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# When Does the Honeymoon End? Electoral Cycles of Satisfaction With Democracy in Africa

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*Scholars have argued that multiparty elections have a profound and immediate influence on mass evaluations of political support. However, what is less clear is whether the effects of elections are short lived or long lasting. Investigating dynamic effects of elections on mass perceptions of political regimes has profound implications on popular foundations of democratic consolidation in an era of democratic backsliding. This article examines electoral cycles in citizens' satisfaction with democracy (SWD)—an important dimension of political support—in multiparty regimes. First, we argue that proximity to elections enhances SWD because campaigns and elections include several processes that reduce the costs and increase the benefits of citizen engagement with the political system. This results in a bell-shaped relationship between citizens' proximity to elections and SWD. Second, we contend that electoral cycles in SWD should vary by the quality of elections and citizens' winner/loser status. We examine these hypotheses using Afrobarometer data in 34 multiparty regimes between 1999 and 2015 finding compelling support. SWD is higher among respondents surveyed closer to elections, while electoral cycles in SWD are more prominent among winners and around low-quality elections.*

**KEY WORDS:** African politics, democratization, electoral integrity, satisfaction with democracy, winner/loser effects

Since the "third wave" of transitions from authoritarian rule, multiparty elections for top officeholders have become a nearly universal phenomenon worldwide. As multiparty regimes proliferate, understanding the consequences of elections for regime stability has been one of the most pertinent issues for scholars and policymakers.[1] On the one hand, multiparty elections represent one of the most important channels for political engagement, preference aggregation, and vertical accountability. Competitive elections increase citizens' political efficacy and strengthen popular foundations of democracy. On the other hand, elections in hybrid regimes fail

[1]We examine multiparty elections held in electoral democracies and electoral autocracies. We expanded the scope of our analysis to electoral autocracies as it enables a much wider variation in the degree of electoral integrity, one of the core moderators in our statistical analysis.

to function as mechanisms of articulating popular will due to widespread fraud, violence, and administrative failures. According to this perspective, the introduction of multiparty elections weakens support for democratic institutions, which may undermine the popular basis for regime consolidation.

With these in mind, scholars have argued that election timing has profound and immediate consequences for mass political support of regime institutions and officials. Nowhere is the link between elections and political support more explored than the literature on citizens' satisfaction with democracy (SWD), or what we define as popular evaluations of how regimes function in practice.[2] Recent cross-national and single-country studies have examined how the macro features of elections, including the quality of elections (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017), proportionality of electoral systems (Anderson & Guillory, 1997), performance of election administration (Norris, 2014), political turnover (Moehler & Lindberg, 2009), and the timing of elections (Morgan-Jones & Loveless, 2021) can sway citizens' satisfaction with democracy. Influential works have also surveyed various individual-level correlates of SWD, including winner/loser status (Singh et al., 2012), political sophistication (Karp et al., 2003), and political participation (Kostelka & Blais, 2018).

Although these studies provide valuable insights, there are several gaps in our collective understanding of how elections influence SWD. First, it is less clear whether the effects of elections on SWD are long lasting or short lived. Second, very few studies have theorized why election cycles in SWD are likely to emerge, especially in contexts outside of established democracies. Third, scholars have not adequately explored the conditional influence of election-level and individual-level factors on the long-term dynamics of SWD.

Only a handful of studies have examined the medium- and long-term dynamics of citizens' regime evaluations (Anderson et al., 2005; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Loveless, 2021), and these innovative works focus disproportionately on liberal democracies. However, studying the dynamics of SWD outside of established democracies helps to bolster existing theories on democratization where SWD is an essential ingredient for democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

This article fills these gaps by examining electoral cycles in citizens' SWD outside of consolidated democracies. Building on the literature that details the democracy-enhancing effects of citizen engagement with government and political systems (Banducci & Karp, 2003; Bratton et al., 2005; Lindberg, 2006), we argue that fluctuations in political engagement during the electoral cycle can account for dynamics in SWD. Temporal proximity to elections enhances SWD because campaigns and elections (i.e., electoral periods) *reduce the costs* and *increase the benefits* of citizens' engagement in politics relative to other phases of the electoral cycle (i.e., nonelectoral periods). Our conceptualization of electoral proximity is guided by several studies that distinguish between electoral and nonelectoral periods (Arceneaux, 2006). Electoral periods start with political party primaries, general campaigns, then election day activities, and extend into the postelection period to include results announcement. Contrastingly, nonelectoral periods include phases of the political process when both political elites and citizens are not engaged in political activities directly related to election matters.

Elections make it easier for citizens to interact with politicians and to become more involved in, and informed about, the political system. Furthermore, campaigns and elections enhance citizens' bargaining power with the state and political elites for resources. As elections become less proximate, however, political elites have less incentives to maintain their linkages

[2]This definition is distinguished from support for democracy (which reflects evaluations of how democracy should work ideally).

with citizens. Opportunities for mass mobilization, information dissemination, and resource distribution decrease, while citizens have to expend more resources to remain connected to the political system, which may invariably increase mass dissatisfaction with how democracy works. In sum, we suggest that the relationship between electoral proximity and SWD approximates *a bell-shape: SWD increases as citizens approach campaigns and elections and decreases after the election and towards the middle of the election cycle*.

We also explore the conditions under which electoral cycles in SWD become salient according to two prominent determinants of SWD: citizens' winner/loser status[3] and countries' election quality. Specifically, we consider whether the "stability hypothesis" (Dahlberg & Linde, 2017), which states that winner/loser gaps in SWD remain stable throughout the election cycle, applies outside of established democracies. Moreover, given the cross-national variation in election quality and its centrality to democratic legitimacy, we explore whether less democratic elections spur election cycles in SWD.

We test our theoretical expectations using survey data from Afrobarometer (AB) in 34 multiparty regimes between 1999 and 2015 (approximately 185,000 respondents). Our results underscore the importance of elections in understanding the dynamics of SWD. Africans surveyed closer to an election, on average, report greater SWD relative to those surveyed at other points in the electoral cycle. SWD is lowest at the midpoint of the electoral cycle and highest in the months immediately before and after campaigns and elections. Finally, our findings also suggest that winners have the highest levels of SWD and are seemingly the most sensitive to electoral cycles in SWD (relative to losers). Furthermore, SWD is lowest in elections that are rigged (relative to credible elections), but even in the context of fraudulent elections, fluctuations in SWD exist.

