

Lund University
Bachelor's Thesis
Department of Political Science

VT24
STVK04
Supervisor: Jonathan Polk



LUND
UNIVERSITY

Electoral Strategies in Contemporary Hybrid Regimes

Comparative Insights from Venezuela and Iran

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Abstract

National elections have been shown to be beneficial to autocratic ruling coalitions within hybrid regimes, and although the super-election year of 2024 is unfolding, there still is a gap in understanding this topic. Since most research has been quantitatively conducted on elections in hybrid regimes, few have examined the purpose elections serve. To understand the mechanisms underlying this, a qualitative approach has been adopted and utilizes a comparative analysis between two diverse and underrepresented cases, Venezuela and Iran. The thesis suggests that hybrid regimes in these countries use national elections as institutional and informational tools which entails co-opting elites, suppressing opposition, and managing public perception, to assert state control. These tools provide the framework for which the analysis is conducted to contribute a deeper understanding of how hybrid regimes utilize national elections to maintain said control. The results align with expectations, showing that both countries use national elections as institutional and informational tools. The study ends with a reflective discussion where we urge future research to take the next step and measure the effectiveness regimes have in utilizing these tools, as well as pointing out a gap in the literature regarding non-national level elections within hybrid regimes.

Keywords: *National Elections, State Control, Hybrid Regimes, Venezuela, Iran*

Wordcount: 9695

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1. Introduction

The current year of 2024 is set to be a super-election year, with almost half the global population having the opportunity to cast their vote, causing long-term global effects (Knutsen, 2024). This may give an appearance of a more democratic world because autocracies are typically understood to be devoid of electoral processes. However, the widespread occurrence of elections in contemporary autocratic regimes suggests otherwise (ibid.).

The prevalence of national elections is not limited to former democracies that have become autocratic over time. By 2024, only five autocratic regimes globally refrain from conducting national elections on a regular basis, despite the rising trend of autocratic governance worldwide (Miller, 2017; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). This trend has prompted scholarly discourse, resulting in the current characterization of such systems as 'hybrid regimes' (Donno, 2013). The fact that most of these non-democratic regimes conduct electoral processes suggests that they serve some purpose of gain for the rulers (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). Studies show that holding national elections within these regimes achieves short-term regime stability, but the evidence for long-term stability is less convincing (Knutsen et al., 2017).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how national elections are utilized by the ruling coalition to assert control and expand further knowledge on how national elections can be used as a tool for power. We aim to do this by looking beyond the scope of overrepresented cases, such as Mexico, China, Egypt, Jordan, Taiwan, and Vietnam (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). By analyzing two vastly different and less-represented cases, Venezuela and Iran, we aim to uncover insights beyond state-specific contexts and identify aspects that might have been previously overlooked. In doing so, this study addresses the following research question:

“How does the ruling coalition within hybrid regimes utilize national elections to assert long-term control over the state?”

1.1 Thesis Structure

The thesis begins by introducing a contextual background for foundational understanding. It then presents a review of relevant previous research on the subject of state control and national elections to gain a better understanding of the current discourse. In addition to a literature overview, the theory used for the study is presented. Building on the previous research and theory, a hypothesis is constructed. The method chapter clarifies the rationale behind our choices of cases and outlines the research design tailored to investigate our research question within our theoretical lens, and presents the conceptualization and operationalization framework. Wrapping up the methodological chapter is a consideration of empirical material and data gathering, along with a discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations. The analysis follows into the next chapter where we dive into our cases and test the hypothesis, followed by a comparative analysis of the findings. The results of the analysis are then presented, with the thesis ending with a conclusive and reflective discussion.

2. Background

The background chapter lays the groundwork for a contextual understanding. It starts with a broad historical overview of hybrid regimes and then dives into the specific and different historical political contexts of Venezuela and Iran.

2.1 Context of Hybrid Regimes

Dictatorships often originate not through violent overthrows of democracies as commonly thought. Less than a third of post-World War II dictatorships began by replacing democracies, with many arising from the removal of previous dictatorial regimes or the end of colonial rule (Geddes et al., 2018). The majority of contemporary hybrid regimes are not ruled by the same totalitarian system that they used to be, with modern-day globalization, economic market, and media, these regimes have adapted and distanced themselves from fear and violence and instead rule with manipulation (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). When these manipulation tactics fail, dictators resort to violence, which can trigger uprisings that lead to military efforts to remove leaders and bring about regime changes. This is a common method by which autocratic rulers are removed. This makes the military one of the most significant threats to an autocrat's power, particularly when it operates independently of the leader's direct control. These factors make the military one of the most important entities for dictators to control (Geddes et al., 2018).

2.2 Context of Venezuela

Venezuela's post-dictatorship era after 1958 was marked by a transition from centralized power to regular elections and a democratic transfer of power. Venezuela's oil residue increased its geopolitical significance, leading to its pursuit of becoming a major regional player (Kingsbury, 2016). A Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chávez in 1999 brought substantial changes to the regime. As this socialist period unfolded, it brought about tougher economic challenges, hyperinflation, and plummeting oil prices. These challenges combined with a deepened political crisis, marked by allegations of electoral manipulation and human rights abuses, led to a downward spiral for Venezuela, characterized by food shortages, mass emigration, and a failing healthcare system (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024; Roberts, 2020).

2.3 Context of Iran

Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran was ruled by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who implemented the White Revolution in the 1960s to modernize the country. These reforms, including land redistribution and women's suffrage which provoked the clergy and landowners. The Shah's regime was seen as corrupt and oppressive, with economic issues like unemployment and inflation adding to public discontent. Protests began in 1977, escalating after the Black Friday massacre in 1978. Unable to silence the unrest, the Shah was overthrown in 1979, leading to Ayatollah Khomeini's establishment of the Islamic Republic (World History Edu, 2024). Following the Arab Spring, Iran strategically shifted its regional policy from challenging the U.S.-backed order to curbing its rivals' policies that disrupt the status quo. This shift, aimed at maintaining its growing regional influence, emphasizes Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony (Ahmadian, 2021; Bill, 1999). With a population of approximately 90 million (United Nations Population Fund, 2024), ranking as the world's 21st strongest military power (Rezaei, 2019), and holding the fourth-largest oil reserves globally (Zhukov & Reznikova, 2021), Iran becomes apparent as a significant and influential actor in its region.

3. Literature Review

This chapter offers a review of previous research. The selected research provides an overview of the broader topic of national elections in hybrid regimes, highlighting key findings and underscoring the foundational aspects of the discourse.

3.1 Competitive and Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes

Research suggests that the stability of these hybrid regimes depends on whether the regimes are classified as competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs) or hegemonic authoritarian regimes (HARs) (Donno, 2013). In CARs, where multiple viable opposition parties exist and the ruling party may have weaker electoral support, the probability of regime change and instability is heightened (ibid.). This vulnerability is especially heightened when both domestic and international actors apply pressure on the regime. This contrasts HARs where the ruling coalition maintains absolute electoral dominance and is less likely to be influenced by such pressures (ibid.). These two statements regarding the importance of the difference between CARs and HARs have also been supported in more recent extensive research (Bernhard et al., 2020).

