Executive Elections in the Arab World: When and How Do They Matter?

Jason Brownlee

Abstract

Although elections loom large in the study of nondemocracies, scholars continue debating what function those elections play. This article sets evidence from the Arab world in a global context to evaluate three theorized roles for elections: safety valve, patronage network, and performance ritual. Executive elections in the Middle East and North Africa remain less common and less competitive than polls in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. This profile is largely consistent with the observable implications of leading theories. The data, though, also show theoretically rich differences. Although levels of competition and participation in Yemen, Tunisia, and Algeria fit expectations about elections being safety valves or political spectacles, Egypt’s presidential election stands apart, with exceptionally meager public involvement. In such circumstances, where competition and turnout are both unusually low, other social and political phenomena may matter more than elections for regime survival, resource distribution, and the manifestation of state power.

Keywords

authoritarianism, democratization, hybrid regimes, elections, clientelism, institutions

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Rather than monopolizing the political arena through military or single-party dominance, modern autocratic leaders often permit their opponents to contest national elections. During the post–cold war period “electoral authoritarianism” became the modal form of nondemocratic government in the developing world (Schedler, 2002). While incumbents entrenched, opportunities for voting proliferated. The drive toward electoralism stoked a vigorous debate about the causes and consequences of elections in authoritarian circumstances.

Scholars of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been especially interested in understanding elections under authoritarianism (Posusney & Angrist, 2005). They have theorized elections serve a variety of functions, including as survival mechanisms for incumbents, as patronage distribution networks between candidates and constituents, and as performances broadcasting state might. At first, nearly all the elections under scrutiny were legislative polls that did not touch the chief executive’s office. Although intriguing, these elections were inherently distinct from the kinds of voting exercises in the Philippines (1986), Mexico (2000), and Ukraine (2004) that captured world attention and catapulted incumbents from power. After decades of single-candidate plebiscites, the introduction of multicandidate presidential elections in four Arab states (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen) provides an opportunity to evaluate prior explanations with empirical material that impels broader attention. And although studies of legislative elections could not speak to the question of executive elections, the inverse is not the case, at least not in these countries. If political contestation differed markedly across legislative and presidential elections in the four Arab governments, the present study would have little to say about legislative electoral politics. As it happens, though, such discrepancies do not emerge, and executive elections display the same kind of incumbent dominance comparativists are accustomed to seeing in Arab legislative elections.

I consider whether the characteristics of presidential elections in the Middle East comport with the observable implications of leading accounts. For the most part comparativists have investigated elections and authoritarianism through close case studies, cross-national statistical research, or a combination of the two. This study pursues a midrange analysis of country-level data and regional trends from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The approach joins, in a cumulative manner, extant idiographic and quantitative research. I situate the small set of Arab governments in a broad comparative context that remains textured and intelligible for area specialists. The resulting topography clarifies the significance of elections in authoritarian circumstances broadly, as well as in the four Arab states.
My principal task is to apprehend regional trends in electoral politics and evaluate whether the assembled evidence fits depictions of elections as pressure valves, clientelistic networks, or demonstrations of state power. Using an original data set on executive elections during 1950-2009 plus election turnout data from the International Foundation for Election Studies (IFES) and Adam Carr’s Election Archive (Psephos), I address three main empirical questions:

1. How frequent are executive elections in the Middle East, relative to other developing regions?
2. In comparative terms, how competitive are presidential elections in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen?
3. How well attended were recent presidential elections in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen?

Initial answers to these queries partly support theories that link elections to authoritarian endurance. To the extent that elections serve the interest of incumbents, one would predict a preponderance of multicandidate polls, but the Middle East, well known for authoritarian resilience, holds fewer contested executive elections than other developing regions. Where executive elections occur, they tend to be uncompetitive and well attended. Lop-sided results and heavy turnout in Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen support the image of elections as a major national affair in which opposition movements vent, voters seek patronage, and states exhibit their prowess. By contrast, subdued voter participation in Egypt indicates the locus of political dissent, social clientelism, and state dominance may rest in other (nonelectoral) political and economic arenas.

