral democracy helps or impedes democratic decline.

We hypothesize that regional representation – i.e. the extent to which regional assemblies and executives are elected – and regional authority – i.e. the powers regional assemblies and executives exercise – impact the incentives and possibilities for authoritarian regimes to interfere with the regional electoral process. The incentives to falsify election outcomes are higher to the extent regions exercise more authority. Strong regions provide the opposition with more opportunities to encourage the organization of civil society, to demonstrate political competence, and to cultivate political support. Hence, regional authority increases the potential threat posed by the opposition to the authoritarian dominant party which increases the incentives of the latter to secure majorities in subnational parliaments. Central governments have more possibilities to interfere when executives are centrally appointed compared when regional executives are elected. Regional incumbents can use the resources associated with holding executive office to serve their own electoral purposes, which can be more or less aligned with the electoral purposes of the national government. They will try to fence off interference from the centre when they represent the opposition party but regional governors from the dominant party may welcome central government interference to help them win majorities in the regional assemblies.

Our expectations can be summarized by two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Interference of authoritarian regimes in the regional electoral process *increases* when regional assemblies are directly elected and exercise more authority.

*Hypothesis 2:* Interference of authoritarian regimes in the regional electoral process *decreases* when regional executives are elected and exercise more authority.

However, authoritarian regimes cannot overtly falsify elections without any costs. A major challenge for authoritarian dominant parties is to find a balance between interfering with elections to preserve incumbent victories without undermining popular perceptions of procedural legitimacy. Blatant electoral falsification provides a focal point for popular mobilization and may potentially lead to mass protest (Howard and Roessler 2006; Smyth 2016; Tucker 2007). Regional authoritarian incumbents want to win by large margins and forestall future competition whereas the central

government also wants to win but preferably with minimal post-election protests (Smyth and Turovsky 2018). In addition, political leaders who commit election fraud are likely to be sanctioned by the international community and holding multiparty elections is often a prerequisite for receiving foreign aid (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Hence, a dominant party faces strong incentives to avoid large-scale falsification of election results on polling day or soon after and instead pursue strategies for manipulation well before election day to secure victories. As Panov and Ross (2021, 3–4) note ‘the main task of authoritarian elections is to guarantee the victory of the ruling party’ and opposition parties are allowed ‘provided that they do not threaten the survival of the regime’. We, therefore, pursue our empirical analysis in two steps. First, we quantitatively explore the impact of regional representation and regional authority on the probability that subnational elections are held free and fair. In a second step, we draw upon nine electoral autocracies that have appeared as an election article or report in the annual reviews of regional elections to identify the strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to interfere with regional electoral democracy beyond election-day vote fraud.

## Quantitative analysis: Data and methods

The V-Dem dataset offers a range of indicators on the quality of subnational democracy (Coppedge et al. 2022; McMann 2016) and one expert survey question is of particular interest to us:

Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider subnational elections (regional and local, as previously identified) to be free and fair on average?

Experts could opt for the following responses:

*No, not at all.* The elections were fundamentally flawed and the official results had little if anything to do with the ‘will of the people’ (who won office).

*Not really.* While the elections allowed for some competition, the irregularities in the end affected the outcome of the elections (who won office).

*Ambiguous.* There was substantial competition and freedom of participation but there were also significant irregularities. It is hard to determine whether the irregularities affected the outcome or not (who won office).

*Yes, somewhat.* There were deficiencies and some degree of fraud and irregularities but these did not in the end affect the outcome (who won office).

*Yes.* There was some amount of human error and logistical restrictions but these were largely unintentional and without significant consequences.

To enhance interpretation, we transformed the responses to create our *dependent variable which is a dummy that indicates whether subnational elections were held free and fair* (= 1; Yes) or whether there were at least some degree of fraud or irregularities (= 0; No, not at all; Not really; Ambiguous; Yes, somewhat). In the supplementary material, we rerun our models with the original ordinal specification of the dependent variable which leads to similar results.

