

Who Votes in Authoritarian Elections and Why? Determinants of Voter Turnout in Contemporary Egypt

Lisa Blaydes
Department of Political Science
University of California, Los Angeles
blaydes@ucla.edu

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Abstract

This paper examines voter behavior in Egypt, an electoral authoritarian country. While some voters cast their ballots on an ideological basis, many Egyptian voters expect to receive a direct material benefit for their vote. Although voter turnout is associated with higher levels of education in developed democracies, I find that in Egypt, illiterates are twice as likely to vote as those who can read. This is because the votes of illiterates tend to be cheaper to purchase by political entrepreneurs, and illiterates are also more vulnerable to intimidation by state authorities. These findings have implications for our understanding of clientelistic politics, electoral authoritarianism, and accountability in autocratic regimes.

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Why do citizens vote in elections that take place under authoritarian regimes? Authoritarian elections are as varied as the regimes that hold them. Within a single non-democratic country, elections can take place at various levels of competitiveness and mobilizing different constituencies. And although authoritarian elections rarely offer the opportunity to change the existing regime, these elections can have politically important results. Even acts of voter abstention can provide meaningful signals of discontent and voter preference. Studies of voting in the Soviet Union, for example, suggest that non-voting was seen as an act of protest in which relatively well-educated individuals consciously decided to ignore mandatory voting laws or spoil their ballots in a country where there was no real choice between candidates (Karklins 1986, Roeder 1989). In China, voters participating in local elections tend to be individuals with a desire to punish corrupt officials (Shi 1999). In Brazil under military rule, compulsory voting led to high turnout but blank and spoiled ballots were often interpreted as a form of protest against the authoritarian government (Power and Roberts 1995). In all of these cases, voters had political beliefs and preferences that led them to engage in the act (or non-act) of voting, and the submission of a valid or spoiled ballot often was a representation of preference. These examples also suggest that in a wide-range of authoritarian countries, there are avenues of political expression, some of which include voter choice and perhaps even forms of responsiveness.

In this paper, I investigate the issue of voter turnout in Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world and, with 75 million citizens, one of the largest autocratic countries in the world. Egypt currently holds elections for a variety of offices. At the parliamentary level, electoral races are highly competitive as party-list candidates from the hegemonic party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), compete with NDP independents, and members of the popular opposition group, the Muslim Brothers. In addition, Egypt had its first multi-candidate presidential election in 2005. While it was clear from the start that incumbent president Hosni Mubarak would win the election, two opponents did provide the potential for individuals to express their opposition to the regime.

This paper considers the incentives associated with voter turnout in Egypt's semi-competitive elections. While some percentage of voters cast their ballots on the basis of ideological concerns, I argue that a large percentage of Egyptian voters expect to receive material or other compensation for their vote, or vote as a result of direct and indirect government pressure.¹ In line with a series of formal works which argue that certain constituencies are likely to be more responsive to targeted rewards than others (Dixit and Londregan 1996, Calvo and Murillo 2004, Stokes 2005), I expect the poor to be more responsive to vote buying since they benefit more from consumption goods. In addition, I find that regime pressure also makes the poor more likely to turnout, particularly in Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential election where widespread vote buying was more difficult to organize. In most

¹A number of important works consider the question of electoral support for the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest recipient of ideology votes in Egypt. See Wickham (2002) for an excellent treatment of this subject as well as a review of the associated literature.

circumstances, therefore, voting in Egypt has a highly rational basis. Using data on voter turnout for the 2000 and 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections and the 2005 presidential elections, I find that in Egypt illiterates are roughly twice as likely to vote compared to their literate counterparts. This finding complements previous studies focusing on Latin America by investigating the ties between poverty and turnout. Rather than relying on survey data, however, to establish this relationship, I use district-level turnout and literacy figures as well as advanced statistical techniques to estimate the impact of literacy on voter turnout.

1 Previous Literature

This research is relevant to a growing literature in comparative politics on clientelism and vote buying. Clientelism is generally defined as a relationship between parties of unequal status that involves some form of exchange. Huntington and Nelson write,

“In traditional societies, patron-client relations provide a means for the vertical mobilization of lower-status individuals by established elites...The introduction of competitive elections gives the client one additional resource — the vote — which he can use to repay his patron for other benefits.” (1976, 55)

“Other benefits” generally refer to some form of vote buying, though these types of relationships can develop over the long or the short term and may not involve cash but rather goods or services rendered on the part of the patron in exchange for the client’s vote. Clientelistic practices are generally distinguished from constituency service by the extent to which reciprocity is enforced.

The clients in these vertical relationships tend to be members of lower classes. Dixit and Londregan argue that “swing” voters, or those with fewer ideological constraints, represent the cheapest votes to purchase in the context of developed countries (1996). Similarly in countries that exhibit high levels of clientelism, poor voters are more susceptible to clientelistic practices than wealthy voters since the marginal benefit of the consumption good is greater for them than for the rich. This is not to say that these individuals do not have preferences. In fact, they may prefer one candidate over the other but the marginal benefit of voting based on preference may be less than the marginal benefit of voting based on cash reward for large segments of the population.² Calvo and Murillo argue that patronage provides different returns to economically advantaged or disadvantaged voters; in other words, patronage targeted at the poor is more efficient than patronage targeted at the middle or upper classes (2004). Stokes — modeling the interaction between voters and a political machine as a repeated prisoners’ dilemma — shows that machines target the poor, for whom the payoff of even a small reward outweighs the expressive value of voting for one’s preferred

²In addition, it may also be possible that poor, illiterate voters are indeed less ideologically committed since they may not have been exposed to campaign and other literature to the same extent as literate voters.

party (2005). These formal treatments of the issue are consistent with the idea that there is a diminishing marginal utility of income.