These cross-regional and country data provide an initial exploration of prior theory. They invite students of dictatorship and dissent to discriminate when attributing political significance to electoral and nonelectoral arenas. The larger contribution for authoritarianism research, though, lies in suggesting directions for future work on elections. This article does not deal with legislative elections in great depth; later studies may integrate legislative elections alongside the study of executive elections. Comparativists may find cases where legislative and executive elections play different roles or operate synergistically. They may also examine the potential for certain elections to provide different functions, for example, executive elections displaying state power, legislative polls distributing patronage. Such propositions are likely to become increasingly complex—yet they should remain testable. Scholars of elections in nondemocratic contests should continue matching the intricacy
of their theories with clear standards by which future students can replicate, confirm, and falsify earlier work.

**Elections, Authoritarianism, and the Middle East**

Just as skeptics of democratization studies were burying the “transition paradigm,” comparativists were erecting new terms for authoritarianism (Carothers, 2002). The resulting literature on hybrid regimes conceptualized, categorized, and explained regimes from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2002). In his seminal article on electoral authoritarianism, Schedler (2002) noted that regimes with multiparty elections had eclipsed exclusionary military and single-party dictatorships in number and geographical breadth. The implications of this shift, toward nominally inclusive autocracy, were indeterminate. Taxonomies of authoritarianism gave way to comparative studies of regime breakdown that sought to discern what the spread of elections meant for rulers and opposition. On this point scholars reached different conclusions, disagreeing about whether elections bolstered or destabilized authoritarianism. Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) found elections and legislatures prolonged the lifespan of nondemocratic regimes, and Magaloni (2008) observed that elections could help autocrats appease their opponents. Pointing the causal arrow in the other direction, Howard and Roessler (2006), Lindberg (2006), and Hadenius and Teorell (2007) reported that elections and vigorous multipartyism increased the likelihood of democratization and regime change (also see Bunce & Wolchik, 2006).

In the Middle East elections far outnumbered incidents of major national political change. Not surprisingly, scholars of the region tended not to regard elections and other plebiscitarian measures as engines of democratization (cf. Herb, 1999). They instead cited state repression, oil rents, religious culture, and geopolitics as major levers of continuity and change (Bellin, 2004; Berman, 2003; Ross, 2001; Stepan, 2003). Consequently, Middle East comparativists began by contemplating why elections might prolong power asymmetries between incumbents and opposition. Notwithstanding the volume and breadth of this scholarship, one may distil its contribution into three influential postulates concerning the role elections play in authoritarian rule. The first views elections as a valve releasing social discontent and enabling the regime to survive crises. A second perspective treats elections as moments of clientelistic transactions between candidates and voters. The final framework portrays elections as a performance displaying a regime’s power and evoking awe among voters.
Although earlier theorists saw liberalization as a slippery slope (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986) and dubbed elections the “death of dictatorship” (Huntington, 1991), Brumberg (1992) drew on Egypt to hypothesize the opposite. Rather than sinking dictators, elections might buoy them through stormy periods. Seemingly inclusionary measures would be “survival strategies” for preserving a regime rather than democratic pacts transforming them. He reasoned that plebiscitary politics in Egypt could open up the political arena to a degree of participation sufficient to attract support from groups with an interest in political reform, such as intellectuals and professionals, without at the same time creating conditions that might give these groups a means to undermine the hegemony of the ruling elites. (Brumberg, 1995, p. 235)

At the same time, Brumberg held out the prospect that President Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-present) could turn on these influential groups and retract any concessions through authoritarian measures, a prerogative exercised in the late 1990s (Kienle, 1998). The image of a pressure valve for releasing social demands by temporarily broadening a regime’s coalition inverted the conventional intuition that elections would catalyze national change. It remains one of the most widely applied frameworks for comprehending voting in Middle East politics (e.g., Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Lucas, 2003; Moore & Salloukh, 2007; Posusney, 2002).

