

# Competition, stakes, and falling electoral participation in Central Asia and the Caucasus: A comparative analysis

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## Abstract

Between 2005 and 2015, a drastic wave of decline in voter turnout affected a series of presidential elections in Central Asia and the Caucasus. To explain this phenomenon, we perform an innovative comparative study using news coverage of four electoral case studies in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Armenia. This analysis is then used to build a new theory, which explains significant falls in participation as outcomes of a composite process of strengthening of incumbent regimes, weakening of oppositions, and generally reduced electoral stakes. Common patterns are identified across all four cases, suggesting that the willingness of the people to refuse to turn out to vote appears largely independent of the level of democracy. We maintain that, across the region, citizens chose to spurn the ballot box because of reduced electoral competition.

## Keywords

Caucasus, Central Asia, comparative method, electoral authoritarianism, political competition, voter turnout

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## Introduction

On December 4, 2005, Kazakhstan went to the polls to vote in Presidential elections. The following day it was announced that *Nursultan Nazarbayev* had won a third consecutive term with 91% of preferences. Some opposition politicians had been co-opted or assassinated before the election, while others struggled to campaign and faced political oblivion. The state of the country's economy was good and future prospects looked even brighter. That day only 76.8% of the registered electoral population showed up at the polls, as two million Kazakhs stayed home, twice as many as in the 1999 election. In Almaty, the country's largest city, voter turnout fell as low as 51%, a participation level as low as we usually see under democratic regimes. How was this possible? If Kazakhstan is an authoritarian state, where presidential power is unchallenged and consensus bought through patronage, why did a fluctuation of turnout take place? Specifically why did the regime not enforce 100% turnout, like during Soviet rule? Why was the electorate unfaithful to its president?

Were this phenomenon limited to a single Kazakh election, one could consider the 2005 case a glitch due to local factors, but it was not an isolated occurrence. In fact, a series of recent elections in Central Asia and the Caucasus saw a sudden drop in electoral turnout under relative political stability. Consequently, this article addresses the following question: why were there several large negative variations in voter turnout in Central Asia and the Caucasus?

This article's regional context allows for variations in the level of democracy, with both more traditionally authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes. Turnout is assumed to be

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negligible in authoritarian regimes because of coercion and manipulation, but such an assumption makes it hard to explain turnout variations over time. Our theory-building exercise adopts a classic comparative approach, drawing evidence from four recent dramatic cases of falling electoral participation. Specifically, we focus on the presidential elections in Kazakhstan (December 2005), Armenia (February 2013), Georgia (January 2008), and Kyrgyzstan (October 2011). Even at different levels of democracy, they are characterized by a similar geopolitical environment of patronal-style politics (Hale, 2015; Sharafutdinova, 2010), while the use of variations in participation allows us to keep any country-specific factors constant. A third unifying element lies in the explanation we propose, which always points to the crucial role of political competition.

Following Schedler (2013), we “take authoritarian elections seriously” to explain the largely understudied sources of large negative variations in participation. We restart from ground zero to reconstruct the chain of events behind these specific elections and trace the similarities and differences in the process leading to falling participation. This strategy was extremely successful for gathering evidence, and it allowed us to substantiate the claim of a common pattern to falls in voter turnout, under illiberal democracy and authoritarianism. We built upon this evidence to produce an original theory following three dimensions: a regime’s growing power, a weakening of the opposition, and the falling political stakes attached to the election. Perhaps most surprisingly, we find that these dimensions apply to elections at different levels of democratization, thus addressing the incomplete understanding of electoral dynamics under illiberal democracy. Sudden fall in turnout matter because they signal a shift not just in the incumbents’ power. Rather than seeing them as signs of weakness, these turnout drops result from regime strengthening. Second, we consider this sort of “*silent electoral revolutions*” as the polar opposite of large social movements or big outpourings of citizen participation. Their ambiguous, negative, withdrawing nature, must not allow one to lose sight of the dramatic change in people’s habits, and in patterns of elites’ domination underneath.

### Voting in authoritarian and hybrid regimes

Voter turnout results from the aggregation of individual voters’ participation in the political process, and extensive studies continue to explore its determinants, usually focusing on a cross section of districts in a specific election, or employing longitudinal data from different sources. The variables tested by these models include institutional configurations (e.g., presidentialism/parliamentarism, district size, compulsory voting), economic performance, and political competition (victory margins).<sup>1</sup> Still, we are still far from being able to apply these theories beyond established democracies, let alone to authoritarian regimes.

Indeed, regime type is largely overlooked when it comes to the institutional determinants of electoral participation.

Any analysis of authoritarian turnout depends on the assumption that authoritarian regimes use elections and democratic institutions strategically. Malesky and Schuler’s (2011) study of Vietnam, summarizes the main explanations of authoritarian elections. Authoritarian elections are a primary tool for collecting information, by assessing levels of regime support (Wintrobe, 1998/2000), including subordinates in local races (Boix & Svobik, 2013), but also by identifying possible opposition (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni, 2008). Others explain authoritarian elections as (i) a channel to signal regime strength and keep local elites in check while discouraging opposition (Magaloni, 2006), (ii) an occasion to distribute patronage (Lust-Okar, 2006) and control the territory through limited power-sharing (Magaloni, 2008), or (iii) an opportunity to increase the legitimacy of the regime, at home (Schedler, 2013) or internationally (Vanderhill, 2017). Following Tilly, Hale (2015) notes that creating a schedule for political contention, allowing for some competition and introducing an electoral calendar, shifts attention to the institutional avenues for the opposition, and diminishes the chances of a counter-insurgency.

Mistrust in illiberal electoral processes made authoritarian turnout a marginal topic, as it is generally conceptualized as artificially high (> 90%), and stable over time. Cold War communist regimes fit this image—but so do contemporary North Korea, Vietnam, or Turkmenistan. And while competition is scarce in many other illiberal regimes, turnout is often allowed to fluctuate between elections. The literature agrees that low turnout is a potential power challenge because it signals the existence of constituencies that could vote to overthrow them (Magaloni, 2006). Therefore, weak regimes keep turnout high to signal strength, while strong regimes might neglect turnout and use elections for information purposes. Authoritarian leaders also use competition as a source of legitimacy, so even hard regimes with compulsory voting like Vietnam attempt to create some degree of competitiveness (Malesky & Schuler, 2011). The incentives to manufacture turnout in illiberal regimes varies in accordance with regime strength and functional purpose of the elections. If the regime does not fabricate unnaturally high turnout, we can therefore surmise that perceived competition (regime-driven or otherwise) is likely to have a more direct influence on participation.

