

Do Formal rules matter? De facto autonomy and Electoral Integrity in comparative perspective

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1 Introduction

Electoral integrity constitutes one of the central pillars of democratic quality, ensuring that the process of selecting representatives is conducted in a legitimate, transparent, and trustworthy manner. Over the past decades, the comparative politics literature has increasingly focused on measuring and understanding the factors that explain variations in electoral integrity across political regimes and institutional arrangements (Norris et al., 2014; Van Ham, 2015; James et al., 2019a). Among the main determinants identified, the role of electoral management bodies (EMBs), the institutions responsible for organizing, supervising, and validating national elections, stands out. Studies have shown that the presence of professionalized, independent, and well-resourced EMBs is positively associated with more credible and fair electoral processes (Garnett; James, 2020; Norris, 2015; Birch, 2011). However, despite these advances, there remains a significant gap in understanding the causal mechanisms that link the institutional design of these authorities to perceived electoral integrity. Dominant explanatory models tend to overestimate the effects of formal rules and underestimate the role of practical autonomy and the operational capacity of EMBs in preventing electoral fraud and dysfunction (Batista, 2024).

In order to address this theoretical and empirical gap, this article draws on the distinction between *de jure* rules, that is, the formal, legal, and constitutional norms that structure the functioning of electoral management bodies, and *de facto* autonomy, understood as the practical capacity of these institutions to operate independently from political pressures or government interference. The central research question guiding this investigation is: what factors drive the practical autonomy of electoral authorities, and how does this autonomy affect electoral integrity? The core hypothesis is that *de jure* institutional design, particularly independence from the executive branch, the absence of partisan oversight, and the stability of EMB leadership mandates, is associated with higher levels of operational autonomy. In turn, this autonomy increases the likelihood of elections being conducted with greater integrity. The article tests this chain of effects through a causal mediation approach, modeled as follows: *de jure* → *de facto* → electoral integrity. This framework allows us to assess whether the impact of institutional rules on integrity is direct or operates through the mediating effect of EMB autonomy, an issue still underexplored in the literature (James, 2020; Garnett; James, 2020).

Investigating the mechanisms that connect the institutional design of EMBs to electoral integrity is not merely a methodological or statistical concern, it is, above all, about understanding the foundations of democratic legitimacy. In many countries, particularly those marked by institutional instability or widespread public distrust, well-intentioned legal reforms are insufficient to ensure

electoral integrity (Birch 2011). What ultimately matters is the concrete capacity of electoral authorities to operate independently, resist political pressure, and enforce rules impartially (Norris, 2015; Birch, 2011). By focusing on this intermediate link, *de facto* autonomy, this study contributes to a research agenda that is more grounded in institutional effectiveness, moving beyond normative approaches that assume good laws necessarily produce good outcomes. The aim, therefore, is to recenter the debate on electoral integrity around what happens between paper and practice: the processes through which legally autonomous institutions become operationally effective.

By proposing a causal mediation model between formal rules and electoral outcomes, this article refines the understanding of how and why certain institutional characteristics produce measurable effects on election quality. In contrast to approaches that assume a direct relationship between *de jure* rules and electoral integrity (Birch, 2011; Van Ham; Lindberg, 2015), we argue that the impact of such rules fundamentally depends on the ability of EMBs to operate with real autonomy, that is, to translate legal prerogatives into effective practices. This emphasis on the operational dimension of institutions moves the analysis beyond institutional normativism and toward the concrete conditions that uphold electoral integrity.

Furthermore, the study's findings offer important normative implications: in contexts of institutional fragility, legal reforms tend to have limited impact unless accompanied by mechanisms that ensure functional protection, bureaucratic professionalization, and insulation from partisan interference (James, 2020). By addressing this blind spot, the article contributes to a more critical and effectiveness-oriented debate on electoral governance in comparative perspective.