3.2 Election Effects on International Legitimacy

Autocrats strategically use national elections to increase their international legitimacy. This can be for international recognition, to avoid sanctions, or to fulfill requirements set by aid organizations, especially when their economies depend on Western democracies (Croissant & Hellmann, 2018, p. 6). In reaction to global initiatives advocating for democracy, autocrats

have devised strategies like creating counter-norms to already established democratic standards, and employ regime-loyal observers to challenge and undermine the integrity of election monitoring (Demmelhuber & Youngs, 2023). National elections also provide autocrats with opportunities to mobilize their supporters, secure international aid, and form economic alliances with other states, making autocrats increasingly dependent on conducting national elections (ibid.). This strategic use of national elections strengthens international legitimacy and state control.

3.3 Elections Long and Short-term Effects

Literature suggests that elections can lead to a higher probability of regime failure in the short-term, as there is a possibility of violent protests, coups, or other forms of mobilization and threats to the regime. However, in the long-term, if the government survives the immediate aftermath of elections, it contributes to greater political stability for the ruling coalition (Knutsen et al., 2017). The short-term implications presented by Knutsen et al. (2017) are convincingly supported, however, the same level of certainty does not necessarily apply to the long-term effects. Evidence suggests elections can stabilize hybrid regimes, but these findings vary across different analyses (Bernhard et al., 2020; Knutsen et al., 2017). This indicates that while the destabilizing impact of elections in the short-term is clear, the long-term benefits for regime stability fluctuate when testing with different control models and variables.

Despite Knutsen et al.'s (2017) suggestion of uncertainty regarding the relationship between elections in hybrid regimes and long-term state control, Venezuela and Iran's ruling coalition have demonstrated prolonged state control. Our research aims to expand upon Knutsen's inconclusive findings, offering insights into how regimes such as underexamined Venezuela and Iran have maintained said control over extended periods. This highlights the relevance of our study and its contribution to the ongoing literature on the long-term effects of elections.

4. Theory

The theory presented in this chapter is built on the foundational work of Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), who investigated the purpose of elections within hybrid regimes. While later broader studies expanded to examine elections' impact on regime stability and authoritarian rule in large-n analyses (Bernhard et al., 2020; Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024; Croissant & Hellmann, 2018; Demmelhuber & Youngs, 2023; Donno, 2013; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Knutsen et al., 2017), a gap remains in understanding the entire effects elections have on these regimes. Drawing from those earlier studies and large-n results, this study constructs two tools that we suggest hybrid regimes use to assert state control, thereby contributing to filling this gap in the literature.

4.1 Institutional Tool

Autocrats need to carefully structure and plan the institutional design of their regimes to maintain long-term stability within those systems. One aspect of this involves co-opting the spoils of office beneficially with other elites within the regime, such as important party members or the military, to mitigate the risk of getting overthrown or exchanged (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009, p. 405). Early research showed that, unlike traditional thought, autocratic leaders who share power within their regime, often by utilizing party structures, de facto experience greater stability and control (Magaloni, 2008). This has also been confirmed by recent research on hybrid regimes (Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024). Surprisingly, 9% of the most powerful positions such as ministerial cabinets within these regimes are given out to individuals from outside the ruling party, which indicates that these power-sharing arrangements can come with real influence (ibid. pp. 18-19). Although this seems counterintuitive, these arrangements may be beneficial for autocrats as they co-opt a select part

of the opposition without fully integrating them into the ruling party, which prevents a strong unified opposition from emerging and obtaining any real and threatening power, while simultaneously sending a message both domestically and internationally of openness and inclusivity (Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024). Elections within these systems, can therefore strategically be utilized and manipulated into institutional control to enhance the autocrat's bargaining power and assert crucial alliances with the other intra-elites and important oppositional figures to maintain control, instead of being employed for the genuine choice of the public (Demmelhuber & Youngs, 2023).

In essence, autocrats do not just conduct national elections, they use them as an *institutional tool* to manipulate institutions and co-opt elites to maintain their grip on power by strategically distributing the benefits of the system to their favor and securing loyalty to other powerful figures.

4.2 Informational Tool

Autocrats can leverage elections beyond maintaining alliances, the electoral processes can act as a vital information-gathering tool for the regime. This can, for instance, include a measure of votes in elections, which can be used as a barometer to assess citizens' loyalty and satisfaction (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). If the level of support falls short of expectations, the ruling coalition may resort to making some form of adjustment, or even punishment (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009, p. 405). Furthermore, these elections can detect potential rivals, and fragment opposition groups with propaganda or other forms of manipulation tactics. This fragmentation makes it harder for the opposition to challenge the established regime (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009).

Guriev and Treisman (2020) highlighted this informational aspect, particularly regarding elections within these systems. Because contemporary hybrid regimes rarely rely on violence, they instead employ informational manipulation to control. This can include concealing their repressive actions by political rhetoric or fabricating false charges against dissidents, to therefore avoid direct association with repression and violence (ibid.). The way

the ruling coalition does this is by utilizing the national elections as an *informational tool*, by manipulating elections, suppressing public opinion, banning demonstrations, and utilizing censored or co-opted media to portray themselves as competent, thereby gaining domestic legitimacy (ibid.).

This aspect of information that autocrats use builds on the previously discussed ideas of co-opting elites and manipulating the institutional design of the regime. The informational and institutional tools, both consisting of utilizing national elections as strategic mechanisms, are designed to assert the ruling coalition's long-term state control. This study will apply these two tools as the primary analytical tools for examining the cases of Venezuela and Iran.

4.3 Hypothesis

Firstly, this study is built upon the premise that national elections are used by autocrats to assert state control. Secondly, it assumes that international legitimacy plays a role in strengthening said control. Additionally, we assume that the degree of control varies depending on whether the regime leans towards being CAR or HAR, with CAR regimes exerting less control and HAR regimes exerting more. Based on the assumption that national elections benefit the ruling coalitions in hybrid regimes, particularly by using them as tools, the following hypothesis has been constructed:

Venezuela and Iran leverage national elections as institutional and informational tools to influence domestic legitimacy and co-opt elites to maintain long-term state control

This hypothesis posits that regardless of variations within hybrid regimes, including the distinction between HARs and CARs, international pressure, or short-term fluctuations in opposition strength, national elections serve as tools for maintaining control. The specific mechanisms by which this control is asserted will be examined in the upcoming analysis of our cases.

5. Methodology

This chapter's purpose is to provide a transparent and detailed explanation of the study's methodological framework. This transparency aims to increase the intersubjectivity, giving other researchers the right conditions to replicate the findings (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 54). The following sections will discuss various aspects such as the rationale behind the case selection, research design, conceptualizing and operationalizing, empirical material and data, as well as limitations and delimitations.

