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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Giovanni Agostinis, Carlos Closa (2022). Democracies' support for illiberal regimes through sovereignty-protective regional institutions: the case of UNASUR's electoral accompaniment missions. EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 28(2), 417-443 [10.1177/13540661221084871].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/909381> since: 2022-12-10

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221084871>

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221084871>

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Democracies' support for illiberal regimes through sovereignty-protective regional institutions: The case of UNASUR's electoral accompaniment missions

Abstract

Why do democracies agree with contested illiberal regimes on the creation of regional institutions for election monitoring? This article tackles this puzzle by analyzing the creation of the Union of South American Nations' (UNASUR) Electoral Council (ECU) and its electoral 'accompaniment' missions. The case of ECU is particularly relevant since its missions permitted legitimizing illiberal electoral practices in a region predominantly populated by democratic states which have pursued democracy consolidation through regional cooperation. We show that the emergence of the ECU resulted from the interaction of the following conditions: Venezuela's leadership, the mobilization of the transgovernmental network of South American electoral authorities, and the interaction among different sets of state preferences regarding election observation that reached an equilibrium around an institutional design that did not impose diminutions of sovereignty on the contracting states. The article sheds light on the genesis of sovereignty-protective institutional designs, showing how they allow for the reconciliation of non-coincident preferences even in a sensitive field like election observation. The article also contributes to the literature on international election observation by explaining why democratic states may favor the emergence of monitoring mechanisms that contribute to the erosion of democracy in a region. In so doing, the article adds to the literature on regime-boosting regionalism, illuminating the conditions under which democratic ROs create institutions that can boost illiberal regimes' legitimacy. In particular, our findings show that secondary powers, like Venezuela, can strategically exploit transgovernmental networks' mobilization to pursue their domestic and geopolitical interests (including illiberal ones) within ROs.

Keywords: regional election monitoring, democratic erosion, institutional design, transgovernmental networks, Latin American regionalism.

Introduction

Regional organizations (ROs) across different world regions – ranging from Latin America to Africa, Europe, and Central Asia – have created mechanisms for election observation. While several of these bodies have assisted democracy consolidation, in other cases they have rubber-stamped unfair elections, boosting illiberal regimes' legitimacy (Cooley, 2015; Daxecker and

Schneider, 2014; Debre, 2021; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Kelley, 2012). The literature investigated the connection between authoritarian/illiberal regional powers and the establishment of manipulated monitors in ROs predominantly composed of non-democratic states (Diamond et al., 2016; Obydenkova and Libman, 2019; Tansey, 2016). However, the emergence of regional monitoring mechanisms becomes puzzling when democratic states cooperate with contested illiberal regimes to create them. Why do democracies agree with illiberal regimes on the creation of regional institutions for election monitoring?

The establishment of the Union of South American Nations' (UNASUR) Electoral Council (ECU) and its electoral missions offers an excellent opportunity to identify the causal mechanism that explains the emergence of a regional election monitoring mechanism that resulted from an interstate agreement between democracies and contested illiberal regimes. The case of ECU is particularly relevant since its missions permitted legitimizing illiberal electoral practices in a region predominantly populated by democratic states which have pursued democracy consolidation through regional cooperation (Closa and Palestini, 2018; Heine and Weiffen, 2014; Legler and Tieku, 2010; McCoy, 2006). The twelve South American states participated in the creation of UNASUR in 2008, a RO that has undergone a severe political and organizational crisis since 2016. So far, nine member states left the organization whose disintegration has happened because of its perceived biased involvement in the political crisis experienced by Venezuela since 2013 (Mijares and Nolte, 2018). The deployment of an ECU monitoring mission in Venezuela's presidential elections of April 2013 stands out as UNASUR's most controversial initiative in the Venezuelan crisis. The most credible international election observers (e.g. the Organization of American States (OAS), the EU and the Carter Center) were not invited to observe Venezuela's presidential elections or refused to deploy a full-scale mission due to the limitations imposed by

the Venezuelan electoral authority on observers' autonomy (Planchuelo, 2017). UNASUR's mission ultimately legitimized the results of a dubious electoral process marked by widespread irregularities and political violence (The Carter Center, 2013), providing an essential backing to Nicolás Maduro's contested victory. The UNASUR mission publicly endorsed the results issued by the Venezuelan electoral body, despite Maduro's small electoral margin of victory (below 1.5%) and the opposition's allegations of irregularities. An emergency meeting of the UNASUR heads of state took notice of the mission's conclusions and recognized Maduro's victory, urging all parties to respect the official results (UNASUR, 2013a).

The emergence of the ECU and its missions is puzzling for two reasons. First, the South American region counted on pre-existing election monitoring mechanisms, such as the Inter-American Union of Electoral Bodies (UNIORE) and the OAS, which have monitored elections in many South American states. There was therefore no pressing functional need for the establishment of an additional monitoring mechanism to explain the creation of the ECU. Second, the UNASUR states displayed different preferences regarding the goals of election observation. Some member states (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) considered themselves "consolidated democracies" (Closa and Palestini, 2018) and had not invited election observation missions since their return to democracy. Yet they continued to value and participate in electoral missions, particularly in the framework of UNIORE (a non-governmental organization composed of the national electoral bodies of the Americas), because those allowed exchanging best electoral practices in the region. Other South American states (Colombia, Peru and Paraguay) have consistently invited election monitoring missions from both the OAS and UNIORE, as well as from extra-regional actors such as the EU, which they consider as a key tool for consolidating democracy at home. A third group of South American states (Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela)

showed a growing rejection of international election observation as a consequence of the criticisms expressed by bodies such as the OAS regarding the quality of electoral processes in the three countries (McConnel et al., 2015; Planchuelo, 2017). The combination of pre-existing election monitoring mechanisms and preference heterogeneity begs the question of why South American states agreed to create a new regional electoral institution (which contributed allegedly to consolidate a dubious regime such as Maduro's Venezuela).

We argue that the emergence of the ECU and its missions resulted from the material and entrepreneurial leadership capacity of Venezuela's electoral body – the National Electoral Council (NEC) – to mobilize a pre-existing transgovernmental network of South American electoral authorities. The pre-existence of such network – consolidated through long-standing electoral cooperation within the OAS and UNIORE – facilitated South American electoral bodies' engagement with Venezuela's proposal to create a regional electoral body within UNASUR. The expertise-based domestic legitimacy and autonomy of South American electoral bodies pushed their respective governments to support the initiative, smoothing the way for an interstate negotiation on the institutional design of the ECU and its missions. The outcome of the negotiation resulted from the interaction of the preferences of two groups of states. On the one hand, 'user' states had an instrumental interest in creating a regional mechanism for election monitoring that they could use in their own electoral processes. Within the 'users' group, we identify two different subsets of preferences: Some South American states wanted to use the new mechanism instrumentally to replace or neutralize other external constraining organizations (the OAS, in particular), which were perceived as excessively intrusive; while a second subgroup of 'user' states considered additional external monitoring as a valuable tool to consolidate democracy at home, which would complement pre-existing monitoring mechanisms. On the

other hand, 'non-user' states did not intend to invite electoral missions, yet they considered ECU as a useful tool for increasing technical exchanges among electoral bodies and improving election quality in South America. Despite having different preferences regarding the use of ECU's missions, the UNASUR states could agree on an institutional design that permitted each group to pursue its own objectives and extract its own instrumental benefits without incurring diminutions of sovereignty.

