

Party Monitors and Election Integrity: Evidence from Argentina¹

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In many countries, parties spend substantial resources mobilizing voters to the polls and monitoring the vote count. Does the presence of monitors make a difference in the election results? Are parties that lack monitors penalized? The 2023 presidential election in Argentina provides an ideal setting for addressing these questions. First, in Argentina, parties print their own ballots, and votes are counted manually; thus, monitors can play a key role in ensuring enough ballots are available and that they are not computed wrong. Second, although two of the three major candidates were backed by large party organizations and thousands of experienced monitors, one lacked such support, diminishing his party's capacity to oversee ballot counting at the grassroots level. Third, the election unfolded across three rounds (a mandatory primary, the general election, and the runoff), allowing us to track support for a similar set of candidates in the same polling station over time. For identification, we exploit the fact that monitors are quasi-randomly assigned to polling stations within schools, allowing us to compare thousands of monitored and (un)monitored stations within the same school. Results bolster the intuition that, even though the presence or absence of monitors did not prompt dramatic biases in vote counts (about 1%), such manipulation could affect the outcome in close races.

“We have doubts about what happened in the election. [...] For example, in Santiago del Estero, we saw polling stations where we didn’t have election monitors, and the result was 100 to 0 in favor of [Sergio] Massa. Where we had monitors, it was 60 to 55. So, clearly, there was fraud.”

Guillermo Francos, later appointed as President Milei’s Chief of Cabinet Staff, October 26, 2023.

Introduction

Elections are a fundamental component of representative democracy. Upholding citizens’ choices at the ballot box is essential for the credibility of democratic rule and the legitimacy of elected officials. However, elections are susceptible to various forms of tampering, which can compromise the fairness of the contest and raise doubts about the democratic nature of the regime. To promote clean elections, countries have implemented various mechanisms, including establishing independent agencies to oversee elections and vote counting, reforming ballot structures, supplementing electronic records with paper ballots, allowing international observers, and ensuring registration rolls are accurate and that only eligible individuals cast ballots. Political parties tend to rely on different strategies than public officials to safeguard the integrity of the process. One common oversight mechanism is the deployment of party monitors — appointed poll watchers who observe election proceedings at polling places on behalf of a political party.

Party monitors can enhance election transparency and incentivize politicians to comply with electoral outcomes. However, under certain circumstances, their presence may also create opportunities for tampering. Since not all parties have the capacity to deploy monitors to every polling station, an imbalance in oversight may open the door to electoral manipulation, reinforcing perceptions of bias and potentially undermining confidence in the process. This concern is particularly relevant when monitoring is conducted solely by the incumbent party.

The role of opposition party monitors has been particularly significant in contested polls. In recent elections in Venezuela and Nicaragua, for example, reports indicated that opposition party monitors were intimidated and forcibly prevented from observing the voting process in several precincts.² These actions suggest that incumbents seeking to manipulate electoral results view opposition monitors as obstacles to their efforts.³ The relevance of election monitors and their role in preventing manipulation extend beyond these cases to other Latin American countries, such as Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, and Argentina, where elections are generally deemed free and fair, and the regime in place is considered democratic.⁴

In Argentina, allegations of manipulation due to the absence of opposition party monitors are commonplace around elections. After the first round of the 2023 presidential election, Guillermo Francos, the main spokesperson for Javier Milei — one of the two contestants making it to the runoff and the eventual winner — stated: *“I have no doubt that in many polling stations where we didn’t have monitors, the people’s votes were manipulated.”*⁵ Milei himself estimated that in the previous nationwide compulsory primaries, his party had been “stolen” between two and five percentage points.⁶ Fearing such manipulations, his party sought the support of other larger political parties with national reach to deploy thousands of party monitors across the country to oversee the presidential runoff election. Despite denials from public officials and assertions that there was no substantial proof of fraud, allegations of electoral manipulation resonated with voters. According to a recent poll, only 30% of Argentine citizens trust that votes are counted correctly and fairly (AmericasBarometer 2023) .

In this article, we analyze electoral results from thousands of polling stations across Argentina to assess the impact of party monitors on the vote shares of different parties. Our focus is on estimating the costs that parties incur when they lack a monitor at a polling station. Following

Casas et al. (2017), our identification strategy leverages the quasi-random assignment of party monitors to polling stations within schools, allowing us to compare monitored and unmonitored stations within the same school. In this study, we apply this approach to examine both rounds of the presidential election.

The article is divided into five parts. First, we briefly review the theoretical and empirical literature on electoral manipulation, highlighting potential mechanisms that inform our expectations. The subsequent section discusses the Argentina case and our data. This is followed by an explanation of our research design strategy. Next, we present our results, showing evidence of subtle yet potentially pivotal vote benefits for a party that has monitors and is not constrained by the presence of other parties' representatives. After discussing heterogeneous effects and extensions to our findings, we conclude with a brief summary.

Electoral Manipulation and the Role of Party Monitors

Electoral fraud involves secretive and often illegal efforts to alter election results (Lehoucq 2003; McDonald 1972). The range of activities that fall within this definition is vast, from ballot stuffing and voter intimidation to vote buying and misrecording votes. On occasion, these efforts take the form of elaborate top-down schemes designed to favor incumbents. Well-known examples include the infamous 1986 Philippine election that preceded the downfall of President Ferdinand Marcos, the 2008 Zimbabwe election that perpetuated President Mugabe's rule, and the 1946-47 elections in Romania, Hungary, and Poland that cemented communist rule.

Recent studies have defined electoral manipulation that occurs during the collection and tabulation of results after polling station counting as aggregation fraud (Callen and Long 2015). Evidence of such irregularities has been uncovered, for instance, in studies of Afghanistan's 2010

parliamentary election (Callen and Long 2015) and Mexico's 1988 presidential election (Cantú 2019). More often, however, rigging occurs directly at polling stations and in a decentralized manner. As Rundlett and Svolik (2016: 180) note, electoral fraud is typically "executed at the level of individual polling stations, not by the incumbent but rather by a machinery that consists of hundreds of political operatives, party members, and state employees."

Election monitoring is a common mechanism for detecting and potentially reducing electoral fraud. International election monitoring has become "perhaps the most visible form of the broader phenomenon of democracy promotion" (Bjornlund 2004:9). Scholars have debated the relative influence of foreign versus domestic monitors, typically emphasizing the comparative advantages of the latter (Carothers 1997; Kelley 2012; Leeffer and Vicente 2019). Domestic observers often come from civil society groups, and evidence confirms their effectiveness in reducing instances of electoral fraud (Asunka et al. 2019; Sjoberg 2012). They can report irregularities and coercive practices prohibited by law while also encouraging others to report electoral malfeasance. Moreover, their mere presence can deter polling station officials from illegal activities and discourage partisan actors from committing electoral fraud (Asunka et al. 2019).

Domestic monitoring may also be conducted by political parties, which send delegates to observe election procedures at polling stations. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), political party poll watchers represent "the single most important check on the possible fraudulent practices that may be perpetrated on the electoral process" (IDEA 1998: 13).

Political party monitoring is common in Latin America, and opposition parties often invest substantial resources in deploying observers. For example, before the second round of the 2021

presidential elections, Ecuador’s opposition coalition, UNES, launched an extensive campaign to cover nearly 75% of polling stations with electoral observers “to lessen the risk of fraud.”⁷ Similarly, during the 2022 presidential elections in Colombia, Gustavo Petro, the left-wing candidate, initiated a national effort to recruit 100,000 party monitors to “defeat the fraud.”