A preponderance of the empirical work on this subject has focused on Latin America, and in particular Argentina, including the evidence presented in Calvo and Murillo (2004) and Stokes (2005) as well as narrative accounts (Auyero 2004). Brusco et. al. (2004) — using the same data as Stokes (2005) — argue that vote buying is an effective strategy for mobilizing electoral support among low-income individuals in Argentina. They arrive at this conclusion based on evidence from surveys conducted which were augmented with qualitative research and in-depth interviews.³ Not surprisingly, the percent of individuals who admitted to receiving payment for votes appears to be far lower than both the authors' expectations regarding the widespread nature of vote buying as well as other, more qualitative accounts of the subject. Only 7 percent of their sample admitted to receiving goods in exchange for votes (Brusco. et. al 2004). The previous literature, therefore, raises some important empirical questions. First, is survey data a reliable tool for examining this question? Individuals may be highly reluctant to admit to engaging in an act which is both illegal and socially undesirable. Second, does this phenomenon travel beyond the borders of Latin America, and particularly Argentina — an empirical focus of much of the work on this subject? My project builds on the important contributions of Stokes (2005) and others by testing some of the key hypotheses in the literature relating patronage to turnout on non-survey data (i.e. actual rather than self-reported data). I also provide a narrative discussion of how vote buying takes place outside of the context of Latin America by considering the case of Egypt.

2 Elections in Egypt

Egypt has been ruled by the current regime for more than fifty years and for a quarter of a century by Hosni Mubarak alone. Sadat introduced a multi-party system in the years prior to his assassination and Mubarak has held semi-competitive parliamentary elections in Egypt in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005.⁴ In 2005, as part of a bid to institutionalize a succession mechanism for Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal, Egypt introduced its first multi-candidate presidential elections.⁵ The regime in Egypt might be considered an electoral

³The surveys were conducted in December 2001 through January 2002 and included 1920 participants.

⁴In addition to lower-house elections, elections are also held for Egypt's upper house — the Shura Council — where approximately two-thirds of that body are elected (the other one-third is appointed) as well as for municipal councils. Municipal elections thus far have only been competitive within Egypt's dominant party though voters are still mobilized to participate in these contests. The lower house of parliament — the People's Assembly — is considered the more important of the two legislative bodies. In this article, I am primarily concerned with lower-house parliamentary elections and Egypt's 2005 presidential election since these elections were of greater political importance and also because of the quality and availability of data and information on these elections.

⁵Up until this point, the Egyptian ruler was nominated by the parliament and then subjected to an up-down public referendum.

authoritarian system (Linz 2000) or competitive authoritarian system (Levitsky and Way 2002) and enjoys some of the traits of a hegemonic party system (Magaloni 2006).

Why do authoritarian regimes like Egypt even choose to hold elections? In recent years, Egypt has come under pressure from the United States and international financial institutions to democratize and this is clearly part of the incentive to maintain the appearance of democratic competition. The domestic reasons for holding elections are perhaps even more compelling. Magaloni argues that elections provide information to the regime about supporters and opponents (2006). Geddes adds that elections can provide leaders with information about the performance of local officials, providing a channel for upward mobility of ambitious local officials (2005). In Egypt elections also provide additional functions. For example, elections offer the regime a mechanism for resolving intra-elite conflicts particularly within the ruling party and they also provide a facade for what might be called the “shadow” political game of graft and corruption (Blaydes 2007). In addition, elections have institutionalized the dominance of the single party in Egypt’s parliament. For these reasons, and others, elections are an important strategy of survival for authoritarian regimes like the one in Egypt. In the following section, I describe the voter calculus for clientelistically-motivated participation in Egyptian elections.

3 Voter Calculus in Parliamentary Elections

Voters who have jumped through the appropriate hoops to ensure their eligibility to vote face a number of possible options on election day. For those who believe the costs of voting will exceed the benefits that they might receive or who are not part of clientelistic networks, staying at home may be the logical choice. Some voters who turnout will make their selection on ideological grounds. While some Egyptian politicians are very able at providing public goods and services to their constituents and may earn votes without forced reciprocity, in many cases voters receive these items with the expectation that a vote will follow. The agents of various candidates, known locally as vote brokers (sing. *simsar*, pl. *samasir*) enforce these arrangements through a series of monitoring techniques.

Zaki writes that political participation through patron-client relationships is “extremely widespread” in Egypt (1995, 99). In addition, political parties — besides the Islamists — tend not to run on any type of ideological platform. As a result “votes are not cast on the basis of political issues or party platforms but as a choice between competing personalities within a context of patron-client relations” (Zaki 1995, 101). In this section, I describe the nature of the exchange that takes place between vote buyers (brokers representing candidates) and vote sellers (citizens).

3.1 Direct Exchange on Election Day

The most obvious case of vote buying — direct exchange of cash for votes on the day of the election — is well documented by Egyptian journalists and human rights organizations. Researcher Amr al-Shobky has argued that although candidates for parliament used to focus their efforts on district service provision, increasingly candidates have been winning seats through direct vote buying.⁶ One monitoring group recorded vote buying on the part of independent and NDP candidates for between 20 and 500 LE.⁷ Vote buying is also common in squatter settlements where citizens have no contact with the government except during parliamentary election season when candidates pay cash for votes (Fahmy 2004). Egyptian researcher Ali al-Sawy attributes vote buying to the low levels of income and bad economic conditions in Egypt (2005).