Despite the growing consensus on the importance of electoral authorities in ensuring free and fair elections, much of the literature still treats these institutions as black boxes: they are normatively assigned functions, such as guaranteeing impartiality, transparency, and efficiency, without clearly examining the mechanisms that make their performance effective (James, 2020; Smets, 2013). Scholars often assume that the mere existence of *de jure* rules, such as legal independence, partisan collegiality, or fixed terms, is sufficient to guarantee institutional performance. However, multiple studies show that, especially in emerging democracies or low-capacity states, formal rules do not automatically translate into robust practices (Van Ham, 2015; Garnett; James, 2020). This institutional asymmetry reinforces the central hypothesis of this article: the practical autonomy of EMBs constitutes a crucial intermediate link between institutional design and the integrity of electoral processes.

Moreover, recent studies suggest that trust in elections is less determined by the existence of legal norms and more shaped by public perceptions of the actual performance of electoral authorities (Norris, 2014; Birch, 2011; James et al., 2019a). This performance goes beyond formal compliance with the law: it involves resisting political interference, safeguarding the integrity of the process, and conveying credibility to the public. The approach adopted in this study aligns with this perspective by treating electoral integrity as a multidimensional phenomenon, one that is influenced not only by the institutional normative framework but also by its operational, relational, and symbolic dimensions (Van Ham; Lindberg, 2015).

In contrast to approaches that rely on aggregate indices of electoral integrity, this research focuses on a specific and particularly sensitive moment of the electoral cycle: the vote count. This methodological choice is strategic, as counting represents the stage of greatest political tension,

frequently becoming the target of allegations, fraud, or public distrust (James et al. 2019b; PEI Report, 2023). By directing the analysis toward this critical dimension, and linking it directly to the *de facto* autonomy of EMBs, the article offers a robust empirical contribution to the debate on the determinants of electoral legitimacy. Rather than simply assessing whether good rules yield good outcomes, we test whether such rules only produce effects when accompanied by operational conditions that ensure their effective implementation.

By adopting a causal mediation approach, this article contributes not only to refining theories of electoral integrity but also to expanding the understanding of the limits of institutional reforms in contexts marked by high political diversity and institutional fragility. Through the articulation of data from multiple sources and the application of a large-scale empirical strategy, the study provides unprecedented comparative evidence on the mechanisms that link formal norms, *de facto* autonomy, and electoral quality. Rather than assuming that well-crafted rules are sufficient, the findings indicate that the performance of EMBs depends on their actual ability to operate with independence, stability, and professionalism. This contribution is relevant both for the advancement of comparative political science and for the development of more effective public policies. The next section presents the research design, detailing the hypotheses, data sources, and identification strategy used to test the proposed causal links between institutional design and electoral integrity.

2 Design

This study investigates the causal mechanisms linking the formal institutional design of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to electoral integrity, with a particular emphasis on the mediating role of *de facto* autonomy. While a substantial body of comparative research has demonstrated that independent EMBs are associated with higher-quality elections (Norris, 2014; Hyde; Marinov, 2012), the causal pathways through which *de jure* institutional arrangements translate into effective outcomes of electoral integrity remain insufficiently theorized and empirically tested. This article advances the argument that the effect of institutional design on electoral integrity is not direct, but instead operates primarily through its impact on the operational autonomy of EMBs, that is, their actual capacity to act independently, resist political interference, and enforce electoral rules impartially.

The analytical distinction between *de jure* norms and *de facto* practices is central to the proposed framework. *De jure* rules refer to the formal legal provisions governing the composition, authority, and organizational structure of EMBs, whereas *de facto* autonomy captures the extent to which these institutions exercise practical independence in the administration of elections (Birch; Van Ham, 2017; Mauk, 2023). This distinction is theoretically consequential because, as Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue, formal and informal institutions frequently operate in misalignment, particularly in contexts of democratic fragility. In the domain of electoral governance, this implies that EMBs endowed with legal independence may nonetheless be vulnerable to political interference in practice, while formally dependent bodies may, under certain conditions, enjoy substantial operational autonomy. Building on this insight, the theoretical model advanced in this article posits a mediation mechanism whereby *de jure* institutional design shapes *de facto* operational autonomy, which in turn affects observable levels of electoral integrity (Garnett; James, 2020; James et al., 2019a).

