1 *Introduction*

The largest competitive election in world history took place in India during April and May 2014. It featured roughly 563 million voters (out of 815 million eligible citizens), choosing from among 8,251 candidates, representing nearly three dozen political parties, competing for 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (the Indian Parliament's lower house), over thirty-five days and nine phases. The results, though anticipated in pre-election polls, sent shockwaves throughout India. The Indian National Congress party, led by Rahul Gandhi, scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, suffered its worst loss since independence – it won only 44 seats, compared to the 206 seats won in the election five years earlier. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won enough seats to form the first majority government India had experienced since 1984. Its National Democratic Alliance, a coalition with 20 other parties, holds 336 seats. Sporadic violence did force the Election Commission to order re-polling in certain locales and allegations of vote-buying were common, if unverified. Yet few questioned the legitimacy of this complex vote. The BJP's leader Narendra Modi took power as the fifteenth Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014 after Gandhi conceded Congress's crushing defeat and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh peacefully relinquished power.

India's 2014 elections extended a long legacy of competitive elections. India has held sixteen competitive national elections since its independence from Great Britain in 1947, beginning with the 1951–1952 elections that first brought the Congress party, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, to political power. Though the Congress party dominated Indian politics for several decades – hardly a surprise given the party's central role in the nation's struggle for independence – it has placed second or lower in four of the last seven general elections. Its first electoral loss in 1977 followed "the Emergency" in 1975, in which President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed declared a state of emergency, allowing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to suspend elections,

imprison opposition leaders, and censor newspapers criticizing her rule. No government in India has attempted such an autocratic gambit since.

Just one year before India's 2014 election, Pakistan held elections on May 11, 2013. That two neighboring countries born in 1947 with a common history of British colonial rule held elections in consecutive years speaks to the potential for democratic hegemony in South Asia.[1] However, these similarities do not obscure the striking contrasts between elections in India and Pakistan. Violence marred the vote in Pakistan. Armed groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attacked candidates and party headquarters in an effort to disrupt the election, causing dozens of deaths in the run-up to voting. Even so, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), an internationally recognized election monitor and democracy promotion organization, declared the election a success, noting its improved "legal and regulatory framework" and increasing participation by young people.[2] Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), who had been prime minster twice before, won a convincing victory and formed a government by attracting independent candidates to his banner. Allegations of vote-rigging have haunted his government, and third-place candidate (and former star cricketer) Imran Khan has continually accused the government of vote-rigging, leading multiple protests against alleged corruption in the government. Beyond elections, Pakistan's domestic politics are roiled by extremist groups and the shadow of an extremely powerful military that has traditionally enjoyed outsized independence and influence over elected politicians.[3] Unhappily, the 2013 election in Pakistan appears unlikely to deepen democratic practice; violence, elite distrust, and political instability instead threaten to unravel the benefits of a relatively clean vote.[4]

Pakistan and India's democratic divergence in the sixty-nine years since their independence is striking. Each was born in 1947 as the sun set on the British Empire, could turn to remarkable founding fathers for political leadership in its early years, has held elections throughout its independent history, has struggled with poverty and internal violence, and has often voted for dynastic families in free elections. Yet India has steadily burnished its democratic credentials, while Pakistan had sadly endured four military coups by 2013 and has never before had one popularly elected administration hand power over to another, despite having held ten elections since 1970.

Elections have produced puzzlingly different consequences elsewhere, too. We might, for example, consider the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, each of which deposed entrenched autocrats in largely bloodless uprisings in early 2011. Yet their paths – and the repercussions of rapidly held elections – have diverged since. Tunisia held elections in 2011 to a constituent assembly charged with writing a new constitution and has held successful and peaceful parliamentary and presidential elections in the last few months of 2014. Challenges remain in the form of a collapsing regional neighborhood and increasingly outrageous forays by extremist groups. Nevertheless, hopes are understandably high that Tunisia's success will set an example for democratic accession to power in its region.[5] By contrast, the initial headiness from the protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square that led to the ouster of Hosni Mobarak have given way to grim cynicism. Competitive elections in 2011 brought to power a government led by Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet Morsi's government fell in a military coup in 2013 – only one year after taking office – after which General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power, in part by winning a carefully choreographed election, the result of which was distinctly preordained. Egypt's courts have handed down mass death sentences, including to Morsi, and state repression of dissent is high.