To explain why South American states agreed to the creation of the ECU and its missions, we trace the preferences and choices of the individuals involved in the negotiation on behalf of the UNASUR states. Focusing on the positions adopted by actors in a strategic bargain allows the establishment of causation and intentionality in the design of a given international institution (Thompson, 2010: 273–274). The identification of the conditions (regional leadership, the mobilization of a pre-existing transgovernmental network, and the interaction of different sets of state preferences) that interact to produce a given outcome allows us to infer causality for this specific case. Our findings contribute to the literature on institutional design by showing how different preferences can intersect and produce an interstate agreement on the creation of an institution of specific design if this satisfies all the sets of preferences without imposing any obligation on the contracting states. This is possible when states share a preference for sovereignty-protective institutional designs, which allow for the reconciliation of different – or even diverging – preferences regarding the goals of collective action. Our findings also contribute to the literature on international election observation by explaining why democratic states may favor the emergence of regional monitoring mechanisms that can contribute to the erosion of democracy in a given region. In so doing, this article adds to the literature on regime-boosting regionalism (Söderbaum, 2004; Debre, 2021), shedding light on the conditions under which

democratic ROs create institutions that can boost illiberal regimes' legitimacy. In particular, our findings show that secondary powers can strategically exploit transgovernmental networks' mobilization to pursue their domestic and geopolitical interests (including illiberal ones) within ROs. Through the case of ECU, the article thus yields new insight into how RO membership provides states with opportunities to contest liberal multilateral norms such as international election observation through competitive regime creation (Morse and Keohane, 2014).

The article follows this structure. First, we derive from the international relations (IR) literature on institutional creation and design and on election monitoring and democracy protection the conditions that explain the outcome. Section two presents the outcome and the research design, as well as the methodology. The third section presents the empirical findings. Section four discusses and interprets the findings. The conclusion summarizes the article's contribution.

Leadership, transgovernmental networks, non-coincident state preferences, and international institution-building

States create international institutions to promote cooperation in areas where they have a common interest, as well as to tackle collective action problems that they cannot solve individually due to transaction costs, information asymmetries, and problems of mutual trust (Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Keohane, 1984). Yet states may also negotiate the establishment of international institutions for reasons other than the realization of mutual gains (Marcoux and Urpelainen, 2013), such as the pursuit of domestic goals defined by different types of domestic coalitions (Mansfield and Pevehouse, 2006; Putnam, 1988; Solingen, 2008). In particular, the IR literature showed how states can create and/or join international institutions to lock-in

democratic reforms or make credible a domestic commitment to democracy (Moravcsik, 2000; Pevehouse, 2002), as well as to increase their internal and/or external legitimacy (Pevehouse, 2005). This literature focused on the role of democratic states and domestic democratic coalitions in the establishment of international institutions that support democracy consolidation. The puzzle then becomes why democracies cooperate with illiberal regimes to create international institutions for election monitoring.

The IR literature demonstrated regional powers' driving role in the creation of regional institutions (Mattli, 1999; Nolte, 2010). More specifically, the literature on autocracy promotion established the link between regional powers and non-intrusive, incumbent-friendly monitoring mechanisms (Diamond et al., 2016; Tansey, 2016). Authoritarian and illiberal powers – such as China and Russia – instrumentalize ROs to prevent foreign powers from threatening their sphere of influence, secure regime survival and gain legitimacy at home and abroad. They also use them to prevent the proliferation of liberal democratic ambitions in their regions (Cooley, 2015; Kneuer et al., 2019; Obydenkova and Libman, 2019).

But what happens in the absence of a strong regional power? In South America, regional projects emerging in the early 2000s resulted from the combined – but not fully coincident – interests of Brazil and Venezuela. Brazil promoted the idea of a South American region strategically autonomous from the US (Burges, 2009), leading an institution-building process that resulted in the creation of UNASUR. However, Brazil remained a reluctant regional power that resisted sovereignty/resource-pooling, which weakened its leadership in the eyes of the other South American states (Malamud, 2011). Venezuela also pursued regional leadership ambitions, which partly overlapped with Brazil's South American project (as proved by Venezuela's active role in the creation of UNASUR), particularly regarding the exclusion of the US from regional

affairs (Malamud, 2011). The literature questions Venezuela's position as a regional power capable of imposing its political and economic model (Flemes and Wehner, 2015). Yet Venezuela did pursue an aggressive foreign policy strategy aimed at spreading an alternative model of democracy (the so-called *Bolivarianism* or twenty-first century socialism) among neighboring countries, such as Bolivia and Ecuador (De La Torre, 2017; Kneuer et al., 2019).

Secondary powers, such as Venezuela, can exert influence by promoting regional institution-building and shaping institutional designs according to their own preferences, particularly when the regional power is reluctant to engage. In particular, secondary powers can exploit their material and entrepreneurial capacities in specific policy areas to promote the creation of regional institutions that suit their interests. In this sense, transgovernmental networks provide a strategic springboard for secondary powers to promote their own objectives (including illiberal ones). These technical networks enjoy a margin of autonomy from intergovernmental politics. Within transgovernmental networks, secondary states can exploit their bureaucracies' technical skills to reap the benefits of interstate cooperation and endorse a course of action that suits their preferences (Alcañiz, 2016). We identify the following condition leading to the outcome:

C1. In the absence of assertive regional powers, secondary powers can use their material and entrepreneurial leadership capacities to mobilize transgovernmental networks and engage other states in regional institution-building in specific policy areas.

The IR literature has traditionally focused on the driving role of governments in international institution building (Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Moravcsik, 1998). A parallel line of

research addressed the role of technical state actors in international cooperation, showing that national bureaucrats can constitute transgovernmental networks, which in turn can play a key role in the emergence of international institutions (Keohane and Nye, 1974; Raustiala, 2002; Slaughter, 2004). These actors' preferences tend to be purely technical ones: they seek to improve their issue-specific capacities through international cooperation to better fulfil their domestic mandates and increase their professional reputation at home (Alcañiz, 2016). Networks usually cooperate on the basis of informal agreements rather than of treaties; frequent interactions rather than formal negotiations create such informal agreements (Raustiala, 2002). However, the actors that compose transgovernmental networks may have an interest in formalizing their cooperation within an international organization, which allows them to intensify technical exchanges and gain international agency, as well as to promote domestic interests not necessarily related to the mutual benefits of cooperation.

Formalization of transgovernmental networks within international organizations requires the support of national executives. The expertise-based domestic legitimacy and/or autonomy of the state actors that compose such networks allow them to move freely across the domestic-regional border and advance cooperation proposals that make national executives' preferences converge towards institution building (Thurner and Binder, 2009). Transgovernmental networks can achieve that by providing governments with issue-specific expertise that smooths the way for the negotiation of a new international institution (Raustiala, 2002). From this discussion, we derive the following condition:

C.2 The pre-existence of transgovernmental networks of state actors that share an interest in formalizing technical cooperation facilitates preference convergence among governments towards the creation of international issue-specific institutions.

An explanation centered on the role of regional leadership within transgovernmental networks still leaves unanswered the puzzle of why democracies and contested illiberal regimes would agree to create a regional institution in a sensitive area such as election monitoring. Election monitoring became an extended international practice throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, accelerating in the 1990s and evolving into the main tool for democracy protection at the international level (Donno, 2010; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). ROs have been a central component of this trend, as proved by the rapid increase in the number of ROs equipped with monitoring mechanisms across different regions, ranging from Latin America to Africa, Europe, and Central Asia (Daxecker and Schneider, 2014). Given states' tendency to treat elections as a sensitive issue related to national sovereignty, a growing body of literature has sought to explain the global expansion of international election observation. Some scholars analyzed the proliferation of election monitoring mechanisms as a key component of a liberal global script where international organizations are used to promote democracy across the globe (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2015). However, election monitoring has emerged within ROs composed not only of consolidated democracies but also of illiberal or authoritarian regimes (Cooley, 2015; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). This situation poses two interrelated puzzles: Why would illiberal governments that fiercely defend their sovereignty from external interference favor the creation of election monitoring mechanisms? And why would democracies agree to establish regional institutions for election monitoring whose design is shaped by the

preferences of illiberal regimes? To solve these puzzles, we need to explore what are the preferences of the states that decide to create an election monitoring institution, as well as how these preferences shape the design of such institution.