While the presence of elite incentives is evident, fewer studies have addressed this question from the “supply-side,” asking why people choose to vote in authoritarian regimes. In a survey-data analysis of post-Soviet states, Herron (2009) finds age, education, and economic performance evaluations all positively correlate with voting intentions. Similarly, Jamal et al.’s (2015) study of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) elections maintains that individuals vote in exchange for material benefits, and also respond collectively

Armenia			Azerbaijan			Georgia			Kazakhstan		
Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$		
1991	70	---	1993	97.6	---	1991	82.9	---	1991	88.2	---
1996	60.3	<b>-9.7</b>	1998	78.9	<b>-18.7</b>	1995	68.3	<b>-14.6</b>	1999	87	-1.2
1998	63.5	3.2	2003	62.8	<b>-16.1</b>	2000	75.9	7.6	2005	76.8	<b>-10.2</b>
2003	63.2	-0.3	2008	75.6	12.8	2004	82.8	6.9	2011	90	13.2
2008	72.1	8.9	2013	71.6	-4.0	2008	56.2	<b>-26.6</b>	2015	95.2	5.2
2013	60	<b>-12.1</b>	2018	74.2	2.6	2013	46.9	-9.3			

Kyrgyzstan			Tajikistan			Turkmenistan			Uzbekistan		
Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$			Year, turnout, $\Delta$		
1991	89	---	1991	84.6	---	1990	96.7	---	1991	94.2	---
1995	86.2	-2.8	1994	95	10.4	1992	99.8	3.1	2000	95.7	1.5
2000	78.4	-7.8	1999	98.9	3.9	2007	95	-4.8	2007	90.6	-5.1
2005	74.7	-3.7	2006	90.9	-8.0	2012	96.3	1.3	2015	91.1	0.5
2009	79.3	4.6	2013	86.6	-4.3	2017	97.3	1.0	2016	87.7	-3.4
2011	61.3	<b>-18.0</b>									
2017	56.3	-5.0									

AVERAGE TRENDS		
Year, turnout, $\Delta$		
1990-97	85.6	---
1998-2004	77.8	<b>-7.8</b>
2005-11	78.4	0.6
2012-18	78.5	0.1

Figure 1. Turnout trends over time in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

to the regime's economic achievements. Blaydes (2010) adds how in Egypt turnout is traditionally low, reliant on poor voters' participation through patronage, while more educated citizens signal protest and noncompliance through abstention. Alternatively, Pop-Eleches et al. (2009), apply the "exit-vs-voice" framework (Hirschman, 1970), finding that higher stakes, measured through institutional openings, EU access, and ethnic competition, all increase turnout. Ultimately, while these studies show that citizens have political and economic reasons to vote under authoritarianism, few of these explanations can account for the volatility of participation from one election to another, and especially on the scale witnessed in several elections in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the past two decades.

### Case selection and methods

The geopolitical regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus are usually considered infertile terrain for studying elections due to the historical burden of Soviet institutions. Initially, great hope was placed in the simultaneous transitions of the eight newly independent republics to democracy and market economy. The economic side was arguably more successful, while politically, hopes were thwarted by the continuity of authoritarianism. Even in the more democratic cases, the traditional elites' leading role and the merging of economic and political power have proven incredibly resilient. Incidentally, these countries' internal and external political dynamics have been explained through localisms and patronal politics, focusing upon

local elites' behavior, structured as large *clans* beyond family ties, and encompassing broad economic networks.

Importantly, Hale (2015) observes that, for the post-Soviet region, elections represent an important display of power for incumbent presidents, as they oblige them to flex their muscles and mobilize their patronal networks to secure victory when facing a however weak opposition. Here, the informal political dynamics of patronal (and sub-patronal) networks are partially replaced by the inescapable formality of countrywide elections for the highest offices. For this study, the role of clans could certainly explain regime resilience but is less useful for dealing with falling participation. This is because the political game which ultimately determines voter turnout bears some resemblance to democratic processes, with their dynamics of competition, and politicians' appeals to the public.

A quick picture of voter turnout in Central Asia and the Caucasus is offered by country-specific temporal trends. Figure 1 shows several turnout variations over the past 30 years, some quite dramatic, as average turnout declined sharply after independence, but settled after 2004. In the three Caucasian countries, participation invariably declined in the second election after independence, while afterward, declines in participation became less systematic. In Central Asia, the initial fall was less pronounced, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan show stability. Although electoral data for the region might not live up to the standards of transparency and accuracy that apply to democratic elections, the presence of manipulation is openly accounted for. Given the focus is on large variations, we acknowledge the

possibility of marginal inaccuracies in the data, but argue that they do not invalidate this study's findings.

Adopting the difference in turnout between the 1990–1997 and 1998–2004 periods (–7.8%) as a reasonable threshold for a dramatic fall of participation we see that 6 out of 24 post-2000 elections qualify as extreme cases. They took place in Tajikistan (2006), Azerbaijan (2003), Armenia (2013), Georgia (2008), Kazakhstan (2005), and Kyrgyzstan (2011). Among these elections, we chose the last four for performing theory building through comparative case analysis, and any data reliability concerns are tackled in the country-specific sections.

Many criteria have been proposed for small-N case selection in the social sciences. “Most similar” and “most different” systems designs (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012) reflect two possible applications of the comparative method: observing different outcomes given the same premises, or the same outcome, given different premises. Since our outcome of interest—falling voter turnout between two consecutive elections—is set, one must pick substantively different cases. Our four elections include two more authoritarian cases (Kazakhstan and Armenia), and two of recent, uncertain democratization (Georgia and Kyrgyzstan). Geographically, two cases belong to the Caucasian region and two to Central Asia. Finally, significant diversity in regime consolidation saw Kazakhstan had presidential continuity, Georgia and Armenia were in their second post-transition election, and in Kyrgyzstan the transition was incomplete.

After the choice is made, we argue against the well-known danger of selecting on the dependent variable: testing the hypothesis “all swans are white” through a however large sample of white swans, as a single black swan could disprove it. Popper famously used this phrasing for showing the importance of scientific falsifiability, and how finding a black swan could stimulate further research (Flyvbjerg, 2001). We firmly believe our study can still be scientific for the following reasons:

- Selection bias applies to theory testing, but not to theory building.
- Large negative turnout variations can be considered extreme cases, which offer fundamental evidence when little is known about a phenomenon.
- Our qualitative approach preempts the problems affecting similar quantitative studies, since turnout and electoral results are co-determined and one should not be used to estimate the other (Simonovits, 2012).
- Coherence of the evidence from the cases is not guaranteed *ex-ante*: a theory-building exercise can fail to produce a general theory.