Our study makes several important contributions. Our article is one of the first to highlight the existence of electoral cycles in SWD using comparative data across a variety of regime types, including electoral democracies and electoral autocracies, and how these dynamics vary based on the quality of elections and winner/loser status. Our findings are equally relevant for research on comparative democratization, especially the ongoing debate about the democratizing power of elections (Lindberg, 2006). Elections can enhance mass support for the political system, even in the short-term, by providing unique and cost-effective methods for citizens to participate in the political process (Teorell & Hadenius, 2009). However, the results also echo scholarly warnings about inferring too much about the election-democratization nexus, without focusing on (1) the role of high quality of elections in promoting political legitimacy (Flores & Nooruddin, 2016); (2) the debilitating consequences of elections for political minorities, including supporters of losing candidates (Moehler, 2009); and (3) the limits of electoralism relative to other institutional mechanisms that promote accountable and responsive governance between elections (Carothers, 2002).

## Dynamics of Satisfaction with Democracy

We define SWD as citizens' evaluation of the performance of nominally democratic institutions within their country. Whereas the literature on political support has yet to agree on the most appropriate conceptualization of SWD (Linde & Ekman, 2003), we explicitly distinguish SWD from other dimensions of David Easton's concept of political support such

[3]Our operationalization of winner/loser status is not based on actual vote-choice in previous elections, but on citizens' partisan affiliation with candidates/parties. Consequently, we are exploring the impact of 'quasi' or 'ideological' winner/loser status (Kim, 2009). Importantly, we assume that there is considerable overlap with how voters and those with strong partisan affiliations formulate their evaluations of regime performance, including SWD.

as diffuse support for democratic principles or more specific support such as trust in political institutions.

The literature on SWD focuses on how the macroinstitutional features of elections and citizens' characteristics and behavior during elections may be correlated with SWD. For instance, scholars have demonstrated that election quality (Norris, 2014) and citizens' winner/loser status (Anderson et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2012) are two strong predictors of SWD.

Despite these contributions, several crucial gaps in the literature remain. One of the main gaps is the lack of attention to how elections may influence intertemporal changes in SWD. Put simply, most studies use data from national or cross-national polls that are collected sometime after elections (Mattes, 2014; Norris, 2014). In doing so, these studies find a correlation between some characteristics of an election (e.g., election quality) and SWD at a single point in time.

Recently, scholars have modeled the dynamics of SWD using two main approaches. One group of studies has explored short-term changes in SWD using single-country panel data collected immediately before and after elections (Blais & Gélineau, 2007; Singh et al., 2012). Because these studies tracked the same individuals in pre- and postelectoral periods while restricting the scope of the analysis to a single country, they made it easier to identify causal relationships between features of elections and regime evaluations. This group of studies was limited, however, because it focused on preelectoral and postelectoral periods and thus did not examine the dynamics of regime orientations during other stages of the electoral cycle.

Another group of studies probe the long-term dynamics of SWD, namely, the cumulative effects of more than one election cycle (Anderson et al., 2005; Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Loveless, 2021; Moehler & Lindberg, 2009; Nemčok & Wass, 2021). Anderson et al.'s (2005) seminal work on winner/loser gaps in SWD analyzes aggregate-level SWD in Britain, Germany, and Spain between 1975 and 1995. All three countries displayed important fluctuations in SWD for winners and losers both between elections *and* across several election cycles. Dahlberg and Linde (2017) explicitly modeled the effects of winner/loser status on SWD using panel data from Sweden. In accordance with the findings of Anderson et al. (2005), they found that SWD fluctuated during the electoral cycle, although gaps between winners and losers remained stable. More recently, Loveless (2021) investigated the durability of winner/loser gaps in SWD across elections in 27 European countries and found that the winner/loser gaps in SWD persists for almost 5 years.

Building upon the literature, we illuminate the dynamics of SWD *between two elections* (i.e., during the electoral cycle) by systematically comparing SWD during election periods with nonelection periods. Specifically, we theorize that, as we will discuss in more detail below, these dynamics are likely to emerge because of the way in which elections make political engagement more cost effective.

Our approach also advances the burgeoning research on electoral cycles in SWD or institutional trust (Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Hooghe & Stiers, 2016; Loveless, 2021) that, while impactful, has not adequately theorized when electoral cycles are likely to emerge and the main mechanisms driving these cycles (Loveless, 2021). What makes our approach unique is that we are one of the first to argue that SWD increases in the period leading up to an election, which we attribute to the three mechanisms through which citizens may experience greater levels of political engagement during campaigns and elections (see also van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). We also argue that SWD begins to decline sometime after an election, providing evidence that the election boost is not durable or stable as suggested by some studies (Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Loveless, 2021).

Furthermore, we narrow the scope of the analysis to regimes where democracy has not been consolidated, regimes where elections fall below democratic standards, or regimes where democracy is restricted between elections (i.e., new democracies, electoral democracies, and electoral autocracies). We assume that it is in these regimes that fluctuations in SWD have implications for the quality of governance, as these regimes are more susceptible to political instability.

Moreover, there are other factors that have the potential to shape cycles in SWD that are more likely to be salient outside established democracies. For instance, Nemčok and Wass (2021) show that SWD varies between elections, especially in new democracies, because of the way that party-system volatility impacts the composition of governments. Specifically, we reengage existing literature on SWD by considering whether electoral cycles in SWD vary when (1) elections fall below democratic standards and (2) citizens support the losing candidate/party. Although research on how SWD differs among winners and losers is voluminous (Anderson et al., 2005), only a few scholars have theorized and empirically tested the durability of winner/loser effects between elections (Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Loveless, 2021; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). The consensus among these studies is that the winner/loser gap remains stable following elections, particularly in advanced democracies. However, the limited evidence in new democracies and transitional settings raise the possibility that winner/loser gaps in SWD may vary in ways that reflect differences in the institutional context.

## Electoral Cycles of Political Legitimacy: Participation, Information, and Goods Provisions

Our theory assumes that the nature and scope of citizen engagement with the political system can shape popular satisfaction with democracy. The literature has highlighted several pathways through which political engagement can enhance democratic norms (Banducci & Karp, 2003; Kostelka & Blais, 2018; Lindberg, 2006). Bratton et al. (2005) suggest that political engagement influences citizens' regime orientations by boosting cognitive awareness and political efficacy, which could result in heightened satisfaction with regime outputs.