A front page article with the controversial headline “Who Pays More..?!” ran the day after the re-vote of the first round of parliamentary elections in Egypt’s independent newspaper Al-Masry Al-Yowm.⁸ The article focused on the rampant vote buying that took place during this re-vote phase of the election.⁹ The pictures that accompanied the article spoke volumes about the nature of vote buying in Egyptian parliamentary elections. In one, the caption reads “a candidate’s assistant distributes cash to voters”. A second picture shows a man holding up five bills; it is unclear if he is a vote seller or a vote buyer. The caption reads “for every vote (there) is a price”. A third photo of an outstretched arm holding bills has the caption “a shower of banknotes came down on eight governorates yesterday”. A final picture shows a well-dressed professional man marking the ballot of an older working class man. The caption reads “a picture from inside a polling station...vote outside of the curtained ballot area or help?!” In addition, the voter appears to be holding a banknote. The implication is clearly that observers cannot be sure if that older man is simply seeking help to vote for his chosen candidate or if the politico inside the polling station is making the choice for him. The content of the article goes on to say that vote buying and the influence of hired thugs (*baltagha*) dominated the election.¹⁰

⁶“Legislative Elections in Egypt: Indicators and Consequences,” Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Issue 46, December 2005

⁷Independent Committee on Election Monitoring (ICEM) Monitoring the Third Phase of the Parliamentary Election Preliminary Report, December 2 2005

⁸Al-Masry Al-Yowm, November 16 2005

⁹When a candidate receives a plurality of votes in the first round, rather than a majority, there is a re-vote with the highest vote getters.

¹⁰It is worth noting that in addition to positive inducements for voting, there are also reports of the use of hired thugs to force voters to choose particular candidates. Following the first round on parliamentary elections in which citizens of eight Egyptian governorates voted, the independent daily Al-Masry Al-Yowm ran a front page article describing the influence of the hired thugs (*baltagha*) in these districts. The article — which ran on November 10 2005 — said that state security forces imposed a form of “passive neutrality” that allowed these hired thugs to dominate the scene and violations in individual districts are discussed in the article as well, particularly in the districts of Sayeda Zeinab and Helwan. Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin

So how do vote buyers ensure that the people they pay vote for the candidate they promised to? In the 1980s, vote buyers used to split a bill in half and promise to give the person the other half of the bill upon completion of voting.¹¹ In recent years, new mechanisms have been developed to ensure that the vote broker gets a vote for his chosen candidate. With the advent of the camera phone, voters now capture their voting in a photo to show to the vote buyer upon leaving the polling station.¹² The first chapter of Ali al-Sawy's book, "How are Elections Forged?" (*Kayf tuzawir al-intikhabaat?*) describes what is known as the "revolving ballot" strategy (al-Sawy et. al. 2005, page 9). At the beginning of the day a voter leaves the polling station without having voted. This ballot is then filled out by the vote broker and handed to the vote seller. The vote seller submits this ballot in the polling station and returns a blank ballot to the vote broker. The vote seller is paid after coming out of the station with this blank ballot. This process is then repeated throughout the day (al-Sawy et. al. 2005, pages 9-11). In this way the vote buyer always fills out the ballot without fear that the voter will have a chance to make his own choice.

This question of how candidates ensure voters will not renege is significant. In her study of Argentina, Stokes dedicates considerable effort to this subject and concludes that "you know if a neighbor voted against your party if he can't look you in the eye on election day" (2005, 317). In Egypt, vote monitoring takes place in a much more straightforward and less impressionistic manner.

3.2 Pre-election Exchange

In addition to the exchange of cash for votes on election day, parliamentary candidates also cultivate support with goods and services in the weeks and months leading up to the election. Since these income and other transfers take place unofficially, documentation of this phenomenon tends to be from personal interviews, journalistic or other sources. It has been reported that candidates running for parliament distribute everything from free shoes to mobile phones to even job applications for public sector employment in the run-up to elections. During a recent parliamentary election campaign, the minister of housing was running for office and he made promises of subsidized apartments for slum dwellers to secure their votes; aids of the minister also distributed free water containers since people living in these areas did not have access to running water (Fahmy 2004). In addition to goods

Ibrahim called the police's unwillingness to stop the thuggery "negative neutrality" in an article that ran in Al-Ahram Weekly (November 17 - 23 2005) and even Makram Mohamed Ahmed — a well-known state-affiliated journalist — said that the absence of government action to deter bullying marred the process in an editorial that ran in Al-Ahram (November 20 2005). Al-Sawy writes that while sometimes thugs are used to force voters to support a certain candidate they are also used to prevent supporters of other candidates from voting at all (2005, 73-75). It is not clear if the newspaper articles references were referring to the former or latter phenomenon or both.

¹¹Egyptian Gazette November 27 2005

¹²Ibid.

transfers that take place, individuals running for parliament can also negotiate for the votes of families and even entire villages by securing the release of men arrested on suspicion of being involved with insurgent activity.¹³

The 2005 parliamentary elections were characterized by vote buying both on the day of the election and in the months and weeks prior. In the hotly contested district of Kasr al-Nile, press reports suggested that candidate Hisham Khalil spent upwards of 10 million LE on his campaign.¹⁴ In Manial, the campaign manager for candidate and wealthy hotelier Shahinaz al-Naggar describes the personal payment of monthly stipends for 500 families in her constituency, at between 20 and 50 LE per family (Blaydes and El Tarouty forthcoming). The trading of food for votes is also a popular strategy employed by candidates.¹⁵ Sacks of dried fruit (*yameesh*) and other foodstuffs are distributed in the election season.¹⁶ Vouchers for chickens are also available; the willing voter should also submit a copy of his or her electoral card to be eligible for these items.¹⁷ School fees and trips to Mecca or seaside resorts are also provided as well as fees associated with critical surgeries.¹⁸ Beneficiaries of these benefits prior to election day are also subjected to the “revolving ballot” or other monitoring mechanisms (al-Sawy et. al. 2005).