5.1 Case selection

The case selection stems from strategically choosing underrepresented cases within the subject to broaden the theoretical applicability. Although to avoid inaccurate and irrelevant results, we apply the following principles for the selection (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 222):

1. *The cases should be heavy, relevant, and meaningful.*
2. *The cases should come with variation.*
3. *The cases should be generalizable.*
4. *The cases should be chosen to complement previous extensive results.*

5.1.1 How the Cases are Heavy, Relevant, and Meaningful

When strategically selecting cases, it is essential to go beyond the usual examples to find those that can provide new insights while remaining heavy, relevant, and meaningful cases. We define heavy, relevant, and meaningful as having geopolitical implications and being discussed in current scholarly discourse (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 152). Although Venezuela has

been a topic of discussion in the literature, its electoral processes in relation to regime control have not been examined as thoroughly as the issues of its declining democracy and its relationship with the West (Ayuso et al., 2024; Gratius, 2022; Roberts, 2020). The case of Venezuela is particularly interesting given its current challenges, one central being its economic decline together with its political implications (John, 2019). Despite its challenges, Venezuela retains significant geopolitical impact due to it being an influential regional petrostate actor (Kingsbury, 2016), as well as having close ties with anti-western countries such as Cuba, China, and Russia (Rendon & Fernandez, 2020).

Iran is mentioned in the electoral academic discourse mostly due to its unique mix of theocratic-republican, where discussions typically revolve around the limitations on electoral freedom. However, similarly to Venezuela, less attention has been focused on how the functionality of these elections is used to assert power (Rahimkhani, 2022). Iran's significant geopolitical role is emphasized by its strategic location and recent international confrontations. The European Parliament's condemnation of Iran's drone and missile strikes on Israel in April 2024, paired with calls for restraint, punctuates the ongoing regional tensions (European Parliament, 2024). Moreover, expanded EU sanctions against Iran's drone and missile production reflect the international community's critical stance on its actions (ibid.). This reinforces Iran's ongoing pursuit of hegemony, establishing it as a central player in the Middle East (Ahmadian, 2021; Bill, 1999).

5.1.2 How the Cases Vary

By comparing two extremes, we can determine whether differences in regimes influence their use of national elections as tools for asserting state control, or not (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 227). Table 1 outlines the differences between these regimes, including regime type, power structure, ideology, civil liberties, and political sphere.

Table 1. Comparative Table of Key Regime Features in Iran and Venezuela

Features	Venezuela	Iran
<i>Regime Type</i>	Illiberal Hybrid Regime (Pareja, 2023)	Tutelary Illiberal Hybrid Regime (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011)
<i>Power Structure</i>	President (executive branch) is dominant, but there is some separation of power (Nystrup, 2020)	Supreme Leader holds ultimate power, with limited power-sharing (Alamdari, 2005)
<i>Ideology</i>	Bolivarianism, with Socialist-driven policy (Lindahl, 2024)	Theocratic, Islamic-driven rule (Buchanan, 2020)
<i>Classification</i>	Competitive Authoritarian Regime (CAR) (Boersner, 2021)	Hegemonic Authoritarian Regime (HAR) (Boroujerdi, 2024)
<i>Civil Liberties</i>	Restricted, with freedom of speech, press, and assembly under threat and surveillance. (Freedom House, 2024, Venezuela)	Severely restricted, with no tolerance for dissent, which leads to harsh punishments (Freedom House, 2024, Iran)
<i>Political Sphere</i>	Elections held regularly but with significant manipulation. Opposition is allowed to exist but suppressed and harassed (Freedom House, 2024, Venezuela)	Elections occur under strict control and with limited candidate selection. No expressions of dissatisfaction or desire for political change allowed (Freedom House, 2024, Iran)

The terms CARs and HARs which were previously discussed to be an aspect of the difference between hybrid regimes in section 3.1, can also be classified into our chosen cases. A definition of this is that competitive authoritarian regimes allow more meaningful pluralism, competition from opposition parties, and some uncertainty in electoral outcomes (Levitsky & Way, 2002). In contrast, hegemonic authoritarian regimes employ national elections as a mere facade, with the dominant party facing no real competition (Maerz, 2019). Venezuela has converted from a representative democracy to a system where free and fair elections have steadily declined and where the opposition and critics are regularly facing repression and exclusion with the abuse of fabricated charges and law manipulation (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). These qualities define Venezuela as a CAR.

Iran has in contrast tightly controlled electoral processes and significant political suppression. Key aspects include the Guardian Council's vetting of candidates to ensure only

regime-aligned individuals can stand, leading to non-competitive elections where the outcome is largely predetermined (Boroujerdi, 2024). These qualities define Iran as a HAR.

There are also other varying aspects between the countries, such as their economy, history, cultures and geographical locations. Despite being noteworthy, these aspects are not deemed directly relevant to the focus on how national elections are used to assert long-term control over the state, as reflected by our research question, hence their exclusion from the table. The cases' similarities, which is the aspect that allows them to be comparable cases, are their shared status as hybrid regimes, and the fact that the respective ruling coalitions' have had a long-lasting rule (Roberts, 2020; Wright, 2015). It is also worth noting that although our hypothesis applies generally, source articles that make up our theory often focus on multi-party systems. Consequently, for internal consistency, both our cases are indeed institutionally multi-party systems.

5.1.3 How the Cases Are Generalizable

Choosing Venezuela and Iran as cases to study supports our aim to research whether the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 4 can be applied to other contexts than previously studied. By testing the theory on vastly different underrepresented cases, the study aims to produce results with good external validity (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 69; Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 330). The consistency of similar results across different cases with varying characteristics suggests broader applicability, in contrast to the expectation of similar outcomes in countries with similar characteristics, posited by Mill's Method of Agreement (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 227-228). If the analysis produces results consistent with our theory, its generalizability is likely strong due to the significant variations in our case and suggests that the theory could apply to a broader range of contexts (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 233-234). Consequently, if the findings do not align with the theory's prediction and instead produce contrary results than expected, it would still contribute to the theory's development by indicating that it does not apply to every context. This dual possibility of what the results produce highlights the case selection being strategically planned to contribute to a deeper understanding of the theory's generalizability as well as its limitations, which marks this study as a theory-developing study (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 48-53).

5.1.4 How the Cases Complement Previous Extensive Results

When choosing cases there tend to be two different options. The first is to choose cases that do not differ much from previous extensive results, and seek to understand those extensive results with causal mechanisms that would further develop theoretical applicability (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 275). The second option is to choose cases that largely differ from the extensive results, and produce entirely new explanatory variables, which can lead to conducting new extensive research (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 276). To complement the extensive results that this study is built upon (Bernhard et al., 2020; Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024; Croissant & Hellmann, 2018; Demmelhuber & Youngs, 2023; Donno, 2013; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Knutsen et al., 2017), it aims to provide a more detailed examination of explanatory factors behind correlations and test theoretical applicability. For these reasons, the first option has been adopted.