A second set of comparativists noted the material aspect of elections connecting rulers and ruled. Research on elections as moments of clientelism and rent seeking occupies a major place in recent literature on the developing world (Bank, 2004; Blaydes, 2006; van de Walle, 2003; Wantchekon, 2003). Earlier students of Middle East politics and elections had noted the importance of clientelism, defined by “reciprocal obligation” between asymmetrically advantaged individuals (Ayubi, 1995; Rouquié, 1978, p. 23). Kassem’s work on voting in Egypt and Lust-Okar’s study of Jordanian elections revived that tradition. Examining the quotidian workings of authoritarianism, they explored the networks of reciprocal obligations that tied rulers to parliamentarians and candidates to voters (Kassem, 1999; Lust-Okar, 2006). Those participating were not contesting power but vying for government spending, as Lust-Okar (2006) described:

That elections and parliaments provide a basis for the distribution of patronage is not entirely unique to authoritarian regimes; to some extent, this characterizes electoral politics in democracies as well. However, in
authoritarian elections, the distribution of state resources trumps by far any role of elections as arenas for contests over the executive or critical policies. (p. 459)

It follows that voters are likely to join the process to address basic economic needs and extract government concessions.

The third approach to elections emerged recently. In an article and subsequent book, Wedeen proposed that elections in unified Yemen under Ali Abdallah Salih (r. 1990-present) provided a demonstration of state power. More precisely, it represented an instant when the regime would “act like a state.” Rather than mimicking democracy, Salih’s landslide victories in 1999 and 2006 advertised the regime’s dominance over its opponents, its ability to orchestrate massive support for the president (Wedeen, 2003, pp. 691-692, 2008, p. 77). The aim was not to convince Yemenis of a credible victory but rather to set the ruler beyond challenge. Salih’s vanquished opponent in 2006 decried procedural subterfuge while conceding the president’s election was “a reality” (Wedeen, 2008, p. 80). Few other comparativists have yet applied or tested Wedeen’s novel perspective on multicandidate elections. This article provides one of the first opportunities to explore empirically how the framework travels beyond its original case.

To consider the role of elections in displaying state power as well as arguments that they foster regime survival and rent distribution, I use global data on the occurrence of elections and levels of competition and participation in them. Within this larger spread of data, I turn to the record of elections in the MENA region as well as patterns in sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, and East Asia. This article does not seek to answer the question of whether or not elections sustain authoritarianism. My more modest goal is to see whether country-level and regional trends support the leading ideas connecting elections and authoritarianism. Rather than proving or falsifying accounts of survival strategies, clientelism, and state performance, this article advances our understanding by indicating which accounts are more or less credible in particular circumstances. As a “plausibility probe” it elucidates whether these suppositions appear valid in light of a broader empirical sample (Eckstein, 1975, p. 108). The analysis thereby informs how extant theories may be effectively utilized, and it illumines areas for research that may have escaped attention (Anderson, 2006, p. 210).

Without rising to the level of abstraction in global statistical tests, comparison of a small number of regions and countries allows for a systematic check of existing assumptions and arguments, more persuasive in some respects than case studies alone. Because I seek to evaluate elections in the Middle
East relative to developmental peers, I excluded from the analysis the Americas and Europe. In those regions processes of state building and decolonization generally occurred much earlier than in the countries of Africa, MENA, and Asia. Accordingly, this study examines elections in the Middle East with respect to elections in other “late-late” developing regions (Gerschenkron, 1962).

One of the advantages of researching elections is a surfeit of reported data. Many sources were utilized as I built an original data set on electoral competition—or the lack of competition—in 195 countries during the period 1950-2009. The principal contribution of this data set is a nearly comprehensive measure of competitiveness in elections for the chief executive, the top power holder in government. Setting aside regime classifications of democracy and authoritarianism, which often change retrospectively based on subsequent events, I measured the margin of victory between the victor and second-place finisher. This broad treatment of elections does not preclude subsequent refinement based on additional data, but it gives the present study a replicable, nonelaborate measure that can be applied cross-nationally. Unless otherwise noted, the main data on frequency and competitiveness of elections in Africa, MENA, and Asia derive from this data set (available from the author on request). I turn next to the empirical record, beginning with the number of contested elections in these regions.

The Infrequency of Executive Elections in MENA

Although the Middle East is known for its preponderance of nondemocratic regimes, the precise contours of this profile are seldom contrasted with the pattern in other world areas. Comparativists have looked at elections in MENA (Lust-Okar & Jamal, 2002; Posusney, 2002), but to what extent are the region’s top officials chosen, even nominally so, through multicandidate elections? If authoritarianism with elections has become the global norm, does this political mode hold for the region in which nondemocracy predominates?