3.3 Longer-Term Familial and Clientelistic Relationships

In many cases, particularly in the Egyptian countryside, individuals are involved in longer-term clientelistic or familial relationships with political candidates. For example, NDP stalwart Kamal al-Shazli ran for reelection in 2005 in his home district in the governorate of Menoufiya; he is thought to be the longest serving parliamentarian in any parliament in the world. A newspaper article describes some keys to his success. “He (al-Shazli) got my children good jobs and is always there for the people of this district’...It was a story repeated by a great many voters, who said they supported al-Shazli because of his ability to provide their communities with jobs and other services.”¹⁹ Kassem writes that “personal assurances of support sought by electoral candidates are largely conditional upon the downward flow of patronage, most of which can realistically be channeled only from the center” (1999, 127). Voting by family bloc is also common. For example, in Springborg’s description of Sayed Marei’s electoral strategy in the post-1976 era Springborg writes that Marei’s electoral success rested on a coalition of four families and this is the basis for the clientelism (1982,

¹³For more details see former Brigadier General Hamdy al-Batran’s exposé of regime activity in the Egyptian countryside, *Yowmiyat dabit fi al-Aryaf* (The Diary of an Officer in the Countryside), pages 24 and 92.

¹⁴Al-Ghad November 23 2005

¹⁵For more details see Blaydes 2006a.

¹⁶Egyptian Gazette October 18 2005

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Al-Ahram Weekly November 10-16 2005

113).²⁰

There are some indications, however, that these longer term, clientelistic relationships are beginning to break down. Amr Shobky has written that since the 1976 Egyptian elections parliamentarians historically offered services — like paving roads, building schools, and helping people find jobs — to voters in their constituencies.²¹ As parliamentarians have become increasingly incapable of providing these services, business tycoons, who can either dip into their own pockets for these expenses or turn to vote buying with cash, have come to play an important role in the parliament.²² Shobky argues that parliamentarians have found ministers unwilling to fulfill demands from particular districts.²³ There are a number of possible explanation for this phenomenon. One is that this is part of a regime — or party — arrangement to increase the influence of big business and favor this constituency. A second, and more likely scenario, is that as budgets have grown tighter over the years, ministries are simply less capable of meeting these demands; this may be the result of either increasing economic liberalization and IFI-imposed structural adjustment or government belt-tightening. Moheb Zaki argues in favor of the former, that it was structural adjustment that decreased the level of funds available for more traditional patronage activities (1995, 229). What has emerged is a “biznis” (i.e. business) culture where the lower classes are not reluctant to use cash transfers in the place of more traditional clientelist relationships (Elyachar 2005, 165).

4 Voter Calculus for the 2005 Presidential Election

The most significant recent development in Egyptian politics has been the introduction of a constitutional amendment allowing for the direct election of the president from a multi-candidate field. While the institutional design of the amendment stacks the deck heavily in favor of the ruling party, Egypt did hold its first multi-candidate presidential election in September 2005.²⁴ Until 2005, the NDP-dominated parliament would nominate a single candidate — Mubarak — and voters had to check either “yes” or “no” on the ballot in the style of a referendum. In the 2005 contest Mubarak ran against candidates Ayman Nour of the Ghad Party and Noman Gomaa of the Wafd Party.

While it was clear from the start that Mubarak would emerge victorious from the contest, turnout was described as being of paramount importance given the regime’s need to legitimize the process.²⁵ Public officials like NDP-stalwart Safwat al-Sherif publicly emphasized the

²⁰Others have argued that patron-client exchange is a societal microstructure. In particular, Reeves (1990) writes that ritualized exchange is part of the cultural schema in many parts of Egypt.

²¹“Legislative Elections in Egypt: Indicators and Consequences,” Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Issue 46, December 2005

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴See Blaydes 2005 for more details on the institutional design of this amendment.

²⁵Two days before the election, Al-Masry Al-Yowm reported that government agencies had already begun

importance of high turnout²⁶ and Mubarak himself was constantly urging Egyptians to turnout to vote on his campaign stops.²⁷ Mubarak campaign officials during the election period also believed that high turnout would strongly favor the incumbent.²⁸

Yet achieving a high level of turnout in the presidential race posed a challenge to Mubarak and his campaign advisors. While vote-buying was a viable strategy for parliamentary candidates at the district level since thousands of individual office-seekers would bear the costs, at the national level a different approach was needed. Paid voting was not as common as in parliamentary or municipal elections, though after the election, Nour held a press conference where he held up an envelope with a ballot marked ‘Mubarak’ and 20 LE. Gomaa — the other main challenger — also accused the government of forcing government employees to vote for Mubarak.

In addition to these illegal strategies, the regime had to use a number of other legal or semi-legal strategies to induce turnout; in other words, in many cases voters were actually “choosing” the authoritarian ruler. One of these strategies was the use of manipulated economic policy in the run-up to the election (Blaydes 2006). These strategies were supplemented by a series of other approaches that ensured that Egypt’s “swing” voters — the poor — were forced to turnout, and in many cases cast their ballots for Mubarak out of fear or a lack of knowledge regarding the other candidates. These mechanisms included the threat of economic sanction and the (ab)use of state-supported religious institutions and media.