We suggest that there are fundamental differences in how citizens become engaged in the political process during electoral and nonelectoral periods. Campaigns and elections include several processes that simultaneously *reduce the costs* and *increase the benefits* of citizen engagement with the political system, relative to nonelectoral periods. As elections become near, there are more opportunities for citizens to connect with political elites as well as participate in, and become more knowledgeable about, the political process. Furthermore, elections also enhance citizens' leverage in securing concessions from the state and political elites.

Building on these insights, we suggest that asymmetries in political engagement between electoral and nonelectoral periods may contribute to over-time differences in how citizens evaluate their political systems. Specifically, SWD may peak as elections become near and decrease as the time after elections increases. Although there are several mechanisms through which asymmetric political engagement emerges, we focus on *three*: participation, information, and goods provisions.

Elections represent an equilibrium for mass political engagement and elite mobilization of citizens. Electoral periods usually provide increased opportunities for citizens to *actively participate* in the political process that are either not available or costlier between elections.

Additionally, political elites are incentivized to mobilize and directly connect with voters through various modes in order to win elections, signal regime strength, and gather information about citizens (Karp & Banducci, 2008). These efforts directly decrease the resources that citizens would normally have to expend to connect with the government and the political system, thereby making engagement less costly.

As elections become distant, however, the costs to mass participation in politics increase relative to the benefits. Political elites, especially those in the incumbent government, are less motivated to mobilize and connect with the citizenry and are often less responsive to citizens' demands (Strom, 1990). Although the rates of *active participation* in politics during elections dwarf other stages of the political process, research investigating the effect of participation on SWD is less definitive. Kostelka and Blais (2018) contend that "participating in an election makes citizens more satisfied with the way democracy works" (p. 374) and support this contention with panel data from five western democracies.

Similarly, electoral periods are a focal point for the dissemination and mass consumption of political information. During campaigns and elections, political information on a range of issues, including the state of the economy or elites' policy positions, is more readily available (Arceneaux, 2006). Voters are inundated with information as political parties are interested in garnering votes during campaigns (Holmberg, 1999). Meanwhile, electoral proximity seems to boost citizens' attentiveness to political information and enhance political learning (Stevenson & Vavreck, 2000). However, between elections, political elites and other third-party actors find it difficult to sustain the flow of political information to citizens, which could increase the resources that citizens have to invest to remain politically engaged. Moreover, several studies associate increased information flows during elections with more favorable perceptions of SWD (Banducci & Karp, 2003).

Lastly, participation in elections boosts citizens' SWD relative to other phases of the electoral process, because elections enable citizens to exact programmatic and particularistic benefits (Lindberg, 2003). The well-established literature on political business cycles demonstrates that incumbents tend to pursue expansionary fiscal policy during electoral periods to enhance their reelection prospects in developing countries (Brender & Drazen, 2005). Citizens benefit directly as governments use these policies to fund infrastructure spending (i.e., roads, public utilities, and schools), to boost the wages of state employees, and to finance the incumbent's political campaigns. Kramon (2016) argues that the distribution of electoral handouts to African voters credibly signals politicians' competence, trustworthiness, and electoral viability. Similarly, the literature on clientelism suggests that citizens also reap the benefits of electoral proximity as politicians engage in targeted preelection distribution of resources (e.g., campaign goodies, cash, food, and jobs) to encourage voter participation in campaigns and elections or to explicitly shape vote choice (i.e., vote buying; Lindberg, 2003).[4] By contrast, during nonelectoral periods, many elected governments, particularly those in less economically developed states, lack the fiscal space to sustain these levels of public spending (Flores & Nooruddin, 2016).

In sum, we suggest that electoral cycles in SWD may arise because elections simultaneously increase the benefits and decrease the costs of citizen engagement in politics. Specifically, elections

[4]Scholars also suggest that the democracy-enhancing effects of elections may dissipate when people perceive that democratic institutions are entrenched in political corruption (Donovan & Karp, 2017). Whether those who benefit from goods provisions support the incumbent or evaluate regime performance positively depends on individual- and country-level contexts. We test these possibilities by examining how electoral cycles of this mechanism may change according to election quality and winner/loser status (Figures S6.5 and S6.6 in the online supporting information).

enhance the opportunities for citizens to (1) connect with political elites, (2) access political information, and (3) secure state resources. This leads to our main hypothesis:

> *H1:* SWD should increase as citizens move from the midpoint of the electoral cycle towards the election and decrease as citizens move away the election to the midpoint in the electoral cycle. This results in a bell-shaped relationship between citizens' SWD and temporal proximity to an election.

### Conditioning Electoral Cycles of SWD: Election Quality and Winner/Loser Status

While our theory suggests elections should enhance citizens evaluations of how democracy works in practice by making political engagement more cost effective, we also recognize that not all elections are the same. Temporal dynamics of SWD may be contingent on micro- and macrolevel factors of which we highlight two: *election quality* and citizens' *winner/loser status*.

We expect election cycles in SWD to be flatter during high-quality elections relative to rigged elections due to four reasons. First, in high-quality elections, candidates have an incentive to begin campaigning and mobilizing voters earlier in the election cycle relative to fraudulent elections. Consequently, SWD increases more gradually in high-quality elections (relative to low-quality elections) as citizens experience opportunities to learn, participate, and benefit materially from elections much earlier in the campaign and elections period.

Second, candidates prioritize strategies for campaigning and mobilizing citizens that have a more meaningful and long-lasting effect on SWD in high-quality elections. For example, in high-quality elections, candidates may prioritize linkages that provide detailed information about candidates' platforms (i.e., through debates) and meaningful opportunities to connect with political elites (door-to-door campaigns). Such programmatic engagement by candidates may enhance voters' confidence in their country's democratic principles as well as free and fair elections in the future. Meanwhile in low-quality elections, because the main emphasis is on mobilizing citizens to turnout, elites prioritize linkages that provide immediate but less enduring payoffs such as the distribution of goods provisions (Higashijima, 2022). This may lead to increasing SWD around elections but may not have long-lasting effects because nonprogrammatic election campaigning is unlikely to improve voters' confidence in the practice of democracy and future free and fair elections.