We do not have to compare different countries to depict the puzzling consequences of competitive elections. Liberia's post-war history since 1995 also demonstrates how competitive elections can generate startlingly disparate consequences for democracy. Competitive elections in 1997 were held to fulfill the obligations of a 1996 peace agreement ending seven years of civil war following the end of Samuel Doe's repressive rule, which itself had followed decades of domination by Americo-Liberians. Voters swept Charles Taylor – the former leader of the National Patriotic Front, a guerrilla group, who campaigned on the slogan "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him" – into office over Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a World Bank economist.[6] The results were perhaps predictably catastrophic. Taylor ruled with an iron fist and fomented civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone. After the dawn of the Second Liberian Civil War in 1999, multiple insurgent groups marched on Monrovia, ending Taylor's reign in 2003. Liberia's second post-war election in a decade, however, thus far seems to have ended far more happily. The 2005 general elections brought Sirleaf to power. Upon assuming control, Sirleaf quickly

sought loan forgiveness, pursued foreign aid in foreign capitals, and won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Liberians re-elected her in 2011.

These anecdotes highlight an electoral paradox familiar to those working to promote democracy around the world. Elections in post-independence India, Tunisia since the Arab Spring, and Liberia in 2003 were followed by democratic progress, however halting. Elections in Pakistan since its independence, Egypt since 2011, and Liberia in 1997, in contrast, were followed by political violence, instability, and authoritarian rule. Explaining this variation in the democratic dividend of elections is our goal.

The Triumph and Failure of the Electoral Boom

The period since 1988, which we label the "electoral boom," witnessed the spread of elections to every corner of the globe. Many of these were opportunities for opposition parties to contest elections that were supervised by international monitors. Yet the apparent triumph of the electoral boom was accompanied simultaneously by failure; elections after 1990 typically yielded little-to-no democratic change. Just as elections became freer and more frequent, they seemingly lost their power to propel long-lasting political change.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the dramatic political change wrought by the electoral boom. It displays the percentage of sovereign countries holding any elections in each year since 1946. It also shows the percentage of countries holding competitive executive elections in those years, thus imposing a higher threshold on what constitutes an election.[7]

The late 1940s represented the previous peak of elections. During this peak, European countries, including Eastern European countries before the Communist takeover of the late 1940s, held relatively free elections in the wake of World War II. Just over a third of sovereign countries held an election, and more than a fifth of countries held a competitive executive election, in 1946. These proportions halved over the next thirty years, falling to about 17 percent and 8 percent, respectively, by 1977. The reasons for this long decline in election-holding are numerous. The geo-political pressures of the Cold War led the Soviet Union and the United States to bolster "friendly" authoritarians around the globe. Colonialism also ended during this time period, substantially expanding the state system, but birthing countries that

