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# Political Party Election Boycotts

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**ABSTRACT:** This document is a brief summary of relevant academic articles addressing political party election boycotts.

Scholarly journals cited include *Democratization* and *Comparative Political Studies*.

Scholars associated with research on boycotts include Scott Mainwaring, Michael Bratton, Susan Hyde, Emily Beaulieu and Stefan Lindberg, among others.

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## PARTY BOYCOTTS OF ELECTIONS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Examples vary in how political parties use boycotts to further their own ends and how results may contrast. Peruvian opposition parties held out from elections in 2000 against President Alberto Fujimori who had been in power 10 years. The candidate challenger, Alejandro Toledo, opted to not participate in the second round, conceding rather than staying in the contest. However, Fujimori would step down after weeks of massive demonstrations, suggesting that the opposition's boycott was part of a broader political strategy.<sup>1</sup> This example is unique in its geographic and historical context but other cases can provide lessons learned.

### Causes of Boycotts

There is a political science literature that supports the notion that election observers encourage election boycotts in a process of self-serving manipulation. In other words, the incumbent's invitation to election observers merely creates the aura of election fairness. At the same time, the incumbent can utilize methods to steal the election without necessarily using overt fraud that the monitors are expecting.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the presence of observers justifies having the elections because it looks like it will be fair and open, but the opposition party realizes that boycotting is the only alternative to a contest it will likely lose anyway.

The main cause of major election boycotts for Beaulieu is the perception for fraud and unfairness on the part of an incumbent government.<sup>3</sup> Election boycotts have been on the increase in the developing world, as have international involvement in elections there. Election boycotts may be an inevitable birth pang in democratization process with international actors acting as "would-be midwives" as evidenced in Jamaica in 1983, Bangladesh in 1996, and Haiti in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, election boycotts occur when one mass opposition party, such as the Yemeni Socialist Party in 1997, or several parties as in Ghana in 1992, withdraws from an election in a show of defiance and protest.

Beaulieu, furthermore, distinguishes between Gandhian-type and Fearonian-type boycotts, Gandhian being peaceful (with the parties having little capacity for

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Weeks. 2013. A cautionary tale for election boycotts. Foreign Policy.

[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/01/a\\_cautionary\\_tale\\_for\\_egypts\\_election\\_boycott](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/01/a_cautionary_tale_for_egypts_election_boycott)

<sup>2</sup> Beaulieu, Emily and Susan D. Hyde. 2008. In the Shadow of Democracy Promotion: Strategic Manipulation, International Observers, and Election Boycotts.

<sup>3</sup> Beaulieu, EA. 2006. Protesting the Contest: Election Boycotts around the World, 1990-2002. PhD diss., University of California San Diego. P. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 212.

violence), and Fearonian (with parties that have military capabilities that threaten the incumbent). Fearonian parties may even incite violence and encourage active resistance while Gandian parties opt for nonviolence and take a moral high ground. The boycott itself may be an effort to “restore the point of coordination that is lost by fraud” and may be done to restore a threat of rebellion in the future (using the Fearonian Model).<sup>5</sup>

Boycotts are generally peaceful and involve the broadest possible inclusion of social actors when a protest occurs.<sup>6</sup> Boycotts also revolve around a moral objective and have a weaker party attempting to obtain a goal versus a strong state perceived to be in the wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Major election boycotts transpire when the majority of the opposition groups/parties opt to remain on the sidelines or these groups join forces. The second scenario is rare since some smaller parties often stay in an election at the behest of the incumbent. Finally, major boycotts initiate when a larger opposition group seeks (or claims to) benefit the greater public good.<sup>8</sup>

Minor boycotts start when small parties, usually “single issue” representing a smaller part of society, refuse to stay in an election and these parties seek more particularistic goals reflecting their size and homogeneous makeup.<sup>9</sup>

Voters will benefit if the opposition makes incumbent fraud publicly known via boycotting and this revelation restores the possibility of a rebellion in the future. Larger political parties will internalize the benefits of increased fairness in an election better than small parties because larger parties appeal to a broader portion of a society.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of election boycotts include: increasing the likelihood of political reform; and the increasing the probability that international election observers will be involved in the future.<sup>11</sup> Foreign assistance can affect the prevalence and impact of minor election boycotts because donors may withhold aid (a loss of revenue for the incumbent), especially if major boycotts develop. But determining exactly where and when is difficult because of the bargaining complexities among the social actors.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 30-32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P. 212.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 213.