4.1 Threat of Economic Sanction

A number of countries in the developed and developing world have compulsory voting. While in countries like Brazil, compulsory voting is taken somewhat seriously (Powers and Robert 1995), in Egypt compulsory voting has been used in a strategic manner by the regime at certain points in time and to intimidate particular constituencies.²⁹ For example, while compulsory voting has not historically been enforced in Egyptian parliamentary elections, there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding this issue in the run up to Egypt’s first presidential election in 2005. In an election where standard vote buying techniques would have fallen entirely on the budget of the regime and party (rather than individual parliamentary candidates), regime and party representatives created the impression that economic sanction would be enforced for individuals who failed to turnout and vote.

A series of press reports support this belief. An article in the independent newspaper Al-Masry al-Yowm reported that the 100 LE sanction was significant factor in voter turnout.³⁰

to prepare the banners congratulating Mubarak’s victory (September 5 2005).

²⁶Al-Ahram July 23 2005

²⁷Egyptian Gazette August 28 2005

²⁸Personal interview with Mohamed Kamal August 2005

²⁹Issue 39 of the Egyptian constitution called for a 20 LE fine for nonvoting in 1976. This amount was increased over the years to the current level of 100 LE.

³⁰Al-Masry al-Yowm September 12 2005

In an article entitled, “Turnout...Mubarak’s Greatest Challenge”, one journalist argued that the regime had stretched its abilities to the maximum to ensure a high turnout. The article describes how loudspeakers blared, “O People of Al-Daba’h! Go to the polling station to cast your vote in the presidential elections. Failing to go exposes you to (pay) a fine of 120 LE!”³¹ In this particular town of 40,000 in the governorate of Kafr al-Shaykh, imams of the four main mosques (using mosque loudspeakers) called on people to vote, so as not to anger Allah.³² The same article reports that “All village mayors were summoned last night (Tuesday) for a meeting at the police station (*al-markaz*) with NDP officials and others from the governors office. Orders were clear: ‘Any low turnout means losing your jobs’”.³³

Another journalist describes the situation in Kafr Shaaban, a small village in northeastern Egypt, where loudspeakers mounted on the local mosques exclaimed “Oh people of Kafr Shaaban, if you do not come to vote, you will be fined immediately and on the spot 105 LE in cash.”³⁴ After these announcements are made, villagers, many of whom are dressed in traditional clothes arrive to vote uncertain of candidates or procedures, stating that the fine would be too much for their budgets to bear.³⁵ The journalist notes that when one elderly man asks where to vote, a local NDP representative says “Go in and choose the president or the crescent sign.”³⁶ The same article reports that a civil servant manning the polling station said that the calls from the mosques came at the order of the state security-appointed village chief (*umdah*).³⁷ A woman is quoted as saying “We are so poor, and we are scared that the village chieftain will fine us 100 LE...I had to vote for the president. They told me at the door to pick the crescent sign. So I did. We do not want trouble and he will win anyway.”³⁸

This suggests that the legal institution of compulsory voting might be used in a strategic fashion by an authoritarian regime. Economic sanction targets constituencies that are poor or perhaps do not have the resources to fight or question such a threatened fine. This would largely affect the underprivileged and illiterate population.

³¹Khaled Mamdouh, *Turnout...Mubarak’s Greatest Challenge*, www.IslamOnline.net, September 7 2005

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.; Mayors, or village chiefs, used to be elected in Egypt but are currently appointed by the Ministry of Interior.

³⁴Emad Mekay, “Choose the Crescent or Be Fined”, Interpress News Service, September 8 2005

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.; Because of the high illiteracy rate in Egypt’s rural areas, candidates are represented by symbols like the palm tree or the crescent to make it easier for voters who cannot read to find their names on the ballot.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

4.2 Biased Media Coverage

In Egypt, the major media outlets are owned and operated by the state. Flagship dailies like Al-Ahram and Al-Ahkbar have tried to cultivate an impression of neutrality and professionalism. That said, within Egypt's educated classes (and perhaps beyond), it is common knowledge that there exists an implicit bias in the reporting of the state-owned press.³⁹

When the announcement was made that Egypt would be holding its first multi-candidate presidential election in the fall of 2005, there were immediate concerns that biased media coverage would provide an unfair benefit to the incumbent. The government responded by legislating that that government-owned media would apply a strict equality of time for candidates. Despite assurances to the contrary, subsequent reports have shown that Egypt's state-owned media remained biased for the incumbent both in terms of the amount of coverage as well as the tone of the coverage provided.⁴⁰ The state media strongly encouraged potential voters to turnout and the television and radio airwaves carried countless Mubarak campaign advertisements.

The Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring (ICEM) studied media coverage during the official campaign period from August 17 to September 4. While some independent newspapers were found to be impartial in their coverage, Al-Ahram—the newspaper of record in Egypt—was not. According to the ICEM report, Mubarak received front page coverage for 83 percent of the campaign period versus his nearest competitor who received front page coverage just 8 percent of the time.⁴¹ Photo coverage was even more unequal between Mubarak and his competitors.⁴² Coverage of Mubarak was also found to be more positive.⁴³ This bias in coverage was not ignored by the opposition press.⁴⁴

How does media bias affect voter choice and turnout? Terrestrial television is state run and this is the television that poor voters are most likely to see. They may also be less equipped to resist government propaganda. Geddes and Zaller (1989) argue that those with high levels of political awareness are able to resist regime-issued propaganda, while those individuals who are exposed to such messages but do not have high levels of political awareness may follow government dictates. Radio tends to be state dominated as well. The middle class and wealthy have access to satellite television to get opposing viewpoints. Those who are sufficiently educated are also able to read the opposition press and are more likely to have access to foreign media.