Our independent variables are taken from the Regional Authority Index (RAI) dataset (Hooghe et al. 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2021). This index measures authority exercised by regions along two main dimensions which each consists of five subdimensions. *Self-rule* taps the extent to which regions exercise authority over citizens within their jurisdiction and is broken down into institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy, borrowing autonomy, and representation.<sup>1</sup> We recalculate self-rule scores by subtracting the scores on representation so that we can assess the impact of regional representative institutions separately from the impact of the authority they exercise. The recalculated self-rule scores can vary between 0 and 14. *Shared rule* concerns the authority exercised by regions together with other regions and the national government in the country as a whole and is assessed along law making, executive control, fiscal control, borrowing control and constitutional reform.<sup>2</sup> Shared rule scores can vary between 0 and 12.

Representation measures the extent to which a region has an independent legislature and executive and is the sum of assembly and executive. *Assembly* taps whether there is no regional assembly (= 0), whether the regional assembly is indirectly elected (= 1), or whether the regional assembly is directly elected (= 2). *Executive* taps whether the regional executive is appointed by the central government (= 0), whether a dual regional executive is appointed by the central government and the regional assembly (= 1), or whether the regional executive is appointed by a regional assembly or directly elected (= 2).

The V-Dem question asked whether subnational elections were held free and fair which includes both local and regional elections. The RAI dataset includes regional tiers that have on average at least 150,000 inhabitants. To strengthen the link between the expert responses and the regional tiers included in the RAI dataset, we excluded countries and years when there was no regional tier and we only included expert survey responses for those country-years for which the experts indicated that there were elected regional governments.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we use the RAI-region dataset which provides annual scores for the most authoritative tier in a country. We think it is plausible that experts had mostly these regions in mind when they answered the question on free and fair subnational elections. In total, our dataset includes 3555 years clustered by 67 countries. Descriptive statistics and



Pearson correlations between the dependent and independent variables are provided in the supplementary material (Tables A1 and A2).

We employ multilevel logit models which estimate the impact of our independent variables – regional authority and representation and their sub-dimensions – on the probability that subnational elections were held free and fair (= 1). The models cluster years by country and include a coefficient ( $\rho$ ) that tracks the variance that can be attributed to countries. Our main focus is on the results of the multilevel logit models but we perform two robustness checks: multilevel ordered logit models that focus on the original specification of the dependent variable – No, not at all (= 0), Not really (= 1); Ambiguous (= 2); Yes, somewhat (= 3); Yes (= 4) – and multilevel logit models that exclude ‘entrenched’ polyarchies (45 instead of 67 countries). In the results section we briefly discuss the robustness of our findings across the various model specifications and the results are presented in the supplementary material.

## Results of the quantitative analysis

Table 1 presents the results of five multilevel logit models that explore the impact of regional representative institutions and regional authority on the probability that experts indicate that subnational elections tend to be free and fair. The first model includes the variables representation (assembly plus executive) and regional authority (self-rule plus shared rule) and their interaction. The results clearly indicate that regional authority and its interaction with representation have an impact. Regional authority and representation and their sub-indicators tend to be correlated with each other (see Table A2) and we explore the sub-indicators and their interactions separately (models 2–4) as well as all together (model 5). The results reveal that all sub-indicators matter for the probability of free and fair subnational elections. The interaction effects may point towards opposing impacts. Assembly in interaction with self-rule and executive in interaction with shared rule have a negative impact whereas executive in interaction with self-rule has a positive impact.

We estimate predicted probabilities to ease interpretation of the impacts of the various sub-dimensions of representation and regional authority and their interactions. Relevant predicted probabilities are those which are calculated using values that feature prominently in the empirical data. Table 2 display a breakdown of the 3555 observations included in our dataset according to their values on assembly and executive. Certain combinations of scores on assembly and executive do not occur or occur rarely which also explains the value of 0.7 for the Pearson correlation between these two variables (Table A2). Regions that have no assembly tend to have a regional executive who is appointed by the central government. Directly assemblies tend to have either a dually appointed or an elected regional executive. Hence, we