Beyond case selection, our path to evidence follows the practice of document analysis (Bowen, 2009; O’Leary, 2017). Our analysis accounts for the original purpose of the document and subjectivity of the source (Bowen, 2009),

two common biases in qualitative methods (Bryman, 2006). Since news agencies for a national audience aim to generate trust in a country’s electoral process, our material comes exclusively from English-language outlets, less prone to incumbent biases. While they perhaps contain less detail, they are suited to the process of reconstructing patterns within electoral cycles. In addition, the information that we extract from these sources is largely factual and event-based, thus filtering out any potential framing bias, for example. We collected a total of 430 documents from the following sources:

- For Kazakhstan (1999–2005) we relied on the BBC selection of collected wire articles archive, which also some official press releases of the *Interfax-Kazakhstan* news agency;
- For Armenia (2009–2013) most of the material was drawn from the website archives of two national news agencies: *ArmenPress* and *Arka*.
- For Kyrgyzstan (2009–2011) material was primarily gathered from *RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)*. Supplementary Material was gathered from *Eurasianet* and the domestic agency *AKI Press*.
- For Georgia (2004–2008), *RFE/RL* was supplemented with material from *Civil Georgia*.<sup>2</sup>

## Comparative analysis

From the literature we extrapolated two broad, competing dynamics leading to falling turnout: regime strengthening, or regime weakening. Stronger regimes lead to lower turnout because manipulation becomes unnecessary, and incumbents can use elections to extract information. On the other side, weaker regimes can lead to lower turnout, because votes might be lost when patronal networks are weakened, or when the economic situation or political performance is poor. How do we observe regime strength? What are the most salient features of illiberal regimes? Without dwelling too long on the politics of authoritarianism, different strands of research have shown the tools utilized by dictators and nondemocratic leaders to stay in power. Notoriously Gerschewski (2013) labeled legitimation, co-optation, and repression the “three pillars of stability” that explain how these regimes are able to survive. Yet, when confronted with documentary evidence from the cases, this sort of simplification excludes many categories of events. What about opposition politics, institutional reforms, regime transitions, or regional dynamics? Since our study is not interested in explaining authoritarian longevity or resilience, but only changes in voters and elites’ behavior with regard to voting, only some dynamics will apply, out of a broad “menu of manipulation.”

Following the important advice to “take authoritarian elections seriously” (Schedler, 2013), we recorded the similarities and differences in the events observed during the four different electoral processes. Guided by the literature,

	Kazakhstan 2005	Armenia 2013	Kyrgyzstan 2011	Georgia 2008
<b>Incumbent</b>				
Pro-incumbent reforms	x	x		x
Opportunistic timing	x			x
Growing media domination	x		x	x
Growing resource imbalance		x	x	
<b>Opposition</b>				
More fragmented opposition		x	x	x
Shrinking candidate field	x	x	x	x
Co-optation	x	x	x	
Opposition disruption/coercion	x			x
<b>Stakes</b>				
Regional divides	x		x	
Voter apathy	x			
Prior watershed political event(s)			x	x
Cleaner election	x	x	x	x

Figure 2. Event comparison between cases along explanatory dimensions.

we focused on the changes in those elements of the political and institutional environment that influence the competition and the stakes of the election. Importantly, our work relies on the notion of equifinality (George & Bennett, 2005): the idea that multiple patterns can lead to the same outcome. In each case, the competition was tempered systematically by those in power, to the extent that substantial decreases in turnout were unproblematic for the electoral chances of the front-runners, and foreign observers generally recorded some progress in the conduct of the election. Figure 2 portrays a summary of national pre-election events, and the rest of this section will be devoted to illuminate the main similarities across the four cases. Three thematic branches soon became evident, relating to: incumbency advantage, weakened oppositions, and reduced stakes.

One notable observation from these elections is the growing weight of incumbency advantage. Only in the Kyrgyzstani 2011 contest the winner was not already president, as *Atambayev* was then Prime Minister. Each incumbent administration could approach the election from a dominant position, and build upon disproportionately higher resources to control the pre-electoral periods. This is acutely demonstrated during the campaigns, as, for example, state-controlled media outlets in Georgia and Kazakhstan, produced a near-monopoly of electoral coverage for the incumbent. Likewise, in Kyrgyzstan a predominantly Russian-language media provided a far greater level of exposure to *Atambayev*, vis-à-vis any of the opposition candidates. This pattern ranged from accusations of unbalanced time allocations in candidate debates (e.g., Kazakhstan), to overt electoral law violations (e.g., Armenia).

In two cases, incumbents introduced institutional reforms that increased their electoral chances and distorted competition. In the Armenian 2013 contest, the creation of a new electoral authority to foster greater transparency and

fairness was contradicted by the government's decision to stack the new body with loyalists. The experience in Kazakhstan was less discreet, as a series of reforms approved in 2004 made it possible to disqualify candidates who offended another candidate's honor, thus limiting criticism and freedom of speech.

The events around the Georgian election of 2008 showed perhaps the most ruthless use of incumbency advantage. In a move that surprised many observers given the pro-reformist tendencies of the *Saakashvili* government, the government decided to forcibly crack down on a series of opposition protests in Tbilisi in November 2007, subsequently declaring a state of emergency and scheduling a snap election for just two months later.

The other prominent aspect across cases is the shrinking of the opposition field, albeit this came to be in different ways. Importantly, none of these cases saw a large-scale boycott of the election from the opposition side, although they had priorly taken place in the region (e.g., in the Azeri election of 1998).<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 shows the two primary channels which successfully lead to shrinking of the opposition: the active restriction (or coercion) of opposition movements and the co-optation of opponents to pledge allegiance or pull out of the race entirely. The cases illustrate that these approaches can be used either in a complementary, or a substitute, manner, always intending to reduce electoral competition. The timing of the election call in Georgia, for instance, caught the opposition off-guard, and the state of emergency obstructed its mobilization through a police raid and temporary shutdown of the main opposition media outlet. *Nazarbayev* adopted a similar tactic in the 2005 Kazakh election when he opportunistically anticipated the election by 1 year. That being said, the ineffectiveness of the opposition can also be partly due to a lack of cohesion and credibility of its parties, as evidenced in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and

Georgia. In these cases, the incumbent capitalized on the disorganized and divided state of the opposition to maintain a disproportionate advantage heading into the election.

The growing division and disorganization of the opposition field made strategic timing not always necessary. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, an opposition which followed north-south alignments, with a divided, conflict-emergent south, enabled *Atambayev* to capitalize. In the Armenian case, three of the four major opposition parties decided not to field a presidential candidate and other candidates abstained from campaigning against *Sarkysyan*, hoping to receive positions in the new administration. A similar tactic was employed in Kyrgyzstan as a large opposition party leader *Babanov* vowed to back *Atambayev* rather than run, later being rewarded with the position of Prime Minister.