To inform these questions I tracked the occurrence of contested executive elections from 1974 through 2009 in the four selected regions. This period covers the “third wave” of democratization as well as the post-cold war period (Huntington, 1991). The evidence shows a strong general trend toward elections for the top offices of government—the same plebiscitarian zeitgeist that drove research into hybrid regimes (see Figure 1 below). The movement for democratic forms of government, however, has shown less influence over MENA.

The MENA region significantly lags behind other developing areas in the occurrence of contested elections for the top positions of governmental
authority. This election gap emerges partly from the multitude of monarchies in which the sovereign lies, de jure, beyond voters’ reach. Nearly half of the 18 countries of the MENA region are kingdoms or emirates (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates). A ninth state, Iran, was a monarchy through 1979, and its successor regime insulates the chief executive (the leader) through an exclusive council (the Assembly of Experts). With political structures precluding executive elections in 50% of the region, MENA confronts a lower ceiling on the maximum portion of countries in which voters can choose rulers. In 2009 the regional share with elected executives was one third, composing elected premiers in two countries (Israel, Iraq) and elected presidents in four states (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen). Most of these states introduced multicandidate elections for the top political offices only recently: Yemen and Tunisia in 1999, Egypt in 2005. Although some commentators hailed these elections as watershed moments, the cross-regional data suggest the regimes of MENA were simply latecomers to the trend of multiparty authoritarianism.

Regional shares for Africa and MENA at the beginning and end of the past 35 years show a significant difference. Although most governments in Africa remain under nondemocratic rule of some sort, an overwhelming majority of African states permit multicandidate elections for the top office holder (87.8%).

Figure 1. Rate of contested executive elections in developing regions (1974-2009)
This was not the case in 1973, when the regional share of executive elected in contested elections (13.2%) barely exceeded the portion in the Middle East (10.5%). These regional patterns raise questions for the theories of elections and authoritarianism under consideration.

There is a striking parallel between the so-called democratic deficit of the Middle East and an “electoralist deficit,” the absence, not of free and fair executive elections but of executive elections of any kind. Rather than pondering elections in the Middle East, comparativists unfamiliar with the region may be curious to know why the region has so few of them. Why has the post–cold war trend toward electoral authoritarianism not swept MENA along? In regard to the issue of regime endurance, what does the relative dearth of elections for the top positions of power imply about the role of elections as survival strategies, rent-seeking opportunities, and demonstrations of power?

At a minimum, one can note that most of the states in the region are enduring, managing patron–client relations, and making the state’s presence known without multicandidate polls for the ruler. One could modestly expand the set of electoralist regimes by including legislative elections (e.g., in Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait) and elections for Iran’s subordinate president, but this would not alter the underlying pattern. The relative lack of executive elections in a region characterized by resilient, nondemocratic regimes directs attention to other mechanism and arenas in which these processes may occur. In short, when generalizing from the main three theories comparativists may need to broaden their field of vision to consider how nonelectoral mechanisms are delivering the kinds of effects described by Brumberg, Lust-Okar, Wedeen, and others.

**Competition in MENA Presidential Elections**

The previous section compared MENA to other regions. The remainder of this article contextualizes multicandidate presidential elections in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen along two dimensions: competition and turnout.

Unlike cases such as the Philippines (1986), Nicaragua (1990), and Kenya (2002), presidential polls in MENA have not resulted in the defeat of incumbent or ruling party candidates. To the contrary, elections in Algeria (2004, 2009), Egypt (2005), Yemen (1999, 2006), and Tunisia (1999, 2004, 2009) renewed the tenure of incumbent rulers. Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been president of Algeria since 1999, whereas Mubarak, Salih, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (r. 1987–present) have led their countries for much longer periods. By international standards, the conditions surrounding voting are widely reported
to favor the ruler egregiously, although the extent of overt pre-electoral, election day, and postvoting interference varies among the cases. These factors—the incumbents’ predictable victories, the prolonged tenure of rulers in office, the obstacles erected before other contestants—ground the cases in the authoritarian regime type. For that reason, elections in these countries have rightly been treated as moments of coalitional reengineering, clientelistic deal making, and state aggrandizement, not opportunities for rotating power among parties. One thus questions not how closely these polls approximate the ideal of electoral democracy but how far they depart from it: How do they appear in a broader sample of presidential elections in developing countries?