³⁹Even Salama Ahmed Salama, famous for his long-running column in Al-Ahram, conceded in an interview with Al-Masry Al-Yowm that Al-Ahram is a mouthpiece for the NDP and a defender of regime interests (Al-Masry Al-Yowm July 8 2006).

⁴⁰Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring, Final Report on the Egyptian Presidential Election, September 2005.

⁴¹Ibid

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Al-Wafd September 7 2005

4.3 State-affiliated Religious Institutions

Since the early 1960s, the Egyptian government has sought sanction from al-Azhar — the highest authority of Islam in Egypt — to legitimate the government's most controversial foreign and domestic policy decisions. Al-Azhar is traditionally known to be Egypt's most respected and influential center for Islamic study. After Egypt negotiated a peace agreement with Israel at Camp David in 1979, Anwar Sadat asked al-Azhar to publicly recognize the legitimacy of an agreement that most Egyptians opposed. Upon entering the US-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, Hosni Mubarak used al-Azhar to assure the Egyptian public that the war effort was acceptable under the dictates of Islam. The Egyptian regime also sought the approval of al-Azhar to justify a crackdown on Islamist insurgents.⁴⁵ These were politically significant policy choices that were highly controversial; religious sanction helped to make the regime's actions more palatable to the general public.

In the run-up to the presidential election, the regime publicized statements by religious figures about the importance of voting in the state-run media. For example, an article that ran in Al-Ahram summarized the religious pronouncements made during the presidential election campaign.⁴⁶ The article reported that major Islamic religious scholars agreed that participation in the election was highly important and considered a vital duty. Some went as far as to characterize non-voting as un-Islamic. These figures included Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar as well as the former head of Al-Azhar University, members of the Islamic research group associated with Al-Azhar, and the chairman of the council of Islamic studies.⁴⁷

In addition to the statements made by Islamic figures, the influential head of the Coptic Christian church in Egypt went beyond encouraging turnout to even endorse President Mubarak.⁴⁸ Pope Shenouda is quoted as having said that Mubarak should be elected because of his experience and good relations with Arab and western countries. Interviews with high level regime officials, however, suggest that Shenouda was promised government approval to crackdown on a dissident faction of the church in exchange for his strong public support of the president.⁴⁹ In addition, Mubarak was endorsed by the Coptic leader of Alexandria and 71 Coptic bishops and archbishops.⁵⁰ It has also been reported that a large percentage of Egypt's 2500 Coptic priests are members of the NDP.⁵¹

So who is most affected by these religious pronouncements? Similar to the Geddes and

⁴⁵Al-Azhar also enjoyed financial benefits as a result of this relationship. In return for acquiescence in these and other controversial policies, the government channeled money to al-Azhar. The funds allowed al-Azhar to develop a nationwide program for primary and secondary religious education. It also permitted al-Azhar to build and maintain thousands of mosques and religious schools throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.

⁴⁶Al-Ahram September 11 2005

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Interview with NDP Policies Secretariat member September 2 2005

⁵⁰Al-Ahram September 6 2005

⁵¹Ibid.

Table 1: Average percent Turnout for three Egyptian Elections.

Election	Percent Turnout across Local Units
2000 Parliamentary	25
2005 Presidential	24
2005 Parliamentary	25

Zaller (1989) argument that those with high levels of political awareness may be able to resist these types of messages, it is likely that individuals who are exposed to these dictates yet not sufficiently sophisticated as to resist them may be susceptible to these types of influences.

5 Empirical Tests

Thus far, I have argued that parliamentary elections in Egypt are characterized by vote buying and clientelistic networks of exchange of goods and services for political support. The votes of the poor and illiterate are generally the “cheapest” to buy for two reasons. First, the marginal benefit or payoff for selling a vote is higher for the underprivileged segments of the population. Second, it is also possible that these individuals are less committed ideologically and therefore more willing to trade their votes for rewards. As a result, I posit that members of the underprivileged class turnout at disproportionately high rates in Egyptian parliamentary elections.

In my discussion of turnout in Egypt’s first presidential election, I come to a similar conclusion, though for different reasons. Threats of fines for not voting and the influence of state-media and religious institutions compelled the same underprivileged classes to turnout to vote for President Mubarak. Threats of economic sanction for non-voting affect the poor disproportionately and the underprivileged are more susceptible to the messages advertised by the state to support Mubarak.

5.1 The Effect of Literacy on Turnout

In order to test the effect of literacy on voter turnout across Egyptian electoral districts, I have compiled data provided to the United National Development Program (UNDP) by the Egyptian Ministry of Planning on both literacy and voter turnout for the 2000 parliamentary elections. These data are reported at the level of the local administrative unit. For the 2005 election, I have matched the most recent data on literacy from the UNDP at the level of various administrative units with data on turnout levels for electoral districts as reported

Table 2: Ecological Inference Problem for Turnout.