**Table 1.** The impact of regional representative institutions and regional authority on the probability that subnational elections are held free and fair.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Representation	−0.001 (0.127)				
Assembly		0.853*** (0.275)	−0.176 (0.255)	1.833*** (0.313)	2.212*** (0.362)
Executive		−0.898*** (0.309)	1.311*** (0.191)	−1.312*** (0.326)	−1.590*** (0.355)
Regional authority	−0.339*** (0.087)	0.068 (0.150)			
Self-rule			−0.215 (0.221)	−1.111*** (0.193)	−0.679** (0.291)
Shared rule			0.586 (0.401)	0.956*** (0.185)	0.831** (0.341)
Representation*Regional authority	0.227*** (0.026)				
Assembly*Regional authority		−0.056 (0.080)			
Executive*Regional authority		0.354** (0.051)			
Assembly*Self-rule			0.247** (0.109)		−0.262* (0.146)
Assembly*Shared rule			−0.098 (0.205)		0.063 (0.176)
Executive*Self-rule				0.892*** (0.102)	0.939*** (0.098)
Executive*Shared rule				−0.204* (0.112)	−0.197* (0.106)
Constant	−1.247** (0.608)	−2.522* (1.368)	−1.412* (0.811)	−1.890*** (0.561)	−3.574*** (0.533)
Rho	0.961*** (0.011)	0.964*** (0.011)	0.955*** (0.013)	0.972*** (0.009)	0.970*** (0.009)
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup>	281***	143***	163***	154***	191***
Log likelihood	−803	−795	−827	−766	−764

Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Shown are the results (beta coefficients and their standard errors in parantheses) of a multilevel logistic regression model whereby 3555 years are clustered by 67 countries. See Tables A1a and A1b for descriptive statistics.

**Table 2.** Distribution of observations across assembly and executive.

Executive	Assembly			Total
	None	Indirectly elected	Directly elected	
Appointed by central government	21.0%	4.9%	7.4%	33.4%
Dual: central government and assembly	0.0%	5.3%	21.4%	26.6%
Elected by assembly or citizens	0.0%	2.3%	37.6%	40.0%
Total	21.1%	12.5%	66.4%	100.0%

Notes: The total number of observations is 3555 years clustered by 67 countries.

estimate two kinds of predicted probabilities. Table 3 displays predicted probabilities for countries where regions have a centrally appointed regional executive in combination with no, an indirectly, or a directly elected assembly. Table 4 presents estimated probabilities for countries where regions have a directly elected assembly in combination with an executive who is

**Table 3.** Impact of *regional assembly* and regional authority on the probability of holding free and fair subnational elections.

Regional assembly	Regional authority			Change
	Low	Medium	High	
No assembly	15%	14%	14%	−1%
Indirectly elected	20%	18%	18%	−2%*
Directly elected	31%	23%	21%	−10%*
Change	15%**	9%***	7%*	

Notes: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Shown are predicted probabilities that subnational elections did not have irregularities, i.e. they were held free and fair. Estimates are based on model 5 in Table 1 whereby executive is set at ‘appointed by central government’ and regional authority (self-rule, SF, and shared rule, SH) moves from minus one standard deviation below the mean (low; SF: 0.4; SH: 0) through the mean (medium; SF: 1.9; SH: 0.6) to one standard above the mean (high; SF: 3.4; SH: 2.0).

**Table 4.** Impact of *regional executive* and regional authority on the probability of holding free and fair subnational elections.

Regional executive	Regional authority			Change
	Low	Medium	High	
Appointed by central government	41%	34%	30%	−11%
Dual: central government and assembly	48%	50%	52%	4%
Elected by assembly or citizens	50%	65%	82%	32%***
Change	9%*	30%**	52%***	

Notes: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Shown are predicted probabilities that subnational elections did not have irregularities, i.e. they were held free and fair. Estimates are based on model 5 in Table 1 whereby assembly is set at directly elected and regional authority (self-rule, SF and shared rule, SH) moves from minus one standard deviation below the mean (low; SF: 3.8; SH: 0) through the mean (medium; SF: 7.2; SH: 3.4) to one standard above the mean (high; SF: 10.6; SH: 7.1).

appointed by the central government, who is dually appointed by the central government and assembly, or who is elected by the assembly or directly elected by citizens. Tables 3 and 4 cover more than 92% of the total number of observations.

In both Tables 3 and 4, we estimate the impact of assembly and executive for different values of self-rule and shared rule which range from one standard deviation below the mean (low), the mean (medium), and one standard deviation above the mean (high). Regions with centrally appointed executives tend to have less regional authority than regions with directly elected assemblies and we estimate the predicted probabilities for the relevant means and standard deviations (see Table A3).