5.2 Research Design

Our study employs a comparative analysis approach, integrating the principles of process tracing to examine two distinct cases, Venezuela and Iran. This methodology is chosen to evaluate the variations in how the ruling coalition within these countries strategically employs national elections to maintain control. The choice of utilizing a comparative case study with two countries is motivated by the recognition that understanding cause and effect necessitates at least two units of analysis (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 109). This allows us not only to compare their differences but also to exemplify and test the applicability of our theory within diverse political contexts. In a comparative case study, the theoretical framework should guide the analysis by highlighting the relevant areas for investigation. This ensures that the analysis remains focused and that the results are both empirically and theoretically generalizable (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 238). This study will also follow a hypothetical-deductive approach, which not only provides clarity on our thought process and expectations but also enables the evaluation of whether our final findings align with our initial hypothesis or not (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 50-51).

The analysis employs the principles of process tracing, aiming to uncover the causal mechanisms that lead to observed outcomes (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 209). The study's independent variable is national elections, and the dependent variable is state control. However it is important to note that this study is not designed to measure or quantify, but instead investigate how the relationship between the independent and dependent variables occurs. Since this study consists of process tracing and comparison we strive to maintain systematic and consistent observations with logical connections between the actions to the outcomes, to account for internal validity (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 69). This design involves a detailed examination of a series of events within each country to identify factors or conditions that lead to state control (Brady & Collier, 2010, pp. 208-209). Then the outcomes will be compared between the cases to identify generalizable results and further develop the theory.

5.3 Conceptualization and Operationalization

This section serves to define the key concepts used throughout this study. Precise definitions are important to ensure coherence in the discourse by minimizing misinterpretations. Establishing operational indicators for these concepts also ensures consistent and accurate measurements, which in turn enhances the validity of our findings (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 57).

5.3.1 Hybrid Regimes

The concept of hybrid regimes refers to political systems that exhibit a mix of democratic and authoritarian features (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011). Hybrid regimes typically have competitive national elections but also restrict political freedoms, manipulate electoral processes, and concentrate power in the hands of a few individuals or groups. These regimes can be classified into three categories: illiberal hybrids, exemplified by Venezuela, tutelary illiberal hybrids, exemplified by Iran, and tutelary liberal hybrids, which will not be included in this study (ibid.). Recognizing these hybrid classifications allows for the analysis of governance complexities, power dynamics, and the interaction between democratic and authoritarian

elements within each case. Since this study does not intend to measure the extent to which a regime is hybrid or not, no operationalization is required for this concept.

5.3.2 National Election

In a democratic system, the electoral process refers to procedures and mechanisms where citizens participate in choosing their representatives or leaders through free, fair, and transparent national elections. This process typically involves voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, voting, counting of ballots, and finally announcing the results (Regalia & Rombi, 2023). However, according to this study, national elections are not necessarily regarded as free, fair, or transparent, they are defined instead as a mere process, where the population can vote on deciding leaders and representatives. These leaders and representatives need to legislate national politics, meaning that the leaders have national control, not bound to regional territory. How the process of national elections is conducted and to what extent it is used as a tool for the leader and ruling coalition to assert long-term state control, is what this study intends to investigate.

5.3.3 Long-term State Control

The concept of state control refers to how the ruling coalition exercises authority over governance and the populace, which in turn allows them to assert power. Long-term is the extent to which the ruling coalition has the authority to exercise said power, which in our cases has been since 1999 in Venezuela, and 1989 in Iran. Although there has been a change in presidents in Venezuela and Iran, the ruling regime has stayed the same for over a decade, which this study defines as long-term. Our primary focus lies on examining how the ruling regime has stayed in power, rather than precisely assessing the extent of control exerted over the state. This study measures state control by evaluating the percentage of votes received by the ruling coalition. Instead of solely focusing on the leader's legislative power, this percentage serves as an indicator of control to evaluate if the ruling coalition has state control or not.

5.3.4 Co-opting Elites

Co-opting elites entails how a leader utilizes other elites in society to maintain control and avoid being overthrown. It examines the process where autocrats strategically involve other elites, for instance, opposition with high support, the wealthy elite, the military, and other elites with influence and authority, to maintain control over the state. By providing these elites with access to patronage and policy concessions, the autocrat gains their cooperation. In return, these co-opted elites refrain from posing challenges to the ruling coalition (Kavasoglu, 2021). How we intend to measure this is by analyzing the process through which candidates are selected and presented, examining the percentage of seats held by ruling parties in the government, and assessing the amount of core governmental positions held by these parties.

5.3.5 Domestic Legitimacy

Domestic legitimacy is defined by the population's perceptions and support for the ruling coalition. This study does not aim to determine whether a regime possesses domestic legitimacy. Instead, it focuses on the actions the ruling regime takes to achieve this legitimacy. The study measures this by examining whether the regime suppresses opposition by restricting access to independent media, free internet, and freedom of expression.

5.4 Empirical material and data

Empirical material will primarily be sourced from official government documents and reports from other countries than Venezuela and Iran, as sources from authoritarian regimes may lack authenticity and accessibility. If information is gathered from these governments, it will primarily consist of constitutional articles or laws. Various media outlets may also be used to gather narratives surrounding national elections in the respective countries, potentially providing valuable insights into the public discourse and overall perception. Only reputable sources like the New York Times and Reuters will be considered. Despite their high credibility, it is important to acknowledge the need for critical evaluation of media sources due to their potential biases.

Reputable global organizations, research institutions, and NGOs such as the International Crisis Group, Pew Research Center, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, will be used to gather material. These sources will mitigate potential biases in the analysis and provide pertinent information concerning assessments of elections in each country and their broader governance implications. To supplement the material mentioned, data from credible datasets such as Freedom House and Harvard Dataverse will be used. Combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis enhances research by providing a more holistic understanding. Quantitative data offers numerical evidence and more objective data, while qualitative material adds context and depth, leading to potentially more correct findings (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 273-275). In the absence of directly relevant material or data, the research will pursue alternative sources to supplement the analysis. These may include scholarly publications, expert interviews, and available opinion polls.

5.5 Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study is its lack of control of a variable. However, with limited time and resources, we optimized this by selecting two cases representing opposite extremes, allowing us to test whether the theory applies broadly. While our case selection is deliberately chosen to produce generalizable results and can therefore mitigate this concern to a certain extent, the inherent limitation of case study research is that findings may not apply to broader contexts. Despite the inherent interpretation that qualitative research relies on, the detailed approach employed in this study minimizes its impact on the study's reliability (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 57). While complete objectivity in research is merely an ideal, this study strives for neutrality by presenting all relevant perspectives and data in a fair manner.

We also want to acknowledge a potential limitation arising from the selection of cases as according to Geddes (1990) case selection bias. Focusing solely on regimes with established long-term control could be perceived as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the theory is being tested on subjects who have already achieved their objective. However, this choice was made because of a gap in the existing literature. Research tends to focus on broad correlations between

authoritarian regimes and election manipulation, resulting in a scarcity of qualitative studies examining the specific mechanisms behind this correlation. This is particularly true regarding the long-term uncertainty of the subject (Knutsen et al., 2017). Our study aims to contribute to this understanding by selecting cases with long-term control, allowing us to isolate and analyze the mechanisms used to maintain that control. If we had chosen cases with varying success in manipulation, we would not have been able to isolate these specific mechanisms and thus could not contribute effectively to the literature.