	Vote	No Vote	
<u>l</u> iterate	β_i^l	$1 - \beta_i^l$	X_i
<u>i</u> lliterate	β_i^{il}	$1 - \beta_i^{il}$	$1 - X_i$
	T_i	$1 - T_i$	

by the Egyptian government.⁵² Regarding the primary independent variable in the study, literacy, approximately 65 percent of Egyptians are literate, though there is considerable variation across the country. In fact, district literacy rates ranges from about 20 percent to over 90 percent depending on the area. Finally for the 2005 presidential election, the government did not release turnout data on the local level. The most reliable data on turnout in this election was collected by the Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring (ICEM) — a collection of independent NGO’s that stationed monitors at almost 30 percent of Egypt’s 10,000 polling stations. The data on turnout for the presidential election is presented at the governorate level.⁵³

Table 1 summarizes the percent turnout for each of the three elections used in the data analysis.⁵⁴ Overall levels of turnout in Egyptian elections are low. Possible explanations for low turnout include widespread cynicism about the efficacy of political participation, lack of confidence in the fairness of procedures, and the weakness of party platforms.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, considering the low policy stakes involved with these elections, the fact that one-quarter of registered voters do turnout is a non-trivial phenomenon in need of explanation. While the regime has a record of overestimating political participation, this has occurred more commonly for Shura council elections⁵⁶ and referendum turnout figures than for statistics involving recent elections. Egyptian political analysts have argued that fraud has decreased considerably since 2000 when the Egyptian judiciary began monitoring elections (Soliman 2006). Local NGOs also monitor elections, decreasing the ability of the regime to wildly exaggerate turnout statistics.

5.1.1 Empirical Strategy

The data that I have collected here is aggregated at the level the local administrative unit or governorate. The mechanisms that I have proposed, however, refer to the actions undertaken

⁵²For urban areas, I used the administrative unit known as the *hayy*, while I used the *markaz* and *kism* for rural and desert areas, respectively.

⁵³Governorates in Egypt are similar to states in the US. There are 26 governorates in Egypt.

⁵⁴These turnout figures are the average across the local units and are not weighted by population.

⁵⁵See Wickham 2002, 85; Al-Ahram August 28 2005; Al-Ahram December 19 2005.

⁵⁶See Springborg 1989, 163 for more details.

by individual citizens making the decision of whether or not they will turn out to vote. Problems such as this are generally called “ecological inference” problems. In order to analyze these data, I use Gary King’s ecological inference estimation strategy which allows quantities of interest (like the proportion of literates or illiterates who vote) to vary over districts while at the same time incorporating the logical bounds for these values (1997). Table 2 shows the marginals, or information that we currently have at the local level, regarding literacy and turnout. T_i is the level of turnout in district i and X_i is the percent of literates in that district. My goal is to infer the quantities of interest within the cells. These quantities of interest include β_i^{il} , the fraction of illiterates who vote in district i and β_i^l , the fraction of literates who vote in district i . Applying King’s ecological inference model to these data yields estimates of these and other quantities of interest.⁵⁷ In addition to the EI results, I also report the results of Goodman’s regression, which assumes that the quantities of interest are constant over districts, as an additional check.

5.1.2 Results

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. I report the EI results as well as the results of Goodman’s regression for each election. The results suggest that illiterates turned out at more than twice and sometimes at three times the rate of literates in the 2000 and 2005 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections. The largest discrepancy between literate and illiterate turnout was in the presidential race where 11 percent of literates voted and 33 percent of illiterates voted. In the 2000 parliamentary elections 15 percent of literates and 39 percent of illiterates voted; in the 2005 parliamentary race 18 percent of literates voted and 37 percent of illiterates voted, according to the estimation.⁵⁸ While these figures are not intended to be definitive, they are highly suggestive and provide evidence that Egypt’s underclasses make up a large percentage of voters.

Figure 1 is a scatterplot of the relationship between literacy (X) and turnout (T) from the 2000 parliamentary elections with the maximum likelihood results of the EI model superimposed. The size of each circle is proportional to the district population. The solid line is the expected value of turnout given the level of literacy, and dashed lines are an 80 percent confidence interval around the expected value. The figure suggests that as literacy increases, turnout decreases across Egyptian electoral districts.

The use of Gary King’s EI program is not without controversy. Scholars have argued that

⁵⁷The results in this section were estimated using King’s *EzI* statistical package.

⁵⁸Egyptian parliamentary elections are held in three separate rounds, an accommodation introduced to allow monitoring by the judiciary. The first round of the election was not seriously marred by government security service intervention while the second and third rounds witnessed violence and government intervention at many polling stations. As a result, I also estimated the 2005 results for just the first round locations and found very similar results to the estimates based on the entire sample (first round: 17 percent for literate voters and 37 percent turnout for illiterate voters). In other words, the relationship between turnout and literacy did not differ meaningfully over different rounds of the election.

Table 3: Turnout by Literacy.

	2000 Parliamentary		2005 Presidential		2005 Parliamentary	
	Literate	Illiterate	Literate	Illiterate	Literate	Illiterate
<i>EI</i>	0.148	0.387	0.111	0.327	0.182	0.368
	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.023)	(0.050)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Goodman's Regression	0.160	0.375	0.139	0.440	0.163	0.401
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.067)	(0.136)	(0.017)	(0.028)
Model standard errors are in parentheses.						