In contrast, more disruptive actions toward the opposition were employed in Georgia and Kazakhstan. In the former, the declaration of a state of emergency enabled the government to crack down on major opposition movements, even forcing opposition “godfather” *Patarkatsishvili* to campaign from abroad over fears of arrest. In Kazakhstan, the process began much earlier, with the arrest of several opposition leaders in 2002, and the dissolution of the main opposition party *DCK* less than twelve months before the 2005 election. In sum, while greater emphasis can fall on coercive or co-optive strategies, we noted their joint presence in some form across these elections.

The electoral stakes were also demonstrably reduced in each case. This was partly due to contextual elements: a reduction in the power of the presidential office in Kyrgyzstan, previous democratization efforts in Georgia, and voter apathy in the Kazakh former capital of Almaty. Major variations can also be identified in Kyrgyzstan, where the revolution lowered stakes for rural districts. Similarly, in both Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, the 2010 referendum and the 2004 election represented watershed political events which captured the attention of the voting population. Therefore, the following elections (2011 and 2008, respectively) took place in conditions of lowered salience. *Nazarbayev* also decided to move the Presidential election a year closer, to capitalize on the 2004 Parliamentary elections where he had humiliated the opposition.

The widespread use of incumbent advantage, disruptive strategies toward the opposition, and reduction of the electoral stakes, each played their part in the drastic decrease in electoral turnout.<sup>4</sup> While this analysis does not allow us to pinpoint one single factor responsible for falling participation, our strategy of analysis of common occurrences and strategies employed by disproportionately powerful incumbents was successful. Not only do these three dimensions seem relevant across the cases, but we did not find strong contradictory evidence, substantiating the claim that these elections seem to bear more than a cursory resemblance to each other. This analysis, therefore, supports the view that reductions in turnout follow regime strengthening. Indeed,

this appears to be so in each case, indicating that the level of democracy is not the driving force. Importantly, however, this analysis has demonstrated that the relationship between any of the three primary contributory factors and reduced participation need not be direct, and it is rather the citizen who decides to spurn the ballot box in the face of reduced competitiveness.

## The four cases

The examination of recurring events across these four elections contributes only to one side of the analysis. Elections are the result of temporal processes that happen within their own eventual contingency, with each belonging to a specific frame of reference, within a certain political system and historical context. Here, these processes constitute different paths to a similar outcome—a drastic reduction in electoral participation.

### *The Kazakh presidential election of December 4, 2005*

The Kazakh 2005 election showed a fall of voter turnout to 77% and 6.7 million voters, from 86% and 7.3 million voters in 1999. While it remains to this day the lowest turnout in the country’s history, variations among districts were significant, with a mere 51% turnout in the former capital Almaty (Kennedy, 2006). The president’s performance, at 91% of the polls, was even stronger than his 81% tally in 1999.

Between 1999 and 2005, Kazakhstan saw a series of events that damaged the opposition’s strength and cohesion. In response to the 2001 anti-regime rallies, *Nazarbayev* had gutted the main rival party, *DCK* (*Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan*), by jailing its main leaders in 2002. Internal fractions and inexperience then did the rest (Ostrowski, 2009). In 2002 the *Majlis* passed a set of reforms banning ethnic, religious, and gender-based parties and introducing membership requirements (Ó Beacháin, 2005) which neutralized the main social cleavages (Russian/Kazakh and Islamic/secular). In February of 2005, a series of sensationalized reports came out to publicize the seizure of propaganda material<sup>5</sup> of an underground Islamic party, and the detention of its alleged members.<sup>6</sup>

In the 2004 *Majlis* election, a relatively strong showing of the opposition parties *Ak Zhol* (12%, former-*DCK* moderates), and *Asar* (11.4%), led by *Dariga Nazarbayeva* yielded a mere five seats. *DCK* was finally abolished in January 2005 after having been deemed illegal by the inter-district economic court.<sup>7</sup> An appeal to the same court by party members was rejected,<sup>8</sup> and a 1,000 people-strong protest rally ended in eight jail sentences.<sup>9</sup> As for *Ak Zhol*, it split in March after a particularly contentious national convention.<sup>10</sup> The rest rallied around the candidature of *Zharmakhan Tuyakbay*, ex-mayor of Almaty and former collaborator of *Nazarbayev*.

Meanwhile, the power of the President was consolidated. Presidential speeches dominated televisions and banners, and the opposition only had space in the three independent newspapers. In 2004 the electoral law had been amended to disqualify any candidate who “offended another candidate’s honor,” thus arbitrarily limiting freedom of speech. A protest rally was held by the opposition on May 22,<sup>11</sup> which the President labeled childish and non-Kazakh.<sup>12</sup> In March 2005, a new ban on political rallies and protests targeting electoral results<sup>13</sup> had effectively stifled any possible animosity in the scarcely-covered campaign. A 5-year rise in oil revenues allowed *Nazarbayev* to promise higher public wages and more public housing (Ostrowski, 2009). His incumbent advantage approaching the election was remarkable, with approval ratings measured at 70% in September of 2005.<sup>14</sup> The new election was initially scheduled for December of 2006, at the conclusion of a 7-year term, but in September 2005 a *Majlis* vote anticipated it a year.<sup>15</sup>

Afterward, a series of events further restricted the opposition’s chances. The electoral tribunal allowed only 5 of the 15 candidates who attempted to register in September.<sup>16</sup> The *Agrarian* and *Civic* parties, which had jointly gathered 7% of votes in 2004, did not field candidates but supported *Nazarbayev*. In September it was rumored that they might enter a new majority coalition.<sup>17</sup> Other presidential candidates dropped out without an apparent reason,<sup>18</sup> and the only television debate was considered unsatisfactory, due to a limited amount of time. Three weeks before the election, former Almaty mayor *Zamanbek Nurkadilov* committed suicide. As a prominent opposition figure outside of the electoral race, his death—for which political motivations were alleged<sup>19</sup>—negatively affected a campaign already lacking a credible opposition. *Nazarbayev* explicitly exhorted the oppositions to leave to Kyrgyzstan, since they only complained and accused him of corruption.

The results confirmed *Nazarbayev* as President with 91.1% of valid votes. *Zharmakhan Tuyakbay* gathered only 6.6% at the polls, around half of what *Serikbolsyn Abdildin* had obtained in 1999. International observers still lamented irregularities such as the presence of strongmen around polling stations, harassment of students, and occasional ballot box stuffing. Clearly those tactics were not employed in Almaty, where turnout was 50% in the wake of the former mayor’s demise. The 2005 election was relatively fair, since the opposition was taken out early, and everything ran smoothly for the incumbent. In the two following Presidential elections (2011, 2015), recorded turnout soared over 90% and opposition candidates stayed under *Tuyakbay*’s 6%.