When states decide to create an international institution, design issues arise insofar as institutional designs heavily affect the outcomes of interstate cooperation (Koremenos et al., 2001). Rational design scholars argue that states are self-interested rational actors who design institutions taking into consideration the relative costs and benefits of different outcomes. As such, examining actors' preferences can explain the design of international institutions that they create (Abbott et al., 1998; Moravcsik, 1998). Design outcomes represent a compromise among actors' preferences that is expected to improve their equilibrium given the strategic circumstances they face (Koremenos et al., 2001). Drawing from the institutional design scholarship, we derive the following condition leading to the outcome:

C3. Institutional design results from the strategic interaction among states' preferences regarding the use of the new institution.

We can identify three sets of state preferences related to the creation of an election monitoring institution. Certain states may conceive international institutions as a mechanism for solving credible commitments problems by delegating compliance verification to third parties (Moravcsik, 2000; Pevehouse, 2002). In particular, the literature showed how domestic actors use ROs to lock-in democratic reforms and ensure regime survival against domestic undemocratic threats through the formalization of binding democracy clauses (Closa and Palestini, 2018; Mansfield and Pevehouse, 2006; Moravcsik, 2000; Pevehouse, 2002, 2005). Consequently, governments that perceive themselves as vulnerable to democratic instability favor the creation

of regional institutions to strengthen their democracies domestically (Poast and Urpelainen, 2013). We posit that this holds true also for election monitoring, which belongs to the arsenal of democracy-protection tools deployed by states at the regional and global levels (Donno, 2010). Based on this branch of literature, we identify a condition related to the preferences of ‘fragile democracies’, which is a sub-group of the group of states we call ‘users’:

C3.1 States expecting gains in the form of reinforcement of their domestic electoral processes and consolidation of their democracies will agree to establish an election monitoring mechanism with little concern about its institutional design.

The literature also showed that national governments can pursue international institution building for non-democratic purposes, such as lowering the costs of illiberal practices by establishing less intrusive election monitoring mechanisms (Ambrosio, 2008; Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Kelley, 2012; von Soest, 2015). Scholars have tried to understand the cross-regional proliferation of such institutions by differentiating between genuine election observation missions and less credible, incumbent-friendly monitors. The former promote independent observation which ensures the autonomy of the experts who organize the mission vis-à-vis the host governments and guarantees that the mission adequately covers the key phases of the electoral process. The latter are less intrusive and less independent monitoring mechanisms created as counter-practices to shield authoritarian governments from external criticism, eroding the norm of electoral transparency (Cooley, 2015; Kelley, 2012).

Evidence from different regions shows that states can use ROs to replace well-established external observation mechanisms, such as the OAS and OSCE, with regional electoral missions that are less independent, less well equipped in terms of competences and material capacities,

and thus easier to control (Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Kelley, 2012; Von Soest, 2015). Such missions do not thoroughly assess the political environment that precedes the voting but rather focus on the election day(s), tending to advocate for accommodation with the electoral outcomes in support of the host electoral authorities (Cooley, 2015). By inviting friendlier regional monitors in place of or along with more credible organizations, governments can deflect criticism while claiming that they are participating in the international monitoring regime (Daxecker and Schneider, 2014; Kelley, 2012). From this branch of the literature, we derive a condition that concerns the preferences of ‘contested illiberal regimes’, which is a sub-group of the group of states we call ‘users’:

C3.2 States seeking to legitimize themselves in the face of internal/external contestation of their democratic credentials will favor the creation of election monitoring institutions whose design neutralizes external interference in domestic affairs.

Finally, states that do not invite election observation missions because they perceive themselves as consolidated democracies could still value the establishment of a regional election monitoring mechanism as a tool for expanding technical exchanges of best electoral practices and improving election quality in their region (Kelley, 2012). As such, these states will favor – or not oppose – the creation of an election monitoring mechanism provided that its mutual benefits outweigh its perceived costs. Scholars showed that consolidated democracies in developing regions have balanced their regional commitment to democracy consolidation with instrumental foreign policy considerations regarding the respect for the norms of national sovereignty and non-intervention (Destradi, 2012; Feldmann et al., 2019; Khadiagala and Nganje, 2016). We thus

expect consolidated democracies in South America to agree on the creation of a regional institution for election monitoring on the condition that it does not entail sovereignty diminutions and external interference. This is in line with South American states' traditional reluctance to delegate authority and pool sovereignty for creating "strong" regional institutions that can interfere with domestic affairs (Malamud, 2003). Accordingly, we derive a condition related to the preferences of the group of states we define as 'non-users':

C3.3 States that do not demand election observation will support the creation of an election monitoring mechanism to increase exchanges of best electoral practices and improve election quality in their region, as long as the institutional design does not entail external interference in domestic affairs.

We argue that groups of states with different – or even diverging – preferences can agree on the creation of an international institution in a sensitive field such as election observation by negotiating an institutional design that allows each group to extract its own benefits while minimizing any cost. They obtain the latter goal by establishing an international institution that does not impose explicit obligations on members and fully protects national sovereignty from external interference. As such, states that share a preference for sovereignty-protective institutional designs can agree on international institutional building although they differ in the goals they intend to pursue through the new institution.

Research design, methods, and data

This manuscript investigates the creation of the ECU and its electoral missions. In-depth analysis of a case study enables the identification of the conditions that lead to the outcome under investigation (Gerring, 2004).

Outcome: ECU and its electoral missions

South American states' electoral authorities constituted the ECU, which was a regional sectoral council grounded into the intergovernmental framework of UNASUR and financed by UNASUR's general budget. ECU's statute states that the council pursued two main activities. First, it promoted technical exchanges among its member states' electoral authorities. Second, it provided electoral assistance through the deployment of 'accompaniment' missions, in full respect of the sovereignty and domestic laws of the host country and its government (ECU, 2012). The launching of any UNASUR's mission followed a formal request by a member government. A bilateral agreement between the host government and UNASUR activated the mission. The same agreement detailed the administrative and legal principles that regulated the mission's activities in the host state. Member states' electoral authorities negotiated the mission composition, which they approved by consensus (including the host state). A group of electoral experts (up to 44) selected from the member states' electoral bodies composed the mission which a 'technical coordinator' (also selected by consensus) headed. This figure acted as the only representative to the host state's authorities. The participation of member states' electoral authorities in ECU's missions differentiates them from OAS's missions (which are composed of independent experts) and makes them similar to those of UNIORE. Yet, differently from UNIORE, ECU's missions did not involve the electoral bodies of the US and Canada. Additionally, UNIORE is a non-governmental organization that a non-state actor (the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights)

coordinates, whereas ECU was a sectoral body of an intergovernmental RO. This means that the foreign affairs ministers and heads of state of UNASUR had to approve a mission. They also appointed by consensus a 'special representative', who was a political figure in charge of representing the national executives in the mission. The presence of a political representative – who accompanied the technical coordinator – distinguishes ECU's missions from those conducted by OAS and UNIORE, which do not involve national executives' representatives.