To empirically test this mediation model, the study integrates three large-scale, expert-based international datasets that are widely used in quantitative comparative research. The Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Project (PEI 10.0) provides comprehensive measures of perceived electoral integrity in national elections, based on more than 480 experts surveys conducted between 2012 and 2023. The Election Management Survey (EMS 2.0) offers detailed information on the de jure institutional design of EMBs in 210 countries, including their position within the state apparatus, the presence of party oversight mechanisms, and the stability of leadership mandates (Garrett; Zavadskaya, 2021). Finally, the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem v15) supplies refined indicators of de facto EMB autonomy, based on expert-coded assessments of practical independence in electoral administration (Coppedge et al., 2024). These datasets are merged at the country-election level, allowing for the operationalization of the model's key concepts, institutional design, operational autonomy, and electoral integrity, with high cross-national validity.

Dependent Variable. Electoral integrity is measured using the PEI conceptual index (PEI_concept_m), which aggregates expert perceptions across multiple dimensions of electoral quality, including voting procedures, vote counting, and electoral administration (Norris, 2014). The index is treated as a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating greater electoral integrity.

Mediating Variable. De facto autonomy (Vdem_Autonomy) is operationalized using the EMB autonomy index from V-Dem v15. This indicator captures the extent to which electoral management bodies are able to perform their functions independently from governmental or partisan pressure in practice. The measure reflects expert evaluations of EMBs' effective operational independence and is treated as continuous.

Independent Variables. Three core de jure institutional characteristics are examined, all derived from the EMS 2.0 dataset. Governmental control (EMB_Governmental) indicates whether the executive branch formally dominates EMB leadership or decision-making authority. Party oversight (Oversight_Partidos) measures whether political parties hold formal supervisory powers over EMB activities. Mandate security (Seguranca_Mandato_Chair) captures the degree of legal protection afforded to the tenure of EMB leadership, including fixed terms and safeguards against arbitrary dismissal. Together, these variables represent formal institutional arrangements that structure EMB authority and accountability.

Control Variables. The models include the level of polyarchy (Vdem_Polyarchy) to account for regime-type effects (Teorell et al., 2019), GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (gdp_pc_ppp) to control for economic development, and regional dummy variables to address unobserved geographic heterogeneity.

To evaluate the proposed causal mechanism, the analysis employs a mediation framework based on sequential regression models, following the classical approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and subsequent methodological developments in causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2011). In the first stage, de jure institutional variables are used to explain variation in de facto EMB autonomy. In the second stage, electoral integrity is regressed on both the mediating variable and the de jure institutional predictors. This two-step empirical strategy allows for a direct assessment of whether the

effects of formal institutional design on electoral integrity operate through the practical autonomy of electoral management bodies.

Model A examines the effect of *de jure* rules on *de facto* autonomy¹:

$$A_i = \beta_0 + X_i\beta + Z_i\gamma + \epsilon_i$$

Model B estimates the outcome equation including the mediator and the *de jure* predictors²:

$$Y_i = \alpha + D_i\beta + C_i\gamma + \epsilon_i$$

Evidence of mediation is established if: (1) *de jure* rules significantly affect *de facto* autonomy in Model A; (2) *de facto* autonomy significantly affects electoral integrity in Model B; and (3) the direct effects of *de jure* rules become statistically insignificant when *de facto* autonomy is included (Baron; Kenny, 1986).