### *The Armenian presidential election of 18 February 2013*<sup>20</sup>

The fall of voter turnout in the 2013 presidential election in Armenia was dramatic, sending it from 72.1% and 1.67 million voters to 60.2% and 1.52 million. The incumbent

*Serzh Sarkysyan* won a second term with 58.64% of votes, *Raffi Hovannisyan* followed with 36.75%, while all other candidates gathered 2% or less. For comparison, in 2008 *Sarkysyan* had received 52.82% of total votes, while *Levon Ter-Petrosyan* had arrived second with 21.5%, and *Artur Baghdasaryan* third with 17.7%.

The playing field of the 2013 election was influenced by the interventions of the *Sarkysyan* administration after the 2008 election had been vehemently denounced by international observers as manipulated. In 2011, a major electoral code reform moved toward good international practice, but without enhancing the credibility of a process which still advantaged incumbents (Mauro et al., 2011). The reform hinged upon a neutral civil service and a party-state separation, neither of which applied to the *Sarkysyan* administration. It also included an update to the electoral registry, adding 216,000 more potential voters in 2013. Furthermore, high-ranking officials were exempted from a new provision that barred state servants from campaigning. Last, a *Central Electoral Committee* was instituted to foster transparency and fairness, but all of its seven members remained Presidential nominees. In sum, a reform meant to weaken the power of incumbents, produced the opposite outcome.

On the other side, the weakening of the opposition happened in the last year, after the May 2012 Parliamentary elections were won by the President’s *Republican Party of Armenia (RPA)* with 52% of votes. *Prosperous Armenia (PAP)* came in second with 28.2%, which reinforced its opposition role,<sup>21</sup> while no other party surpassed around 5% of the vote. The following period was marked by the shrinking and co-optation of the opposition, as talks of a possible coalition government between the two main parties were initially rejected in the spring,<sup>22</sup> but then again raised in November under the guise of a memorandum.<sup>23</sup> They contributed to create suspicions over the nature of the political game in the country and the existence of real competition.

Shockingly, three of the four main parties lacked a presidential candidate, prematurely admitting defeat. In particular, former President *Levon Ter-Petrosyan* withdrew in December 2012 telling the media that “Armenia is in the hands of a group of criminals” (Deloy, 2014). He was the leader of the *Armenian National Congress (ANC)*, which had received 5% in 2012. Businessman *Gagic Tsakuryan*, leader of the *Prosperous Armenia Party*, second-placed at the legislative elections, followed suit, further shrinking competition. The one important opposition candidate left, *Raffi Hovannisyan*, led the *Heritage* party that in 2012 had received 3.2% of votes, and 5 seats in Parliament. He claimed to be the real alternative to *Sarkysyan*,<sup>24</sup> invited him to an open debate,<sup>25</sup> and stated that in case of fraud he would call for street demonstrations.

Out of an initially large field of candidates, the ballot only included eight, with several notable self-exclusions.<sup>26</sup> Many opposition personalities did not campaign for *Hovannisyan* because they hoped to receive a job in exchange for their

loyalty to the regime. Notably, an important member of the *Heritage* party denounced a climate of fear and distrust.<sup>27</sup> The campaign was uneventful, save for a late assassination attempt on *Paruyr Hayrikian*, a marginal Presidential candidate. From the hospital, *Hayrikian* requested a delay, then proceeded to change his mind four times,<sup>28</sup> before allowing the election to be held.

The consolidation of the incumbent's strength was efficiently conducted in the months before the election. Administrative and financial resources were overwhelmingly used for the President's electoral bid, openly violating the electoral code. Nine of the ten governors took leave to support *Sarkysyan's* campaign (OSCE, 2013). President *Sarkysyan* even made public remarks about his margin of victory in the North, possibly signaling that he could control the outcome, while the pre-electoral polls gave him an early advantage.<sup>29</sup>

International observers witnessed some ballot box stuffing but reported overall improvement, with manipulation limited to high-turnout districts. Given an enormous competitive imbalance, the election could be transparent in Yerevan and Gyumri where international observers were present,<sup>30</sup> and manipulated in the peripheral regions. Without manipulation turnout would have probably fallen further. *Hovannisyan's* victory claims were an attempt to create momentum around a candidature undermined by co-optation, and was not matched by his 36% performance. In sum, with opposition candidates withdrawing and the government limiting electoral fraud to the countryside, voter turnout naturally declined in Armenia.

### *The Georgian presidential election of 5 January 2008*

The third case regards the remarkable 31.8% turnout decrease between the 2004 and 2008 Georgian presidential elections, from 82.8% to 56.2%. The 2004 election had been a political watershed for the small Caucasian republic, as it had moved the country away from the Soviet-trained elite that had guided it through its double transition. Since international observers considered the Georgian election of 2004 partially free—coming in the aftermath of the so-called *Rose Revolution* that ousted president *Eduard Shevardnadze*—the precision of aggregate values must be taken with caution. Still, it is uncontroversial that participation in 2008 was much lower than in 2004, even despite *Mikheil Saakashvili's* claims of a relative turnout success.<sup>31</sup>

The administration updated and expanded the voter registry by more than a million voters between 2004 and 2008, in an attempt to gain more popular support. Yet, many names on the old lists could not be traced and remained on the new lists, thus amplifying the fall in voter turnout (National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2008). The Election Code of Georgia was amended in late 2007, to regulate polling

stations and nominations, and allowed voters to register at the polls, which negatively affected the transparency of the process. The threshold to enter parliament was also lowered from 7% to 5%, which the opposition considered insignificant. These reforms also had a minor effect since they were proclaimed very close to the election (OSCE, 2008) and their impact on the public was limited.

In this case, the weakening of the opposition in the lead-up to the election was the outcome of a more abrupt process. In response to a series of protests in Tbilisi accusing him of anti-democratic actions and abuse of state power,<sup>32</sup> *Saakashvili* called for a snap presidential election in November 2007. Rather uncharacteristically of the administration's reformist rhetoric, the government responded with a ruthless crackdown to disperse the protesters, subsequently declaring a state of emergency.<sup>33,34</sup> The headquarters of influential opposition media company *Imedi* were also subject to a police raid that led to the temporary closure of the station at a point when a fragmented opposition had little time to mobilize for the imminent electoral campaign.<sup>35,36</sup>

The strongest contender of a fragmented opposition was *Levan Gachechiladze*, Long-term politician and *Saakashvili's* former campaign manager. He was backed by a nine-party coalition,<sup>37</sup> and was also favored by the *Putin* administration. Despite having campaigned on a platform of constitutional reform to transform the country into a parliamentary republic, he only managed to gather 26% of the vote. A second contender was “opposition godfather” *Badri Patarkatsishvili*: a tycoon and former CEO of the main opposition media outlet *Imedi*.<sup>38</sup> *Patarkatsishvili* had conducted a long-distance election campaign from London, where he resided over fears of arrest for his alleged involvement in the November 2007 anti-government protests. After finally affirming his place on the ballot two days before the election, he received just 7.3% of the vote.