Table 3 clearly reveals that an indirectly or directly elected assembly significantly increases the probability of free and fair subnational elections especially when regions have not much authority. The probability for free and fair subnational elections increases with 15 percentage points when self-rule and shared rule take up low values and this probability is 7 percentage points for high values. Table 3 also reveals that the probability for free

and fair subnational elections declines with 2–10 percentage points when (in)directly assemblies exercise more authority. These results provide strong empirical support for our first hypothesis that stipulates that interference of authoritarian regimes in the regional electoral process *increases* when (in)directly elected regional assemblies exercise more authority. Table 4 exposes that executive has a strong positive effect on the probability that subnational elections are held free and fair especially when regional authority is high. The impact of executive is dependent on the authority exercised by regional executives and increases with nine percentage points when self-rule and shared rule are low and with 52 percentage points when self-rule and shared rule are high. The increase of 32 percentage points is also highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). These results confirm our second hypothesis that interference of authoritarian regimes in the regional electoral process *decreases* when regional executives are elected and exercise more authority.

The results remain robust when we employ multilevel ordered logit models that focus on the original specification of the dependent variable – No, not at all (= 0), Not really (= 1); Ambiguous (= 2); Yes, somewhat (= 3); Yes (= 4) (Tables A4–A6). Unfortunately, we are not able to examine over-time dynamics in the extent to which subnational elections are held freely and fair. There are too few changes in scores. There are only 16 instances of decline and 36 instances of improvement out of a total of 3555 observations (1.5%).<sup>4</sup> Hence, our results mostly pertain to cross-sectional variation whereby it is very difficult to ascertain causation between the independent variables. Nevertheless, the results do reveal strong associative relationships between free and fair subnational elections and representation and regional authority.

We also ran models that exclude 22 ‘entrenched’ polyarchies (and 1230 years) which are defined as having an average score of 0.80 or more on the variable polyarchy (electoral democracy index) from the V-Dem dataset that ranges between 0 and 1 and is based on a weighted average of expert evaluations of freedom of association, clean (national) elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage (Coppedge et al. 2022).<sup>5</sup> The reason to focus on 45 non-polyarchies (and 2325 years) is because all 16 instances of decline and all 36 but three instances of improvement in the extent to which subnational elections are held free and fair happened in non-polyarchies. The results (see Tables A7–A11) appear to be very robust and reveal very similar substantive impacts of assembly, executive, and regional authority.

These results strongly suggest that the association between representation and regional authority and the probability for free and fair subnational elections are driven by the variation for non-polyarchies. This implies that one should focus on non-polyarchies to learn more on the

causes for and the conditions under which regional elections are held less freely and fairly. In the next section, we will draw upon election articles and reports on nine electoral autocracies to identify strategies for manipulating regional elections.

### **Strategies employed by electoral autocracies for manipulating regional elections**

Key for identifying the causes and conditions under which subnational elections become less free and fair is the observation that the processes underlying backsliding electoral democracy often involve much more than blatant election-day vote fraud (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Levitsky and Way (2002, 53) note that in competitive authoritarian regimes, elections are generally free of massive fraud but ‘incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate election results’. Hence, one process of democratic backsliding can be described as the *strategic manipulation of elections*. The aim is to tilt ‘the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents’ and involves ‘hampering media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commission, changing electoral rules to favor incumbents, and harassing opponents’ (Bermeo 2016, 13). These actions tend to be applied well before an election takes place and rarely involves obvious violations of the law.

By drawing on the election articles and election reports published in the annual review of regional elections we can provide an in-depth and qualitative exploration of the conditions under which dominant parties have incentives and possibilities to interfere in regional electoral processes. We do not aim to provide for a complete overview, rather we want to offer some insights into the ways in which authoritarian regimes meddle with regional electoral democracy. Based on the list of electoral autocracies for 2021 produced by the V-Dem project (Boese et al. 2022, 45, Table 1) we selected the following nine election articles and reports for our explorative analysis: Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Philippines, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela. We focus on electoral autocracies because these countries hold *de jure* (but not *de facto*) multiparty elections whereas closed autocracies do not (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). The five annual reviews of regional elections include a total of 43 articles and reports which means that our sample comprises 21% of the total number of publications and that, on average, each annual review includes about two electoral autocracies. The remaining 34 articles and reports concern electoral democracies and liberal

democracies which hold *de facto* multiparty and free and fair elections (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018).