To gauge levels of electoral competition in the contested presidential elections of the Middle East, I measure the margin of victory between the winning candidate and the second place finisher in the deciding round of voting (including runoffs when they occurred). For example, in Yemen in 2006, President Salih officially garnered 77.2% whereas his opponent received 21.8%. Thus, the margin of victory was 56.6%. In Algeria in 2004, Bouteflika won reelection by a margin of 78.6%, and Mubarak defeated the second-place finisher in 2005 by a similarly large spread of 81.0%. The gap between Ben Ali and his opponent was even vaster; the Tunisian president took 94.5% of the official vote in 2004, more than 90% more than any other candidate in the race.

On their face, these outcomes flagrantly favor the incumbents, but how distorted are they? To answer this question, I consider the full set of 197 multicandidate presidential elections that occurred during 1974-2009 in Africa, MENA, and Asia. Because the main theories of elections and authoritarianism address regime survival, rent distribution, and state prowess, the relationship of Middle East elections to the broader universe of election results can yield insights into what these processes mean for rulers and citizens. Outlandishly skewed results would, for instance, comport with Wedeen’s (2008, p. 221) theory of regimes “acting like states,” parading their dominance, if only briefly.

Figure 2 plots a histogram of victory margins in presidential elections of the late-late developing regions. It includes a normal distribution curve centered at the mean (a victory margin of 38%). In the sample from Africa, MENA, and Asia, Middle Eastern polls appear at the low to noncompetitive end of the spectrum, on which margins of victory approach 100% on the right-hand side. Vertical lines locate outcomes from the Yemeni, Algerian, Egyptian, and Tunisian elections. In competiveness among the 197 elections, the nine races rank 144th, 149th, 169th, 174th, 176th, 182nd, 184th, 190th, and 194th.

The graph confirms certain intuitions about Middle Eastern elections by showing what is not occurring. Opposition movements are not contesting elections anywhere close to the “normal” range of competition. The case that most
closely approximates an average presidential margin of victory is Yemeni president Salih’s reelection in 2006, although even that outcome falls in the downward slope of the right tail (less competitive than 73% of the set). Outcomes in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen (1999) are still more lopsided. It is worth observing that this graph does not include parliamentary polls or any elections from Europe or Latin America. In a full global sample the presidential polls would emerge as even less competitive.

One could imagine, and test for, a point at which the margin of victory evinced a serious electoral struggle holding potential for incumbents’ defeat. That zone of contestation would probably begin to the left of the mean. In other words, when Arab opposition candidates lose by 35% or 25% comparativists might reexamine whether elections are primarily safety valves or patronage opportunities, not competitive arenas. For the present, these data provide empirical support for those arguments and for the accompanying skepticism about multipartyism—even at the executive level—as a harbinger of democracy. In particular, the gulf between incumbent and opposition performance invites extension of Wedeen’s argument about the production of elections in

**Figure 2. Competitiveness of presidential elections in developing regions (1974-2009)**
Yemen. As it happens, poll results in Algeria, Egypt, and especially Tunisia may embody the phenomenon even more dramatically than under Salih’s regime. Those three countries also evince an intriguing convergence in the margin of victory. A share of 88% or so (with the runner-up in single digits) may today provide for incumbents what they previously reaped with 99% showings in single-candidate plebiscites.

The final facet of elections, participation as measured by turnout, speaks to the utility of such research and broadens the empirical evidence on theories of survival strategies and clientelism.

**Participation Levels in MENA Presidential Elections**

Turnout bears on how comparativists interpret elections in authoritarian conditions, but popular participation seldom receives systematic attention. When considered at all, participation rates get noted in particular countries, without broader evaluation. They should matter a great deal, though, if elections are expected to provide benefits for government officials and segments of the public.