Already in the months following the 2004 election, Fairbanks (2004) referred to *Saakashvili's* regime as a *hyperpresidency*, as he concentrated powers around his figure, and marginalized his two closest collaborators during the Rose Revolution. Despite some level of opposition, the president had the full support of the military and the state apparatus (Hale, 2015). The amount of resources for the different candidates was considerably unbalanced, and *Saakashvili* had a considerable advantage vis-à-vis his opponents. In addition to greater financial resources, he was the only candidate to independently spend on TV advertising, while his rivals appeared almost exclusively in the space legally allotted to them. Whereas opposition candidates were restricted by *Imedi's* temporary shutdown, the President could rely on state-controlled media to ensure his exposure and coverage was far greater than that of other candidates. This disproportion in the media and resources had a strong impact in giving the perception of a low-competition election with a sure winner.

*Mikheil Saakashvili* secured the presidency in the first round, by receiving 54.7% of the vote, as opposed to January 2004, when 96% of voters had elected him. The large fall of voter turnout might be surprising in the light of this apparently increased competition, but the bulk of the Georgian population never believed that *Saakashvili* could lose. Many viewed the election as a second referendum on the Rose Revolution of 2003, and specifically on the President. In sum, in the 2008 Presidential race *Saakashvili* conserved a 29-point margin, and a large part of the newly registered population abstained. On the other side, the electoral stakes were much lower, since democratization had taken place without producing the radical changes hoped for by the electorate. An unprepared and fragmented opposition meant that this election bears similarity to many others in the region in the mid-1,990s, following the waning of initial democratic enthusiasm.

### *The Kyrgyz presidential election of 30 October 2011*

Following the ouster of the then President *Kurmanbek Bakiyev* in a revolution and subsequent popular referendum on the state's constitution, Kyrgyzstan transitioned to a semi-presidential republic in 2010. Alongside a reduction in the extent of executive power possessed by the president, the reforms also introduced a one-term limit to the now 6-year office. The first presidential election under this new system took place on 30 October 2011, where the incumbent interim president *Roza Otunbaeva* opted not to stand and gave way to *Almazbek Atambayev*.<sup>39</sup> The election saw a significant drop in turnout relative to the presidential election of 2009, moving from 79% and 2.3 million voters to 61% and 1.8 million voters, the lowest figures in the country's short independent history.

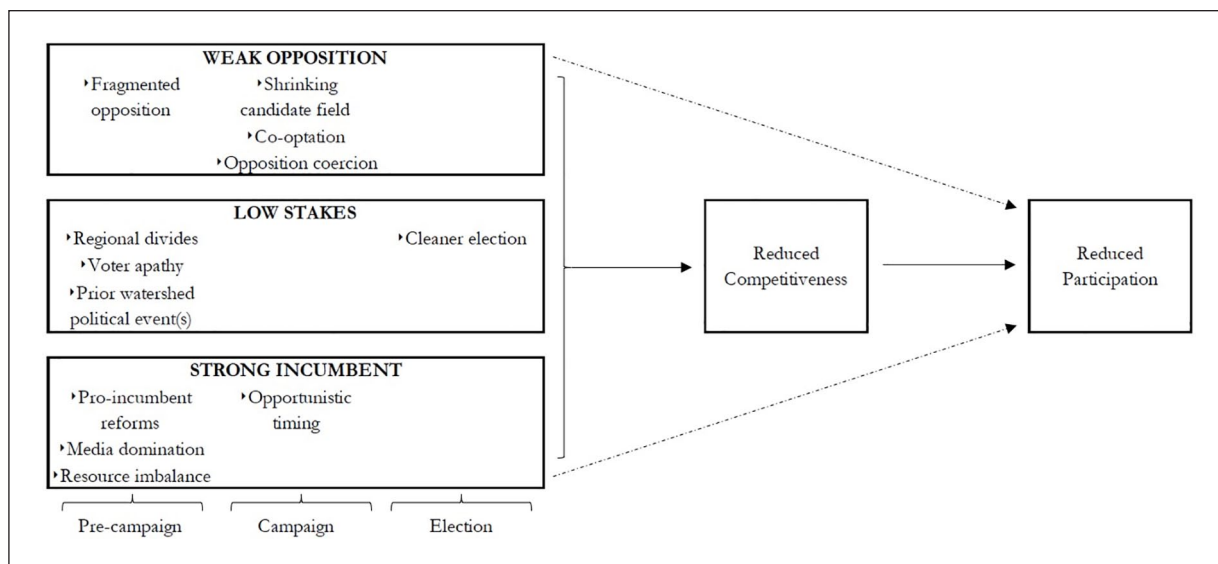
The current interim Prime Minister, *Atambayev*, decided to run for President, as he approached the campaign from a position of advantage and strengthened his position in the year preceding the election.<sup>40</sup> He could count on strong support in the capital Bishkek and the north in addition to Russian approval.<sup>41</sup> Within the interim government, *Atambayev* made use of the resources controlled through his position as Prime Minister. A coalition of small political parties from the northern districts dominated the parliament with only *Ata-Zhurt* as a credible southern opposition, and the acting Prime Minister had even replaced some of the provincial administrative leaders to ensure lack of electoral fraud in favor of the other candidates. The coverage of Russian-language media, which is widespread throughout the country, was also overwhelmingly dedicated to *Atambayev*,<sup>42</sup> who regularly warned against the threat of *Bakiyev* supporters returning to the political scene.<sup>43</sup>

In this case the opposition was weakened before the election partly due to its own faults. The southern part of the country — once the stronghold of the previous president

*Bakiyev* — was recovering from violent ethnic clashes. The main southern party, *Ata-Zhurt*, ran on a Kyrgyz ethno-nationalist platform which had given it the largest share of votes at the 2010 parliamentary elections with 14.6%, and was part of the interim coalition government (Hale, 2015). The south also produced the two main opposition candidates, *Kamchybek Tashiev*, who ran for the nationalist *Ata-Zhurt* party and represented the old *Bakiyev* clique, and *Adahan Madumarov*. The fact that *Omurbek Babanov*, the leader of *Respublika*—one of the main parliamentary parties—decided not to run, rather opting to endorse *Atambayev*, significantly curbed electoral competition. *Babanov* would soon become *Atambayev*'s Prime Minister, indicating that a co-optive pact was already underway during the campaign (Fumagalli, 2012).