From these nine election articles and reports, we distilled strategies for manipulating regional elections to tilt the electoral balance in favour of the dominant party that are mentioned for at least two countries. The six strategies we identified are: simultaneity between regional and national elections, limiting party entry, gerrymandering, nationalizing regional election campaigns, party switching, and centralization of authority (see Box 1). In the remainder of this section, we will discuss each of these strategies in detail.

**Box 1. Six strategies for the strategic manipulation of regional elections**

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<i>Simultaneity between regional and national elections</i>	Holding regional and national elections at the same date increases the probability that national vote choice for the dominant party spills-over into regional vote choice.
<i>Limiting party entry</i>	High thresholds and strict registration requirements make it very difficult or nearly impossible for the opposition to field party lists in regional elections.
<i>Gerrymandering</i>	Constituencies where the opposition is dominant are merged together in fewer constituencies or merged with constituencies where the dominant party wins large majorities.
<i>Nationalizing regional election campaigns</i>	Dominant parties can control regional election campaigns directly by owning or strictly regulating the media or indirectly through attuning their campaign messages towards the specificities of a region.
<i>Party switching</i>	Possibilities for dominant parties to persuade members of opposition parties to switch allegiance increase when party institutionalization is low and national office provides opportunities for patronage.
<i>Centralization of authority</i>	Centralization reduces the capacity of regions ruled by the opposition to mobilize electoral support.

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***Simultaneity between regional and national elections***

A dominant party increases its chances to win regional elections by conducting them on the same date as elections for national offices. Popularity at the national level can more easily spill-over into subnational electoral arenas when elections are held on the same date. Vertical and horizontal simultaneity between elections is relatively common for eight out of the nine electoral autocracies that we focus on. Elections for national and subnational executive (president and governor) and parliamentary elections take place on the same date and across the statewide territory in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Philippines. A high degree of horizontal simultaneity between regional elections in Russia is achieved through federal legislation which stipulates that regional elections need to take place on ‘unified days of voting’: either in March or October up until 2012 and in September after 2012. In Hungary and Turkey all subnational elections take place on the same date across the statewide territory but

that is not uncommon in many other unitary countries. Relatively close timing between national and subnational elections is present in Nigeria (two weeks), Venezuela (two months) and in Hungary (six months; until 2014). In these three countries, regional elections take (shortly) place after the national elections when the dominant party can still benefit from a 'victorious' national election campaign.

Holding elections simultaneously increases the probability that national vote choice spills-over into subnational vote choice. Burbidge (2020, 392–393) presents survey data for Kenya that reveal that 100% and 90% of the respondents know that the presidential and governor offices are up for election and these percentages are 81% for MPs, 74% for senators, 72% for county assembly members, and 63% for the women representative. It is likely that voters take their cues for whom to vote for from party competition at the national rather than at the subnational level especially when voters do not know that subnational offices are up for election too.

Although it appears that dominant parties prefer simultaneity between elections, in certain instances the dominant party purposefully aims for non-simultaneity. Angerbrandt (2020, 430–431) reveals that during the 2017 regional elections in Nigeria, violence was used on election day to postpone elections in opposition strongholds. This bought time to concentrate resources in 'supplementary elections' that were held a few weeks later and enabled incumbents to 'buy' votes and increase their popularity through development projects such as digging boreholes and rehabilitating clinics. Another example concerns Venezuela where gubernatorial and state legislative council elections were originally scheduled on the same date in December 2016. The gubernatorial elections were moved forward to October 2016 whereas the state council elections were held in May 2018 on the same date as the presidential elections (Polga-Hecimovich 2022, 15–16).