Levels of participation can reflect the function of elections for rulers and citizens. If elections serve as a pressure valve for tempering elite or mass dissent, one would expect to find substantial turnout. Similarly, if elections distribute rents, the number of participants in a developing state will expectedly be substantial, for voting carries great incentives: from the single-day payoff of selling one’s vote to the returns of serving the patron after Election Day. Finally, if elections generate an aura of invincibility around the ruler, voting would expectedly be widespread. In sum, the observable implication of the leading arguments about elections in the Middle East is a healthy and perhaps even high level of turnout. The more voters, the more confident we can be in understanding elections as involving the public in a process of regime stabilization, clientelistic exchange, or ruler glorification. Low turnout would not necessarily mean that elections hold no significance but that their role and import may need to be revisited, particularly in comparison to other venues of contestation.

These considerations raise empirical questions that are in some ways quite basic: What is a “low” level of turnout in developing countries? Furthermore, to what extent should we expect turnout figures, such as electoral outcomes, to be distorted? On these points this analysis opens up new approaches to the study of authoritarian politics. It is a plausibility probe of certain intuitions.
and arguments, not an exercise in cross-national hypothesis testing. Like the above evaluations of electoral frequency and competitiveness, judgments about high and low levels of participation will be inherently relative. Likewise, a critical consideration of turnout rate inflation may begin, in the first stage, by discerning the parameters of the “normal range.” In sum, this discussion provides an empirical basis for subsequent studies of turnout in democracies and autocracies.

To explore turnout, I collected data on the portion of registered voters who cast ballots in presidential elections of Africa, MENA, and Asia during 2004-2008. This 5-year period included the most recent multicandidate polls of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, plus 52 other presidential elections. Some of the governments in question are considered electoral democracies; others are typically called electoral authoritarian. After gathering turnout information from Psephos and the IFES election database, I used the list of electoral democracies published by Freedom House to identify those countries in which elections were judged minimally democratic. There were 22, and data from those states provide a meaningful baseline for evaluating the broader span of data. The official turnout among electoral democracies averaged 68.6%. In the nondemocracies the mean was marginally lower: 66.8%.

Table 1 lists turnout levels from the 58 elections, ranking the countries in terms of turnout from highest to lowest: Tunisia (2004), Tunisia (2009), Algeria (2009), Yemen (2006), Algeria (2004), and Egypt (2005) ranked 4th, 7th, 19th, 35th, 45th, and 58th. Turnout in most of the listed presidential elections fell between 40% and 91%. Only eight elections, four at the top of the range and four at the bottom, are outside this band of typically reported turnout.

This panoramic of public engagement contextualizes variance in voting rates among Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. Although all four states clustered on the low end of electoral competitiveness, they display intriguing differences in turnout. Voting rates in Tunisia are high; in Yemen and Algeria they fall within the normal range; in Egypt they are strikingly low. With reported voter participation at 22.9%, the Egyptian presidential election of 2005 registered less than a third of the average turnout. This was not a one-off event for the Arab Republic of Egypt. Independent observers reported 20% turnout in monitored polling stations over three rounds of voting in parliamentary elections that same fall (Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring, 2005, pp. 37-57). Egyptian specialists are accustomed to such stories. The data acquire greater significance, however, in comparison to peer governments that are just as authoritarian as Egypt but that experience much higher levels of public engagement on Election Day.
**Table 1. Presidential Election Turnout in Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and Asia (2004-2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Turnout (%)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Turnout (%)</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Turkmenistan</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>30. Ghana</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>2. Indonesia</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>31. Uganda</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tunisia</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>33. Sierra Leona</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tajikistan</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>34. Congo</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Uzbekistan</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>35. Yemen</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
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<td>7. Tunisia</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>36. Mauritania</td>
<td>64.6</td>
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<td>8. Namibia</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>37. Togo</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<td>85.1</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>38. Gabon</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>11. Taiwan</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>40. Madagascar</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>42. Guinea-Bissau</td>
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<td>58.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Turnout is calculated as a portion of registered voters. Figures are for the deciding round, including second rounds of voting (“runoffs”). Middle East and North Africa states (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen) are in bold. Data were collected from the Psephos and IFES online databases. Equatorial Guinea 2009 results are from http://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=262 (accessed June 28, 2010); Kyrgyzstan 2009 results are from http://www.rferl.org/content/Withdrawals_Protests_Mar_Kyrgyz_Election/1783700.html (accessed June 24, 2010); Malawi 2009 results are from http://www.norway.mw/News_and_events/embassy_news/elections2009/ (accessed June 24, 2010).