While opposition parties see political party monitoring as essential for safeguarding elections, incumbents sometimes attempt to interfere, preventing and punishing monitors for exercising their oversight role. In Costa Rica, between 1901 and 1946—before the establishment of an independent electoral commission—fraud accusations frequently involved threats against party observers or their expulsion from polling stations (Lehoucq 2003). More recently, in the lead-up to the 2024 elections in Venezuela, the Democratic Unitary Platform, the opposition front challenging the dictatorial regime of Nicolás Maduro, launched a major campaign to enlist tens of thousands of party monitors to safeguard the contest’s integrity. “This is not a free and fair contest,” stated Maria Corina Machado, the most prominent opposition leader in Venezuela, during a public gathering on June 12, 2024, outlining the opposition’s massive effort to recruit and train poll watchers.⁸ In the aftermath of the election, which was widely denounced as fraudulent, armed groups allegedly linked to the government searched for and detained individuals who had served as poll watchers for the opposition alliance.

A key distinction between civil society and party monitors is that while both can help prevent fraud, the latter have also been identified as potential agents of electoral manipulation (Casas et al. 2017). Their stake in the contest differs from that of nonpartisan civil society monitors, as they are directly tied to competing candidates. During the flawed Nicaraguan election of 2011, for instance, the government manipulated the monitoring process by packing polling stations with regime-friendly party monitors while excluding those from the opposition.⁹ This tactic skewed

oversight in favor of the ruling party, created privileged opportunities for tampering, and ultimately undermined confidence in electoral integrity.

Recent studies have highlighted the challenges of overseeing party monitors. For example, Cantú's (2019) analysis of Mexico's 1988 presidential election showed that fraud was more likely at polling stations where opposition monitors were absent. Similarly, Duarte and Carrizosa's (2024) analysis of Paraguay's 2018 election found that parties lacking monitors at polling stations tended to receive lower vote shares, a pattern also observed by Asencio and Rueda (2019) in their study of Mexican congressional elections from 2000 to 2012.

In short, deploying party monitors is a widely used anti-fraud strategy. Less often noted, however, is that party monitors themselves can become perpetrators of the very irregularities they are meant to prevent. Following our review of party monitoring in Argentina, presented in the next section, our empirical analysis identifies its causal effect, assessing how different configurations of party monitors at polling stations affect vote shares.

Party Monitors and Allegations of Electoral Manipulation in Argentina

Our analysis focuses on Argentina, a democratic country where allegations of electoral manipulation at polling places are common, despite elections being considered free and fair and national electoral authorities remaining impartial. These allegations are most often linked to the uneven distribution of party monitors, highlighting how their presence can both legitimize elections and cast doubt on the results. Argentina also serves as a revealing case, illustrating the challenges posed by decentralized mechanisms of electoral oversight.

As in other countries, fraud allegations most often target the largest political party, the Peronist Party (PJ), which is frequently the incumbent at either the national or provincial level.

Due to its extensive organizational structure, it typically has monitors at most polling stations. In contrast, smaller opposition parties often struggle to deploy monitors as widely.

Examples of electoral manipulation allegedly occurring at polling stations were outlined in an instruction manual issued by the Peronists' main rival, the Together for Change coalition, ahead of the 2019 election. Titled *How Electoral Fraud Is Committed Against Us (and How to Prevent It)*, the manual described various fraudulent methods, including ballot stuffing, damaging or stealing ballots, allowing ineligible voters to cast votes, miscounting, and altering official documents before submission to central electoral authorities. Miguel Ángel Pichetto, the coalition's 2019 vice-presidential candidate, linked the lack of party monitoring to substantial vote losses, stating — perhaps overstating the risk — “If you're not at the polling station, you'll probably obtain zero votes.”¹⁰

As the next presidential election approached, Alfredo Cornejo, a Radical Party Governor of Mendoza, emphasized the need to safeguard the election from fraud, stating that the presence of party monitors was “*the only thing that guarantees it.*”¹¹ One of the leading candidates and eventual winner, Javier Milei, a political outsider backed by the newly formed Liberty Advances Party, alleged fraud in both the nationwide compulsory primary elections and the first round of the presidential race, which we analyze later in this article. He claimed that “*there were irregularities of such proportion that they put the result in doubt*” and asserted, “*whoever counts the vote controls everything.*”¹² Several opposition leaders accused the ruling Peronists of attempting to rig the vote. In the lead-up to the runoff, Milei joined forces with Together for Change leaders Mauricio Macri and Patricia Bullrich to oversee the election process. His party aimed to recruit 140,000 party monitors, with about half provided by Macri's party.

Electoral officials denied that fraud had occurred in the first round of the 2023 presidential elections and assured the public that the runoff would be clean. They criticized those making fraud accusations and noted that no political party had filed formal complaints.¹³ While some non-governmental organizations and press groups questioned the allegations,¹⁴ they nevertheless resonated with many Argentines who, according to public opinion polls, distrust the electoral process and suspect manipulation (AmericasBarometer 2023).

Proving electoral fraud is notoriously difficult. In recent decades, several forensic approaches to detecting election irregularities have been advanced, contributing to a growing empirical literature with significant normative implications (Lacasa and Fernández-García 2019; Rozenas 2017). In a prior analysis of Argentina, Casas et al. (2017) investigated the potential effects of party monitoring in the 2011 election in the Province of Buenos Aires. They leveraged the alphabetical assignment of voters to polling stations within schools — a reliable identification strategy, as the first initial of a voter's last name is uncorrelated with political preferences, and socioeconomic characteristics (which may be correlated with political preferences) are evenly distributed across stations within school. These features allowed them to establish a causal link between the presence of a party monitor and the vote count. Their analysis showed that the presence of party monitors systematically biases electoral results in Buenos Aires. In the following sections, we build on their identification strategy to analyze the effect of party monitors on vote counts in the two rounds of the 2023 presidential election across the country — elections in which prominent political figures publicly alleged that fraud related to party monitoring was likely occurring.

Data

Electoral data come from digitized reports from the National Electoral Chamber (Cámara Nacional Electoral). Information on polling stations—including the names, signatures, and official ID numbers of polling station authorities and party monitors, as well as the partisan affiliation of the latter—is sourced from the official telegrams sent from polling stations to the Ministry of the Interior on election night. Figure 1 provides two examples of these telegrams.

Due to the inability to accurately extract handwritten names and numbers through automated methods, we opted to hand-code data on party monitors at the polling station level. Given the scale of the task — covering approximately 105,000 polling stations over the two elections — coding every station was unfeasible. Instead, we coded the number and affiliation of party monitors for a sample of roughly 7,200 polling stations, which, across the three election rounds, corresponds to approximately 21,600 telegrams and represents around 20% of all polling stations.

We aimed to ensure our sample was representative at both the federal and provincial levels. However, since our identification strategy relies on comparing multiple polling stations within the same school, we sampled entire schools rather than individual polling stations. Due to the unavailability of school data for the province of Formosa, we excluded it from the analysis. To maintain comparability across rounds, we further restricted the sample to polling stations with valid telegrams for both elections, discarding those with missing or corrupted electronic files.

