

# Suffrage and Voting Secrecy in General Elections

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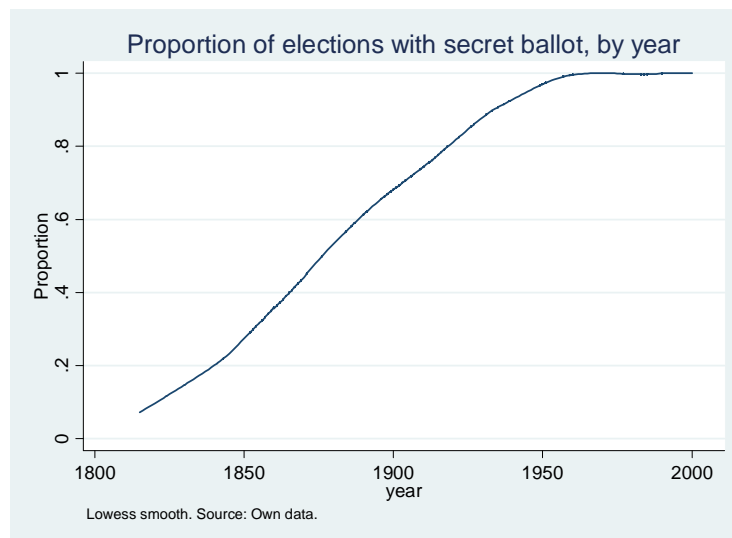
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## Abstract

The paper examines the hypothesis that voting became secret in order to protect voters from intimidation entailed in social, economic, or political dependence. Using the data on national elections in the world between 1788 and now shows that transitions to secret voting tended to occur under revolutionary threats by the lower classes but also in order to protect the political opposition from intimidation by the incumbents.

## 1 Introduction

Voting was almost everywhere public when first national elections took place, early in the nineteenth century. Yet the adoption of secret ballots was steady and inexorable. To my best knowledge, only Bhutan and Iran utilized public voting as of 2000.



Why, then, did voting tend to be public early on and became almost universally secret over the past two hundred years? One argument<sup>1</sup> was that secret voting is a second-best. Independent citizens, endowed with reason and virtue, should bear the responsibility of making their political choices known to fellow citizens. The impediment is independence. If the electorate contains citizens who are not only unequal but embedded in relations of social, economic, or political dependence, publicity of the electoral choice would make those who are dependent vulnerable to sanctions by their masters and thus exposed to intimidation (Tau Anzoátegui and Martiré 2003: 587 on Argentina, Baland and Robinson 2006 on Chile). Hence, they must be protected by the secrecy of the vote.

If this is the reason voting became secret, it should be true that voting would be public when the electorate is homogeneous and it would be secret when it includes workers as well as their employers, peasants as well as landlords, or perhaps women as well as their husbands or fathers. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether this is a plausible explanation of the historical evolution of voting secrecy rules.

## 2 Historical Background

The raw information concerning numbers of elections that took place under different suffrage criteria and different secrecy rules is provided in Table 1:

Table 1: Numbers of elections in the world 1788-2000, by suffrage qualifications and voting secrecy.

Suffrage qualifications	Voting		Total
	Public	Secret	
Property, males	41	4	45
Income <i>and</i> literacy, males	36	50	86
Income only, males	142	117	259
Income <i>or</i> literacy, males	39	72	111
Independent males	108	61	169
Manhood	88	291	379
Income for males, some women	8	7	15
Income or literacy for males, some women	0	1	1
Income or literacy for males and females	0	41	41
Independent males, some women	0	1	1
Independent males and females	0	1	1
Manhood, some women	5	25	30
Universal	16	1469	1485
Total	483	2143	2626

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<sup>1</sup>I am writing this paper without access to bibliographical sources, so I am not able to document some of my assertions.

Note: Cells give numbers of elections in which the office of the chief executive was at stake. Income category includes qualification on the basis of tax contribution or exercise of some professions. "Independent" males are those who are not personal servants or day laborers or who have "regular" or "known" sources of income. "Some women" means that suffrage was additionally restricted for women.

If we group all the cases in which suffrage was restricted by criteria other than gender separately from manhood or universal rules, the relation between the extent of suffrage and the voting rule shows not to be accidental ( $\rho = 0.52, p = 0.0000$ ). This grouping, however, is questionable. A closer inspection of Table 1 shows that voting tended to be public when suffrage was restricted by property or income criteria but not when restrictions entailed literacy.

Table 2: Numbers of elections in the world, 1788-2000 by types of suffrage restrictions and voting secrecy.