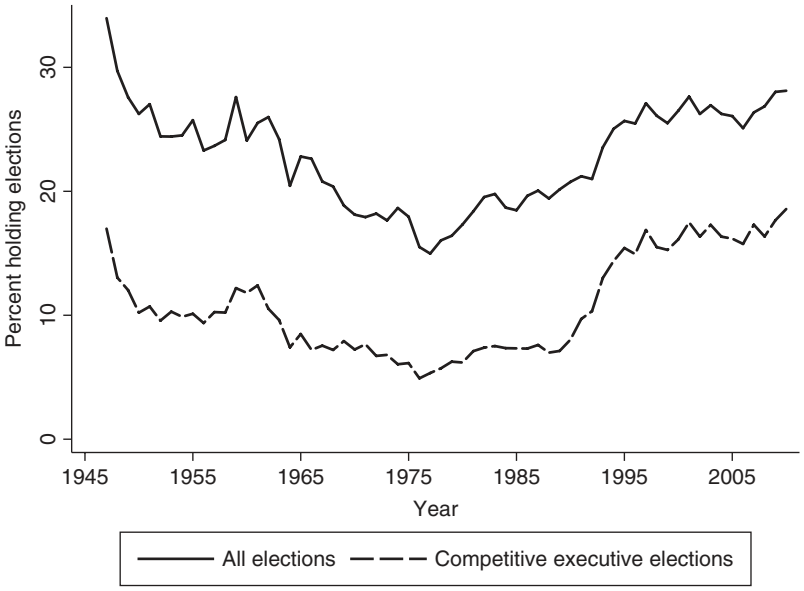

Figure 1.1 An increasing proportion of countries held elections after the late 1980s

avoided elections for years. The late 1970s witnessed the global nadir of elections.

The electoral boom reshaped this state of affairs. The change is most noticeable for competitive executive elections. Until the mid-1980s, fewer than one-tenth of countries held a competitive executive election in any given year. However, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, societies turned (or returned) to electoral competition to choose their political leaders. The percentage of countries holding competitive executive elections nearly doubled in just ten years between 1988 and 1997. The same trend holds if we consider the wider population of all elections. The proportion of countries holding elections has remained highly stable since the electoral boom's initial surge ended in the mid-1990s, running between 25 and 30 percent since about 1995. To state it plainly, in any year in the past three decades, one out of every four countries has held an election of some kind, and three out of every four were within a year of doing so.

The electoral boom particularly transformed politics in the developing world. Developing countries held more elections between 1988

and 2010 (544 competitive executive, 889 total) than in the forty-one years between 1946 and 1987 (332 competitive executive, 866 total). Another indicator of the ubiquity of elections is the number of countries in a given year that are electoral exceptionalists. This group of dubious exclusivity includes countries that have not yet held a national competitive executive election since the conclusion of World War II. Membership in this group is dwindling rapidly. As of 1987, more than 57 of 135 developing countries had yet to hold an election; by the end of 2015, just thirteen countries remain on the list of states yet to hold a national competitive executive election. This set of "election hold-outs" are dominated by Middle Eastern monarchies.[8]

A tempered response to the triumphalist "end of history" narrative of the electoral boom might be that these elections were only nominally free and fair but were de facto uncompetitive. As democracy activists and journalists – not to mention putative opposition candidates – would attest, printing an opposition candidate's name on the ballot is not the same as allowing that candidate to compete on an even playing field. Morgan Tsvangirai of Zimbabwe, for example, was arrested and beaten in 2007 for daring to oppose President Robert Mugabe in the upcoming elections, and Viktor Yushchenko was poisoned as he contested the presidency of Ukraine in 2004. Corrupt autocrats have held nominally competitive elections while stealing them through other means, such as harassing the opposition. Did the electoral boom only reshape autocratic rule, or did it actually represent meaningful political change?

Figure 1.2 divides all elections held since 1946 into three categories: uncompetitive; nominally competitive, but featuring harassment of the opposition; and competitive without such harassment. It then plots the proportion of elections in each category by decade. The electoral boom not only increased the number of elections held, but also improved their quality. For the first time since the 1940s, the majority of elections (more than 60 percent in the 1990s and 2000s) are competitive without harassment of the opposition. The proportion of elections deemed uncompetitive, meanwhile, plummeted to less than 10 percent after remaining stable at around 30 percent for more than thirty years between the 1960s and 1990s. Nominally competitive elections have also become more common; they comprised more than a quarter of all elections in the 1990s and 2000s. The rise of nominally competitive elections has come mainly at the expense of