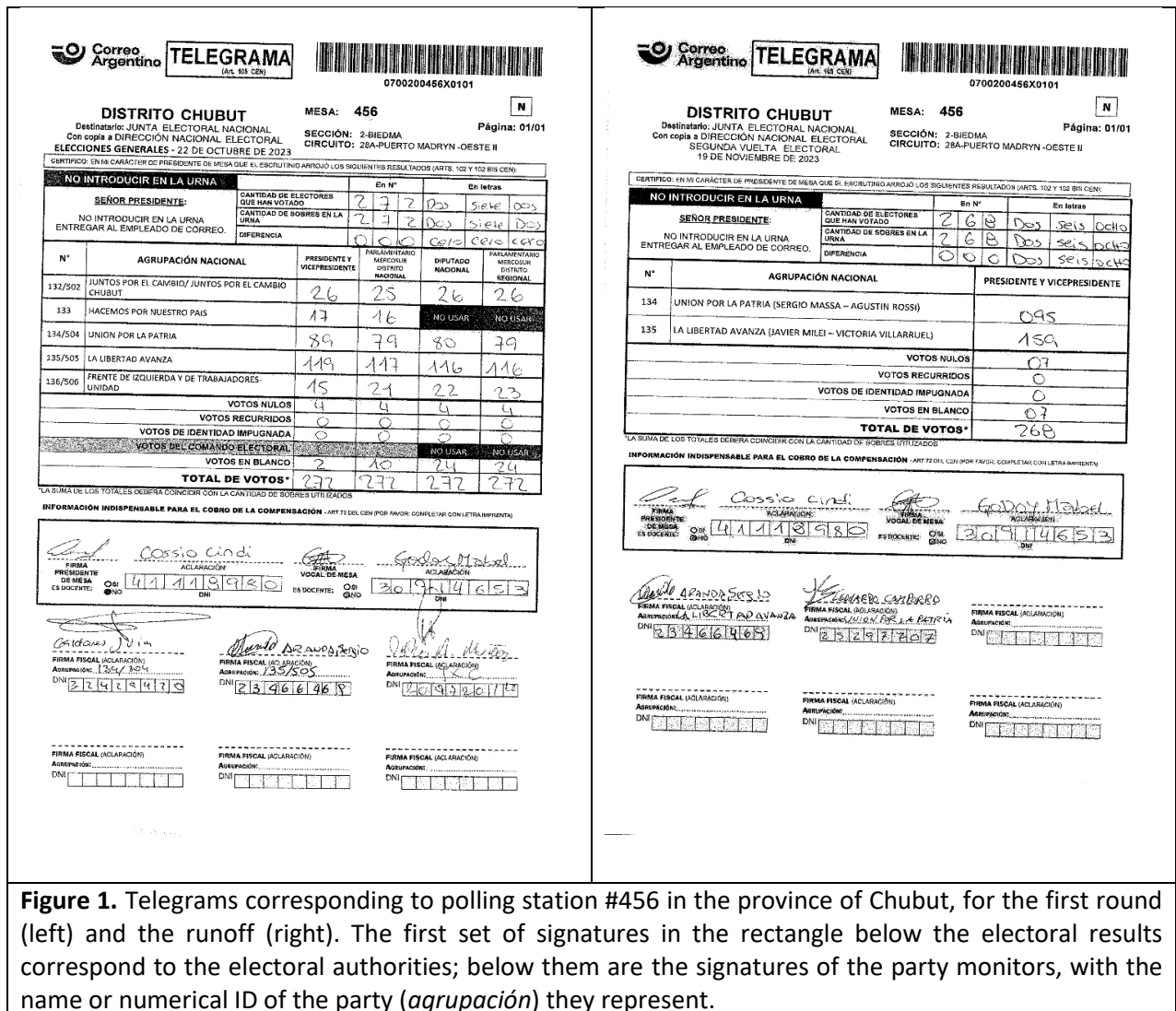


Figure 1. Telegrams corresponding to polling station #456 in the province of Chubut, for the first round (left) and the runoff (right). The first set of signatures in the rectangle below the electoral results correspond to the electoral authorities; below them are the signatures of the party monitors, with the name or numerical ID of the party (*agrupación*) they represent.

This process left us with a sample of 95,560 polling stations (92.4% of the total) across 15,007 schools. We successfully collected data on party monitors for approximately 3,304 schools — about 22% of the total — over the two rounds. To obtain representative results by province, we stratified the sample as follows. First, we divided Buenos Aires Province — Argentina’s largest, home to roughly 38% of the country’s population — into two main regions: the *Conurbano*, the urban area surrounding the City of Buenos Aires, where nearly two-thirds of the province’s population resides and a stronghold of the PJ; and the *Interior*, the province’s hinterland, where

elections are typically much more competitive (Feierherd and Lucardi 2023). Further details on the sampling process are provided in the appendix.

To demonstrate that our sampling process does not compromise the representativeness of the overall results, Figure 2 compares: (a) the vote percentage received by each party according to official results, (b) the corresponding percentages excluding Formosa, (c) the corresponding percentages in our sample with polling stations weighted equally, and (d) the corresponding results with polling stations weighted inversely to the probability of their school being selected. Overall, the results remain highly similar for both the general election and the runoff, with the closest match occurring when comparing the official results without Formosa—excluded from our sample—to our sample using inverse probability weighting.

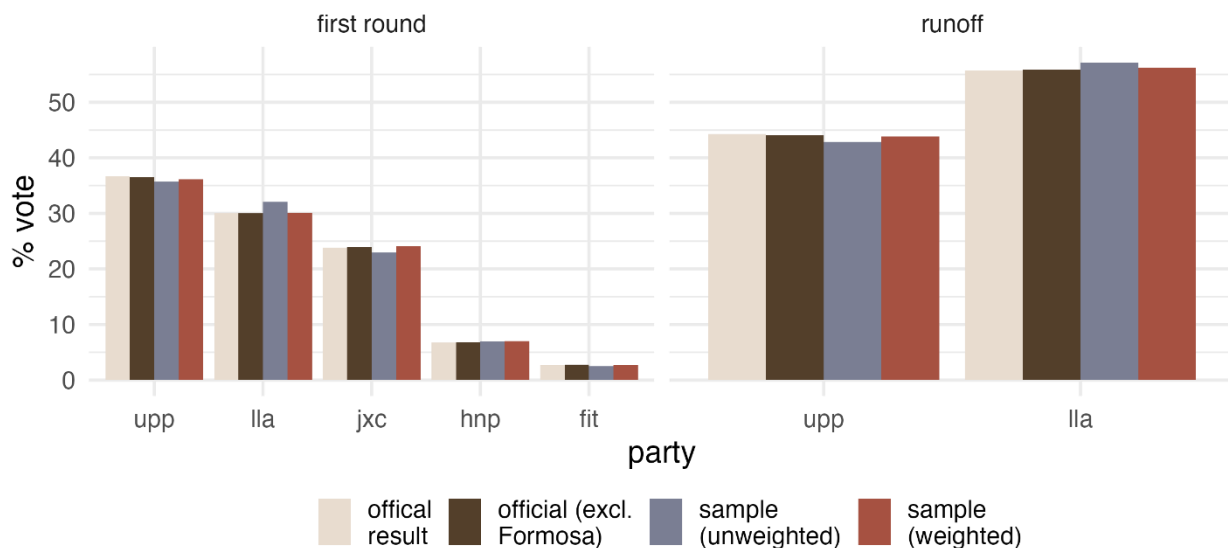


Figure 2. Comparison of official results in the first round and the runoff with those in our sample, using inverse probability weighting.