The time scope of this study is delimited around the duration of the ruling coalition's tenure in each case, spanning from 1979 to 2024 in Iran and from 1999 to 2024 in Venezuela. Although we recognize the complications with such a long timeframe, our study is not intended to necessarily be a longitudinal study. The issue is that to be able to analyze long-term electoral mechanisms for maintaining control, a broader timeframe is necessary to capture several election cycles. Another delimitation of this study is its primary focus on national elections, as material and data on regional and local elections are insufficient for the analysis. The last delimitation of the research lies in its focus on the political aspect, while acknowledging that economic, cultural, historical, and other factors likely contribute to the issue.

6. Analysis

This chapter is dedicated to answering the research question by testing our hypothesis. The first two sections will focus on Venezuela and Iran, respectively. The third section will compare the findings from both cases, the final section will present and discuss the results.

6.1 Venezuela

Hugo Chávez won the presidential election in 1998 in Venezuela which marked a period of significant political change (Roberts, 2020). His Bolivarian Revolution implemented socialist policies aimed at wealth redistribution and avoiding U.S. influence. While initially popular, concerns began when the centralization of power and the erosion of democratic institutions increased (ibid.). Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, continued these same policies and Venezuela's current political landscape reflects the decline from its initial democratic route, continuing with its historical socialist authoritarianism. The United Socialist Party represents Chávez's legacy and is currently led by Maduro, who has effectively maintained long-term governance over Venezuela (Freedom House, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

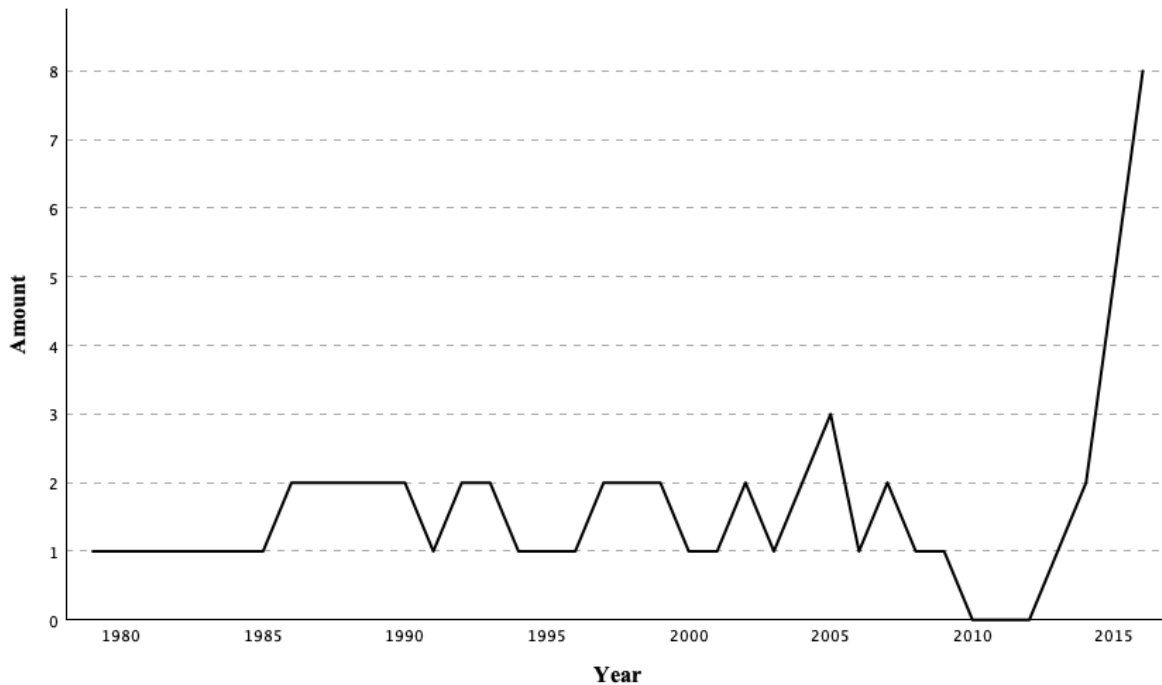
6.1.1 Institutional Tool in Venezuela

Following the passing of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2013, a presidential election was held the same year shortly after. Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's predecessor, who represented the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), barely secured the victory even with allegations of pre and post-election fraud, propaganda, government interference, use of state resources by the ruling party, and voter manipulation (National Democratic Institute, 2015; Poushter & Cuddington, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2019). This event marked the final

strike of democracy in Venezuela that continued with the parliamentary elections that took place in 2015. Maduro's PSUV had a decisive defeat and ended up losing control of the National Assembly for the first time since Chávez's death. The opposition coalition, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) emerged victorious capturing the absolute majority of seats (ibid.). Following this event, as Maduro began losing his grip on control and power, his administration arrested thousands of individuals, primarily targeting opposition figures, including twelve anti-Maduro mayors across the country. There were reports of widespread home invasions, arbitrary arrests, and even the use of torture aimed at deterring protesters (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Simultaneously, Maduro's regime called for a rewriting of the constitutions, and restructuring of institutions. Although the specifics of what these changes entail remain unclear, Maduro signed an executive order to establish a 'Constituent National Assembly', including reshaping the legislative body and redefining the president's executive power and authority (Brocchetto & Romo, 2017). Maduro made a reform to the state, consisting of a new assembly that would have approximately 500 constituents, elected through a direct and secret vote. Maduro legitimized this action by claiming that change was necessary because the elected opposition-controlled national assembly was 'rotten' (ibid.).

The outcome led to a reinstated national assembly of exclusively pro-Maduro candidates and allies, removing MUD and other oppositional figures from the assembly. This effectively disregarded their power and Maduro asserted control over the state (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Graph 1 depicts the significant shift occurring in 2015, presenting data on the number of Venezuelan cabinet ministers holding military titles (Nyrup, 2020). Although the data only covers up to 2015, the previously mentioned events surrounding Maduro's reassertion of power, together with the information stated in section 2.1, imply that subsequent years likely saw these ministerial positions occupied by military personnel as well. This suggests Maduro's co-opting strategy of the military elite, to regain control, aligning with the theory.

Graph 1. Number of Venezuelan Cabinet Ministers Holding Military Titles



Maduro's use of the institutional tool to assert himself and his elites has become increasingly apparent in the following years. In 2021 regional and local elections took place and are widely considered to have been largely skewed in favor of pro-Maduro candidates (U.S. Department of State, 2022). These elections resulted in Maduro's allies winning 20 out of 23 governor posts, effectively securing his ruling coalition power de novo. Despite public uprisings, Maduro maintained control of the state by co-opting various elites, and reportedly even gangs, to strengthen his ruling coalition (Al Jazeera, 2021). Maduro's coalition governs 20 out of 23 posts, leaving only 3 to the opposition, reflecting the theoretic strategic facade of inclusivity and openness to gain domestic and international legitimacy. Maduro currently maintains a firm grip on legislative executive power and is unlikely to lose the 2024 national elections due to his control of state institutions that influence the electoral processes (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024). Through these events, such as rewriting the constitution and implementing institutional changes during contested periods, we observe Maduro effectively utilizing elections as an institutional tool to assert control over the state.