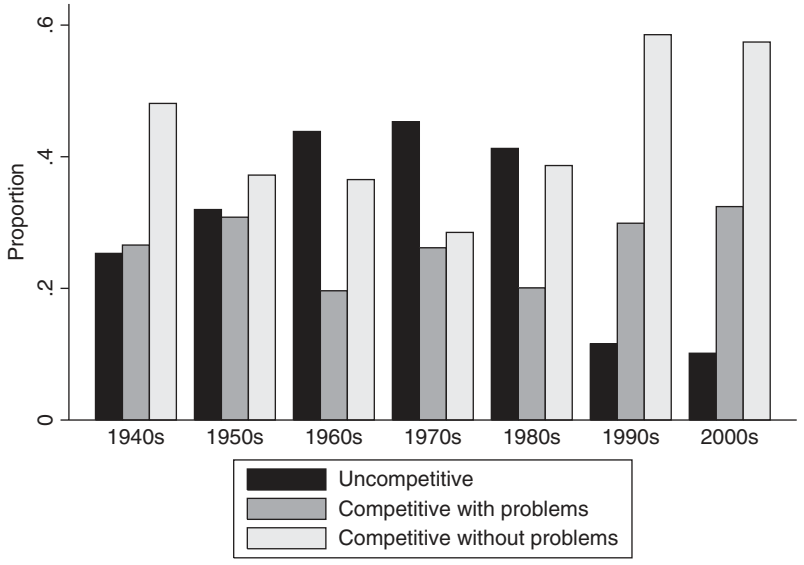

Figure 1.2 Elections have increased in quality during the electoral boom

uncompetitive elections – the share of elections rated uncompetitive by National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dropped by roughly 25 percent between the 1980s and the 2000s, while the share of nominally competitive elections with harassment of the opposition increased by about 12 percent and the share of clean competitive elections increased by about 14 percent. The trend over the last three decades has been inexorably towards cleaner elections, especially when we consider just how many more elections were held in the 1990s and 2000s. The elections of the electoral boom, then, have been the cleanest in post-war history, a claim which has been verified by the scores of electoral monitors attending such elections in recent years.

Thus far, we have told a rather happy democratic story: the electoral boom not only spread elections to every corner of the globe, but elevated standards of electoral integrity as well. These gains seem permanent – the proportion of countries holding competitive executive elections has remained stable, and even slightly increased, since the heady days of the mid-1990s. Electoral cynics might point to the stubbornly high percentage of elections that adhere to only minimal norms

of open competition. Citing unhappy cases such as Egypt since the Arab Spring or Zimbabwe in the past few decades, they might argue that a wide proportion of elections in developing countries remain only nominally competitive. This amounts to a claim that such elections will do little to improve democratic practice in the medium and long runs. Electoral optimists would counter by arguing that elections represent a necessary and vital first step towards opening up previously closed regimes; even elections marred by malpractice are arguably better than none, especially if the scrutiny of international actors emboldens opposition activists and spurs incumbents to enact pro-democratic reforms.[9] Might it be that elections, even imperfect ones, open Pandora's box for incumbents and begin an inevitable process of genuine democratization?

The claim of "democratization by elections" is intuitive and normatively attractive. Elections, in this telling, do more than merely provide a mechanism to choose new political leaders. They also create spaces for political oppositions to organize, alter the expectations of political representation among voters, and reveal the true popularity of incumbent regimes. Even when these incumbents – nervous about their prospects – resort to fraud and intimidation to secure victory, merely having to do so exposes their vulnerability and inspires domestic outrage and international condemnation.[10] In a sense, this is precisely the history of the established democracies of the West, whose early efforts at elections would scarcely have passed muster with election observers from the Carter Center or the European Union.

Has the electoral boom improved the prospects for democracy globally? Figure 1.3 suggests not. For every developing country holding a competitive executive election, we calculate the change in its democracy score two and five years into the future.[11] We call this the "democratic dividend" of elections. A positive democratic dividend means that the election yielded further democratic progress, while a negative democratic dividend means that democracy deteriorated following the election.