The outcome of interest in our analysis is a party’s percentage of *positive* votes (i.e., excluding blank and null ballots) in a polling station. We calculate this variable for each of the following five political groups that participated in the first round of the election:

1. UPP: *Unión Por la Patria* (“Union for the Fatherland”). The incumbent coalition, led by the Peronist Party (PJ), Argentina’s largest patronage-based political machine. Its presidential candidate, Sergio Massa, was the Minister of the Economy. Since the 1983 democratic transition, Peronists have controlled the presidency 70% of the time (1989–1999, 2002–2015, and 2019–2023) and most provincial governments. The party has maintained near-dominance in the Buenos Aires *conurbano* and has been particularly successful in the country’s poorest provinces (Stokes et al. 2013; Torre 2017).
2. LLA: *La Libertad Avanza* (“Liberty Advances”). A newly formed libertarian party led by Javier Milei, a staunch pro-market political outsider. Despite lacking an established party structure, Milei unexpectedly won the primary, placed second in the first round, and ultimately won the runoff election.
3. JxC: *Juntos Por el Cambio* (“Together for Change”). A coalition between the centrist Radical Civic Union (UCR), Argentina’s oldest party, and PRO, a center-right party founded in 2005. The UCR governed in 1983–1989 and 1999–2001 and was part of the JxC government from 2015 to 2019. The coalition’s candidate, Patricia Bullrich, a former Security Minister from PRO, finished third in the first round of the 2023 presidential election. Afterward, JxC’s most prominent leaders backed Milei in the runoff.
4. HNP: *Hacemos por Nuestro País* (“We Build for Our Country”). A Peronist splinter coalition led by Juan Schiaretti, the incumbent governor of Córdoba, Argentina’s second-largest district. Positioned in opposition to the national government, the coalition had a strong presence only in Córdoba Province.

5. FIT: *Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores* (“Front of the Left and the Workers”). A coalition of four small far-left parties with some union support. It has traditionally received a very small share of the votes.

Our main explanatory variables indicate whether each of these parties had at least one electoral monitor in a given polling station. In some cases, monitors were affiliated with parties outside the four political groups that fielded presidential candidates. These monitors, typically from provincial parties that did not officially support a presidential candidate, are coded as “neutral.”¹⁵ We classify as “unknown” the few cases where a monitor’s party affiliation cannot be determined, either because the party’s official stance in the presidential election is unclear or because the monitor’s affiliation is illegible or undisclosed.

Control variables are sparse since school fixed effects already account for all characteristics shared within schools, including geographic location and associated factors such as municipality characteristics, as well as school-specific factors. We include a variable measuring the number of registered voters in a polling station, another indicating whether the polling station had a chair (*presidente*) present, and a third reflecting the number of lower-level polling officials (*vocales*).

Research design

We expect parties to perform better at polling stations where they have a monitor present. This expectation raises two potential reverse causality concerns. First, parties may find it easier to recruit volunteers willing to serve as monitors—spending an entire Sunday supervising the vote and count, often late into the night—in areas where they already have strong popular support. While monitors do not need to be registered at the polling station where they serve, it remains the case that monitors are more readily available near a party’s stronghold. Second, when parties deploy monitors to polling stations where they are not registered, they may do so strategically.

They might assign monitors to low-support areas to safeguard their limited voters or to strongholds to prevent ballot theft by rival monitors. Either approach may confound the relationship between a party's vote share and the presence of a monitor.

To address these concerns, we exploit the fact that schools have multiple polling stations – 6.14 on average, with 91% of schools having at least two polling stations – and that voters are assigned to polling stations based on their last names.¹⁶ Voters are automatically registered and assigned to a school based on their declared place of residence.¹⁷ Thus, while a party's expected level of support in a school may be predictable *ex ante*, its relative performance in individual polling stations within the school should not be. For such a pattern to exist, there would need to be an association between the first letter of a voter's last name and their demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. However, evidence suggests this is not the case, either in Argentina (Casas et al. 2017) or in other Spanish-speaking countries more broadly (Duarte and Carrizosa 2024). Moreover, for such an association to be problematic, it would need to exist not only in the general electorate but also among voters registered in the same school, where we should expect less diversity than within the population at large.

In the absence of such a correlation, parties' assignment of monitors to specific polling stations within a school should depend on idiosyncratic factors. Including school (or party-school) fixed effects should make polling stations within a school directly comparable. The key point is that when parties lack enough monitors to cover all polling stations within a school, their assignment of monitors is not strategic but instead based on idiosyncratic reasons. As a result, our estimates can be interpreted causally. This would still pose a challenge if there were little variation within schools—that is, if parties systematically placed monitors in either all or none of a school's

polling stations. However, as Figure 3 shows, with the exception of the two minor coalitions (HNP and FIT) in the first round of the presidential election, this was not the case.

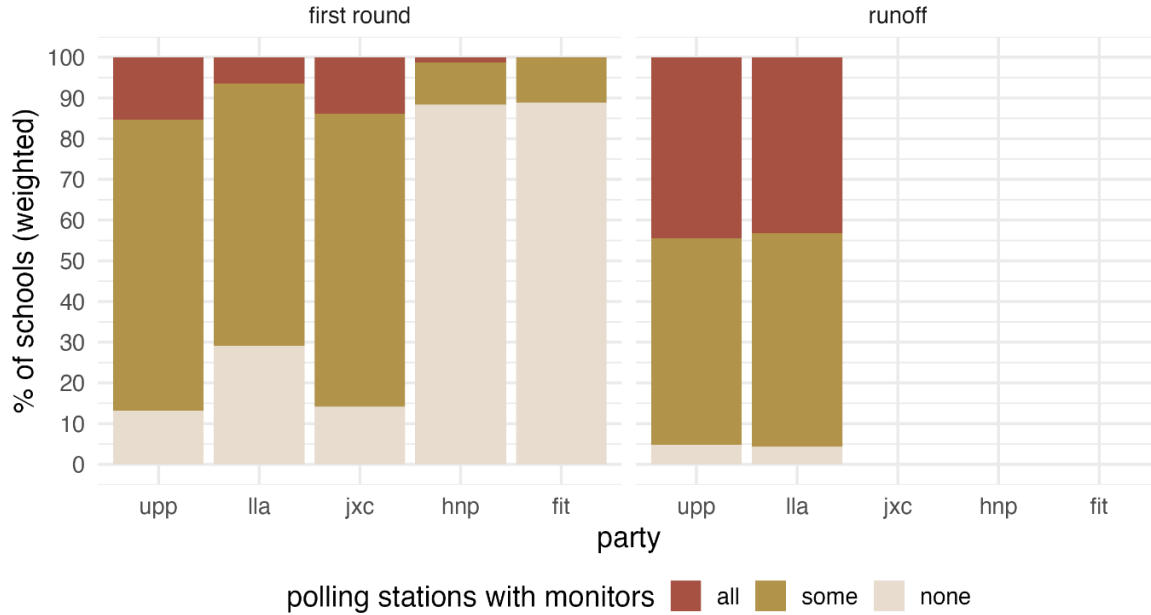


Figure 3. Evidence of within-school variation in the presence of party monitors.