The design of ECU's missions included a set of general guidelines aimed at defining the mission's basic tasks. Yet ECU's missions lacked a detailed manual for deployment. Each mission's methodology resulted from an ad hoc negotiation between the host state and the electoral authorities of the other member states. The former was expected to provide information on key aspects of the electoral process, such as domestic rules related to the electoral register, the number of voters per polling station, and the country's socio-political and media context. Differently from the OAS, ECU thus did not deploy its missions on the basis of an institutionalized methodology that allows generating independent information and dictates with precision how the mission should operate in all the phases of the electoral process. Finally, mission reporting happened at three stages. After two preliminary reports with no recommendations, the technical coordinator submitted a final report (including observations and recommendations) to the host state' electoral authorities, who could decide whether to make it public. Therefore, differently from the OAS missions, ECU's missions were not allowed to independently report on the quality of the electoral processes they accompanied¹.

¹ This is clearly observable in article 15 of the bilateral agreement between Venezuela and UNASUR for the deployment of an electoral mission in the 2013 presidential elections, which explicitly forbids the head of mission

In sum, the design of UNASUR's electoral missions fully protected the autonomy and sovereignty of the host state, which could also condition the mission's composition and deployment through its participation in the decision-making process, as well as control and filter the dissemination of the mission's reports. The extensive control accorded to the host state drastically reduced the autonomy of ECU's missions, turning them into 'intervened in' missions (Planchuelo, 2017).

Country classification

We constructed the 'users' and 'non-users' categories on the basis of their use of external election monitoring. The first group comprises all South American countries except Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, which make up the non-users group. All states from the non-users group score 0.75 or higher in the V-DEM Dataset (v. 11.1) Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (Coppedge et al., 2021) in the period 2008-2012, which qualifies them as polyarchies (Altman 2019, 119); whereas user states score lower than 0.75 in that same index. Within the users category, we further differentiated between 'fragile democracies' (Colombia, Paraguay and Peru) and 'contested illiberal regimes' (Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela). The erosion of the balance in the state's fundamental powers, and particularly the subordination of the electoral power to the national executive, led to the contestation of the democratic credentials of the regimes that compose the second 'users' sub-group (Cameron, 2018).

from issuing subjective assessments of the electoral process before submitting the mission report to Venezuela's NEC (UNASUR, 2013b).

Methods and data

The research protocol (Annex I) provides detailed information about methodological decisions and technical solutions adopted in the research design and implementation process. We identify the causal mechanism that explains the outcome of interest. A causal mechanism consists of a set of interacting factors which conform a causal chain leading to a given outcome (Gerring, 2008). In this case, the different conditions singled out in the previous section identify the components of the causal mechanism: (i) regional leadership, (ii) the mobilization of a pre-existing transgovernmental network, and (iii) the interaction of different sets of state preferences regarding election observation. We consider a condition ‘confirmed’ when a sufficient number of interviewed actors provide confirmatory evidence. We establish a validity threshold for individual explanations related to a given causal condition: at least three actors from three different countries must coincide on a given explanatory factor, while no actor should refute any given factor. Naturally, assuming that actors may be lying permits questioning the robustness of this inference. However, refutation based on this assumption needs to be empirically established.

To generate empirical evidence, we conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and top-level bureaucrats from the electoral bodies and foreign affairs ministries of nine UNASUR states (Annex II lists the interviews). Given the difficulties encountered in accessing Venezuela and the refusal of relevant Venezuelan actors to be interviewed, we could only derive preferences for Venezuela’s representatives in the negotiation indirectly through the statements of other participating actors. We used a positional sampling strategy to select

interviewees (Tansey, 2007): the individuals' direct participation in the negotiation of the ECU² determined their inclusion in the sample. Non-random sampling is the most appropriate approach to elite interviewing in the context of a process-tracing study, since it includes the most important actors who participated in the events under investigation (Annex I details the sample selection strategy and discusses its coverage).

Interviews and coding

We conducted semi-structured interviews based on a basic questionnaire, which enabled us to shed light on the hidden elements of the negotiation process that could not be deduced from the analysis of the outcomes or other primary sources (Tansey, 2007). We deliberately asked our interviewees to focus on the original motivations behind their decision to create the ECU. In doing so, we sought to neutralize the bias behind functionalist accounts that infer an actor's motivations from the effects of a given institution. The central question, which informed the interviews, was 'Why did you decide to create the ECU?' Beyond the original questions related to agency and preferences in the negotiation of the ECU, interviewees were allowed to express their own views freely, which diminishes the scope for the interviewer to manipulate the data obtained by imposing interpretative schemes when asking questions. Actors' claims allow us to verify whether the actors' actions at each stage of the causal process were consistent with the assumptions implied by the theory. When possible, we conducted interviews in person. We

² Between October 2009 and November 2012, representatives of South American states' electoral bodies and foreign affairs ministries gathered four times in Caracas, Asunción, and Lima to negotiate the creation of the ECU and its missions.

carried out our fieldwork in Santiago, Lima, Quito and Bogotá between March 2017 and March 2018. We were unable to conduct our interviews in person in seven occasions and used Skype instead.

We analyzed the interview transcripts using the software for qualitative data analysis Atlas.ti© and then we coded them. We generated deductive codes from the conditions underlying the article's causal argument. Our initial reading of the transcripts permitted the inductive identification of supplementary codes for these conditions, following canonical coding practice (Campbell et al., 2013). Overall, we generated a list of 36 codes to which we assigned a total of 307 claims extracted from the interviews' transcripts (Annex III provides the complete codebook with the assigned quotations). To secure the internal validity of the empirical evidence (and the robustness of causal inference), we ran an internal validity (replicability) test based on Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient (α) (Krippendorff, 2004). Annex I provides detailed information on the modes and results of the replicability test.

Findings: analysis and results

This section presents the empirical evidence organized around the different conditions that led to the emergence of the ECU and its missions. Footnotes indicate the quotations that confirm our theoretical expectations, referring to the name of the person interviewed followed by the number assigned to each specific quotation within the interview. The software Atlas.ti automatically generates this information (see Annex IV).

The leading role of Venezuela's NEC in the mobilization of the network of South American electoral authorities

The Venezuelan electoral body led the first decisive moments of the creation of the ECU, as reported by most of the interviewees³. Venezuela's NEC unilaterally convened the first meeting of the South American electoral bodies in Caracas, without the backing of any intergovernmental mandate from UNASUR's decision-making bodies⁴. To mobilize South American electoral authorities, Venezuela's NEC used its entrepreneurial capacity to create a strategic opportunity for them to advance an electoral cooperation agenda even in the absence of a political mandate from the UNASUR governments⁵. The Venezuelan NEC cemented its entrepreneurial leadership in material aspects: it paid for the necessary travel, accommodation, and logistics, which played a key role in the mobilization of the network of South American electoral authorities⁶.

In addition to the leading role of Venezuela's NEC, the interviewees assigned important roles to electoral authorities from other countries. Interviewees identified two specific national bodies (and the individuals within) as relevant actors in the negotiation of the ECU and its missions: those from Argentina and Uruguay⁷. Argentina played a coordinating role⁸. In the opinion of the technical officer who represented Argentina in the negotiation, this occurred because of Argentina's ability to act as a bridge between different domestic electoral models

³ Cabrera Burgos 49, 51, 55; Fernández and Ríos 1; García 3, 57; Neves da Silva 8, 35; Tullio 12, 14.

⁴ Fernández and Ríos 1, 57; Neves da Silva 8; Penco 23; Tullio 12.

⁵ Fernández and Ríos 1, 23; 55, 57; García 3; Neves da Silva 35; Penco 23; Tullio 14.

⁶ Cabrera Burgos 26, 47; García 3; Neves da Silva 6, 35, 47; Tullio 12, 14.