6.1.2 Informational Tool in Venezuela

In 2021, when Maduro's government took over the majority of governor posts, the European Union was invited to observe the presidential election for the first time in 15 years. However, Maduro's regime removed the observers before they could complete their final report on the election's legitimacy. Meanwhile, domestic election observers and NGOs reported arbitrary arrests, criminalization of opposition parties' activities, bans on candidates, and media censorship during the elections (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Issues concerning Venezuela's legitimacy and fair elections have persisted over time. Since 2005, the United States has imposed sanctions on Venezuela to prevent the undermining of democratic institutions and processes (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

In addition to making institutional and constitutional changes in the 2015 presidential election, Maduro's coalition also imprisoned political oppositions and fabricated false charges against dissenters (Poushter & Cuddington, 2015). This pattern is consistent with current events where Maduro uses the same tactics to ban oppositional candidates in the upcoming presidential election, notably María Corina Machado, who is gaining increasing support (Glatsky, 2023). This rise in oppositional popularity before the election has prompted various efforts from the ruling coalition to suppress and eliminate the opposition, including arresting and disqualifying opposition figures from electoral participation on false grounds (Al Jazeera, 2024).

It is important for Venezuela to comply with the economic sanctions' requirements regarding their elections, as failure to do so can severely damage their economy. An agreement between the US and Venezuela was made to lift some sanctions previously imposed, in exchange for permitting a banned oppositional candidate to participate in the national election (Glatsky & Turkewitz, 2023). However, issues persisted as the Venezuelan ruling coalition decided to prohibit electoral monitoring in the upcoming 2024 national election. This choice to suppress such information regarding electoral oversight led to multiple warnings from various organizations and governments, notably the United States (Miller, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The removal of electoral monitoring, coupled with disqualification and suppression of oppositions raised serious concerns in the international community about the legitimacy of the election. As a result of Maduro's breach of the arrangements regarding conducting the election

democratically, the US has reinstated those economic sanctions (Glatsky, 2024). Immediately following the event of reinstated sanctions, Maduro's administration started negotiating with the opposition regarding their terms and conditions for the national election this year, aiming for relief from the economic sanctions (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

A recurring pattern is observed in how Maduro uses the informational tool before elections to influence public opinion and seek both domestic and international legitimacy, aiming to portray himself as capable and inclusive. In response to warnings from the USA about reinstating economic sanctions, Maduro used co-opting media to propagate the narrative that the US and the West's goal is to 'destroy the revolution', which refers to the socialist revolution Chávez started (Gunson, 2024). Maduro also proclaimed that the entire Venezuelan government would collapse within months if he were to be removed from office (ibid.). Apart from these rhetoric tactics, Maduro also utilizes strategies to obscure information regarding electoral processes. This includes last-minute alterations to voting center locations and implementing secretive conditions for voting for opposition candidates, thereby creating significant obstacles to the voting process (Ellsworth, 2018).

These events have resulted in a major decline in electoral turnout each year since Maduro's regime solidified its power in 2015. While the turnout was approximately 75-80% before this period, it dropped to around 30% in subsequent years (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2023). This decline is accompanied by approximately 7.7 million Venezuelans fleeing the country since 2017 (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024). These trends will likely foreshadow the upcoming 2024 national election, where Maduro expectedly will employ similar tactics to maintain control. This pattern of informational and institutional manipulation which is still evident in the upcoming national election, proposes a clear trend of the ruling coalition utilizing informational strategies to gain domestic legitimacy and underscores the significant extent to which Maduro relies on the informational tool to assert control of the state.

6.2 Iran

Ali Khamenei, the president of Iran in 1981, expressed to the press that state power should be centralized and that one person should be in charge (Pear, 1989). Shortly after that, in 1989, Khamenei became Supreme Leader. Since then, he has successfully centralized power and maintained long-term state control, remaining in the position to this day (Sadjadpour, 2015).

6.2.1 Institutional Tool in Iran

Iran's political landscape has undergone dramatic transformations since the mid-20th century. In the 1950s, Shah Pahlavi's Western-influenced modernization plans sparked displeasure among religious leaders and establishments. This built up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrowing the monarchy and establishing an Islamic republic and constitutions (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). The new constitution established a separation of powers with elected presidents and legislatures. However, it also created parallel Islamic institutions, such as the Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts, which often held more power and ultimate authority was vested in the Supreme Leader (Wright, 2015).

The main body responsible for overseeing elections in Iran is the Guardian Council. This council has the authority to approve or disqualify candidates seeking to run in parliamentary, presidential, Islamic Assembly, and Assembly of Experts elections, which are all available elections within the regime (Iran Data Portal, 2020). By having this authority, the ruling coalition ensures that only supporters can run for any political power. This co-opting of elites is carried out by disqualifying candidates from running in elections and either dismissing them or compelling them to adjust their views to align with the ruling coalition (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018). For instance, from the end of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 through 2017, a total of 3811 people registered to run for president in national elections. However, only 26 candidates were allowed to compete, with the number of candidates ranging from four to eight, which means that only about 0.7% of the applicants were deemed eligible by the Guardians Council (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018, p. 80). Providing the people with a presidential candidate to vote for creates a deceptive illusion of choice for the citizens. This is because the

elected president already follows the agenda of the ruling coalition instead of being employed for the genuine choice of the public as according to the theory.

Once elected, the president has significantly less authority relative to other components of the state. If the president or other political elites oppose the ruling coalition, their opposition alone is not sufficient to overcome it. This claims that, while power is allocated to political elites and figures, it is not substantial enough to challenge the will of the ruling regime, reflecting the theory. Article 113 of the Iranian constitution states: (Papan-Matin, 2014, Article 113): "After the office of Leadership, the President is the highest official in the country. His is the responsibility for implementing the Constitution and acting as the head of the executive, except in matters directly concerned with (the office of) the Leadership." This exception is what underscores that the President has limited influence over issues that are under the direct purview of the Supreme Leader. Moreover, the areas of influence concerning the Supreme Leader are determined by himself. This institutional structure inherently limits the President's power in many aspects of governance thereby limiting the power citizens have in elections and effectively co-opting the president, maintaining the ruling coalition's state control. By conducting national elections the regime can also gain international legitimacy and avoid sanctions, by pointing to the existence of a seemingly democratic process.

Another important aspect of the institutional design is how various governmental bodies get appointed or elected. The institutional power structure in Iran is very complex, involving numerous bodies that overlap each other's authority. To easier understand this, Figure 1 has been designed to illustrate a simplified model of Iran's institutional power structure (The Iran Primer, 2010).