Results

We begin by presenting the raw data, showing the distribution of different party monitor configurations and their bivariate relationship with party vote shares. We then report a series of statistical analyses, first for the full dataset and then for subsets based on whether a state held concurrent gubernatorial elections and the incumbent governor’s party.

Graphical Analysis

As underscored in the first part of this article, the extent to which a party benefits from having a monitor in a polling station may depend on whether monitors from *other* parties are present. Intuitively, if two monitors from rival parties are present in the same polling station, they may place checks on each other. Conversely, opportunities for malfeasance may be higher when the monitor from a single party finds herself alone. Thus, we focus on different monitor

configurations (Duarte and Carrizosa 2024). In particular, we focus on cases where (a) there is a single major party monitor; (b) monitors from two major parties; (c) monitors from the three major parties; (d) single versus multiple monitors of non-major parties, and (e) no monitors. Figure 4 shows the distribution of these configurations, conditional on whether a province held concurrent gubernatorial elections in the first round or not, and election round.¹⁸

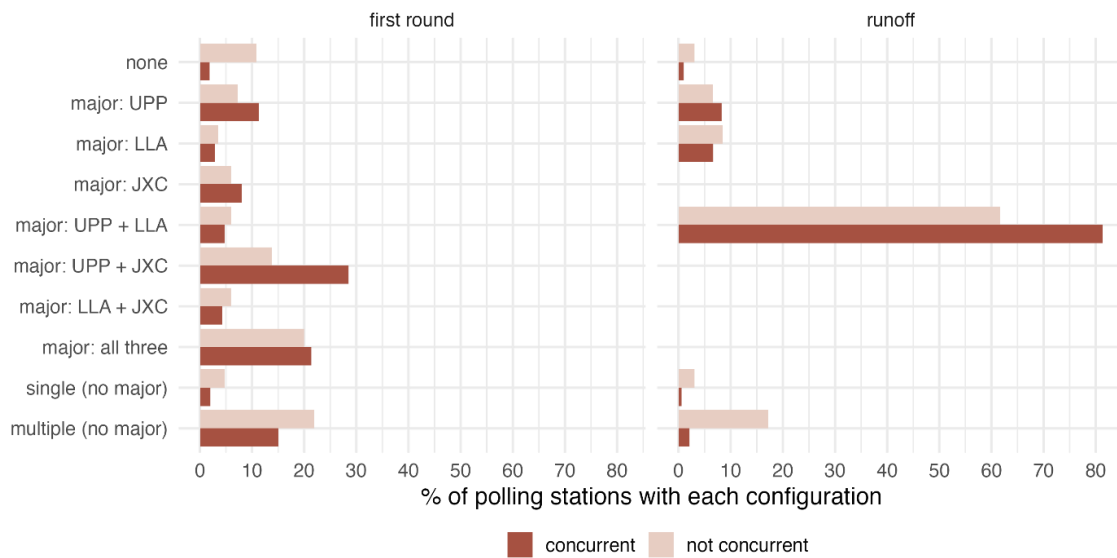


Figure 4. (Weighted) proportion of polling stations with different (and mutually exclusive) monitor configurations, by round and concurrency status.

Four main insights arise from this figure. First, it is not very common for a single major party to have a lone representative. Second, reflecting their size and organizational strength, UPP and JxC are far more likely than LLA to have monitors at polling stations—alone or, more often, together—especially in the first round. This is further reinforced by Figure A1 in the Appendix, which shows the probability of a party having a monitor at a polling station. Third, major parties are more likely to deploy monitors in the four provinces that held concurrent elections in the first round, aligning with Rau et al.’s (2025) finding that party elites and activists exert more effort when local offices are also at stake.¹⁹ Finally, in the runoff, party monitor distribution becomes more uniform: between 60% (in provinces without concurrent elections) and 80% (in those with

them) of polling stations have at least one UPP and LLA representative. “Unguarded” polling stations are less common in runoff elections.

Having describe these patterns, we now examine whether parties overperform electorally depending on monitor configuration. Figure 5 displays parties’weighted vote share based on monitor configuration.

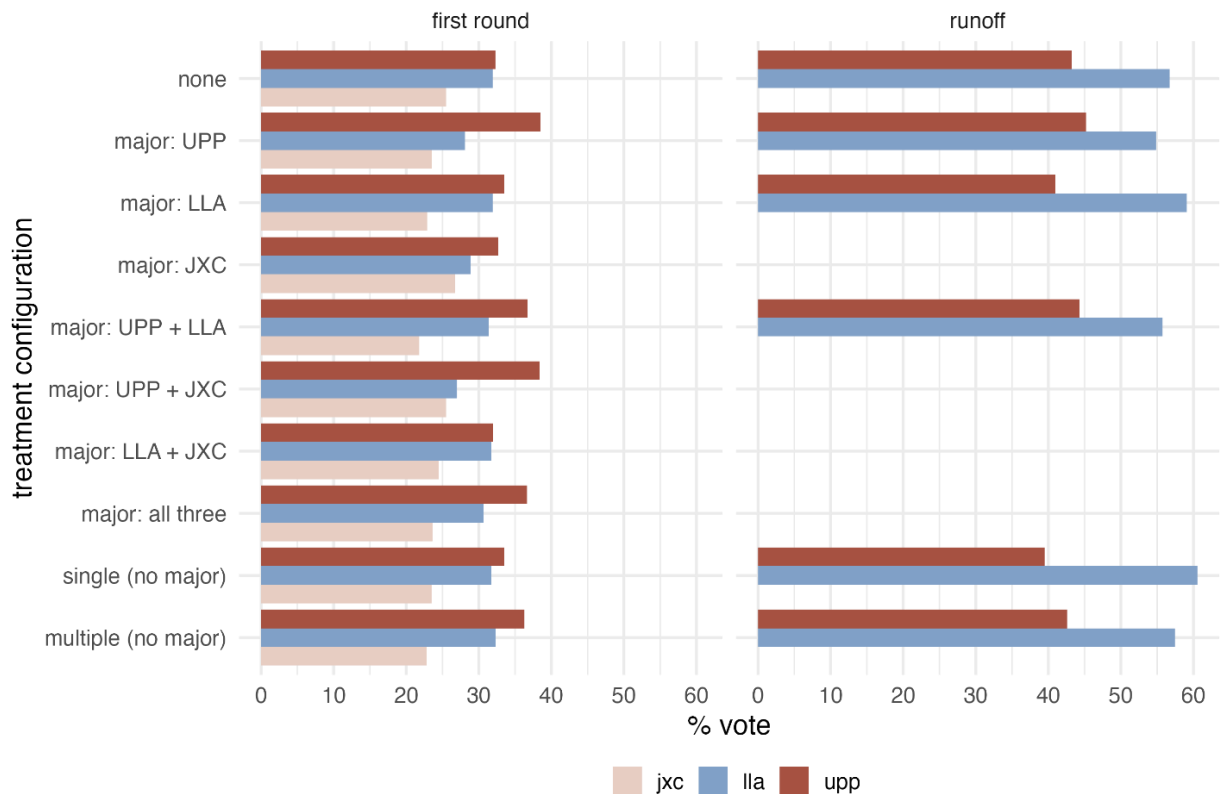


Figure 5. Parties (weighted) vote % conditional on a given monitor configuration.

