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978-1-107-03054-1 - Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections:
Theory, Practice, and Implications

Alberto Simpser

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Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections

Theory, Practice, and Implications

Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections advances a general theory about the motives that drive electoral manipulation and tests some of the theory's main observable implications using a variety of empirical sources. Alberto Simpser argues that there is often substantially more at stake in manipulating elections than simply winning. The central idea is that electoral manipulation can convey information of relevance to the choices and behavior of bureaucrats, politicians, unions, businesspeople, citizens, and other political and social actors. By utilizing electoral manipulation to appear strong, therefore, a party can align actors' incentives with its own, increasing, for example, its bargaining power, reducing demands from out-of-power groups, and mitigating future political challenges. This perspective is able to account for the otherwise puzzling fact that electoral manipulation is frequently utilized excessively and perpetrated blatantly, even when manipulating in this manner cannot contribute to winning. In addition to its theoretical contributions, the book provides an empirical snapshot of the patterns and correlates of electoral manipulation around the world in recent decades.

Alberto Simpser is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He has been Research Fellow at the Center for Globalization and Governance at Princeton University and National Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Professor Simpser received his B.Sc. from Harvard College and his Ph.D. in Political Science and M.A. in Economics from Stanford University.

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A mis padres y abuelos, y a mi bisabuela

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Preface

More than Winning

The initial spark for this study was the observation that there is a mismatch between actual patterns of electoral manipulation and the idea that parties manipulate with the goal of winning: quite frequently, parties assured of victory nevertheless manipulate heavily, and they do so blatantly. The residual, the part that is not accounted for by the idea of manipulating for winning, constitutes the “dark matter” of electoral manipulation: its excessive and blatant use.

Motivated by that mismatch, this book develops a theory of electoral manipulation. The key idea is that electoral manipulation is about more than meets the eye. Beyond its role in helping to accumulate more votes than the next contender, electoral manipulation can provide information to the public about the power of the manipulating party. Manipulating elections excessively and blatantly can make the manipulating party appear strong, while failing to manipulate in this manner can convey weakness. A party that is perceived to be powerful and resourceful will enjoy greater bargaining power, ampler scope for governing, a lesser need to share rents and to compromise in policy, and fewer challenges to its hold on office, than a party that is perceived to be weak and vulnerable. This set of ideas constitutes the gist of the *more than winning* theory of electoral manipulation.

Once the informational properties of electoral manipulation are recognized, the common practice of excessive and blatant electoral manipulation begins to make sense: cheaters do not stop at winning not because they err or miscalculate, but rather because their goal is something other than simply reaching the victory threshold. Under this view, we cease to expect that only unpopular leaders will cheat in elections. Instead, popular leaders with a strong record and a large reservoir of goodwill and legitimacy will often choose to manipulate elections substantially too. In addition, we cease to expect that electoral manipulation will be the discreet, hushed-up affair that it is supposed to be: showing that one can cheat with impunity can make one appear stronger in the

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public eye. Finally, the *more than winning* perspective implies that even when cheating big leads to a loss in popularity or legitimacy, this need not result in net harm for the manipulator: an unpopular ruling party may nevertheless command considerable deference if it is perceived to be strong.

Attempts at excessive and/or blatant electoral manipulation do not always succeed, but many do. Examples abound and include Mexico's PRI in its heyday, Putin's Russia, and Mugabe's Zimbabwe up until the late 1990s. This practice can form part of a self-sustaining dynamic in which a powerful ruling party further empowers itself via excessive and blatant manipulation, in turn expanding possibilities for subsequently manipulating excessively and blatantly. For this reason, the *more than winning* perspective implies that policies that render electoral manipulation more difficult, or more competitive, can have salutary effects even if they do not manage to fully prevent parties from manipulating or stealing elections. When excess and blatancy are curtailed, manipulation's informational role is undermined: a cheating party that wins with 55 percent of the vote will certainly appear weaker than one that obtains 75 percent, for example, with positive consequences for the vigor of political competition and for the relative balance of power between different social and political forces.

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