As the deadline for presidential candidates registration passed, a total of 83 declared their intent to run.<sup>44</sup> Prior to the electoral campaign, some opposition figures had also cozied up to the then Prime Minister in an attempt to join the ruling coalition.<sup>45</sup> Over time, however, the field shrank drastically to 16, as candidates pulled out of the race and/or failed to reach the eligibility criteria of the electoral commission.<sup>46</sup> Generally, the state had little control over the more remote areas of the country (especially the semi-autonomous south), given that the territory is relatively large for a population of 5 million. The southern population could therefore afford to consider the Presidential contest a low-stakes election, and feel sufficiently represented by its local leaders (Hill & Huskey, 2015).

This decline in voter turnout was concomitant to a 22% divide in the values for the northern and southern parts of the country. *Atambayev* won the election with 62.5% of preferences, but with a much stronger performance in the north, in particular in the capital Bishkek, where he gathered 79.6% at the polls. His main opponents—*Madumarov* and *Kamchybek Tashiev*—got, respectively, 14.3% and 14.7% nationally, canceling out their possible joint impact. The north-south split in many ways structured the patterns of electoral competition, as there is significant evidence to suggest the stakes of the election differed along this dimension (Hill & Huskey, 2015). *Atambayev* came out on top in most southern cities because of the split in the nationalist vote. That being said, turnout also declined in the north and was measured at 73%, significantly lower than the 79% country-wise observed in 2009. Therefore, even if amplified by the incredible drop in the south (51%), this was a national change, and even if southern voters could palate the idea of a northern President, the opposite was a more troublesome thought in the north. In addition, a political watershed in the country had already taken place with the 2010 referendum, which exhibited a larger turnout (72%). By 2011, therefore, the ethnic conflict in the south had been sedated, the grip on power of the new elite was more consolidated, and the outcome of the presidential election had already been decided.



**Figure 3.** Theoretical model demonstrating the expected impact of election dynamics on participation.

### Building a theory of dramatic falls in voter turnout

To organize the evidence gathered through our comparative process-based examinations, it is necessary to group mechanisms into broad categories that are applicable to all elections. Regardless of regime type, electoral participation is a function of elite behavior and citizen choice. And while it is easier to track the actions taken by political elites than the thought processes of citizens, we argue that political competition and electoral stakes apply to both. Generally, incumbent elites' primary goal is keeping power, which incentivizes them to pre-emptively reduce competition because inflating turnout through ballot-box stuffing to win the election is costly. By reducing competition early on, autocrats might run "free" elections at lower turnout levels and show international observers that the country is democratizing, which brings prestige, foreign aid, and FDIs (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Simultaneously, the literature on democratic elections indicates that the expected margin of victory drives voter turnout. If competition between candidates collapses before an election, people have little to gain from casting ballots, because their vote will have no influence.

Summarizing, one should observe large falls of voter turnout in non-democratic regimes when political competition is stymied. Drawing from our own observations, we construct electoral competition as generated through a process with two primary dimensions: the extent of incumbency advantage and the strength of the opposition. The political stakes<sup>47</sup> of the election complete the story by incorporating the idea of salience, usually overlooked under authoritarianism. Generally, stakes can be considered lower when there is less to be gained or lost, such as elections for an office with diminished executive power, or following events of much greater political consequence. For

incumbents, lower-stakes elections make a small loss of control over election day irrelevant, so turnout manipulation can be neglected. For voters, lower stakes mean lower interest, and generally result in apathy and abstention, as is observed, for example, after a watershed election,<sup>48</sup> or in second-order contests like European Parliament elections. We subsequently outline three hypotheses based on this theoretical model.

Aspects of these three dimensions can appear throughout the electoral cycle: in the pre-campaign, campaign, and election phases. Figure 3 illustrates the expected impact of these dimensions on participation via, and independent of, electoral competitiveness, while also representing their temporal nature. It is important to note that the model illustrated below is non-essentialist, as one could feasibly argue that some mechanisms listed within each dimension could occur in different (or multiple) phases of the electoral cycle. In the graph, they give a general indication based on the cases' evidence.

That said, reduced competitiveness can be considered a symptom of the dynamics between the relative strength of the incumbent and opposition (by design), as well as the political stakes (incidental and/or by design), all of which contribute in reducing electoral participation.<sup>49</sup> This theorization is the outcome of our inductive process, generated through the observation of the electoral processes in four specific cases. Three separate hypotheses summarize our assumptions about the processes leading to turnout drops.

First, electoral competitiveness depends on the opposition's chances of victory. In our analysis, we described how the opposition can be considerably weakened—by way of obstructive acts on the part of the incumbent, and/or by internally failing to form a cohesive and effective opposition movement—and the competitiveness of the election restricted. In particular, competitors can be stifled by co-optation, corruption scandals, internal disputes,

fragmentation, intimidation, exile, or violent means. A general statement of this hypothesis is as follows:

H1: A weakening or shrinking of the opposition in comparison to the situation of the previous election should lead to a sudden drop in voter turnout.

The second dimension that reduces electoral competitiveness is the current regime's strengthening. While this may partly overlap with the opposition dimension (incumbents can directly disrupt opposition organizations), its impact is distinct. Conceptually, some events could benefit the incumbent without having an equal, reversed effect on the opposition. In particular, incumbents may introduce institutional reforms, increase their media presence, use opportunistic timing, and exploit a growing resource imbalance, to significantly enhance their own capacity and chances of electoral success. Formally,

H2: A strengthening of the incumbent's political position in comparison to the situation of the previous election should lead to a sudden drop in voter turnout.

Last, we assume that a significant drop in voter turnout is more likely in the aftermath of a watershed event, especially one that changed the rules in favor of the incumbent, made the new election meaningless, or created false hope in democracy. This is similar to what we observe in Europe for European Parliament elections, and in the United States for midterm elections, which are run at lower levels of turnout, except that here we hypothesize that in less institutionalized contexts electoral salience can vary between elections to the same office. Formally,

H3: A reduction in the political stakes in comparison to the situation of the previous election should lead to a sudden drop in voter turnout.

## Conclusion

By studying the dynamics of four electoral cycles in Central Asia and the Caucasus, this article is able to offer a theoretical model of drastic reductions in voter participation. We find this to be the product of three complementary themes, which disincentivize the electorate to turnout due to vast reductions in electoral competition. Importantly, we point out that a growing incumbent advantage, weakened oppositions, and reduced electoral stakes reduce competition to the extent that ballot box stuffing is superfluous, as vast swathes of the electorate willingly decide to abstain from the process. In addition, perhaps the most surprising part of our work is the applicability of its findings across a range of levels of democratic consolidation. In particular, the oppositions seem to matter even in more authoritarian instances, which suggests the need to study electoral outcomes more carefully in hybrid regimes. We argue that this capacious theoretical framework can be

successfully applied in the future to a broader sample of elections, and its validity tested beyond falling electoral turnout.