As the figure shows, UPP performed better in those polling stations where its monitor is not accompanied by any of the other three major colaition, or by JxC. Conversely, it performed worst in those polling stations monitored only by JxC or LLa (or both). A similar pattern is documented in the runoff. LLa and JxC followed a similar trend. They tend to perform better when their monitor faces no checks and worse when monitors from another major party—or both other major parties—are present. These differences are not trivial, reaching up to five percentage

points, which can be significant in close elections. However, these results reflect purely bivariate relationships that may be confounded by province-, department-, or school-specific factors and should therefore be interpreted as illustrative.

Statistical Analyses: Main Results

To verify the *causal* effect of election monitors, we estimate models of the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{vote margin}_{s,i} = & \gamma^A \cdot \text{UPP}_{s,i} + \gamma^B \cdot \text{LLA}_{s,i} + \gamma^C \cdot \text{JxC}_{s,i} + \gamma^D \cdot \text{UPP \& LLA}_{s,i} + \gamma^E \cdot \\ & \text{UPP \& JxC}_{s,i} + \gamma^F \cdot \text{LLA \& JxC}_{s,i} + \gamma^G \cdot \text{other (single)}_{s,i} + \gamma^H \cdot \text{other (multiple)}_{s,i} + \gamma^I \cdot \\ & \text{none}_{s,i} + \delta \cdot C_{s,i} + \mu_s + \epsilon_{s,i}, \end{aligned}$$

where $\text{margin}_{s,i}$ is the vote margin between two partisan groups based on the positive votes obtained in school s in polling station i . For the runoff election, it is the difference between the UPP and LLA percentages of the vote for president. For the first round, we also include the UPP-JxC and the LLA-JxC margins. In the appendix, we include the results of alternative models using vote percentages and the logged number of votes as dependent variables, with the main results unchanged.

The rest of the variables are dummies indicating if any given party or combination of parties that had at least one monitor in the corresponding station. The baseline is polling stations with monitors from all three main partisan groups. $C_{s,i}$ is a (possibly empty) vector of controls defined at the individual polling station (such as the logged number of registered voters, the number of electoral authorities, and the total number of monitors), μ_s are school fixed effects, and $\epsilon_{s,i}$ is the error term. The school fixed effects restrict the statistical comparison to polling stations within the same school.

We estimate the coefficients of interest, the γ 's, by weighted least squares, weighting each polling station by the inverse probability weight that its school is selected. Since the allocation of monitors to polling stations is decided at the school level, we include clustered standard errors by school. Table 2 reports the results, with the first column indicating the specific configuration of party monitors.

Table 1. Monitor presence and electoral performance

	first round			runoff
	UPP-LLA (1)	UPP-JxC (2)	LLA-JxC (3)	UPP-LLA (4)
<i>Monitors: UPP only (0/1)</i>	1.22** (0.398)	1.62*** (0.477)	0.402 (0.269)	0.513 (0.471)
<i>Monitors: LLA only (0/1)</i>	-0.184 (0.400)	0.380 (0.487)	0.564 (0.363)	-0.051 (0.379)
<i>Monitors: JxC only (0/1)</i>	0.386 (0.379)	0.268 (0.442)	-0.118 (0.290)	
<i>Monitors: UPP & LLA (0/1)</i>	0.368 (0.366)	0.473 (0.434)	0.106 (0.305)	-0.294 (0.472)
<i>Monitors: UPP & JxC (0/1)</i>	1.22*** (0.344)	1.31** (0.420)	0.084 (0.233)	
<i>Monitors: LLA & JxC (0/1)</i>	0.041 (0.341)	-0.204 (0.374)	-0.245 (0.304)	
<i>Monitor: Other (single) (0/1)</i>	0.452 (0.457)	0.910 (0.540)	0.458 (0.406)	-0.343 (0.624)
<i>Monitor: Other (multiple) (0/1)</i>	0.611 (0.330)	0.973* (0.415)	0.362 (0.261)	-0.022 (0.333)
<i>No Party Monitors (0/1)</i>	0.025 (0.502)	0.464 (0.542)	0.439 (0.345)	0.589 (0.944)
school FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i> auth. FEs	No	No	No	No
<i># registered voters (logged)</i>	No	No	No	No
<i>N</i> obs.	21,594	21,594	21,594	21,595

WLS regression estimates. Observations are weighted by the inverse probability that their school is selected. The unit of observation is the polling station. The dummies are mutually exclusive. The excluded category captures polling stations with monitors from all three partisan groups. Standard errors clustered by school in parentheses.

Signif. codes: '***' 0 '***' 0.01 '*' 0.05

Results indicate that when monitors are exclusively from the incumbent Peronists, their coalition (UPP) experiences a statistically significant electoral boost. Specifically, the vote margin between UPP and LLA increases by 1.22 percentage points when only UPP monitors are present, while the margin between UPP and JxC increases by 1.62 percentage points under the same conditions. In contrast, having only LLA or JxC monitors has no significant effect on the vote margin. Similarly, no significant effect is observed on the LLA-JxC vote margin under any monitor configuration.

The results also indicate a significant increase in the UPP-LLA vote margin when UPP and JxC monitors are present but LLA monitors are absent. While the absent party (LLA) might be expected to face a penalty, it is surprising that this electoral boost for UPP in this configuration of party monitors also extends to the UPP-JxC margin. In short, LLA monitors do not produce a statistically significant boost or penalty to their party's vote margin; JxC monitors provide no significant boost to their coalition's vote margin but incur a penalty when matched only with UPP monitors; and UPP monitors yield a significant advantage when alone or paired with JxC monitors but not with LLA monitors. Unlike LLA and JxC, UPP's vote margin never faces a statistically significant penalty under any monitor configuration.

The results from the runoff presidential election tell a very different story. While the coefficient for UPP-only monitors remains positive, it is not statistically significant. Moreover, none of the monitor configurations have a statistically significant effect on the UPP-LLA vote margin.

Several factors may explain this finding. One possibility is that public denunciations of electoral manipulation in the first round deterred tampering in the runoff. Another is that the opposition's efforts to expand and train monitors helped curb irregularities. Additionally, the

absence of concurrent elections in the runoff may have reduced incentives for manipulation, as local races — conducted alongside the first round — were no longer at stake. In the next section, we examine this factor in greater detail.

Heterogeneous effects

To better understand the mechanisms driving the results in Table 2, we examine whether outcomes vary systematically across different subsets of provinces. First, we assess whether monitors have a greater impact in provinces where gubernatorial elections coincided with the first round of the presidential election. While 22 of Argentina’s 24 provinces typically hold gubernatorial elections in presidential election years, in 2023, 18 provinces had already elected their governor in separate contests before the presidential first round.

Governors and gubernatorial candidates have more at stake in concurrent elections, as both the governorship and the composition of state legislatures are contested. In a federal system with strong provincial governments, like Argentina’s, these elections have significant political consequences. Figure 4 illustrates that the proportion of polling stations without monitors was considerably higher in provinces where gubernatorial elections were not concurrent, whereas the proportion of polling stations with monitors from all major partisan groups was higher in provinces with concurrent elections.

Moreover, even when monitors were present, they may have had lower incentives to engage in risky tampering, as they had less at stake. To the extent that electoral manipulation benefits a party across multiple races—for example, by stuffing the ballot box with a full party slate or removing opposition ballots from the voting booth—efforts aimed at influencing state and local races may also boost a party’s presidential candidate. However, if monitors and brokers lack

sufficient motivation to manipulate the local race, they may also refrain from doing so in the presidential election (Rau et al. 2025).