		Voting	
	Public	Secret	Total
Suffrage			
Restricted	374	358	732
of which by income	299	191	490
of which by literacy	75	167	242
Manhood or universal	109	1785	1894
Total	483	2143	2626

Hence, it seems that one reason for public voting was the purely technological difficulty of administering secret ballots to illiterates. This difficulty was explicitly recognized in the 1945 constitution and the 1946 electoral law of Guatemala, where voting was secret for literates and public for illiterates (Curvale 2010: 110). It is true, nevertheless, that as long as the electorate was homogeneous in terms of property or income voting tended to be public.

### 3 Suffrage and Secret Ballot

If the secrecy of voting enables the lower classes to vote against the wishes of those on whom they depend economically or socially, the latter should oppose it. Why, then, would people who monopolize political power ever decide to put their interests or values at risk by sharing it with others?

This question has been studied with regard to extensions of suffrage. Why would those who hold political rights in the form of suffrage decide to extend these rights to anyone else? The question is sufficiently puzzling to have received intense attention. The classical explanation of extensions was offered by Earl Grey, speaking in the 1831 parliamentary debate: "The Principal of my Reform

is to prevent the necessity of revolution. . . . I am reforming to preserve, not to overthrow." It was echoed by Bendix and Rokkan (1962: 30), who observed that "following the French revolution many if not most European countries have undergone a process of popular agitation demanding that extension of rights, some pattern of resistance to this agitation by the privileged and established sections of the population, and an eventual accommodation through a new definition of rights." Przeworski and Cortés (1971) as well as Freeman and Snidal (1982) developed models in which elites extend franchise as a response to the declining viability or legitimacy of the political system. In turn, Conley and Temini (2001) argued that extension of franchise occur when the interests of the enfranchised and disenfranchised groups conflict and the disenfranchised group presents a credible threat. This general argument is subject to a twist, provided by Acemoglu and Robinson (2000; a more general treatment is by Jack and Lagunoff 2003), namely that franchise would be extended only if the mobilization of the lower classes was transient: if the lower classes were permanently organized, they would be assured to keep receiving economic concessions without having political rights. A statistical evaluation of this argument by Przeworski (2008) provided strong evidence in its favor with regard to extensions of suffrage to lower classes, although extensions to women seem to follow a different, partisan, logic. Moreover, alternative ways of measuring the revolutionary threat (Aidt 2009, ????) generate the same result.

Yet even if suffrage was extended under a threat of revolution, the political effects of broad suffrage could be still mitigated by all kinds of "filters," prominently among them public and indirect voting. As one speaker observed in the Spanish parliamentary debate in 1889, "We are going to establish universal suffrage, and then what is going to happen in our national political history? Nothing ... the Congress of Deputies will continue working as it is doing now; the legislative power will be wielded by the Crown with the Cortes; the Crown will have ... all the guarantees and privileges given by the Constitution of 1876" (cited in Garrido 1998: 213). Or, as Graham (2003: 364) put it with regard to free Afro-Brasilians, "Their vote was allowed because the results could be manipulated." Since particular institutional devices affect the rich and the poor differentially, they could be used to make the voice of the poor inaudible.

Now, ninety-four countries adopted manhood or universal suffrage with secret ballots when they established first electoral rules, of those all but three – Greece in 1844, Bulgaria in 1879, and Cuba in 1901 – after WWI. It seems that after 1918 "democracy" came to mean at least manhood suffrage as well as secret ballot, so that the decision whether voting should be formally public or secret disappeared from the intellectual horizon of the newly independent countries.

"Formally" bears emphasis. The information used here is purely legalistic: voting is classified as secret whenever legal documents, constitutions or other basic laws, specify it as such. But we know that there are innumerable ways in which such provisions can be circumvented and there are anecdotal stories about how this was and is done.

Note that voting may be secret from other voters or from the state authorities that administer elections. For example, in Argentina ballots of different parties come in different colors. Moreover, if someone wants to vote across party lines, he or she must cut one ballot and paste it on another: indeed, such voters come to the polls equipped with scissors. Imagine then – the story is real – a daughter who picks a red ballot in the presence of her father, who pick a blue one: the act is known to the father and it constitutes defiance. In turn, in communist Poland one picked a ballot from a table on one side of a room and had to walk across it to deposit the ballot, with an option of entering a private booth in which one could modify the unique list that contained more candidates than places but in order preferred by the authorities. The booth was private but one’s trajectory across the room was nonchalantly observed by two uninformed gentlemen. Hence, while voting was formally secret, entering the booth was observed by the not-so-secret police.

With this caveat, we can return to the numbers. The argument with which we began implies that: (1) If suffrage is restricted by class, voting should be public, (2) If restricted suffrage becomes universal at least for males and if voting is public at the time of the extension, it should become secret at the same time.