Figure 1: Simplified Model of Iran's Institutional Power Structure

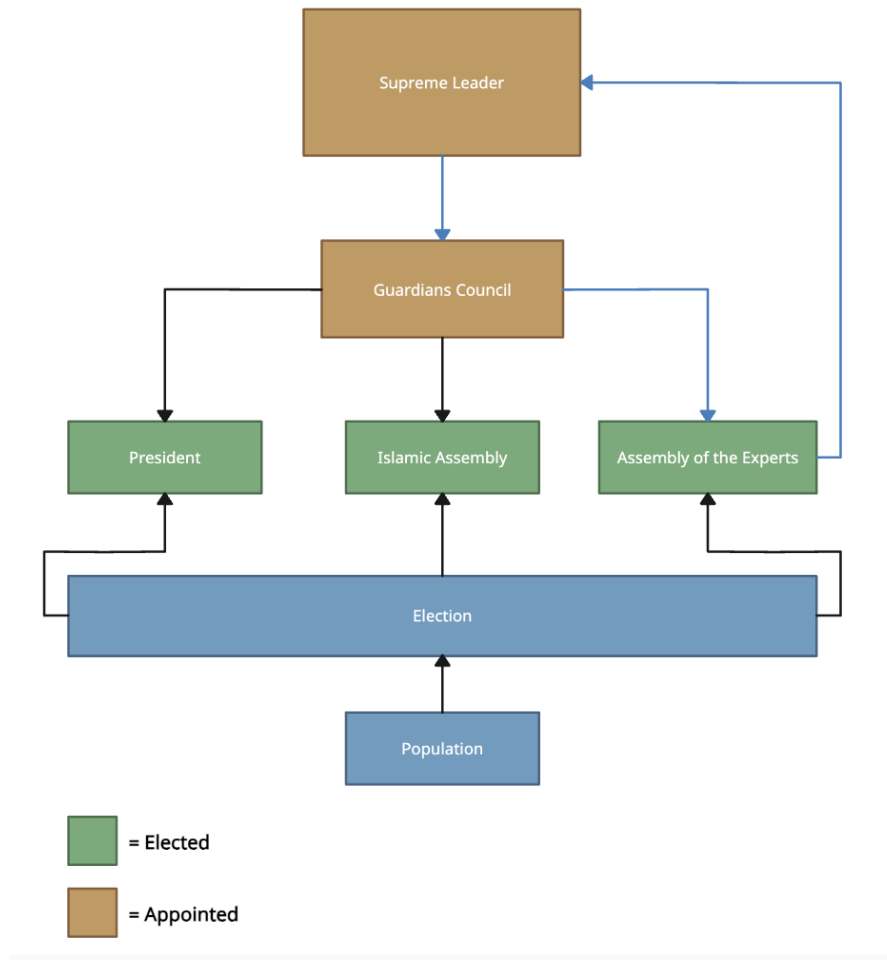


Figure 1 illustrates that the Supreme Leader is the most authoritative figure within the institution, and appoints six out of the twelve members of the Guardian Council. The remaining members are appointed by the Assembly of Experts. Although the Assembly of Experts nominally appoints the Supreme Leader, their choices are limited to candidates pre-selected by the Guardian Council. To further centralize power and influence the process, the Supreme Leader can strategically use his appointments to the Guardian Council to nominate candidates for the Assembly of Experts who align with his preferences. This arrangement ensures the Supreme Leader remains highly influential over the elections, effectively shaping the leadership and limiting the power of the citizens (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018, p. 37). This

circular process where the appointed leaders appoint new leaders is highlighted by the blue arrows in Figure 1.

Iran's Islamic Assembly, which serves as their regional elected parliament, is significantly less powerful compared to other governmental bodies due to the overarching control of the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council strictly vets all legislation to ensure its constitutional and Islamic compliance, often blocking parliamentary initiatives. Additionally, the Supreme Leader possesses the direct authority to intervene in the legislative process. For example, by having the power to veto bills, including those related to press law reforms, the Supreme Leader limits the parliament's legislative autonomy and effectively makes the elected personnel closest to the citizens have the least amount of power (Farhi, 2015).

The Supreme Leader is often highlighted and studied, but less focus has been paid to other elites of the institution. Graham Fuller (1991, p. 26, as cited in Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018, p. 18) states: "Because the Iranian political and social systems decree that one deal with personalities and not with institutions, the personal relationship to this day transcends any formal or institutionalized relationship." According to the institutional design presented, this statement can be seen as somewhat skewed and in need of adjustment. Rather than personal relationships transcending the institutions, the institutions have been shaped in favor of the elites, ensuring that elites in the Assembly of the Experts, Guardians Council, and the Supreme Leader, indeed can appoint members based on relationships to the establishment, effectively co-opting elites.

In summary, the institutional design of Iran asserts the ruling coalition's control over the state. It is an electoral system in which the citizens can only vote for candidates pre-selected by the ruling coalition and elites, where the elected president and parliament have no final say in matters concerning the Supreme Leader. Consequently, these national elections are used as an institutional tool for maintaining state control.

6.2.2 Informational Tool in Iran

The Iranian government utilizes religion to legitimize its sovereignty through the principle of *Vilayat-i-faqih*, as outlined in the 1979 constitution of Iran. This principle asserts that while sovereignty is divinely given to the people, they are not the primary holders of this sovereignty

since it was given to them by God (Leandro, 2021, p. 92). This theological foundation justifies laws that criminalize anti-regime and anti-Islamic expressions, resulting in imprisonment for activists like Sepideh Qolian and musician Toomaj Salehi. This religious legitimization serves a strategic purpose. By framing the regime as the divine guardian of governance, it seeks to enhance its electoral support among the citizens, portraying any opposition as not only political but also religious dissent and thus gaining domestic legitimacy.

This was evident following the 2022-23 protests when approximately 22000 citizens were arrested. Although briefly released under a general amnesty, many were forced into signing pledges against future protests, with individuals subsequently being rearrested, demonstrating the regime's effort to eliminate dissent ahead of elections (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, the government's control over the media and internet censorship are tactics employed to shape public opinion and suppress dissent, ensuring a controlled electoral environment that favors the ruling regime thus gaining domestic legitimacy (ibid.) The state's ownership and operation of major media outlets further assert this control. Specifically, Article 175 of the Iranian Constitution (Papan-Matin 2014, Article 175) explicitly states: "Freedom of expression and dissemination of ideas must be granted through the mass media of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with due observance of Islamic criteria and the welfare of the country. The leader appoints and removes the head of the mass media of the Islamic Republic of Iran." This confirms the Supreme Leader's direct control over media narratives, ensuring that media aligns with government policies and objectives. This orchestrated approach not only asserts the government's authoritarian rule but also manipulates electoral outcomes to maintain power.

Iran's harsh response to protests is not unprecedented. Historically, voter turnout in presidential elections has consistently exceeded 50% since 1980, with the three elections prior to 2021 averaging about 77%. However, a significant decline occurred in the 2021 presidential election, where the turnout rate dropped to just 48% (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2021). This low turnout indicates that citizens are boycotting national elections, suggesting a growing opposition. The regime appears to use electoral turnout as a barometer for measuring public sentiment towards its policies, which is evident from the actions of Iran's government in 2022-23 against protestors. By monitoring the results of elections, the government can strategically use the information to suppress protests and control the media to maintain its power, as according to the theory.