⁷ Lerner 4; Távara 12; Tullio 19, 43.

⁸ Neves da Silva 38; Tullio 22, 61; Salomone 26.

(characterized by varying levels of legalization)⁹. Chilean actors argued that Argentina politically aligned itself with Venezuela in the negotiation, and more broadly with the Bolivarian bloc¹⁰. On the other hand, Uruguay's electoral body also emerged as an important player. Uruguay's stance depended on the incumbent presidency of the electoral body. Interviewees reported that the president in office when the process started was reluctant to engage with Venezuela's leadership initiative because he saw the risk of the politicization of electoral cooperation¹¹. His deputy participated in a personal capacity in the early stage of the negotiation of the ECU and gave a decisive contribution to its formalization once he became Vice President of Uruguay's Electoral Tribunal¹². Interviewees from other electoral bodies considered that Uruguay's electoral body played an instrumental 'facilitating' role in getting Chile, Colombia and Peru involved in the negotiation by acting as a honest broker, while fully supporting Venezuela's initiative¹³.

The role of Brazil's electoral body in the negotiation differs from the typical position of a regional power. As in the case of Uruguay, the electoral authorities' personal perceptions determined their initially aloof stance towards ECU, which evolved into more active participation because of a domestic change at the head of the country's electoral body¹⁴. Brazil's foreign ministry maintained a cautious approach to the negotiation, which led to the widespread

⁹ Tullio 22.

¹⁰ Cabrera Brugos 31; Fernández and Ríos 20.

¹¹ Cabrera Burgos 30; Penco 24.

¹² Cabrera Burgos 30; Penco 24.

¹³ García 4; Tullio 19, 20.

¹⁴ Cabrera Burgos 29; Neves da Silva 28, 42; Paredes 15; Salomone 11, 29; Távara 7.

perception of Brazil as the most reluctant country towards the creation of ECU¹⁵. Chile's electoral authorities actively engaged in the negotiation¹⁶ with the support of their foreign affairs ministry¹⁷, seeking to ensure that Venezuela's leadership did not translate into its excessive influence within the new regional institution¹⁸.

The role of the transgovernmental network of South American electoral bodies

Interviewees coincided on affirming that national electoral authorities took the initiative to create the ECU and its missions¹⁹. Interviewees also agree that the technical initiative enjoyed the consent of UNASUR's member governments, which backed the electoral bodies' leading effort²⁰. The pre-existence of technical cooperation among the South American electoral bodies (particularly within UNIORE and OAS) facilitated the initiative by making it natural for electoral authorities to attend the first meeting convened by Venezuela's NEC in Caracas²¹. Equally, some

¹⁵ Fernández and Ríos 19, 45; García 29; Neves da Silva 29; Paredes 15.

¹⁶ Fernández and Ríos 59; García 1, 37; Paredes 11.

¹⁷ Cabrera Burgos 63; Fernández and Ríos 59, 60; García 46, 54.

¹⁸ García 37, 39, 47.

¹⁹ Cabrera Burgos 1, 2, 12, 66; Neves da Silva 4; Ovanda Rojas 1; Paredes 2; Pozo 18; Salomone 2, 3, 4; Távara 24; Tullio 1.

²⁰ Cabrera Burgos 5, 20, 21, 63, 66; Fernández and Ríos 59, 60; Lerner Ghitis 1; Neves da Silva 29, 32, 44; Penco 21, 34, 49; Pozo 10, 11; Salomone 12, 23, 45; Tullio 37.

²¹ Cabrera Burgos 41, 43, 45, 46; Galindo 4; García 43; Neves da Silva 1; Penco 47, 61; Tullio 29, 36, 51; Zambonini 15.

of them report the existence of UNASUR as an opportunity to institutionalize electoral cooperation at the South American level²².

Interviewees agree that national executives fully respected the autonomy of their respective electoral authorities in the negotiation²³. This allowed electoral bodies to create two technical working groups devoted to the drafting of the ECU's statute and the definition of the norms and criteria underpinning ECU's missions, respectively. Electoral bodies' autonomy in the negotiation did not mean a lack of coincidence between political and technical state actors. In fact, a number of interviewees indicated that officials from foreign affairs ministries provided their electoral bodies with political and legal support in the negotiation²⁴, although accounts of national executives' influence on ECU's institutional design vary. Specifically, several actors singled out the figure of the special political representative of ECU's missions as a key contribution from the member governments²⁵. In any case, the consensus seems to be that governments did not interfere in the design of ECU's missions, although technical actors incorporated political inputs and demands coming from national executives²⁶.

The value of external election monitoring for fragile democracies

²² Neves da Silva 9; Penco 16, 64; Tullio 3, 42.

²³ Cabrera Burgos 20, 76; Fernández and Ríos 59, 60; García 54, 55; Neves da Silva 29; Ovanda Rojas 11; Salomone 23, 36; Zambonini 12.

²⁴ Fernández and Ríos 59, 60; García 46, 54; Penco 34; Pozo 10; Salomone 1, 23, 45; Zambonini 9; 12.

²⁵ Guerrero 16; Salomone 46; Penco 46, 49, 67, 69; Tullio 44.

²⁶ Cabrera Burgos 1; Penco 5, 34, 45, 46, 49; Pozo 10; Salomone 23; Tullio 25; Zambonini 9.

The interviews with the electoral authorities from the countries considered ‘fragile democracies’ (Paraguay, Peru and Colombia) grouped themselves around a set of preferences. The first is the instrumental role of international election observation in strengthening democracy in their countries, a point that actors from Colombia²⁷, Paraguay²⁸ and Peru²⁹ made and external observers corroborated³⁰. A second preference expressed by fragile democracies’ electoral authorities – one which resonates with a preference expressed also by interviewees from the other two groups³¹ – refers to the value of deepening technical exchanges among South American electoral bodies: they considered sharing experiences and best electoral practices a key tool to improve the quality of electoral processes at home³². Specifically, officials from Colombia, Paraguay and Peru valued electoral missions composed of national electoral authorities for their technically-oriented focus on sharing best practices rather than merely scrutinizing national elections³³. Finally, a third preference relates to the value of the ECU in relation to the OAS. Although the closeness among South American electoral bodies and their regional identity represented an added value³⁴, interviewees from the fragile democracies group

²⁷ Galindo 2.

²⁸ Zambonini 2, 7, 19.

²⁹ Távara 11.

³⁰ Fernández and Ríos 8; Penco 15; Tullio 17.

³¹ Cabrera Burgos 74, 75; Guerrero 2, 8; Neves da Silva 10; Ovanda Rojas 2, 3, 4; Pozo 16.

³² Távara 14, 15, 18; Galindo 1, 5, 13, 15; Zambonini 18.

³³ Galindo 3; Lerner 12; Távara 6, 13; Zambonin 16.

³⁴ Galindo 4; Lerner 1, 11, 12; Távara 8, 9, 26.

insisted that the ECU's and the OAS's electoral missions were complementary³⁵, recognizing that the latter played a pivotal role in supporting democratization in their countries³⁶.

The value of 'neutralized' election monitoring for contested illiberal regimes

This group comprised those states that had benefitted directly from international election observation but developed a rejection of external interference in domestic electoral processes due to growing internal and external contestation of their democratic credentials: Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Several interviewees coincided in describing these states' instrumental self-interest in the creation of the ECU³⁷. This group shared some preferences with the fragile democracies group. Ecuadorian electoral authorities expressed interest in election observation as a mechanism to strengthen democracy at home³⁸. Additionally, actors from the electoral bodies of Bolivia³⁹ and Ecuador⁴⁰ referred to a preference for institutionalizing technical cooperation among South American electoral bodies following a model of election monitoring based on mutual learning aimed at improving domestic electoral practices rather than at scrutinizing the electoral process.