a. Identified by Freedom House as an electoral democracy in a given year.
Exploring the Turnout Puzzle in Egypt

Egyptian turnout rates constitute one of the most compelling findings of this article, with distinct implications for how we conceive of elections in the reproduction of Mubarak’s rule. The population of Egypt in 2005 was nearly 80 million with approximately 32 million registered voters. Despite introducing multi-candidate presidential elections with great fanfare, Mubarak mustered only 6,316,714 votes. His copartisans regularly reap such lackluster support in the country’s quinquennial lower house elections. In the Arab world’s most populous state, a country that exemplifies electoral authoritarianism, more than 90% of the population is not bribed, coerced, or even artificially reported into lodging votes for the ruling party and its standard bearers. This anomaly raises several questions. To what extent are calculations about regime survival, clientelism, and state dominance at work in an exercise that involves so few of a country’s citizens? What explains the extraordinary amount of electoral absenteeism in Egypt? Last, if elections are not a salient arena of contentious politics, through which alternative institutions and processes does the regime co-opt its critics, disperse rents, and act like a state?

Future research may address these queries, but a comparative perspective on Egyptian electoral turnout poses an implicit challenge to the three leading propositions about elections and authoritarianism, or at least about their applicability to recent politics under Mubarak. If the utility of elections as pressure valves can be judged by the engagement of critics and dissatisfied groups who let off steam through the process, Egyptian elections do not appear to be appeasing many of the government’s detractors. The great absence of participants does not, in itself, signal a mass undercurrent of dissent. In fact, turnout rates in the 2005 presidential election were not significantly lower than the rates earlier in Mubarak’s tenure and during his predecessor’s. Thus, one cannot infer that nonvoters were antagonistic as well as disengaged. Their distance from the polls does invite attention to other concerns, outside of voting, and the ways Mubarak and his associates manage those issues, whether substantively or nominally. Arguments about clientelism in Egypt also merit reconsideration. Mubarak’s patronage network may pervade Egyptian society, but in comparative terms it is coaxing few Egyptians to vote. Other pathways toward material benefits and government services may supersede electoral rent seeking (Singerman, 1996).

The turnout puzzle reflects also on the meaning of Wedeen’s theory for Egypt. Unlike its counterpart in Yemen, the Egyptian government does not...
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seem to be acting like a state during elections—or at least not a very compelling one. If Mubarak and his associates are putting on a performance, it is a major flop. The ruling elite does not appear bent on concocting higher levels of participation, either by driving more voters to the polls or announcing different figures. The elites who would presumably have the most at stake during elections are, in their way, reciprocating the citizens’ inattention and disregard. No doubt Mubarak’s retinue finds other opportunities to exhibit state-like capacities, but its national elections are a subdued affair compared to those of peer governments.

Unlike in Egypt, official turnout rates in Yemen and Algeria fall in the normal range of electoral participation. These levels of involvements provide another layer of support for theories of survival strategies, clientelism, and the production of state power. The numbers from Tunisia rest conspicuously among turnout figures from authoritarian states of the former Soviet Union. Although Salih’s election in Yemen signifies how regimes use elections to display their presence, Ben Ali’s polls may epitomize the phenomenon.

It is germane to note that politicians often seek to exaggerate their popularity by meddling with turnout numbers. Official turnout data should thus be treated as an upper bound, not a reliable reflection, of popular sentiment. Independent coverage of voting rates in Egypt and Yemen indicated the figures had been inflated (Abu-Nasr, 2006; “Mubarak Son Leaves,” 2005). One can suppose that turnout in Yemen’s 2006 presidential election was less than 50%, as the opposition contended, and that less than 20% of registered Egyptian electorate voted in 2005, as reports suggested. Even so, turnout in Egypt would remain dramatically lower, with the same accompanying implications. Moreover, to the extent that nondemocratic regimes listed in Table 1 are magnifying turnout rates, the above implications from Egypt will bear on elections in additional authoritarian cases. Skepticism about government data strengthens the case for reevaluating existing accounts.