In Table 2, we replicate the first-round analysis from Table 1, dividing the sample into two groups: the four provinces that held gubernatorial elections concurrently with the first round of the presidential election — the city of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires Province, Catamarca, and Entre Ríos— and the remaining 20 districts.

Table 2. Heterogeneous effects: First-round concurrent and not concurrent elections

	first round					
	UPP-LLA		UPP-JxC		LLA-JxC	
	(C)	(Not-C)	(C)	(Not-C)	(C)	(Not-C)
<i>Monitors: UPP only (0/1)</i>	2.03*** (0.604)	0.066 (0.375)	2.58*** (0.753)	0.325 (0.343)	0.552 (0.414)	0.259 (0.280)
<i>Monitors: LLA only (0/1)</i>	-0.537 (0.691)	0.018 (0.439)	0.186 (0.905)	0.364 (0.436)	0.723 (0.650)	0.346 (0.364)
<i>Monitors: JxC only (0/1)</i>	0.774 (0.569)	-0.062 (0.454)	0.739 (0.706)	-0.259 (0.430)	-0.035 (0.455)	-0.197 (0.305)
<i>Monitors: UPP & LLA (0/1)</i>	0.525 (0.669)	0.125 (0.353)	1.460 (0.848)	-0.531 (0.308)	0.936 (0.562)	-0.657* (0.278)
<i>Monitors: UPP & JxC (0/1)</i>	1.83*** (0.519)	0.249 (0.282)	2.19*** (0.655)	-0.001 (0.250)	0.365 (0.358)	-0.250 (0.223)
<i>Monitors: LLA & JxC (0/1)</i>	-0.372 (0.639)	0.266 (0.345)	-0.268 (0.728)	-0.300 (0.315)	0.104 (0.552)	-0.566 (0.312)
<i>Monitors: UPP & LLA & JxC (0/1)</i>	0.749 (0.948)	0.200 (0.484)	1.43 (1.24)	0.360 (0.454)	0.677 (0.871)	0.160 (0.390)
<i>Monitor: Other (single) (0/1)</i>	0.563 (0.526)	0.621 (0.331)	1.30 (0.692)	0.554 (0.299)	0.737 (0.419)	-0.067 (0.244)
<i>Monitor: Other (multiple) (0/1)</i>	-0.484 (1.14)	0.092 (0.504)	0.131 (1.27)	0.243 (0.461)	0.615 (0.680)	0.150 (0.357)
concurrency (first round)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
school FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N auth. FEs	No	No	No	No	No	No
# registered voters (logged)	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
N obs.	6,660	14,934	6,660	14,934	6,660	14,934

WLS regression estimates. Observations are weighted by the inverse probability that their school is selected. The unit of observation is the polling station. The dummies are mutually exclusive. The excluded category are polling stations with no monitors at all. Standard errors clustered by school in parentheses. Signif. codes: '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05

The results indicate that the effects are driven by the provinces with concurrent elections. When only UPP monitors are present in these provinces, the UPP-LLA margin increases by 2.03 percentage points. However, in non-concurrent elections, the coefficient remains positive but is not statistically significant. A similar pattern emerges for the UPP-JxC margin: in concurrent elections, it increases by 2.58 points, a statistically significant difference, whereas in non-concurrent elections, the coefficient is positive but lacks statistical significance.

The finding that having both UPP and JxC monitors boosts the UPP margin against both LLA and JxC is also evident in this analysis. However, we now find that these results are driven by provinces with concurrent elections. An unexpected result is a slight advantage to JxC over LLA in non-concurrent elections when JxC monitors are absent.

An alternative explanation for our findings is that the influence of party monitors varies depending on whether a copartisan holds the governor's office. In Argentina, governors wield significant legal, political, institutional, and economic resources, making them the country's most powerful political figures after the president (Calvo and Murillo 2005; Gervasoni 2010; Lucardi and Almaraz 2017). Their strong capacity to mobilize voters and shape electoral outcomes could influence how monitors impact elections. Thus, in Table 3, we examine whether these effects differ based on whether the provincial governor is affiliated with UPP or JxC — as LLA held no governorships in 2023.²⁰

Results indicate that in provinces where UPP holds the governorship, having only UPP monitors increases the coalition's vote margin over LLA by 1.51 points and over JxC by 1.98 points, with both effects being statistically significant. The results also show that in UPP-governed provinces, the UPP margin over LLA and JxC increases when UPP and JxC monitors are present, but LLA monitors are absent. A similar pattern emerges in JxC-governed provinces,

where the UPP margin over LLA also increases significantly under the same monitor configuration.

Table 3. Heterogeneous effects: Party of the Governor

	first round					
	UPP-LLA		UPP-JxC		LLA-JxC	
	(UPP G)	(JxC G)	(UPP G)	(JxC G)	(UPP G)	(JxC G)
<i>Monitors: UPP only (0/1)</i>	1.51**	0.212	1.98**	0.347	0.463	0.136
	(0.517)	(0.537)	(0.624)	(0.579)	(0.338)	(0.522)
<i>Monitors: LLA only (0/1)</i>	-0.455	-0.798	0.149	-0.730	0.604	0.069
	(0.547)	(0.810)	(0.674)	(0.971)	(0.484)	(0.716)
<i>Monitors: JxC only (0/1)</i>	0.466	0.728	0.367	0.216	-0.100	-0.511
	(0.515)	(0.493)	(0.613)	(0.570)	(0.397)	(0.495)
<i>Monitors: UPP & LLA (0/1)</i>	0.352	0.691	0.873	-1.10	0.522	-1.79**
	(0.460)	(0.660)	(0.557)	(0.712)	(0.377)	(0.663)
<i>Monitors: UPP & JxC (0/1)</i>	1.44***	1.01*	1.61**	0.637	0.168	-0.374
	(0.435)	(0.448)	(0.536)	(0.471)	(0.287)	(0.406)
<i>Monitors: LLA & JxC (0/1)</i>	-0.133	0.954	-0.356	0.566	-0.223	-0.388
	(0.454)	(0.676)	(0.492)	(0.683)	(0.384)	(0.703)
<i>Monitors: UPP & LLA & JxC (0/1)</i>	0.309	0.874	1.33	0.228	1.02	-0.646
	(0.681)	(0.744)	(0.841)	(0.796)	(0.603)	(0.651)
<i>Monitor: Other (single) (0/1)</i>	0.768	0.113	1.16*	0.158	0.396	0.045
	(0.420)	(0.469)	(0.539)	(0.458)	(0.329)	(0.432)
<i>Monitor: Other (multiple) (0/1)</i>	-0.210	0.018	0.461	-0.092	0.671	-0.109
	(0.759)	(0.630)	(0.813)	(0.648)	(0.468)	(0.561)
concurrency (first round)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
school FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N auth. FEs	No	No	No	No	No	No
# registered voters (logged)	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
N obs.	13,906	4,065	13,906	4,065	13,906	4,065

WLS regression estimates. Observations are weighted by the inverse probability that their school is selected. The unit of observation is the polling station. The dummies are mutually exclusive. The excluded category are polling stations with no monitors at all. Standard errors clustered by school. Signif. codes: '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05

Robustness

These results are robust to a wide variety of specifications. Table A1 in the appendix shows that including controls that vary by polling stations within schools –chiefly, the (logged) number of registered voters and fixed effects for the number of polling authorities present– does not change the results from Table 1. This make sense, as school fixed effects likely capture most of the variation between polling stations. Tables A2 and A3 show that adding controls does not change the results for Tables 2 and 3 either. Table A4 indicates that replacing the outcome with the logged number of votes received by a party in a polling station does not change the results by much either: the main change is that the effect of having both a monitor from UPP and from JxC is insignificant. These results are also impervious to the inclusion of controls.