Table 3 describes the frequencies of the first electoral rules adopted in particular countries:

Table 3: First electoral rules, by country

		Voting		
	Public	Secret	No data	Total
Suffrage				
Restricted	24	14	27	65
Universal	2	94	20	116
Total	26	108	47	181

Note: For some countries neither information is available. Countries that lost and regained independence are counted twice.

Thus voting was initially public only in twenty-six countries. In eleven instances in which voting was at some time secret it temporarily became public only to return to secrecy. Hence, transitions from public to secret voting occurred in thirty-seven instances. They occurred simultaneously with extensions of suffrage in eleven cases, simultaneously with contractions of suffrage in two cases, both in Guatemala, and in years in which suffrage remained unchanged in twenty-four instances.

Table 4: Changes of secrecy rules, by suffrage rules

Suffrage		From		
	Public to secret		Secret to public	Total
Unchanged	24		7	31
Extended	11		2	13
Contracted	2		2	4
Total	37		11	48

Another way to look at the relation between suffrage and secrecy rules is to examine only the instances in which suffrage was extended.

Table 5: Secrecy rules accompanying extensions of suffrage

			To	
		Public		Secret
	Public	23		11
From				
	Secret	2		87

Examining Tables 4 and 5 shows that the relation between changes of suffrage and of secrecy rules is tenuous: thirty-one changes of secrecy rules occurred without modifications of suffrage rules while seventeen were accompanied by extensions or contractions of suffrage. Conversely, suffrage was extended in twenty-three instances while voting remained public and in eleven instances suffrage extensions were accompanied by a shift to secret ballots.

The numbers provided thus far include all extensions of suffrage. But the extensions relevant to the hypothesis being examined are only those that make the electorate heterogeneous in terms of class. Table 6 shows the incidence of shifts from public to secret voting by types of suffrage extensions, conditional on balloting being public at the time of extensions.

Table 6: Secrecy rules accompanying extensions of suffrage, by types of extension

From/To	Income	Literacy	Manhood	Universal	Total
Income	0.25 (1/4)	0.33 (1/3)	0.38 (3/8)	0.50 (1/2)	0.35 (6/17)
Literacy	0.00 (0/5)	0.66 (2/3)	0.50 (1/2)	(0/0)	0.30 (3/10)
Manhood	(0/0)	(0/0)	(0/0)	0.40 (2/5)	0.40 (2/5)
Total	0.11 (1/9)	0.50 (3/6)	0.40 (4/10)	0.43 (3/7)	0.34 (11/32)

Note: The first number in each cell shows the proportion of cases in which balloting was public and became secret at the time of the extension. The numbers in

parentheses are the shifts to secret ballot and the total number of cases in which balloting was open at the time of an extension.

The data seem to confirm that shifts from public to secret ballots were more likely when suffrage was extended to lower classes, with the modification due to literacy.

If the numbers in this table are small, it is because in most cases, eighty-one, voting was already secret by the time of the particular extension. Shifts from public to secret ballots occurred more frequently as reforms separate from extensions of suffrage. There were twenty-eight such reforms: three when suffrage qualifications required literacy, thirteen when they were formulated in terms of property or income, six when suffrage was universal for males, and six when it was already universal.

If shifts from public to secret voting were a concession by the upper classes facing a revolutionary threat, then such shifts should have occurred under circumstances similar to those under which suffrage was extended along class lines. Statistical explanations of the two changes share in common the most important effect, that of "*unrest*," defined as a sum of strikes, demonstrations, and riots in a particular year (Banks 1996). Moreover, in both cases reforms were more likely when the percentage of the military personnel in the population (*milper*) was lower. Hence, it appears that shifts to secret voting occurred under the same conditions as extensions of suffrage, namely, under revolutionary threat.

Table 7: Comparison of statistical models of suffrage extensions and of shifts to secret voting.

Variable	Extensions by class	Shift to secret
unrest	+++	+++
milper	-0	- - -
family farms	+0	-0
GDP/cap	+++	+++

Note: Probit estimates. Three signs indicate that the coefficient is significant at  $p(z) < 0.01$ . Source for extensions by class is Przeworski (2008).

One may also think that when balloting is public, voters are intimidated from voting against the incumbent, at least as long as the incumbent is expected to win re-election. Secrecy would then constitute protection against directly political, rather than social, intimidation. But then secrecy should have been demanded by the opposition and it should have been a partisan matter. One way to test this hypothesis is to examine the relation between the presence of an opposition and the secrecy of the ballot when the electorate was restricted by income criteria alone.