Additionally, we also expect SWD to decrease at a slower rate following high-quality elections relative to low-quality elections because governments elected through free and fair elections usually enjoy a longer "honeymoon" period. Several studies have shown that voters are less likely to withdraw support from the government and allow it more time to enact policies because they have been legitimately elected (Flores & Nooruddin, 2016). Finally, it could also be the case that baseline levels of SWD are already so high in countries that hold high-quality elections (due to having held high-quality elections in the past or the expectation that elections will be free and fair in the future) that spikes in SWD are less likely to occur during the election period relative to low-quality elections, where baseline levels of SWD are lower.[5] Following this, we suggest that:

> *H2:* The bell-shaped relationship between electoral proximity and SWD is flatter during high-quality elections than low-quality elections.

[5]This is somewhat akin to the deep reservoirs of diffuse support that Easton (1975) associated with high-quality democratic contexts. We are thankful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

Electoral cycles in SWD may also vary within countries by citizens' winner/loser status. In this respect, our theoretical expectation is somewhat different from the "stability hypothesis" (Dahlberg & Linde, 2017; Loveless, 2021) whereby the gap between winners and losers remains constant after elections in the context of advanced democracies. Instead, we suggest that SWD may not be a stable phenomenon, and the gap between winners and losers can vary between elections, especially in contexts outside of established democracies (Nemčok & Wass, 2021).

This is not to say, however, that losers do not experience postelection declines in SWD.[6] By our estimation, they do. But losers should have flatter SWD cycles relative to winners due to two reasons. First, one feature of elections outside of established Western democracies is that incumbent parties have significantly higher reelection rates compared to Western democracies. According to our calculations (based on the V-Dem data), in non-Western multiparty regimes (i.e., both electoral autocracies and electoral democracies), 26.7% of elections experience executive turnover, while 37.5% of elections in Western democracies experience it, approximately a 10% difference between the two. This incumbency advantage means that during campaigns, losers are likely to have been on the losing end of multiple elections and have lower expectations of victory. Consequently, elections provide fewer meaningful opportunities to engage in the political process, and the act of losing in previous elections has a lower marginal effect on SWD, particularly because baseline levels of SWD are so low.

Second, declines in SWD among losers following elections should be relatively small in comparison to winners whose expectations about the government's ability to deliver on election promises are more likely to remain unfulfilled as elections become more distant. Based on these mechanisms, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H3:* The bell-shaped relationship between electoral proximity and SWD is flatter for electoral losers relative to winners.

## Survey Data Analysis

### *Dependent Variables: Satisfaction with Democracy (SWD) and the Three Mechanisms*

We construct SWD, the main dependent variable, by combining data from Rounds 1–6 of Afrobarometer (AB) public opinion surveys. The merged dataset contains information on 184,896 respondents in 34 countries and 134 country-survey rounds between 1999 and 2015 (see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for a list of countries and rounds). Across all six rounds, AB evaluated citizens' satisfaction with the performance of the regime by asking "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way that democracy works in [country name]?" Response options include, "Not at All Satisfied," "Not Very Satisfied," "Fairly Satisfied," and "Very Satisfied." SWD is coded on a 0–3 scale, with 0 indicating "Not at All Satisfied" and 3 indicating "Very Satisfied". SWD has a mean of 1.55 and a standard deviation of 0.99. A slim majority of respondents (55%) report being fairly/very satisfied with the way democracy works, whereas 45% of respondents express dissatisfaction.

We suggest three mechanisms through which electoral proximity leads to increases in SWD: participation, information, and access to goods provisions. For the participation mechanism, we rely on a variable from AB that measures respondents' contact with their

[6]Research indicates that losers are more likely to experience declines in SWD and other political attitudes, immediately following any election (Conroy-Krutz & Kerr, 2015; Pierce et al., 2016).

member of parliament (MP).[7] Contact is widely considered a form of participation available to citizens at all stages of the democratic process (Croke et al., 2016). For the informational mechanism, AB has several political knowledge items, which ask respondents to identify the names of MPs, vice-president, local councilors, and finance minister. We use these questions and estimate a binary item response theory (IRT) model to create an interval latent variable *political knowledge*.[8] For the goods-provisions mechanism, we explore whether respondents are more likely to positively evaluate the state's provision of public goods immediately before or after elections.[9] Using respondent evaluations of six types of goods provision, we construct an interval-latent variable *goods provisions* via an ordinal IRT model.

### *Main Independent Variable: Electoral Proximity*

To capture the dynamic effects of elections, previous studies counted the number of months between the survey and the closest election (e.g., Eifert et al., 2010, Higashijima & Nakai, 2016). Simply measuring the proximity in months from the closest elections, however, cannot directly test our bell-shaped hypothesis on the electoral dynamics of SWD. This is because existing approaches do not distinguish between elections that precede or follow the administration of the survey or control for the varying length of time between elections. As an alternative, we adopt an approach similar to the one originally developed by Michelitch and Utych (2018), which measures the distance in time from the last election as a proportion of the electoral cycle. First, we measure the time in months between the closest (either upcoming or previous) legislative/executive election and the date of the AB survey (months from the closest election). Then, we divide this by the length of the electoral cycle (i.e., the time between the last legislative/executive election and upcoming legislative/executive elections). This calculation is summarized as follows:

$$\text{Electoral Proximity} = \frac{\text{Difference in months between survey and closest election}}{\text{Total months between last and upcoming elections}}$$

To distinguish time periods before and after the closest election while centering on the election date, we code *electoral proximity* as follows. When the closest election is an upcoming election, the electoral proximity variable takes a negative value (i.e., preelectoral period). When the closest election is a previous election, the variable takes a positive value (i.e., postelectoral period). *Electoral proximity* has a mean of −0.004 and a standard deviation of 0.28 across our sample. To test the bell-shaped relationship between elections and SWD, we introduce the square of electoral proximity (electoral proximity$^2$). The inclusion of the quadratic term allows us to examine whether SWD increases around elections and decreases as elections become less proximate.