### ***Limiting party entry***

Once in power, dominant parties often rely on modifying rules for party entry to limit opposition. By introducing high thresholds and strict requirements it can be very difficult or nearly impossible for the opposition to introduce a party list in all the regions. For example, in Hungary, county party election lists are abolished since the elections of 2010 (Kákai and Kovács 2021, 408). In Nigeria, regulations prohibit ethnically and religiously based parties and require that a party has an executive board with national representation and a spread of votes for the president with at least 25% of the votes in two-thirds of the states (Angerbrandt 2020, 420). The minimum number of party members required to be legally registered was drastically reduced from 40,000 to 500 in Russia in 2012 after large-scale protests. As a result, the number of parties increased from 7 in 2011 to 78 in 2017 (Ross and

Panov 2019, 359–360). However, when the wave of protests ebbed, an amendment in 2014 reinstated the requirement of party list candidates to collect nomination signatures except for parties that hold seats in the national parliament or received 3% of the votes in national parliamentary elections. The average number of registered party lists per region initially rose from 13.2 in 2012 to 17.2 in 2013 but subsequently declined to 7.8 in 2015 (Ross and Panov 2019, 360).

### ***Gerrymandering***

One clear way to control the opposition is to concentrate its supporters in fewer electoral constituencies with high margins as reported by Polga-Hecimovich (2022, 9) for Venezuela. Dominant and conservative parties tend to be more popular in rural areas which induces authoritarian governments to gerrymander rural areas into urban constituencies. Kákai and Kovács (2021, 408; citing Vida 2020, 83) note that the delineation of the single-member electoral districts for parliamentary elections reveals an attempt ‘to counter the leftist dominance of cities by integrating tiny peri-urban settlements’. However, gerrymandering is much more difficult for county elections because there are 23 cities with county rank which do not fall under the jurisdiction of the counties (Kákai and Kovács 2021, 407). Hence, gerrymandering cities with county rank requires changing the territorial borders of subnational jurisdictions. The AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; Justice and Development Party) in Turkey has followed that path.

A law on metropolitan municipalities adopted before the election of 2014 merged rural districts, villages, and towns in 14 provinces with the provincial capital and increased the total number of metropolitan municipalities to 30. The mayor of metropolitan municipalities is directly elected whereas the governors of provinces are appointed by the President on the recommendation of the Interior Ministry (Taskin 2021, 463). Hence, by enlarging the electoral district to include rural areas, the AKP attempted to win the mayoralties of metropolitan municipalities. The party was more successful in 2014 than in 2019, the number of won metropolitan municipality mayoralties decreased from 18 to 15 and, importantly, the AKP lost the mayorships of the capital Ankara and the financial capital Istanbul (Taskin 2021, 469). However, the AKP won the majority in the Ankara and Istanbul municipality councils and municipal councillors can obstruct mayoral policy by not attending council sessions or vetoing council proposals (Taskin 2021, 472).

### ***Nationalizing regional election campaigns***

Dominant parties do not always have the possibility to change electoral laws to increase simultaneity between subnational and national elections, to limit



party entry, or to gerrymander electoral districts. This can be particularly the case in decentralized federal countries with rigid constitutions and where states have competence to regulate their own elections. In these instances, dominant parties may opt for adopting particular campaign strategies in an effort to manipulate the elections. One obvious way for authoritarian rulers to control campaigns is by adopting laws that include strict registration and licensing requirements and government inspections that effectively restrict the freedom of the press as is the case in Ethiopia (Ayele 2018, 286–288). Authoritarian governments can also fully own media companies or may obtain majority shares in *de jure* private sector newspapers as is the case in Hungary (Kákai and Kovács 2021, 410).

These strategies of direct involvement may not be available for many dominant parties, especially when the dominance of a party still needs to be established. But also in these instances nationalizing regional election campaigns is an important strategy for manipulating regional (and national) elections. Schakel, Sharma, and Swenden (2019) attribute the BJP's impressive electoral performance of the past decade to the campaign style and messaging of the BJP and its leader Narendra Modi. During the 2014 general election campaign, Modi adopted a 'regional messaging' approach. While speaking in various parliamentary constituencies, he wore the traditional headgear and costume representative of the state and spoke a few opening sentences in the appropriate regional language. In addition, Modi criticized state leaders for not upholding their predecessors' ideals and promised to adopt policy tailored towards state's concern (Schakel, Sharma, and Swenden 2019, 334–335). During the campaigns of the state elections held after 2014, the BJP adopted a 'national messaging' approach which focused on promises of corruption-free politics and a narrative on Hindu nationalism and whereby the BJP did not announce chief ministerial candidates (Schakel, Sharma, and Swenden 2019, 342–344).