Our work, therefore, offers a significant theoretical contribution to the field by relying upon established methodological praxis. As a qualitative, comparative article, this work traces a series of empirical processes to reconstruct the similarities between four Central Asian and Caucasian elections marked by falling participation. As a theory-building exercise, this study successfully isolates a series of concrete factors and events that are fundamental to the process behind voter participation. In comparison to single-case electoral studies, our approach is broader, focusing on four elections as instances of a wider phenomenon. In contrast with large-N analyses, it retains a focus on details and escapes the impossibility to measure some of the factors of interest. A quick summary of the four cases easily captures these dynamics.

The Kazakh election of 2005 showed a full range of events linked to shrinking competition and stakes: coercion and co-optation of the opposition, pro-incumbent reforms, growing media domination, and opportunistic timing. Under these conditions *Nazarbayev* could run a semi-clean election, which international observers took more seriously, while participation fell. The 2013 Armenian election was surprisingly similar. *Sarkisyan* increased his power through his disproportionate access to media and resources, and then scared the opposition into fielding a lonely candidate, as everybody else hoped for a position in his new administration. Armenians were unsatisfied and deserted the polling stations, especially in the major cities. In Georgia, 2008 should have marked its first fully democratic and competitive election, but instead it was basically a repeat of the 2004 plebiscite for Saakashvili. The president spoiled his own democratic credentials by repressing the opposition, tightening his control over media outlets, and unfairly calling for a snap election, all of which limited participation. Finally, Kyrgyzstan in 2011 had its first election after a political transition, but the new Northern elites already had a strong grip over power. Here too, the opposition was shrinking and fragmenting, and the resource imbalance and media control all favored the incumbent Prime Minister, who comfortably won the election while turnout fell countrywide.

In our analysis, we identified patterns in the use of manipulative and opportunistic incumbent strategies that derail electoral competition throughout the electoral cycle. Even considering the variation in democracy levels across cases, we pointed to more general, overarching trends, despite variation in incumbents' explicit or implicit attempts to undermine competition. Moving forward, we believe that this framework can be refined by applying it to more cases of falling electoral participation. Not only this will allow researchers to establish a firmer ground for these categories, which came from the analysis of elections under authoritarian and hybrid regimes, but also to extend their validity within, and beyond, the regional focus of this article.

Inductive social scientific methods can only be fully generalizable when applied to a sufficient number of cases,

while we also believe it important to maintain a focus on the historical specificities that contextualized each case. Moreover, the direct comparison of this type of election—these *silent electoral revolutions*—with cases of stable participation under authoritarian and hybrid regimes will be crucial in establishing once and for all the difference between one and the other. Within the limits of the article format we chose to focus upon cases of extreme variation, but looking at the cases of stability can also provide some kind of explanatory leverage, be it in terms of process, or in terms of causal relationships. For example, for pairs of elections in Armenia (1998–2003) and Uzbekistan (2007–2015) one could also use media sources to look for traces of stable electoral competition and stakes, parallels with the previous election, or contradictory signals leaving their average levels unaltered.

Moving forward, the theoretical model presented here could be tested in various ways. One route could be to further explore the temporal nature of mechanisms related to incumbency advantage, opposition weakness, and decreased stakes. As referred to during our theorization, elements of these mechanisms could occur at various stages in the electoral cycle. It would, therefore, be beneficial to discover how and in what ways event timing can impact electoral competitiveness, and thereby participation. Another potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be to explore whether these theoretical mechanisms play an equal or unequal role in reducing electoral competitiveness. In our model, there is no assumption made with regard to the weight assigned to the relationship between competitiveness and opposition co-optation as opposed to an incumbent-dominated media, for example. A way to dig deeper into the forces underpinning this theory would, therefore, be to investigate similar cases that differ in only the occurrence of one particular manipulative mechanism.

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### Notes

1. For a summary, see the meta-analyses by Blais (2006) and Geys (2006).
2. The full citations for the news stories used in the analysis are available in the Additional Bibliography. Below they are referred to as for example, KAZ#1 (Kazakhstan story 1).
3. Indeed, Beaulieu (2006) demonstrates that boycotts are more likely when the opposition is stronger. For an exhaustive review of the literature on election boycotts, see Beaulieu and Hyde (2009).
4. That being said, it is pertinent to bear in mind that these factors may affect electoral competition besides decreasing competitiveness. For example, if we consider that each election was generally deemed cleaner than previous iterations, it would be plausible to suggest that at least part of the downturn in participation depended upon the *lack* of tangible manipulative efforts (e.g., ballot box stuffing).
5. (KAZ#1)
6. (KAZ#2)
7. (KAZ#3)
8. (KAZ#4)
9. (KAZ#5)
10. (KAZ#6)
11. (KAZ#7)
12. (KAZ#8)
13. (KAZ#9)
14. (KAZ#10)
15. (KAZ#11)
16. (KAZ#12)
17. (KAZ#13)
18. (KAZ#14)
19. (KAZ#15)
20. The 2013 Armenian election is severely understudied: no academic article tackles it solely.
21. (ARM#1)
22. (ARM#2)
23. (ARM #3)
24. (ARM#4)
25. (ARM#5)
26. (ARM#6)
27. (ARM#7)
28. (ARM #8)
29. (ARM#9)
30. A Foreign Policy Center report by Zaven Kalayjian and Sassoon Kosian strongly supports this hypothesis.
31. (GEO#1)
32. (GEO#2)
33. (GEO#3)
34. (GEO#4)
35. (GEO#5)
36. (GEO#6)
37. (GEO#7)
38. (GEO#8)
39. (KGZ#1)
40. (KGZ#2)
41. (KGZ#3)
42. (KGZ#4)
43. (KGZ#5)
44. (KGZ#6)
45. (KGZ#7)
46. (KGZ#8)
47. We are certainly not the first to refer to the importance of political stakes for elections, which is stated as early as Downs (1957) and Tullock (1967).
48. A “watershed election” (Safire, 2008) is defined as a campaign that decides the course of politics for decades; one that is especially memorable, or that proves to be a dividing line between historical periods. [. . .] The political meaning comes from both the nourishing meaning [. . .] and the epochal meaning [. . .].

49. This relationship may not be exclusively indirect, as represented by the dashed lines in Figure 3. These factors are expected to have a direct effect on turnout when they lead to cosmetically purer, non-directly-manipulated elections.

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