One potential advantage of using this approach is that, if the timing of the surveys is independent of both a country's electoral calendar and the level of SWD, then it is possible that electoral proximity is "as if" randomly assigned. While we are unable to argue that electoral

[7]AB asks "During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problems or to give them your views: A member of parliament." A binary variable is 1 if a respondent contacts their MP.
[8]AB asks "can you tell me the name of [your MP, local government representative, finance minister, vice president]?" A binary variable is 1 if a respondent provides the correct name.
[9]AB asks "How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters?" We use six items linked to public goods provision: electricity, water supply, food supply, infrastructure, educational needs, and health services.

proximity is "as if" randomly assigned in this sense and thus our results are correlational and do not necessarily point to causal relationships between elections and SWD, we explicitly attempt to minimize threats of endogeneity in two ways. First, AB surveys are generally fielded more than 3 months before and after national elections.[10] There are six country-round case exceptions to this rule within our sample, where surveys were conducted less than 3 months to an election (Burkina Faso [Round 5], Malawi [R6], Namibia [R1 and R6], Botswana [R1], and Sudan [R6]). That said, AB's general tendency not to field surveys 3 months around elections might potentially violate the randomness of the electoral proximity variable. However, excluding these six country-survey cases individually or simultaneously does not change our estimation results. Second, it is likely that election dates, not survey dates, are endogenously determined by governments. When governments think SWD is high, they may be tempted to call early elections, especially in the case of parliamentary democracies. To ensure that endogenous election timing does not significantly drive our results, our robustness checks restrict the sample to scheduled elections, and the results remain unchanged (Appendix S4.2-1 in the online supporting information).

### *Election Quality, Winner/Loser Status, and Control Variables*

We also account for contextual and individual factors affecting citizens' SWD. The quality of elections is a strong country-level predictor of SWD (Norris, 2014). When testing Hypothesis 1, that is, electoral cycles of SWD, we control for the quality of the last election. This is because quality of elections might be correlated both with electoral proximity and popular perceptions of democracy (e.g., surveys might be taken far from elections that anticipate violence and autocratic repression). To examine Hypothesis 2, we interact election quality with electoral proximity. To measure election quality, we rely on expert-based assessments of election quality developed through the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) (Version 7.1; Coppedge et al., 2018). V-Dem includes an index of election quality (clean elections index) composed of expert coding of eight indicators measuring different aspects of election quality, such as electoral management body autonomy and capacity, accuracy of the voter register, vote buying, voter fraud, intimidation, violence, and whether or not elections were free and fair. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values corresponding to clean elections.

One of the most important individual-level correlates of SWD is winner/loser status (Singh et al., 2012). Similar to election quality, we control for winner/loser status when testing Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, to examine Hypothesis 3, we interact winner/loser status with electoral proximity. While AB does not ask citizens whom they voted for in the last election, we operationalize winner/loser status by linking citizens' reported partisan affiliations with the candidates elected to executive office.[11] We then create three binary indicators to gauge the citizens' "quasi" winner/loser status: *winners*: respondents who report supporting the president (or party with legislative majority); *losers*: respondents who report supporting a candidate who lost the last presidential election (or party without legislative

[10]For the surveys taken more than 3 months away from an election, it is highly unlikely that the decision to field the survey at that time depended on the country's level of SWD. There are only three surveys that are explicitly stated pre-election surveys (Nigeria 2007, Uganda 2011, Zimbabwe 2013), and we did not include these surveys in the analysis.

[11]Our operationalization of winner/loser status deviates from the conventional approach that assesses respondents' past vote choices for the winning/losing candidate. While our approach is the de facto approach for measuring winner/loser status among research using Afrobarometer data (e.g., Bratton et al., 2005), in order to distinguish it from the conventional approach, we classify our indicator as "quasi" or "ideological" winner/loser (Kim, 2009).

majority); and, *independents*: respondents who report no affiliation with a presidential candidate (or party).

We introduce several country-year controls which are one-year lagged to AB survey year, including the level of democracy (Polity IV), economic development (Logged GDP), economic growth (GDP growth), and population size (Logged population). The degree of democracy 1 year before the election (thus in a nonelection year) is very likely to affect baseline levels of SWD outside the path of election quality and election timing and thus should be controlled for. At the individual level, we account for news media exposure (radio) and standard demographics (gender, age, education, and urban/rural residency).

### *Estimation Strategy*

We employ two estimation strategies. First, since the SWD is ordinal, we estimate an ordered logistic regression that includes both country fixed effects (FE) and survey-round FE (see Table 1: Models 1–2). The two-way FE model is particularly rigorous in estimating the effect of electoral proximity on SWD, because the electoral proximity is a country-level variable which might be confounded by country- and time-specific unobservable heterogeneity (Eifert et al., 2010). Second, we also employ a two-way FE logistic regression with the binary dependent variable by coding the SWD variable as 1 if it takes the value of either "Very Satisfied" and "Fairly Satisfied" and as 0 otherwise (see Table 1: Model 3).

### *Results 1: Electoral Cycles of SWD (Hypothesis 1)*

Models 1–2 report the results for Hypothesis 1, providing strong support for electoral cycles of SWD. Electoral proximity$^2$ is negative and statistically significant. This suggests that the positive effect of elections on SWD increases before and after elections within country-units, and this positive effect decreases as elections become less proximate. Figure 1a illustrates the bell-curve relationship between electoral proximity and SWD based on Model 2 (which includes controls). It shows the predicted probability of respondents being "fairly" or "very" satisfied with democracy increases when elections are very close (i.e., *electoral proximity* takes a value close to 0). Moreover, SWD decreases over time as citizens are surveyed closer to the midpoint of the electoral cycle (i.e., approaching 0.5 or −0.5 for *electoral proximity*).

Figure 1b (Model 3) shows a similar pattern when we estimate a binary logistic regression. SWD reaches its peak around the campaign and elections period and then falls to its lowest level around the midpoint of the electoral cycle. Figure 1b suggests that, on average, 58% of Africans report being satisfied with democracy when surveyed around election day (i.e., electoral proximity takes a value close to 0), compared to 53% of Africans surveyed either around the midpoint of the prior election cycle (i.e., electoral proximity takes a value close to −0.5), or the midpoint of the following electoral cycle (i.e., electoral proximity takes a value close to 0.5). Simply put, Africans' predicted SWD increases by 4.3% from the midpoint of the prior electoral cycle (i.e., electoral proximity ~ −0.5) to around election day (i.e., electoral proximity ~0) and decreases by 4.5% from around election day to the midpoint of the next electoral cycle (i.e., electoral proximity ~0.5). Given that between-country standard deviation of SWD is 13%, the effect of electoral proximity accounts for 0.35 (4.5/13) of SWD's standard deviation, meaning that the standardized effect size is moderate but substantive.[12]

[12]Rules of thumb on the standardized effect size suggest that effects of less than 0.3 are considered small and between 0.3 and 0.8 are considered medium (Gerber & Green, 2012, p. 70).