Table 8: Ballot secrecy by the presence of an opposition when suffrage is restricted by income criteria

			Secret		
		No		Yes	Total
	No	56		7	63
Opposition					
	Yes	163		168	331
		219		175	394

Note: "Opposition" means here that voters had a choice between at least two candidates or parties or lists.

The hypothesis is weakly confirmed: in elections without opposition balloting was predominantly public, while in its presence it was as likely to be public as secret ( $\rho = 0.29, p = 0.0000$ ). Probit regression shows that transitions to secret ballot were more likely in the presence of an opposition, independently of the threat of unrest.<sup>2</sup> Hence, a part of the explanation of secret voting in homogeneous electorates may have been the fear that incumbents would abuse their power to intimidate opposition voters.

## 4 Did It Matter?

If the argument that secret ballot protects voters from intimidation is valid, incumbents should be less likely to win elections under secret voting. Did secret ballots matter for the electoral chances of the incumbent? The answer is "enormously."

We know the results of 2,386 elections in which incumbents presented themselves, where the "incumbent" can be a person, a party, or a hand-picked successor. Incumbents won 92 percent of the 449 elections in which voting was public and 76 percent of the 1,937 in which it was secret ( $t=7.47, \text{pr}(T>t)=0.0000$ ). Regression (probit) results show the same. With controls for year, per capita income, the proportion of the population enfranchised, and direct (as opposed to indirect) elections, the effect of secret voting is still large and highly significant: secret voting reduces the probability of incumbent's victory by 0.13 ( $z=-2.32, P>|z|=0.02$ ).

Table 7 shows that frequencies with which incumbents won elections under different rules concerning suffrage and voting secrecy. It is notable that elections became somewhat competitive only when suffrage was universal in terms of class and balloting was secret.

Table 7: Election results, by suffrage qualifications and voting secrecy.

<sup>2</sup>The direction of causality is obviously unclear. Moreover, secrecy and opposition may have been jointly endogenous.

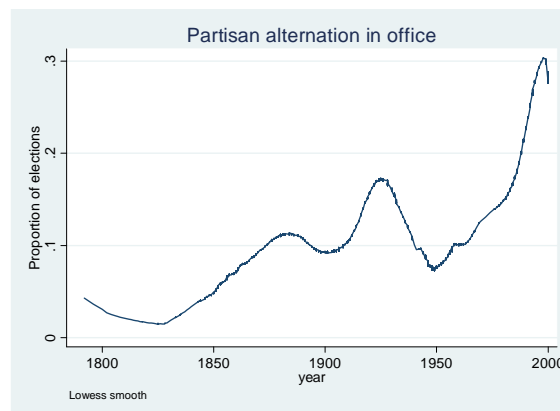


Suffrage qualifications	Public	Public	Secret	Secret	Total	Total
	Lost	Won	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Property, males	4	32	1	2	5	34
Income <i>and</i> literacy, males	0	29	5	44	5	73
Income only, males	15	109	34	71	49	180
Income <i>or</i> literacy, males	3	35	15	32	18	67
Independent males	6	86	10	48	16	134
Manhood	7	80	45	214	52	294
Income for males, some women	0	8	0	2	0	10
Income or literacy for males, some women	0	0	0	2	0	2
Income or literacy for males and females	0	0	7	31	7	31
Independent males, some women	0	0	0	1	0	1
Independent males and females	0	0	1	0	1	0
Manhood, some women	0	5	4	19	4	24
Universal	2	14	341	977	343	991
Total	37	398	463	1463	400	1861

Reliance of open ballots (as well as indirect voting) as a way of manipulating elections was much more frequent in Latin America than in Western Europe. Indeed, eight Western European countries introduced and maintained secret ballots when suffrage was restricted to males by income criteria, still in the nineteenth century, while only two Latin American did so: Dominican Republic as of 1844 and Guatemala, albeit for a short period in 1838. In contrast, seven Latin American countries maintained open voting even under manhood suffrage, while Spain was the only Western European country to do, after 1871.

## 5 Conclusion

Competitive elections, elections in which the incumbents faced some risk of losing, are a very recent phenomenon.



Until World War I, political conflicts concerned mainly suffrage and other "filters" by which the incumbent elites controlled the results of elections, primarily secrecy of the ballot and direct elections. Both suffrage and secret ballots seem to have resulted from the elites yielding to revolutionary threats by the lower classes but to some extent also from the desire to protect opposition voters from the intimidation by incumbents.

After World War I, universal suffrage and formally secret ballots became a universal norm and the main issue of political conflicts became whether opposition would be allowed at all, with many countries adopting the great technological innovation of V.I. Lenin, namely, one-party systems. Only in the last twenty years or so did elections become truly competitive.

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