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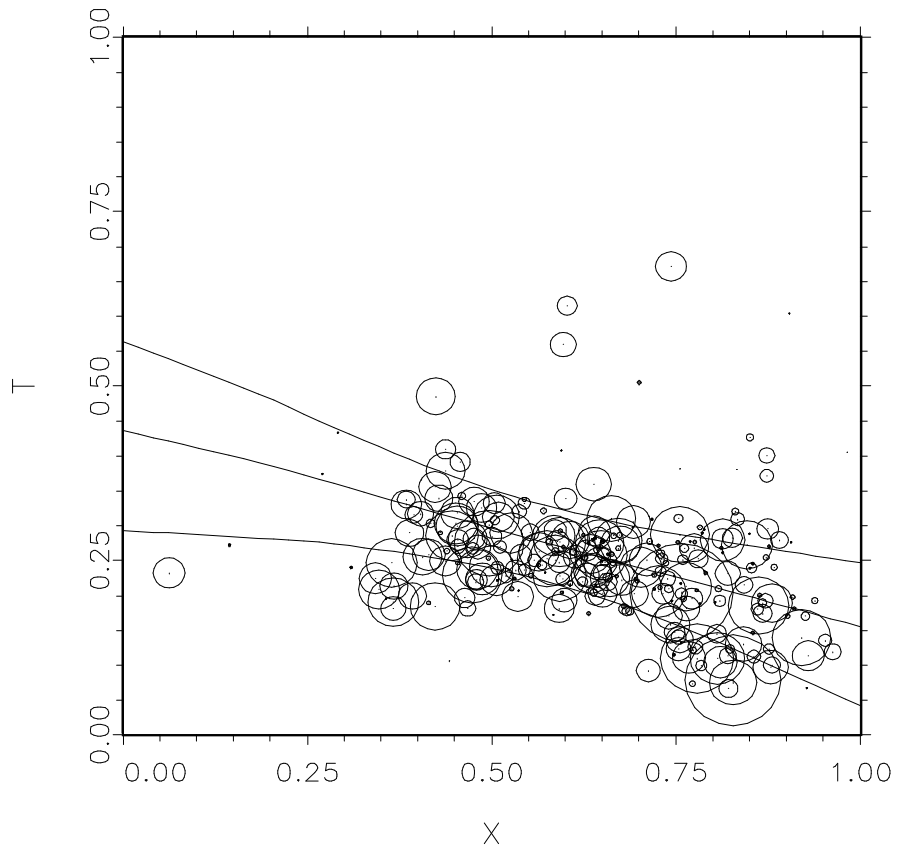


Figure 1: *Relationship between literacy and turnout in the 2000 Parliamentary Elections. Literacy is on the x-axis and percent of percent turnout is on the y-axis.*

if the strict assumptions of the estimation procedure have not been met, then the program is inappropriate and may lead to wrong inferences. In particular, Cho and Gaines (2004) argue that three conditions must be met before even considering the use of EI. These include that: (1) the data must be informative, (2) there should not be evidence of aggregation bias, and (3) estimation should only be attempted in the presence of a strong microtheory. Let me consider each of these factors in turn. First, what does it mean for the data to be informative? Cho and Gaines (2004) write that tomography plots of the data should intersect at a single point or in the same vicinity. Visual inspection of the tomography plots for these data (available upon request) suggest that the lines do intersect in a common area. King (1997) suggests that the data are more informative when there is considerable variation in the explanatory variable. As mentioned previously, there is considerable variation in the level of literacy in Egypt, which ranges from about 20 to over 90 percent across districts. The next condition put forth by Cho and Gaines (2004) is that the aggregation process did not introduce bias. In other words, literates living among literates cannot be shown to behave differently than literates living among illiterates and illiterates living among literates do not behave differently than illiterates living among illiterates. Visual inspection of the relationship between literacy and the estimated β^l and β^{il} values (available upon request) suggests that no strong aggregation bias exists. Finally, Cho and Gaines (2004) write that there needs to be a strong microtheory of individual behavior. Details about the microtheory have been presented in the previous sections of this paper.

6 Conclusions and Implications

This paper has considered the calculus of voters in a series of recent Egyptian elections. I have argued that while some individuals may turn out to vote on an ideological basis, large swaths of voters — particularly the poor — instead choose to exchange their votes for goods, money, or services at the individual, group, or family level. One of the empirical implications of this argument is that poor, and often illiterate, voters turnout at rates considerably higher than wealthier, and often more literate, voters in Egyptian elections. This finding is largely consistent with Egyptian commentators, like Hassan Abu Taleb, who argue that political life in Egypt is dominated by two classes of individuals — the wealth minority of political elite who buy votes and the poor majority of citizens who sell their votes to the highest bidder.⁵⁹

This understanding of Egyptian elections has left some local intellectuals concerned about the normative implications of voter participation by a largely illiterate electorate. Moheb Zaki has argued that this type of participation is harmful to Egypt's political development given the likelihood that these voters will be manipulated (1995, 106). I would argue, however, that even imperfect elections replete with vote buying and clientelistic manipulation still force political elite to court citizens in their districts. Exchange of political support for

⁵⁹Al-Ahram November 19 2005

money, goods, and services represents a net gain for voters who are able to extract some resources out of their elected officials. In addition, having the choice to vote, and perhaps even more important, the choice to abstain from voting provides citizens with some degree of agency. Hermet argues that withholding one's vote is a challenge to power (1978, 12) and poor voter turnout certainly hurt the regime's attempt to institutionalize a succession mechanism for Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal, in the form of contested presidential elections.⁶⁰ The choice not to vote is particularly relevant when abstentions are concentrated in certain geographic or demographic areas.

Economist Timur Kuran has argued that due to social or other pressure, individuals often misrepresent their preferences and that this phenomenon is common in autocratic regimes (1995). When citizens become aware of the true preferences of others in their community, however, this may empower them to demand change. This suggests that even in Egypt's semi-competitive, highly imperfect elections, there is something valuable about the mere existence of the opportunity to vote. Voter abstention signals a protest of the political system and opposition newspapers use low turnout figures as evidence of lack of political trust in the regime.⁶¹ Some percentage of voters cast their ballots for the opposition Muslim Brothers and this provides valuable information about others' preferences. The way that this type of information disseminates and informs the actions of fellow citizens living under authoritarian rule is critical for our understanding of autocratic breakdown and the possibility for transition to democratic government in countries like Egypt.

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⁶⁰Al-Wafd October 11 2005

⁶¹Al-Wafd October 10 2005

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