However, contested governments' preference for deepening technical cooperation had a second face: electoral missions were expected to be non-political in the sense of fully respecting

³⁵ Galindo 12; Lerner 13; Távara 21; Zambonini 1, 2, 5, 17.

³⁶ Galindo 12; Lerner 6; Zambonini 2, 5.

³⁷ Fernández and Ríos 36, 66; García 2, 12; Neves da Silva 37; Salomone 30.

³⁸ Paredes 4, 29; Pozo 4, 12, 21, 43, 47, 48.

³⁹ Ovanda Rojas 3, 4.

⁴⁰ Guerrero 2, 4, 8; Paredes 3, 20; Pozo 5, 16, 26, 27, 30, 36.

the host state's national sovereignty, and particularly the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs⁴¹. This had a very clear origin: the governments of Venezuela, Ecuador and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia were dissatisfied with the performance of existing election observation mechanisms (both regional ones, such as UNIORE under the coordination of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights⁴², and extra-regional ones such as the EU and the Carter Foundation⁴³). However, the main target was the OAS. Interviewees from fragile democracies and non-user states recorded the tensions between Venezuela and Ecuador and the OAS observation missions⁴⁴. Specifically, interviewees from Ecuador's electoral body resented the intrusive character of OAS's missions and their role as external judges of domestic electoral processes, which explains this country's preference for regional electoral missions free from external political interference and sanctions⁴⁵. The interviewees also reported complaints at the lack of technical preparation of the OAS missions because those were not composed of technical experts from the member states' electoral bodies⁴⁶. This translated into a clear preference for regional expert knowledge based on the similarities among South American electoral systems⁴⁷.

Interviewees from Chile reported contested Bolivarian regimes' perception of the OAS as an instrument of US influence and interference; hence bypassing the OAS amounted to an effort

⁴¹ Guerrero 4, 24; Ovanda Rojas 9; Paredes 26; Pozo 6, 13, 30, 32, 37.

⁴² García 12, 23, 15, 61.

⁴³ García 13; Guerrero 4; Tullio 11.

⁴⁴ Cabrera Burgos 16; Fernández and Ríos 10, 36, 66; Lerner 12; Salomone 9; Tullio 8.

⁴⁵ Guerrero 4; Paredes 21, 30; Pozo 7.

⁴⁶ Guerrero 4; Penco 33; Pozo 36; Salomone 8, 9.

⁴⁷ Guerrero 4, 8, 12; Penco 38; Pozo 5, 30; Salomone 8, 9; Tullio 58.

to ‘expel’ the US from the region⁴⁸. In particular, the interviewees argued that Venezuela wanted to remove the OAS from observing regional electoral processes and persuaded Bolivia and Ecuador into supporting this goal⁴⁹. Ecuador fully shared Venezuela’s anti-OAS preference. Ecuadorian actors expressed their resentment of the OAS’s patronizing and censorious attitude⁵⁰. This created a perception of antagonism towards the OAS as a source of external interference in domestic affairs⁵¹. As a result, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador called for the establishment of an autonomous regional mechanism⁵², as interviewees from the other two groups confirmed⁵³.

Contested illiberal regimes’ preferences shaping the design of ECU’s missions

Venezuela’s leading role was based on a clear idea of the type of institution it wanted, which it promoted actively in the negotiation by exploiting the strategic advantage of hosting the initial meeting of South American electoral bodies⁵⁴. Venezuela’s NEC explicitly requested to label ECU’s missions as ‘accompanying missions’ (a term replicated from Venezuela’s domestic electoral legislation⁵⁵) to avoid any reference to election observation: ‘accompanying missions’

⁴⁸ Fernández and Ríos 10; García 26.

⁴⁹ Fernández and Ríos 36, 10; García 13.

⁵⁰ Guerrero 4; Paredes 21, 30; Pozo 7.

⁵¹ Fernández and Ríos 10; Salomone 9; Tullio 8.

⁵² Guerrero 4; Ovanda Rojas 9; Paredes 30; Pozo 5.

⁵³ Cabrera Burgos 16; García 26; Lerner 12; Salomone 9; Tullio 8, 68.

⁵⁴ Fernández and Ríos 1, 10; García 13; Neves da Silva 35, 47; Tullio 14.

⁵⁵ In 2010, Venezuela’s NEC removed the practice of international electoral observation from its regulation, replacing it with that of ‘electoral accompaniment’ (NEC 2010).

are not critical of domestic conditions and do not undermine the host state's absolute sovereignty over the electoral process⁵⁶. The Chilean interviewees considered that Bolivia and Ecuador fully supported Venezuela's goals⁵⁷, something that the Ecuadorian⁵⁸ and Bolivian⁵⁹ interviewees confirmed. In particular, Ecuador's electoral authorities highlighted their preference for an institutional design that privileged non-interference and the respect for national sovereignty over transparency by granting the host authorities complete control over the mission's final report, which they would autonomously decide whether to make public⁶⁰. Similarly, Ecuador's electoral authorities expressed their preference for consensus decision-making within the ECU, to ensure that everyone – including the host government – would agree to the mission's composition and deployment modes⁶¹.

The value of election monitoring for 'non-user' states

The third group of actors comprises 'non-user' states (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay), which did not intend to invite observation missions yet shared an interest in intensifying electoral cooperation at the South American level. Officials from Argentina's electoral bodies and foreign affairs ministry backed the creation of the ECU and generally had a

⁵⁶ Cabrera Burgos 67; Guerrero 19; Paredes 26; Pozo 32.

⁵⁷ Cabrera Burgos 32; Fernández and Ríos 66; García 2, 13.

⁵⁸ Guerrero 24; Paredes 21; Pozo 6, 13, 32.

⁵⁹ Ovanda Rojas 9.

⁶⁰ Guerrero 19, 24; Pozo 13, 39.

⁶¹ Paredes 26.

non-negative perception of Venezuela's leading role⁶², while the electoral authorities from both Brazil and Uruguay at first adopted a distant stance towards Venezuela's initiative⁶³. Chile also was initially reluctant to support the creation of the ECU⁶⁴; yet, as the initiative gathered steam, the Chilean electoral authorities, in coordination with their foreign affairs ministry, adopted a pragmatic approach: better to be in than absent⁶⁵, a position based on the perception that there were no costs involved⁶⁶ and the willingness to steer the new institution in a democratic direction⁶⁷. Non-users shared a position of external engagement with international election observation: they contributed – technically and financially – to electoral missions in the region, but they did not invite missions to observe their own elections because they considered themselves consolidated democracies⁶⁸. Correlated to this, non-users shared a preference for the promotion of the norm of non-interference in domestic affairs⁶⁹. The deepening of technical exchanges of best electoral practices and mutual learning among South American electoral

⁶² Salomone 25; Tullio 21, 22, 68.

⁶³ Cabrera Burgos 28, 29, 30; García 29; Neves da Silva 42; Penco 24.

⁶⁴ Fernández and Ríos 12, 27, 65; García 37; Paredes 11.

⁶⁵ Cabrera Burgos 79; García 8, 21.

⁶⁶ Cabrera Burgos 70, 81.

⁶⁷ Fernández and Ríos 7, 8; García 21, 39, 47.

⁶⁸ Cabrera Burgos 81; Fernández and Ríos 26; Penco 14, Valdés 3.