### **Party switching**

In electoral autocracies, party institutionalization is often low. This creates possibilities for dominant parties to persuade members of opposition parties to switch party. This is a particular popular election manipulation strategy in the Philippines where parties are 'coalitions of provincial bosses, political machines, and local clans, anchored on clientelistic, parochial, and personal inducements rather than on issues, ideologies, and party platforms' (Teehankee 2018, 384; citing Teehankee 2012, 188). In the 2016 gubernatorial and House of Representatives elections LP won 40 out of 82 (49%) governorships and 116 out of 297 (39%) seats whereas the respective numbers were 0 and 3 for PDP-Laban. However, the simultaneous presidential election was won by the PDP-Laban candidate (Duterte) and not the LP candidate

(Roxas). Members of LP massively switched party and the number of seats in the House of Representatives grew to 200 (67%) (Teehankee 2018, 385–391). Above we noted that the strategies for the manipulation of elections tend to be applied well before an election takes place. As Teehankee (2018, 392) notes, party switching may occur before an election when candidates file their nomination papers and raise campaign funds as well as after an election when elected officials affiliate themselves with the winning party to gain access to patronage.

Party switching also contributes to the dominance of the BJP in India. The nationalized campaign strategy of the BJP in India appeared not to be successful in some states with strong regional parties. In these states, the BJP engineered defections from the Congress party alongside allying itself with regional parties and relying on centrally appointed state governors to invite the BJP to form the state government (Schakel, Sharma, and Swenden 2019, 342–344). Perks and patronage depend on the resources attached to an office and governors in federal states may have substantial resources at their disposal. However, party switching towards the dominant party at the national level also occurs in federal countries. Angerbrandt (2020, 423–430) and Burbidge (2020, 395–401) note that governors in Kenya and Nigeria have strong incentives to align themselves with the party of the president because of extensive executive powers of the president and the opportunities this gives for distributing patronage resources.

### ***Centralization of authority***

Centralization of authority reduces the capacity of regions ruled by the opposition to ensure timely public service provision which subsequently gives grounds to people to criticize the regional governments' poor performance and decreases the chances of opposition parties to effectively mobilize electoral support. Interestingly, centralization of authority does not feature prominently in electoral autocracies. There is only one clear example where centralization of authority has been used as a strategy to control the opposition. Polga-Hecimovich (2022, 13–15) describes how Chávez, the President of Venezuela, used a strategy of 'selective centralization' in response to electoral losses in particular regions. States in Venezuela are fiscally highly dependent on the central government and intergovernmental fiscal transfers constitute around 70% of their income. After the 2012 gubernatorial elections, fiscal transfers were delayed and not paid out to states where the dominant party did not win a governorship. In addition, Chávez established parallel central government institutions headed by centrally appointed *protectores* in states where the opposition delivered the governor.

Centralization of authority has also been applied in Hungary where the authority of counties has been 'hollowed out' by the establishment of

deconcentrated units of the central government and spatial development councils that manage EU Cohesion funds. In addition, policies that citizens care about such as hospitals, children's and nursing homes and secondary schools have been nationalized (Kákai and Kovács 2021, 407). However, these centralization strategies did not impact 23 cities with county rank – which govern over 38% of the total Hungarian population – to a similar extent because they also exercise local competences. Similarly, provinces in Turkey have a governor who is appointed by the central government whereas metropolitan municipalities have a directly elected mayor (Taskin 2021, 463). Hence, taking away authority from subnational governments may not be the most feasible or effective strategy to manipulate election outcomes. This may be one of the reasons why the strategies of nationalizing regional election campaigns and gerrymandering feature prominently in Hungary and Turkey (see above).

## Discussion

In this introduction, we set out to analyse the relationship between regional representation and regional authority and the extent to which subnational elections are held free and fair. A quantitative analysis provides strong empirical evidence that authoritarian governments' interference with the subnational election process *increases* to the extent that regional assemblies are elected and exercise more authority but have an executive that is centrally appointed whereas interference *declines* to the extent regional executives are elected and their authority is larger. We explain these results by the incentives and opportunities authoritarian governments have to interfere with the subnational election process. The incentives to interfere increase to the extent regions exercise authority but the possibilities to interfere are largest when the central government appoints the regional executive and are lowest when regional executives are elected and have significant authority.