Figure 1.3 plots the average democratic dividend by decade, yielding several lessons about the capacity of elections to foment democratic change. The first trend should distress the electoral optimist: elections since World War II generally have not yielded a democratic dividend, but rather incurred a democratic debt. The average election in the thirty-four years from 1946 until 1980 actually precipitated a

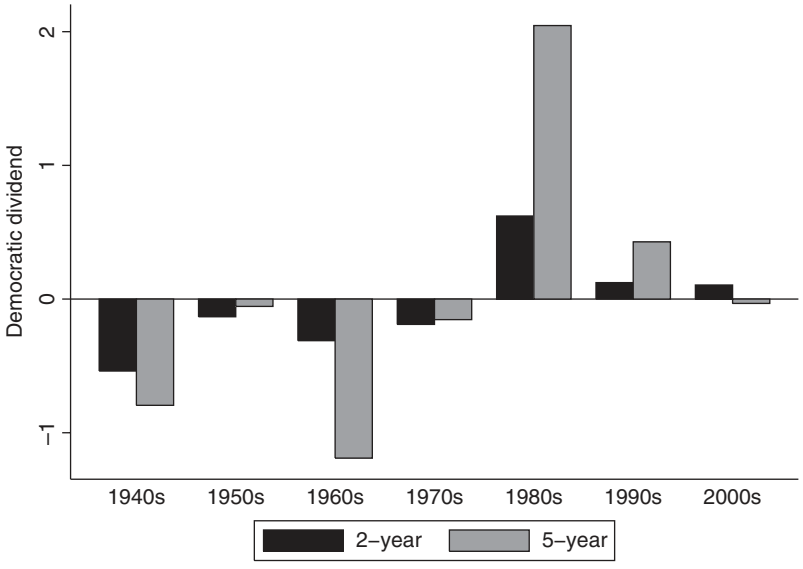

Figure 1.3 Elections during the electoral boom have yielded little democratic change

reduction in the country's democracy score. The five-year democratic debt was deeper than its two-year counterpart in each of these decades but the 1950s (though it remained negative even then), implying that democratic deterioration usually worsened with time. For instance, out of seventy-six competitive executive elections held in the 1970s, twenty-three (30 percent) were followed by democratic backsliding within five years with only thirteen (17 percent) witnessing democratic progress. All this would change in the 1980s; finally, elections were typically followed by a democratic dividend. The average developing country gained more than half a point on its democracy score within two years following competitive executive elections and almost two points within five years of the election. Thirty-two election-holding countries saw democratic progress within five years, versus only thirteen that witnessed democratic regression. Elections in the 1980s were also associated with more sustained democratic momentum; the five-year democratic dividend was actually positive and greater than the two-year dividend for the first time since World War II. This peak led to democratic triumphalism in the academy with the publication of

Huntington's *Third Wave* and Fukuyama's *End of History*. However, this victory was temporary.

In the 1990s, the average democratic dividend from elections plunged to a fraction of its 1980s peak. The change remained positive, which still differentiates the 1990s from the dark days of the 1960s and 1970s, but the return from competitive executive elections clearly had entered a slump. That slump continued into the 2000s, when the average two-year democratic dividend was nearly nil; on average, a developing country holding a competitive executive election experienced no democratic change. The 2000s also witnessed an important change from the 1980s and 1990s: the five-year democratic dividend once again turned negative.[12] Sixty years of elections had yielded little democratic fruit; elections in the developing world were associated with democratic change for only a brief shining period during the 1980s, just before the electoral boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The global spread of elections following the end of the Cold War, however, did not produce a healthy democratic dividend.

Perhaps we judge elections' success in encouraging democratic change too harshly. It is entirely possible that the countries holding elections democratized so quickly and completely before they held elections that little work remained to be done after elections. There is some truth to this objection; the typical developing country holding a competitive executive election in the 2000s was already quite democratic, suggesting that it was reaching a kind of democratic ceiling in which further democratic change was less possible.

Yet this objection does not undermine the core empirical point at issue for two reasons. First, election-holding countries have hardly reached their democratic ceiling; by any accepted measure of democracy, nearly one-third of countries holding competitive executive elections are non-democratic. Indeed, this trend of authoritarian governments calling elections has led to a proliferation of labels such as "hybrid regimes," "electoral autocracies," and "competitive authoritarianism." Further democratic change certainly remains possible after elections. Second, the poor democratic performance of elections is evident even if we consider only those countries holding their first multiparty elections. By definition, such countries have healthy room for democratic improvement. The comparison of the 1980s and 1990s is again telling. Countries holding their first elections in the 1980s harvested a bumper democratic crop; however, by the 2000s, the