**Table 1.** Electoral Cycles of SWD in Africa

| Variables<br>Estimator | Model 1<br>Ordered Logit | Model 2<br>Ordered Logit | Model 3<br>Binary Logit |
|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral Proximity | 0.109*** | −0.0344* | 0.00559 |
| | (0.0166) | (0.0191) | (0.0218) |
| **Electoral Proximity$^2$** | **−0.670*** ** | **−0.585*** ** | **−0.710*** ** |
| | **(0.0680)** | **(0.0739)** | **(0.0844)** |
| Independent (reference: Loser) | | 0.110*** | 0.119*** |
| | | (0.0121) | (0.0137) |
| Winner (reference: Loser) | | 0.880*** | 0.916*** |
| | | (0.0126) | (0.0145) |
| Election Quality (EQ) | | 2.050*** | 2.135*** |
| | | (0.0837) | (0.0964) |
| GDP Growth | | −0.0146*** | −0.0138*** |
| | | (0.00129) | (0.00152) |
| Logged GDP per capita | | −0.804*** | −0.859*** |
| | | (0.0559) | (0.0636) |
| Logged Population | | −1.471*** | −1.779*** |
| | | (0.138) | (0.152) |
| Polity IV | | 0.100*** | 0.0887*** |
| | | (0.00434) | (0.00484) |
| Media Exposure | | −0.00518 | −0.00816** |
| | | (0.00334) | (0.00388) |
| Female | | −0.0141 | −0.0173 |
| | | (0.00914) | (0.0108) |
| Age | | 5.29e−05 | 7.04e−05 |
| | | (0.000329) | (0.000383) |
| Education | | −0.00410 | −0.00684 |
| | | (0.00601) | (0.00713) |
| Rural Residence | | −0.0317*** | −0.0496*** |
| | | (0.00993) | (0.0118) |
| Cut Point 1 | −1.820*** | −24.68*** | |
| | (0.0275) | (1.655) | |
| Cut Point 2 | −0.427*** | −23.25*** | |
| | (0.0273) | (1.655) | |
| Cut Point 3 | 1.343*** | −21.40*** | |
| | (0.0277) | (1.655) | |
| Constant | | | 27.61*** |
| | | | (1.849) |
| Individuals | 184,896 | 165,438 | 165,438 |
| Country-Survey | 134 | 130 | 130 |
| Country Fixed Effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Survey Round Fixed Effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Log Pseudolikelihood | −241,049 | −211,126 | −103,534 |
| Wald Chi^2 | 15,077.4*** | 21,711.6*** | 16,992.4*** |

*Note*: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
***$p < .01$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .1$.

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we conduct a series of sensitivity analyses (Appendix S4 in the online supporting information). We rerun the three models in Table 1 by (1) focusing only on scheduled elections to mitigate possible reverse causality between election timing and SWD; (2) examining alternative measures of the electoral proximity variable ([i]

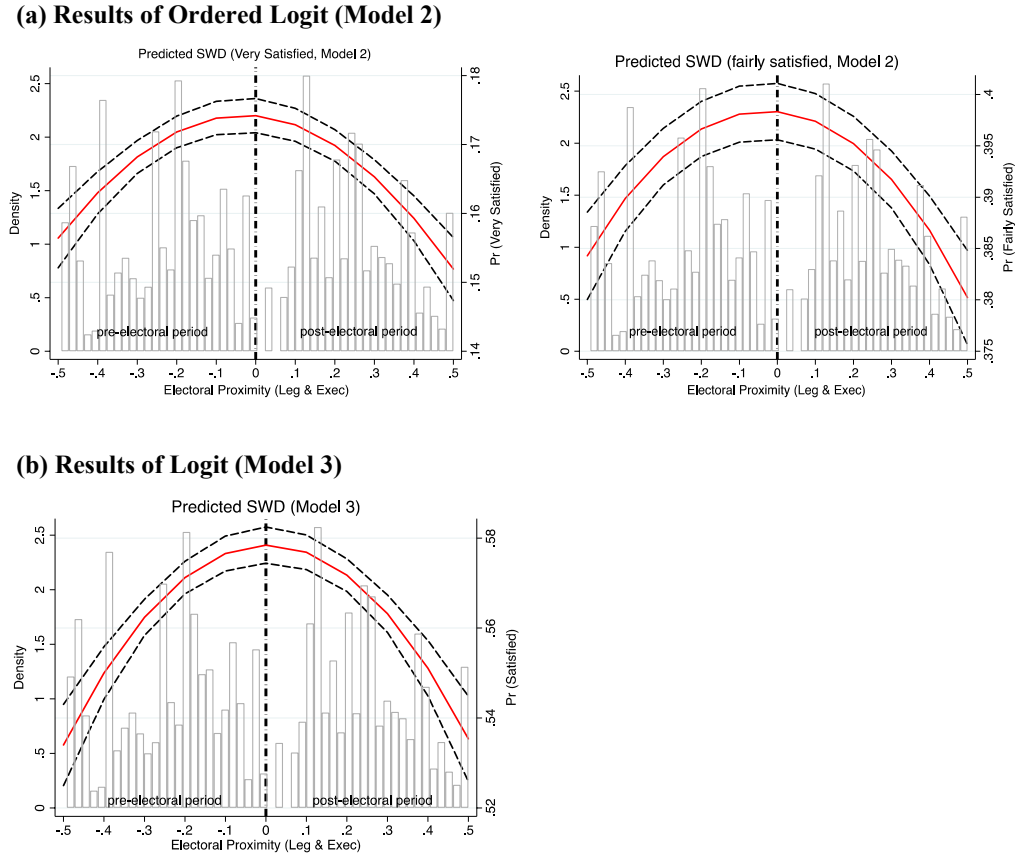


**Figure 1.** Electoral cycles of SWD in Africa. (a) Results of Ordered Logit (Model 2). (b) Results of Logit (Model 3). Upper-left plot shows the probability of being "very satisfied" with democracy, and upper-right plot shows the probability of being "fairly satisfied." Lower-left plot shows the probability of being "very/fairly satisfied" (Model 3). Dotted lines are 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are set at their means. Gray bars represent histogram of electoral proximity.

daily counts of electoral proximity, [ii] monthly time distance from the closest election, [iii] disaggregating into legislative and presidential elections, [iv] log transformation of monthly time distance from the closest election); (3) estimating an alternative measure of SWD; (4) estimating a multilevel model; (5) including additional control variables; (6) restricting sample to electoral democracies and electoral autocracies; (7) controlling for coethnic interview effects to deal with social desirability bias; and (8) estimating a jackknife analysis by country and survey year.