In **Table A5** we look at how monitors affect the proportion of null and blank votes in a polling station. An increase in these may suggest, for example, that monitors steal other parties' ballots –inducing shy voters to cast a blank ballot instead– or systematically damage valid ballots favoring the competition. Neither seems to be the case, as the estimates are consistently close to zero in absolute terms and insignificant. In **Tables A6** we follow the strategy of Casas et al (2017), who pool the results for all parties together, thus reporting the average effect of having a monitor without consideration to either party identification or whether a monitor is present alone or alongside other parties'. We find mostly positive estimates for all three main parties, but at between 0.22 and 0.28 percentage points, these are much smaller than the ones reported in **Tables 2 through 4**. Finally, in **Table A7** we look at how the presence of a monitor from a specific party (plus “other,” “neutral,” and “unknown” parties) affect the vote shares of the three main parties. The results are roughly similar, though with some differences. The Peronists benefit from having a monitor of their own, though just by 0.32 to 0.44 pp., whereas the presence of a monitor from LLA

improves both LLA's and JxC's vote share at the Peronists' expense. As before, in the second round the estimates become much closer to zero and insignificant. Still, the fact that these dummies are *not* mutually exclusive point against the causal interpretation of these findings. The reason is that if parties lack enough monitors to cover all polling stations in a school, monitors may opt to go to polling stations that already have a monitor from another party. For this reason, using entire monitor configurations, as we did in **Tables 2 through 4**, yields more credible results (see also Duarte and Carrizosa 2024).

Conclusion

It was extensively argued that electoral manipulation and fraud are threats to democracy, and that, for self-interest, parties do their best attempts to avoid being harmed on the election day. One of the most frequent tools to avoid electoral malfeasance is the appointment of monitors at voting stations, expecting that their votes will not suffer any negative bias. However, resources and efforts tend to be limited, and parties may fail to cover every single station with monitors. Besides normative consideration, in this piece we estimate whether there is a causal effect prompted by differences in the presence of monitors in the Argentine 2023 presidential election.

Our results indicate that President Mieli, then a candidate from the opposition, overestimated the effect of party monitors, which he suggested was around 5%. Our estimates show that the effect of having only UPP monitors on the UPP-LLA margin was less than 2% and about 2% in those provinces holding concurrent gubernatorial elections. While these are in way trivial margins, they did not prevent LLA's candidate from going to the runoff. Heterogeneous effects analyses display that this pro-Peronist bias was particularly salient in districts with concurrent gubernatorial elections and where there was already a copartisan Peronist running the province. Explanations for these findings are in line with the notion of machine politics (Calvo

and Murillo 2004), reinforcing the idea that monitors do their best whenever there is a principal forcing and/or enforcing them. Our statistically insignificant estimates for the runoff do not only reflect the wide monitors' coverage by both coalitions, but also bolster the perception that mutual oversight seems to be the key to avoid manipulation. From Montesquieu on, we know that power checking power is a reasonable asset against abuse.

Finally, if stronger parties with resources are advantaged, the system is not completely fair. While this should not be taken as evidence of systematic and unavoidable fraud, it might be a redflag to promote different alternatives to minimize deviations from the popular rule. Recent claims for the use of an Australian ballot (Alles, Pachon and Muñoz 2018), the incorporation of technology, or the implementation of an electronic votes-counting systems have been the consequence of public distrust with the status quo of electoral organization. While none of this reforms have been proved to be perfect (Barnes, Tchintian and Alles 2017; Alles, Barnes and Tchintian 2023), they might be, at least, feasible alternative to overcome one of the least satisfactory effects of machine politics over democratic performance.

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² BBC news, 8/26/2024: “Tuve que irme de Venezuela tras recibir intimidaciones por ser testigo electoral de la oposición.” <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cn49wqx4g20o>. El Diario, 7/28/2024: “Foro Penal registró

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³ See also, Cheesman and Klass (2018, p. 158) for an account of government loyalists forcefully removing opposition party monitors during the counting of ballots in Kenya.

⁴ See, for instance, Ascencio and Rueda (2019). El Ciudadano, 2/7/2021: Elecciones en Ecuador: Equipo de campaña de Arauz denuncia que no dejan ingresar a sus delegados a centros de votación.”

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⁶ La Nación, 10/20/2023: “Elecciones 2023: La justicia electoral investiga la denuncia de Milei sobre un supuesto fraude para el domingo.” <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/la-justicia-electoral-investiga-la-denuncia-de-milei-sobre-un-supuesto-fraude-para-el-domingo-nid20102023/>

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⁹ Confidencial, 4/12/2021: “La maquinaria del fraude electoral del FSLN.” <https://confidencial.digital/principal/la-maquinaria-del-fraude-electoral-del-fsln/>

¹⁰ Clarín, 21/10/2019. “Mauricio Macri habló con sus ministros de “irregularidades” en las PASO.”

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¹² AP, 11/18/2023: “Milei echoes Trump with fraud claims that inject uncertainty into Argentina’s presidential runoff.” <https://apnews.com/article/argentina-milei-massa-fraud-election-runoff-683332bb71bc2084c604e22c5919e144>. El Cronista, 11/5/2023: “Siguen las denuncias de "microfraude" del equipo de Milei: qué explican los expertos electorales.”

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¹³ Cenital. 11/9/2023: “Qué hay detrás de las acusaciones de fraude.” <https://cenital.com/que-hay-detras-de-las-acusaciones-de-fraude/>

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¹⁵ When provincial (or municipal) and national elections are held simultaneously, voters vote for all offices in the same polling station. Thus, provincial (and sometimes local) forces may have monitors at a polling station even though they have no presidential candidates of their own.

¹⁶ Polling station size is capped at 350 (with very few exceptions).

¹⁷ Voters sometimes fail to declare their new address when moving, but changing addresses, and especially moving between cities and states, is far less common in Argentina than in the United States.

¹⁸ Concurrent elections took place in the city of Buenos Aires (CABA) and the provinces of Buenos Aires, Catamarca and Entre Ríos.

¹⁹ Nonetheless, the fact that the pattern persisted in the runoff, where only the presidency was at stake, is not entirely consistent with this interpretation.

²⁰ The provinces whose governor was affiliated with the UPP presidential candidate were Buenos Aires, Catamarca, Chaco, Chubut, Entre Ríos, La Pampa, La Rioja, Salta, San Juan, San Luis, Santa Cruz, Santa Fe, Santiago del

Estero, Tierra del Fuego and Tucumán. The governors of the city of Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Jujuy and Mendoza were affiliated to JxC. The governor of Córdoba was affiliated with (indeed, was the presidential candidate of) HNP. No provincial governor was affiliated with LLA. The remaining four provinces (Misiones, Neuquén and Río Negro) had a neutral governor.