The more elections in which turnout resembled officially and independently reported turnout figures from Egypt 2005, the stronger the basis for investigating nonelectoral mechanisms of power. The paradox of Egypt in its first year of multicandidate presidential elections was that street demonstrations and contentious collective action escalated even as the electorate was muted (El-Mahdi, 2009). A cascade of labor and professional protests in subsequent years reinforces the impression that the most dramatic events lie beyond the regime’s electoral stage. Comparativists may discover a similar pattern in other “electoral” authoritarian regimes.

Another area that may support or complicate the prior theories lies in the interaction of executive and legislative elections, into which this article has not delved. Do powerful incumbents such as Mubarak use different forms of
elections for different purposes, employing presidential voting to display state strength and legislative polls to distribute patronage or shunt dissent into the ballot box? Based on the present data, that scenario seems less likely in Egypt than in a country where levels of competition and participation vary across presidential elections and lower level contests. And although the patterns of legislative and presidential elections in Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen are not congruent with Egypt’s, in a comparative perspective they bear great resemblance—most noticeably in the perennial hegemony of the president and his party. In short, the present Arab cases suggest a replication of labor rather than a division of functions between presidential and legislative elections.

Conclusion

Comparativists of authoritarianism and Middle Eastern regimes have labored intensely on the subject of elections in nondemocratic contexts. This article joins that broader intellectual project by contextualizing elections of the MENA region and four of its presidential autocracies. Evidence from the developing world allows us to probe the plausibility of current explanations and inform the creation of new hypotheses.

Executive elections in MENA have occurred less frequently, enjoyed less competition, and, in the case of Egypt, attracted far fewer voters than contemporary elections in Africa and Asia. The relative dearth of multicandidate polls for the executive points to other mechanisms at work behind regime survival and rent distribution. In the four states holding contested presidential elections, titanic victory margins strongly support theoretical approaches that portray elections as political safety valves, patronage fetes, and regime exhibitions. Opposition performance to date remains far from the competitive zone in which incumbent defeat seems conceivable. Only in the realm of turnout do empirical trends run against the grain of the leading assumptions. Although voting rates in Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen comport with the expectations of the main theories, the Egyptian electorate is marked by enervation and detachment. Because the Egyptian public was far from quiescent during the 2005 presidential contest and its aftermath, shallow voter participation may say more about the place of elections in Egyptian political life than about relations between the government and citizenry.

As comparativists shed the transition paradigm and its democratization telos, elections continue to occupy a prominent if problematic place. On one hand, elections are well-publicized, easily observed events that produce ample data and evoke intense curiosity among academic and general audiences. Scholars have considered how elections serve nondemocratic ends; events in many countries buttress those theories. On the other hand, elections are
infrequent and, in the Middle East, largely inconsequential for the personnel and policy changes political scientists of North America and Europe customarily expect. This article suggests that specialists of authoritarianism in the developing world should be judicious in framing their claims about how elections matter and developing testable empirical implications from those theories: Complexity should not prevent clarity.

In addition to testing the effects of elections, researchers can determine the relative significance of elections in contrast to other events and venues. Where citizens of authoritarian governments vigorously pursue their goals outside of elections, comparativists should follow.

**Appendix**

**U.S. State Department Country Listings for Select Regions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>South and Central Asia</th>
<th>East Asia and the Pacific</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<td>Benin</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>Myanmar</td>
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<td>Nepal</td>
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<td>Chad</td>
<td>Libya</td>
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<td>Comoros</td>
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<td>Congo-Brazzaville</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
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<td>Congo, Dem. Rep.</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
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<td>Côte d’Ivoire</td>
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<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
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<td>Taiwan</td>
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Note

1. Social scientists have no firm rule for coding countries in regions. I referred to the State Department’s six regional categories (the Americas, Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific) from the department’s website. In a basic sense this grouping matches the literature in comparative politics. The appendix provides the region and country listing used in this article.

References


**Bio**

**Jason Brownlee** is an associate professor of government and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches comparative politics and U.S. foreign policy. He has written on elections and authoritarianism in journals such as *World Politics* and the *American Journal of Political Science* as well as in his book, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (2007).