### *Results 2: Tests for Observable Implications*

To reiterate, our theory assumes that three mechanisms are responsible for cycles in SWD. First, electoral periods incentivize active mass participation in political processes (*participation*). Second, citizens' exposure to and consumption of political information increases around elections (*information*). Third, incumbents and the opposition have strong

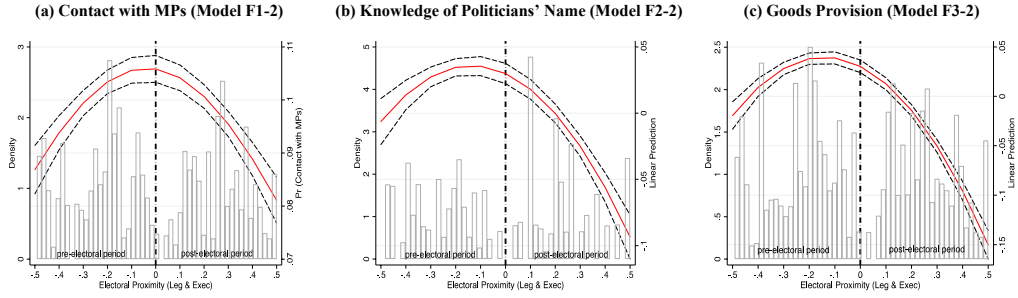


**Figure 2.** Participation, information, and goods provision. (a) Contact with MPs (Model F1-2), (b) Knowledge of politicians' name (Model F2-2), (c) Goods Provision (Model F3-2). Figure (a) shows the probability that a respondent contacts their MPs; Figure (b) shows the probability that a respondent knows the names of politicians. Figure (c) shows favorable evaluations of state public-goods provisions. Dotted lines are the 95% confidence intervals. Estimation results shown in Appendix S6 in the online supporting information.

incentives to spend money in strengthening goods provisions during election campaigns (*goods provisions*).[13]

For the participation mechanism, we set *contact MP* as the main dependent variable (Figure 2a and Table S6.1 in Appendix S6 in the online supporting information). For the informational mechanism, we use the questions on *political knowledge* (Figure 2b and Table S6.2 in Appendix S6). For the goods-provisions mechanism, we use the interval latent variable *goods provisions* (Figure 2c and Table S6.3 in Appendix S6). For all three dimensions, the results are consistent with our expectations: Africans surveyed closer to elections are more likely to reach out to MPs, be more knowledgeable about politics, and positively evaluate state provision of public goods relative to those surveyed when elections were less proximate. For the goods-provisions mechanism, results were identical when we set each of the ordinal measures of local public goods provision as the dependent variable (Figure S6.4 and Table S6.4 in Appendix S6).

### *Results 3: Dynamics of SWD by Winner/Loser Status and Election Quality (Hypotheses 2–3)*

Besides the net effect of elections on SWD, we also hypothesized that the dynamics of SWD may vary according to two factors: winner/loser status and election quality. Figure 3 shows the heterogeneous effects of these two factors on electoral cycles of SWD (See Appendix S5 in the online supporting information for estimation results).

We classify elections as high or low quality to test Hypothesis 2, finding several distinct features of electoral cycles between these two scenarios (see Figure 3a).[14] SWD among respondents who experienced high-quality elections in the previous election cycle tends to increase all the way up to the next elections; thereafter, these respondents do not report significant declines in SWD. By contrast, low-quality elections are associated with clearer

[13]If these mechanisms work, SWD should be positively correlated with these variables. Results indicate that these variables have positive correlations with SWD (Appendix S7 in the online supporting information, Table S7-1).

[14]We use the mean of the election-quality variable to identify high- and low-quality elections. The results are similar when we categorize election quality into four groups according to the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles as thresholds (Figure S5.1-3 in the online supporting information). Instead of Polity IV, we control for electoral margins and national sample means of the proportion of partisan winners/losers to consider electoral competition and find that the results remain robust (Figure S5.1-2).

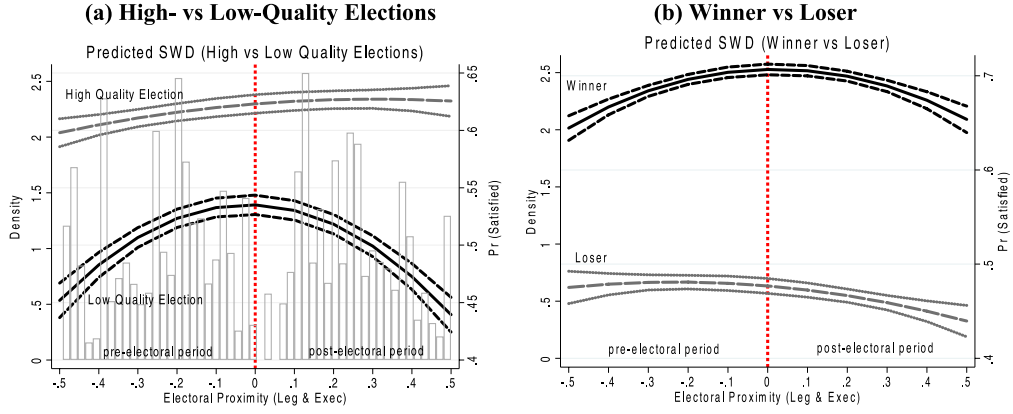


**Figure 3.** Dynamics of SWD by political status and election quality. (a) High- vs. Low-Quality Elections, (b) Winner vs. Loser. Left plot shows the probability of being "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied" with democracy across low- and high-quality elections. Right plot shows the probability of being "very satisfied" and "fairly satisfied" across winners and losers (Model E1-3, E2-3 in Appendix S5 in the online supporting information). Dotted lines are 95% confidence intervals.

electoral cycles: Changes in SWD throughout the cycle of low-quality elections are 10%, which is 2.2 times larger than those of Model 3 (4.5% change). SWD increases as a next election gets closer. However, following low-quality elections, SWD declines towards the midpoint of the electoral cycle.

These findings suggest that free and fair elections are least sensitive to electoral cycles. We attribute this to the way clean elections incentivize responsiveness on the part of incumbents and other political elites and motivate citizens to participate in activities that enhance democracy, both before and after elections (H2). An examination of our analyses of the three mechanisms provides additional support for this contention. During high-quality elections, the contact and information mechanisms more strongly correspond to electoral cycles than the goods provisions mechanism, while in low-quality elections, the goods-provisions mechanism experiences clearer increases around elections (Figure S6.5 in the online supporting information).