⁶⁹ Cabrera Burgos 4, 28, 78, 81; Fernández and Ríos 67; Tullio 18.

bodies emerges as a crucial shared preference for non-users' electoral authorities⁷⁰, along with a shared emphasis on avoiding any external interference in the ECU electoral missions⁷¹.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the non-users group is the lack of antagonism towards the OAS. Interviewees from Argentina⁷², Brazil⁷³, Chile⁷⁴ and Uruguay⁷⁵ explicitly insisted on the need to ensure ECU's complementarity with the OAS and the other existing election observation bodies. More specifically, interviewees from non-user states stressed that they wanted to restrain the temptation to exclude the OAS⁷⁶ and tame Venezuela's effort to impose its own geopolitical goals in the negotiation⁷⁷. Two interviewees portray the creation of the ECU as a trade-off between two approaches: one which sought to expel the OAS from the region and the other which sought to ensure ECU's compatibility with other election monitoring institutions⁷⁸. Interviewees from non-users' electoral bodies also referred to the existence of a regional identity in electoral matters based on South American electoral authorities' shared expertise and domestic autonomy from their respective national executives⁷⁹. Finally,

⁷⁰ Cabrera Burgos 8, 11, 74, 75; Fernández and Ríos 3, 4, 61; Neves da Silva 10, 11, 12, 13, 43, 45; Penco 30; Tullio 5, 58, 64; Valdés 1.

⁷¹ Cabrera Burgos 78; Fernández and Ríos 67; Penco 6, 45, 56, 70; Salomone 7, 8; Tullio 6, 18.

⁷² Tullio 50.

⁷³ Neves da Silva 40.

⁷⁴ Cabrera Burgos 18; Fernández and Ríos 62, 68; García 7, 8, 45; Valdés 13 .

⁷⁵ Penco 50.

⁷⁶ Cabrera Burgos 16, 18; Fernández and Ríos 62, 65, 68; García 8.

⁷⁷ Fernández and Ríos 10, 12; García 21, 37, 47, 57; Neves da Silva 8.

⁷⁸ Fernández and Ríos 10, 36, 65; Tullio 9.

⁷⁹ Cabrera Burgos 42, 46; Penco 13; Tullio 29, 30, 33.

interviewees from non-user states highlighted that ECU's missions contributed to the legitimization of national elections in South America⁸⁰. However, no interviewee from non-users referred to ECU (or any other electoral mechanism) acting to legitimize their own electoral processes. Only interviewees from Chile conceived ECU as a mechanism that contributed to the defense of democracy in South America⁸¹. More broadly, interviewees from non-user states did not report any concern regarding the possibility that ECU's missions could undermine democracy in South America.

Non-users' preferences shaping the design of ECU's missions

The electoral bodies of non-user states authored a number of elements of the institutional design of the ECU and its missions. The ECU's model of 'accompaniment missions' fitted well with non-users' internal regulation, which did not envisage international election observation and reflected their aloof stance towards external interference in domestic affairs⁸². Likewise, decision-making by consensus on the composition and deployment modes of ECU's missions guaranteed every state a veto, which suited non-users' preference for the defense of national sovereignty⁸³. More boldly, Argentina introduced a number of elements from its own domestic electoral system into the ECU's institutional design⁸⁴. In particular, since Argentina possesses two different electoral authorities (i.e. the National Electoral Directorate, which depends on the

⁸⁰ Penco 17, 42; Valdés 16.

⁸¹ Cabrera Burgos 14; Fernández and Ríos 7, 8, 63, 64; García 10.

⁸² Cabrera Burgos 4, 33, 81; Fernández and Ríos 26, 67; Penco 14; Tullio 18; Valdés 3.

⁸³ Cabrera Burgos 33, 70, 78; Fernández and Ríos 67; Tullio 18.

⁸⁴ Tullio 5.

executive, and the Electoral Chamber which depends on the judiciary), the Argentinian government pushed to include a special political representative in the ECU missions⁸⁵. Electoral bodies would thus designate the technical coordinator for each mission, while foreign affairs ministers would select a political delegate to represent the member states' national executives. Interviewees from non-users' electoral bodies acknowledged that this introduced the challenge of keeping the ECU missions free from political intervention⁸⁶. Non-users also supported that the final mission report should focus on providing the host authorities with useful inputs to improve their electoral processes rather than on being made public (except at the host authorities' explicit request) or externally validating electoral results⁸⁷. This reflected non-users' preference for avoiding external interference in domestic affairs.

Discussion

Our findings confirm that the interaction of the conditions identified in the theoretical section can explain the emergence of the ECU and its electoral missions. The causal mechanism shows that a secondary power mobilized a pre-existing transgovernmental network to activate an interstate negotiation on the creation of a new institution. The interaction among different sets of state preferences reached an equilibrium around an institutional design that afforded each group of states the ability to extract benefits without incurring into diminutions of sovereignty.

⁸⁵ Salomone 46.

⁸⁶ Cabrera Burgos 25, 73; Neves da Silva 46; Penco 45, 56, 70; Tullio 6.

⁸⁷ Cabrera Burgos 78; Salomone 34; Tullio 18.

The findings show that Venezuela used its material and entrepreneurial leadership capacities to mobilize South American electoral bodies and engage the other South American states in the creation of a regional issue-specific institution. Exploiting South American electoral bodies' shared interest in institutionalizing technical cooperation, as well as the distant stance of the regional power Brazil, Venezuela promoted the establishment of an election monitoring mechanism within UNASUR. To do so, Venezuela's NEC unilaterally convened and paid for a technical meeting of electoral bodies in Caracas, which triggered the beginning of a formal interstate negotiation.

The pre-existence of a transgovernmental network of South American electoral authorities – consolidated through long standing cooperation within UNIORE and OAS – facilitated the convergence of these bodies around the opportunity to institutionalize technical cooperation at the regional level, proving instrumental for advancing in the negotiation of the ECU and its missions. The findings show how electoral bodies drove the initiative, reaching out to their respective governments to obtain the political backing they needed to start a negotiation at the UNASUR level. National governments granted diplomatic support to the electoral bodies, while actively participating in the negotiation of the institutional design of the ECU and its missions. We found no evidence of any South American government going against its own electoral body, which indicates that electoral bodies' preferences were aligned with the preferences of the respective governments.

South American states engaged in the negotiation to pursue both shared goals (i.e. deepening regional electoral cooperation) and country-specific (non-coincident) objectives related to the use of ECU's missions. We identified the existence of two groups of states (users

and non-users) endowed with different preferences on the role of election observation. Within the users group, we identified two sub-groups – ‘fragile democracies’ (Colombia, Paraguay and Peru) and ‘contested illiberal regimes’ (Venezuela, Ecuador and to a lesser extent Bolivia) characterized by different subsets of preferences.

The findings show how the UNASUR member states managed to achieve preference convergence through the negotiation of an institutional design that embodied the key preferences of the two groups of states. All the states shared a strong preference for institutionalizing electoral cooperation within UNASUR. This was due to the fact that electoral authorities from all the South American states perceived ECU as a tool for catalyzing technical exchanges and adding value to the similarities among the South American electoral systems and the mutual knowledge of how they work accumulated through previous cooperation. User states also coincided among themselves in seeking a mechanism to strengthen their own regimes. However, while fragile democracies considered ECU and its missions instrumental to consolidate democracy at home, contested illiberal regimes saw in ECU’s missions a tool for strengthening their legitimacy vis-à-vis internal and external contestation of their democratic credentials. Non-users (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) supported the creation of the ECU because their electoral bodies considered it as a useful tool to foster the dissemination of best electoral practices and improve election quality in the region. Only one non-user state highlighted ECU’s relevance as a tool for protecting democracy. Non-users coincided with fragile democracies in envisioning ECU as an additional layer of election monitoring rather than as a replacement for OAS’s observation, which itself was considered a valuable tool for consolidating democracy in the region. Additionally, ECU would not create any costs for non-users since they did not intend to invite its missions nor were they paying directly for their deployment. Among user states,

contested regimes meant to use ECU as a strategic platform to replace independent election observation (OAS's missions in particular) with incumbent-friendlier missions composed of the member states' electoral authorities rather than of externally appointed experts (Planchuelo, 2017). Contested governments' preference for a non-intrusive observation mechanism fitted non-users' preference for avoiding external interference in domestic affairs.