In summary, the Iranian regime leverages religion and propaganda to legitimize its use of violence and media control. It uses these tactics to portray the ruling regime as competent and righteous thus gaining domestic legitimacy. To achieve this the ruling coalition uses national elections as a barometer for public support, indicating when it is necessary to use these tactics and thereby effectively using national elections as an informational tool to maintain state control.

6.3 Comparative analysis

Comparing the findings across both cases allows for the understanding of the theoretical applicability across various contexts. The differences in our two cases, as outlined in section 5.1.2, have become apparent throughout the analysis. The analysis does however, indicate that whether it regards a hegemonic power structure rooted in Islamic principles and institutionalized centralized authority as Iran, or the socialist coalition in Venezuela which is struggling to endure various challenges of mass emigration and the reimposition of economic sanctions, both ruling coalitions in each case has consistently utilized national elections as an institutional and informational tool to maintain long-term state control.

The initial comparison of Iran and Venezuela may be seen to have different results in their use of the institutional tool. Venezuela's case exemplifies a targeted approach in 2015 with a constitutional rewrite and institutional reforms, aiming to eliminate dissent and secure control. On the contrary, Iran appears to employ a systemic approach, integrating an institutional circular process within its electoral system to uphold power by restricting alternative powerholders. However, upon closer inspection, similarities appear in both cases, particularly post-2015. These similarities include constitutional and institutional changes in favor of the ruling regime, having a seemingly but fraudulent democratic electoral process, and distributing governmental positions with no sufficient power to pose a threat to the ruling regime. Despite different contexts, both regimes have institutionally manipulated their electoral systems to co-opt elites and suppress dissent, thereby minimizing citizens' political influence and asserting their long-term state control.

The analysis also reveals that both Venezuela and Iran employ the informational tool, although differences in their approaches have been identified. They both utilize information tactics such as control over media, suppression of information, and silencing dissent, however, the importance of these strategies varies between the countries. In Venezuela, informational strategies seem to play an important role in maintaining the domestic and international legitimacy of the ruling coalition, particularly during electoral processes. These tactics are crucial for sustaining the regime's power and control amidst challenging times. In contrast, Iran seems to rely more on its well-established institutionalized power structure to maintain electoral dominance. While both countries resort to the informational tool to suppress political dissent, manage low voter turnout, or in periods of public uprising, the Venezuelan ruling coalition appears to rely on these strategies to a broader extent than Iran because they more frequently encounter these challenges.

6.4 Results

This section aims to present the main findings from the analysis, and by doing this, demonstrate how the analysis has answered the research question and held up to the hypothesis. This section will also evaluate the theory and discuss how our findings have contributed to its development.

The analysis provides strong support for the hypothesis, which states that “Venezuela and Iran leverage national elections as institutional and informational tools to influence domestic legitimacy and co-opt elites to maintain long-term state control”. This is attributable to the main findings of the analysis, which indicate that both Venezuela and Iran use institutional and informational tools to maintain state control. In Venezuela, the government manipulates electoral processes and censors the media to control information and gain legitimacy. Additionally, it reshapes institutions and co-opts elites to secure Maduro’s regime's control of the state. In Iran, the ruling regime manipulates electoral processes by allowing the Guardian Council to approve or disqualify election candidates, thereby limiting true electoral choice and co-opting elites. Moreover, Iran leverages religion for domestic legitimacy, by controlling the media and the internet, as well through arrests and general censorship to create

an illusion of widespread support and thereby manage opposition. Since the anticipated results derived from our theory aligned with the evidence presented in the analysis, this study has demonstrated the theory's validity. By applying the theory to the cases of Iran and Venezuela, this study has contributed to its development and reinforced its theoretical framework of previous extensive results (Bernhard et al., 2020; Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024; Croissant & Hellmann, 2018; Demmelhuber & Youngs, 2023; Donno, 2013; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Knutsen et al., 2017). The results from the comparative analysis provide support that the theory applies in two diverse countries, indicating that the theory is not necessarily context-specific, but perhaps generalizable to a broader set of cases.

Consequently, we were able to address how the ruling coalition within hybrid regimes utilizes national elections to assert long-term control over the state, by finding that hybrid regimes do use national elections as institutional and informational tools to assert state control. This is achieved by co-opting elites, repressing opposition, manipulating and utilizing institutions and constitutions, suppressing public opinion and information, banning demonstrations, censoring media, and limiting internet access.

7. Conclusive Discussion

The study began by highlighting the significance of the super-election year 2024, noting the increasing relevance of research on hybrid regimes. To research this, the study proposed a hypothesis that was then used to analyze how these regimes utilize national elections to assert long-term control over the state. The analysis findings largely matched the expected results, demonstrating the theory's high validity and its ability to answer the research question. Nevertheless, the depth of this question necessitates further exploration to achieve a holistic understanding of the subject. Some of these aspects have been highlighted in the analysis with a central focus on how the extent of utilizing institutional and informational tools varies depending on the regime's context. This observation leads to a discussion on the causes of these differences. Our analysis showed that increased political competition, indicated by opposition popularity or low voter turnout, correlated with higher use of informational tools. Specifically, Venezuela (CAR) relied more on these tools compared to Iran (HAR). However, Iran also used the informational tool, although mostly during heightened political competition, suggesting a link between competitiveness and tool usage. Investigating this link further could be an interesting focus for future research.

We also observed that Venezuela faced challenges in upholding both domestic and international legitimacy. The emigration of approximately 7.7 million citizens suggests low domestic legitimacy, while the re-imposition of economic sanctions indicates low international legitimacy. Similarly, in Iran, the increased low voter turnout and sanctions reflect a lack of domestic and international support. While this research does not intend to measure the success of these observations, it does encourage future studies to investigate the potential relationship between the level of competitiveness within regimes and the effectiveness of the institutional and informational tools employed, to further develop the theory. Additionally, after researching this topic, we identified a gap in the literature concerning local and regional elections in hybrid regimes. Just as national elections in hybrid regimes raise questions about their purpose, understanding local and regional elections within these regimes could also prove valuable for a deeper understanding of the topic, however, finding relevant material and data on that may prove challenging, as we have discovered. Although the analysis aimed to have a wide array of

sources with multiple different international organizations and governments, the majority of information in the analysis ended up consisting of American sources, which could introduce biases against the study's selected countries due to their poor relations with the US. Other than these internal aspects, external aspects such as economic, geopolitical, historical, and cultural, likely influence the utilization and effectiveness of how leaders leverage elections to maintain control.

In conclusion, hybrid regimes employ both informational and institutional tools to maintain long-term control over the state. These findings may provide a solid foundation for further research, as there is much more to uncover about these dynamics. With the upcoming super-election year in 2024 where many democratic and hybrid regimes may undergo significant changes, including Iran and Venezuela, understanding the implications and mechanisms of elections is of most importance. While Iran is unlikely to see significant changes, the same cannot necessarily be said for Venezuela, making it interesting to observe how events unfold. Regardless, this study has revealed some of the tactics these regimes use to retain power, thereby informing citizens as well as scholars, and encouraging further exploration into the nature of elections in hybrid regimes.

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