The dynamics of SWD also differ between winners and losers (Hypothesis 3; Figure 3b). Losers' SWD tends to decrease all the way up to the next election. Without experiencing a surge in SWD around elections, losers reduce SWD throughout postelectoral periods. By contrast, winners' electoral cycles are clearer: SWD increases during preelectoral periods as the next election becomes closer and decreases in the postelectoral periods. Changes in winners' SWD throughout the electoral cycle are 7%, which is 1.5 times larger than those of Model 3 (4.5% change). The results corroborate our expectations that electoral cycles of SWD are more likely to appear among winners than losers (H3).

We argue that across new electoral democracies and electoral autocracies, higher incumbency reelection rates for executive elections influence the ways that supporters of losing political parties engage in the political process relative to winners, both before and after elections. For example, between 1990 and 2015 executive turnover only occurred in 20% of executive elections in Africa (Bleck & van de Walle, 2018). The effects of multiple losses and the lower expectations of future electoral success means that losers have lower incentives to engage in the political process relative to winners. Similarly, the postelection decline in SWD should be less severe for losers as compared to winners; they are less invested in the political process and

less dissatisfied with reduction in opportunities for engagement. The empirical test of our three mechanisms further corroborates the winner/loser dynamics. Winners tend to have more salient electoral cycles in the contact and goods-provisions mechanisms than losers (and independent voters), while for the knowledge mechanism, the cycles are identical among the three groups (Figure S6.6 in the online supporting information).

## Conclusion

This article examines the dynamics of satisfaction with the democracy (SWD), one of the most widely studied dimensions of political support. Illuminating the role of elections in multiparty regimes, we argue that SWD follows electoral cycles: When elections are proximate, people are more likely to be satisfied with the political outputs of the regime than during periods where elections are more distant. This is because campaigns and elections, relative to other stages of the electoral cycle, provide greater opportunities for citizens to engage in and benefit from the political system.

This article makes several contributions to the literature on the determinants of SWD. First, it advances research on the dynamics of satisfaction with democracy (Singh et al., 2012) by extending the scope of inquiry beyond periods immediately before and after elections to the entire electoral cycle and examining them in a cross-national context, not just a single country. Consequently, we show that similar to Anderson's et al (2005) classic work, SWD experiences electoral cycles. These cycles are connected to how elections provide incentives for political engagement (Kostelka & Blais, 2018). Moreover, electoral dynamics of SWD vary by citizens' winner/loser status and the quality of elections in ways that are consistent with previous research (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017).

Second, our study is one of a handful to shift the focus away from established democracies to regimes in Africa that transitioned to multiparty rule during the 1990s. The implications of our findings are not limited to our African cases, but more generally to regimes that transitioned during the third wave, where fluctuations in popular support are likely to affect regime instability. Our findings suggest that regime instability is more likely to emerge around the midpoint of the electoral cycle when the legitimacy (or "honeymoon") associated with an electoral victory wears off. These findings challenge studies that associate elections with heightened risks of regime instability and political conflict.

Lastly, our findings are also relevant for debates on the importance of elections for democratization (Carothers, 2002; Lindberg, 2006). First, we suggest that African elections fulfill a legitimizing function, as they provide a temporary boost in citizens' satisfaction with the political outputs of their regime. This underscores the importance of elections as mechanisms for enhancing popular engagement in politics (Teorell & Hadenius, 2009). But our study provides a cautionary note about the limits of "contingent-legitimacy" associated with elections (Flores & Nooruddin, 2016). The democracy-enhancing effects of elections seemingly wane towards the midpoint of the electoral cycle (even among winners). Although elections are necessary for popular satisfaction with democracy, they are far from sufficient. For popular support to be sustained, multiparty regimes need to invest in well-functioning institutional mechanisms that promote accountability responsiveness and rule of law and protect human rights.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Appendix S1**. Countries and Number of Survey Rounds
**Appendix S2**. Descriptive Statistics
**Appendix S3**. Discussion on the Results of Control Variables
**Figure S3**. Marginal effects of electoral proximity.
**Appendix S4**. Robustness Checks
**Table S4.2-1**. Scheduled Elections
**Figure S4.2-1**. Scheduled elections.
**Table S4.2-2**. List of Irregular Elections
**Table S4.3**. Alternative Measure of the Electoral Proximity Variable (Daily Measure of Survey Date)
**Figure S4.3**. Alternative measure of the electoral proximity variable (daily measure of survey date).
**Table S4.4-1**. Alternative Measure of the Electoral Proximity Variable (Months from the Closest Election)
**Table S4.4-1**. Alternative Measure of the Electoral Proximity Variable (Months from the Closest Election)
**Table S4.4-2**. Log Transformation
**Figure S4.4-2**. Log transformation.
**Table S4.5**. Alternative Measure of Electoral Proximity Variable (Presidential Elections)
**Figure S4.5**. Presidential elections.
**Table S4.6**. Alternative Measure of Electoral Proximity Variable (Parliamentary Elections)
**Figure S4.6**. Legislative elections.
**Table S4.7**. Alternative Measure of SWD
**Figure S4.7**. Alternative measure of SWD.
**Table S4.8**. Multi-Level Regression (Random Intercept) Model
**Figure S4.8**. Multi-level regression (random intercept) model.
**Table S4.9-1**. Additional Controls I—Election Boycott and Election Turnover etc.
**Figure S4.9-1**. Additional Controls I—election boycott and election turonover etc.
**Table S4.9-2**. Additional Controls II—Party System Fractionalization and Electoral Systems
**Figure S4.9-2**. Additional Controls II—Party system fractionalization and electoral systems.
**Table S4.10**. Restricted Sample (Using Skaaning et al. [2015])
**Figure S4.10-1**. Electoral democracy and electoral autocracy.
**Table S4.11**. Social Desirability Bias
**Figure S4.11**. Social desirability bias.
**Appendix S5**. Heterogeneous Effects of Electoral Proximity
**Table S5.1**. Depending upon Electoral Integrity
**Table S5.1-2**. Depending upon Electoral Integrity (Controlling for Electoral Margins and Sample-Mean Proportion of Winners and Losers)
**Figure S5.1-2**. Depending upon electoral integrity (Controlling for electoral margins and sample-mean proportion of winners and losers).
**Table S5.1-3**. Categorical Measure of Election Quality
**Figure S5.1-3**. Categorical measure of election quality.