Opposition parties can introduce boycotts as a threat to the incumbent as a way to extract electoral changes, knowing the incumbent needs more candidate participation to better bolster the election's legitimacy.<sup>13</sup>

Election boycotts are a way to delegitimize an incumbent and signify that the political rules of a system are still being established. Examples includes "inchoate" Latin American party systems that reflect opposition leaders who spend more time and energy protesting the process that supports the incumbent rather than using resources on winning elections.<sup>14</sup> Boycotts are an opportunity to shape the rules that over time could promote change to a more democratic approach.<sup>15</sup>

Kelley argues that election observers themselves do not encourage party boycotts of elections. Instead, other problems endemic to society and institutions are likely causes of the boycotts as are actions such as vote stealing, ballot stuffing or other illicit activity by the incumbent. In fact, opposition parties probably see monitors as checks on the government, especially if the monitors are reputable and well-known.<sup>16</sup> Monitors can decrease boycotts, a point that reinforces the mission of democracy promotion and the "broader notion that international actors can exert positive influence in domestic politics".<sup>17</sup>

Vague and poorly enforced election rules and laws are consistently a precursor to election boycotts. Other causes include the incumbent's abuse of government resources, the restriction of campaigning of opposition party activities, media bias, and other technical-related election day issues such as registry activities and procedural matters.<sup>18</sup>

Buttorf presents a formal theory of election boycotts that takes into consideration institutions, the ideological divergence of actors, and the beliefs of key actors regarding the legitimacy of the incumbent. It is the regime's legitimacy that will permit its continuing power so a chess match of strategic interaction between the opposition and the government becomes the precursor to whether a boycott will succeed in changing political power.<sup>19</sup> Boycotting is a tool among a broad set of possible strategies open to parties, and both the incumbent and the opposition face uncertainty about how much the public wants to oust the incumbent. If there

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<sup>13</sup> Schedler, A. 2002. The Nested Game of Democratization by Elections. *International Political Science Review* 23(1):103-122.

<sup>14</sup> Mainwaring, Scott and Timothy R. Scully. 1995. Building Democratic Institutions: Party

<sup>14</sup> Systems in Latin America. Stanford: Stanford University Press. P. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kelley, Judith. 2012. Do international election monitors increase or decrease opposition boycotts? *Comparative Political Studies* 45(7)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. P. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly. P. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Buttorf, Gail. Undated. Why do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections? P. 2.

is a boycott, the incumbent can offer a concession to run or it can ignore the party.

The boycotting party must predict, and later rely on, how the public reacts to the government's responses to the party's demands.<sup>20</sup> The government's lack of response to opposition demands for reform after a boycott could give the party an opportunity to trigger a crisis (revolt), thereby challenging the greater authority of the regime. The author also delineates the cases in which boycotts and participation can occur with both legitimate governments and illegitimate ones. Opposition parties will participate in elections under illegitimate regimes, explaining the decision to boycott and participate in both democratic and nondemocratic countries.<sup>21</sup>

In his analysis of African political party behavior from 1989-2003, Lindberg concludes that party election boycotts "derail" democratization instead of promoting it. He considers opposition strategies and creates the notion of electoral authoritarianism in those societies that have yet to consolidate as democracies. Opposition parties must contend with three factors in their strategies: authoritarian continuity, electoral violence and electoral systems. Breaking down the statistical data, the author pinpoints the existence of peaceful elections over time as a key factor for the opposition running for office or boycotting a contest.

If violence occurs, especially in presidential systems, boycotts increase to 60 % of cases.<sup>22</sup> With sporadic political violence, only 27% of cases indicate boycotts. During flawed elections, the opposition boycotted 50-60% of the time. During elections deemed open and fair, boycotts occurred only 10% of the time. Opposition parties will likely run in elections when the minimal requirements of freedom, fairness and peace are satisfied. In more authoritarian, violent conditions, boycotts were more common as the opposition had fewer incentives to adopt cooperative strategies.<sup>23</sup> Boycotts were confrontational tools to discredit the incumbent.<sup>24</sup>

Pastor suggests that party election boycotts indicate an election has failed in its role in aggregating voters in a fair contest.<sup>25</sup> If all voter interests cannot be represented in an election, then any subsequent government is that much less legitimate. For him, it is vital that all parties compete in an election even if the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. P. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Lindberg, S. 2006. Tragic Protest: Why Do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections? In A. Schedler (Ed.), Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition (pp. 203-223): Lynne Rienner Publishers. P. 160.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P. 161,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Pastor, Robert. The Role of Electoral Administration in Democratic Transitions.

<sup>25</sup> *Democratization* 6(4): 1-27.

electoral process is flawed.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Bratton see boycotts as a method for opposition leaders to cope with a flawed electoral process. Parties predict the incumbent will commit fraud in a specific contest.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Smith contrasts minor boycotts (small, religious communities and ethnic groups seeking public attention to a cause) to major boycotts (those by opposition parties vying to control of the government). He summarizes that each type has different effects depending on the type of boycott and the time-period of focus.<sup>28</sup> His research suggests parties have a useful strategy in boycotts when trying to defeat an incumbent even if it means losing a current election to plant the seeds of success in the future vis-a-vis the regime.<sup>29</sup> A boycott creates the appearance of gains by the incumbent, but in fact does the opposite in sowing doubt of the present leadership in the eyes of voters, thus becoming a low risk option for the opposition in the process of democratization.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bratton, Michael. 1998. Second Elections in Africa. *Journal of Democracy* 9(3): 18-

<sup>27</sup>33. P. 19, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, IO. 2009. Election Boycotts and Regime Survival. MA Thes., Georgia State University. P. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. P. 34.

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