We can trace easily the translation of these sets of preferences into the institutional design of the ECU missions. The fact that ECU's missions were composed of member states' electoral authorities coincides with the preference of actors from all the states for exploiting the mutual knowledge and technical expertise accumulated through previous cooperation and adding value to the institutional similarities among South American electoral bodies. However, the preference for technical specialization did not imply granting electoral bodies autonomy from governments in the deployment of ECU's missions: the creation of the figure of a Special Representative designated by member states' foreign affairs ministers responded to the idea of retaining intergovernmental control over the missions. Moreover, the missions' composition did not undermine the host state's autonomy: its electoral authorities voted for the mission technical coordinator, which the ECU elected by consensus. Likewise, the host government voted for the mission's special representative, which member states' foreign affairs ministers also elected by consensus.

The label 'electoral accompaniment missions' for ECU's missions clearly emphasizes that those missions sought to avoid external scrutiny (Planchuelo, 2017). Accompaniment missions provide less costly international legitimization of domestic electoral processes, which can formally comply with the international norm of election observation while avoiding external interference. This fitted the preferences of non-users and contested regimes, both of whom promoted the

norm of non-interference in domestic affairs. Similarly, the fact that the ECU missions did not publish their final report but submitted it confidentially to the host country's authorities reflected the preference for non-interference in domestic affairs of non-users and contested regimes. Finally, ECU's missions were not designed in opposition to the OAS missions, reflecting the preferences of non-users and fragile democracies for complementarity between ECU and OAS. However, this did not impose any extra costs on contested illiberal regimes, which remained free not to invite an OAS mission. This flexibility fully accommodated all the states' preferences, while providing illiberal users with a strategic opportunity to exploit ECU's missions to undermine the authority of OAS and water down the norm of international election observation.

In summary, the design of ECU's missions accommodated diverse sets of preferences regarding election observation. South American states shared some of those preferences (e.g. enhancing regional cooperation among electoral authorities), whereas they differed – in some cases even diverged – on the final goals they wanted to achieve, particularly regarding democracy consolidation and the subversion of the international norm of election observation. We argue that the creation of an international institution in presence of different preferences is possible when states agree upon an institutional design that allows each state to pursue its own objectives without imposing any obligations that may restrict national sovereignty. Such an institutional compromise enabled the UNASUR states to reach an equilibrium point with respect to election monitoring by ensuring non-interference in domestic affairs and the preservation of the host state's autonomy, which limited the sovereignty costs associated with the deployment of ECU's missions. Interestingly, the design of the ECU and its missions allowed for agreement between democracies and contested illiberal regimes in a sensitive field such as election monitoring.

Conclusion

This article addressed the following puzzle: Why do democracies agree with contested illiberal regimes on the creation of regional institutions for election monitoring? The empirical case study of the ECU yielded a set of findings that allows answering this puzzle. The creation of the ECU shows that states with different preferences can agree on the establishment of an international institution by negotiating an institutional design that does not impose any restriction on participating states' autonomy and sovereignty, while creating strategic opportunities for the pursuit of country-specific interests by certain member states.

Our findings also confirm theoretical expectations about the role of transgovernmental networks as facilitators of preference convergence among states towards international institution-building. The case of ECU shows that pre-existing transgovernmental networks facilitate preference convergence among technical state actors towards the institutionalization of regional issue-specific cooperation. The expertise-based domestic legitimacy and autonomy of the state actors that compose transgovernmental networks allow them to get their respective governments on board in the institution-building process, smoothing the way for intergovernmental agreement on the creation of an issue-specific international institution. Additionally, the creation of the ECU demonstrates that regional powers are not the only actors capable of promoting the establishment of non-intrusive, incumbent-friendly election monitoring mechanisms. The ECU was established under the leadership of a secondary power (Venezuela), which strategically mobilized the network of South American electoral authorities to pursue its country-specific (illiberal) goals, with the consent and active participation of a variety of other states (including states committed to democracy consolidation).

While establishing the ECU enabled member states to deepen regional electoral cooperation through the deployment of 26 accompaniment missions between 2011 and 2018, it failed to ensure rigorous democratic scrutiny in Venezuela's 2013 elections, 'accompanying' the country into political instability and democratic backsliding. This poses a daunting paradox related to the hidden and unintended costs of institutional designs that strongly protect national sovereignty and the norm of non-interference at the expenses of independent external monitoring. In the case of the ECU, democratic South American states, non-users (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) in particular, miscalculated the ability of illiberal regimes to use the sovereignty-protective design of ECU's missions to legitimize dubious electoral practices. This finding confirms the tension between democracy defense and the norm of non-intervention in South American established democracies' foreign policies, which has prevented them from acting consequentially against the erosion of democracy in the region, particularly when that is pursued by incumbent governments (Feldman et al., 2019). More broadly, our findings indicate how the erosion of the norm of non-interference in Latin American regionalism (see Coe, 2019) is far from being uniform and consistent trend. In the case of the ECU, democracies and illiberal regimes could agree on the creation of an election monitoring mechanism precisely on the basis of a shared preference for sovereignty-protective (non-intrusive) institutional designs. The case of ECU also reveals how contested illiberal regimes can exploit their membership in predominantly democratic ROs – such as UNASUR – to boost their survival chances by promoting the creation of election monitoring institutions that overlap and potentially compete with independent international observers. Through the ECU, Venezuela pursued a competitive regime creation strategy (Keohane and Morse, 2014) aimed at replacing the OAS's observation missions with an incumbent-friendlier monitoring mechanism. In the case of Venezuela's 2013 elections, the

deployment of an ECU ‘accompaniment’ mission allowed the incumbent government to lower the costs of not inviting independent observers, resulting in the subversion of the standards of electoral transparency and the watering down of the norm of international election observation (Nolte, 2018).

The article provides four main contributions to the IR literature. First, it draws our attention to the genesis of sovereignty-protective institutional designs that do not impose any obligations on their parties, revealing how they can allow for the reconciliation of non-coincident preferences even in a sensitive field such as election observation. Second, the article demonstrates why states committed to democracy protection can paradoxically engage in the creation of election monitoring mechanisms that produce dysfunctional effects, such as legitimizing dubious electoral processes leading to the erosion of democracy in a given region. Third, the article provides new insight into the role of transgovernmental networks in international institution building, showing how second-tier states can exploit them to promote the creation of regional institutions that support the pursuit of their own domestic and geopolitical interests (including illiberal ones). In so doing, the article contributes to the debate on regime-boosting regionalism (Debre, 2021; Söderbaum, 2004), illuminating the conditions under which democratic ROs create election monitoring mechanisms that allow contested illiberal regimes to boost their survival chances. Methodological strictness secures the internal validity of our findings. External validity remains conditional upon confirmation in further cases in other world regions where states created monitoring mechanisms that overlap and potentially compete with independent international observers. Africa seems to be a particularly promising region for testing our framework, inasmuch as several African ROs (e.g. the African Union and the South African Development Community), whose memberships include both democracies and

non-democratic states, are equipped with monitoring institutions that have legitimized dubious elections, allowing contested incumbents to boost their legitimacy (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Stoddard, 2017).

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