These findings are almost completely based on developments in non-polyarchies which are defined as having an average score of below 0.80 on the variable polyarchy (electoral democracy index) from the V-Dem dataset. Hence, we zoomed-in on nine electoral autocracies that have featured in the annual review of regional elections to learn more on the causes for and the conditions under which regional elections become less free and fair. Processes underlying backsliding electoral democracy often involve much more than blatant election-day vote fraud and we used the concept of *strategic manipulation of elections* (Bermeo 2016) to identify common strategies across the nine electoral autocracies that have been pursued to tilt the electoral playing field in favour of dominant parties. Six strategies were applied in at least two electoral autocracies: simultaneity between regional and national elections, limiting party entry, gerrymandering, nationalizing regional

election campaigns, party switching, and centralization of authority. Most of these strategies can be applied simultaneously and may interact with each other. For example, simultaneity between regional and national elections may make it easier to nationalize regional election campaigns.<sup>6</sup> In addition, these six strategies can also be applied to manipulate the national election process and thereby this list may not appear to be very surprising. However, our qualitative exploration reveals that electoral autocracies make great efforts in trying to manipulate regional electoral processes whereas dominant parties often are in the position to heavily centralize authority or to abolish regional government, especially in unitary and centralized countries.

The reason that regional governments are very rarely abolished strongly suggests that this strategy does not feature prominently on the 'menu of institutional reforms' for authoritarian leaders. This may be because regional elections can be beneficial for electoral autocracies. Ayele (2018, 277) notes that electoral authoritarians 'use elections as a "safety valve" to allow the public let off steam and express its displeasures and frustrations so that it does not resort to uprisings'. Hence, electoral autocracies need to find a balance whereby the opposition is allowed to compete but should lose the elections (Schedler 2002, 47). This is a difficult balancing act because there are often limits regarding the extent to which authoritarian regimes can exclude opposition parties from the electoral process.

Our quantitative analysis reveals the need to have a closer look at the internal dynamics in authoritarian regimes and in particular the extent to which subnational elections and institutions may contribute to democratic resilience and autocratization (see also Sinkkonen 2021). Thereby, our findings on regional electoral democracy further contribute to an emerging literature that finds that subnational democracy can significantly vary across regions within countries and can trigger but also hamper democratization at the national level (Auerbach 2021; Gibson 2005; Giraudy 2013; Harbers, Bartman, and van Wingerden 2019). Our qualitative exploration reveals that dominant parties often rely on several strategies to manipulate elections and that different strategies are chosen over time. This underlines the notion that processes of democratization and autocratization are the result of a long sequence of events and processes (Lührmann 2021) and that the role that regional elections and institutions can play in these processes is likely to depend on the stage of the process and timing of other crucial events (see e.g. Boese et al. 2021; Bajpai and Kureshi 2022).

## Notes

1. *Institutional depth* (0–3) measures the extent to which a regional government is autonomous rather than deconcentrated. *Policy autonomy* (0–4) indicates the

range of policies a regional government is responsible for. *Fiscal autonomy* (0–4) taps the extent to which a regional government can independently tax its population. *Borrowing autonomy* (0–3) assesses the extent to which a regional government can borrow.

2. *Law making* (0–2) measures the extent to which regional representatives co-determine national legislation. *Executive control* (0–2) assesses the extent to which a regional government co-determines national policy in intergovernmental meetings. *Fiscal control* (0–2) taps the extent to which regional representatives co-determine the distribution of national tax revenues. *Borrowing control* (0–2) indicates the extent to which a regional government co-determines sub-national and national borrowing constraints. *Constitutional reform* (0–4) measures the extent to which regional representatives co-determine constitutional change.
3. Experts were asked: *Are there elected regional governments, and – if so – to what extent can they operate without interference from unelected bodies at the regional level?* Experts could indicate whether neither the assembly nor executive were elected, the assembly only, the executive only, or both. We excluded country-years for which the experts indicated that neither the assembly nor executive were elected.
4. The original ordinal specification of the dependent variable produces only 39 instances of decline and 157 instances of improvement (5.5%) which is also a too low number of changes for multilevel ordered logit models.
5. The 22 ‘entrenched’ polyarchies are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.
6. We would like to thank one of the reviewers to bring this point to our attention.

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