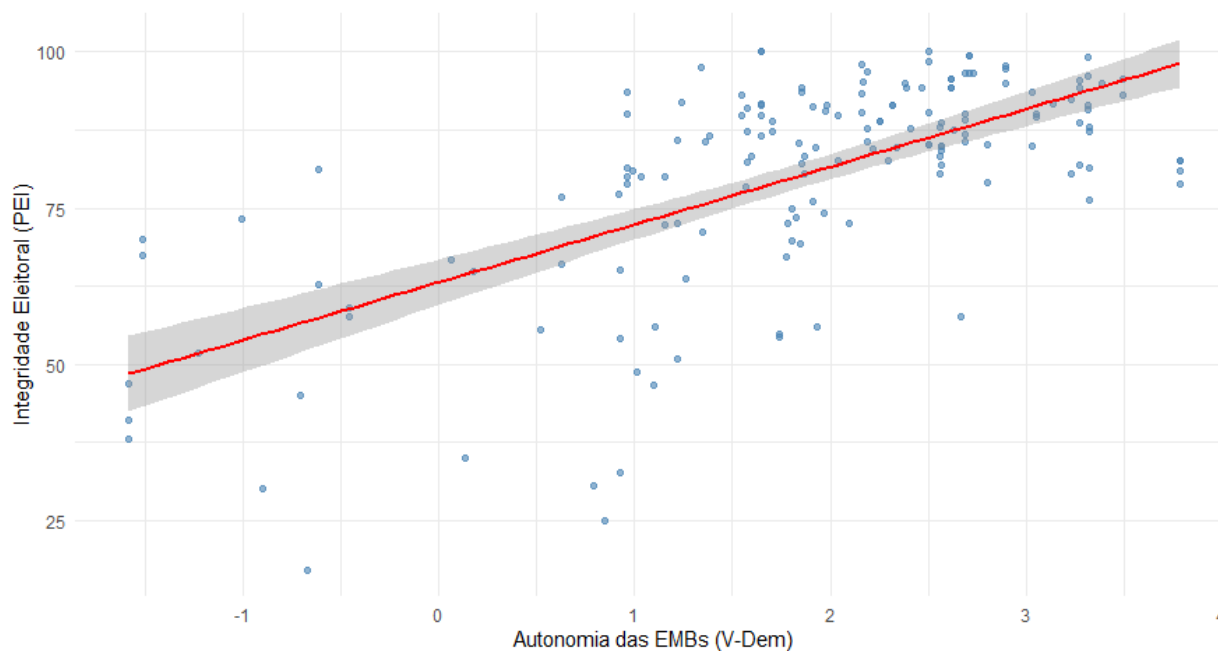
3 Empirical analysis

Our integrated dataset comprises 157 complete observations of national elections across various countries. After excluding cases with missing data through listwise deletion, the analysis was conducted with samples ranging from 150 to 151 observations, depending on the model specification. Model A, which estimates EMBs' *de facto* autonomy based on formal institutional characteristics, showed an excellent fit ($R^2 = 0.84$), suggesting that the proposed theoretical framework explains a substantial portion of the observed variation in the operational independence of these institutions. This result reinforces the validity of the mediation model, indicating that *de jure* factors are strongly associated with *de facto* autonomy.

¹ Explicit model A: $Vdem_Autonomy_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot EMB_Governamental_i + \beta_2 \cdot Oversight_Partidos_i + \beta_3 \cdot Seguranca_Mandato_Chairi_i + \beta_4 \cdot Vdem_Polyarchy_i + \beta_5 \cdot GDP_pc_pppi_i + \epsilon_i$

² Explicit model B: $PEI_concept_mi = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \cdot Vdem_Autonomy_i + \gamma_2 \cdot EMB_Governamental_i + \gamma_3 \cdot Oversight_Partidos_i + \gamma_4 \cdot Seguranca_Mandato_Chairi_i + \gamma_5 \cdot Vdem_Polyarchy_i + \gamma_6 \cdot GDP_pc_pppi_i + \mu_i$

Figure 1 - Relationship between *de facto* autonomy and electoral integrity



Source: author

Figure 1 reveals a clear positive relationship between the *de facto* autonomy of electoral authorities and the integrity of electoral processes. The upward linear trend, represented by the fitted line and its confidence interval, indicates that elections administered by EMBs with greater practical independence tend to score higher on the electoral integrity index. The dispersion of data points along the line demonstrates consistency in this pattern across various national contexts, although with significant variation that warrants further qualitative investigation. Notably, there is a concentration of cases in the medium-to-high autonomy range, suggesting that very low levels of operational independence are relatively rare in the sample. The strength of this bivariate association provides preliminary support for the study's central premise: that EMBs' ability to operate free from political interference is intrinsically linked to the quality of electoral processes. The regression output from the models is presented in the table below.

Table 1 - Mediation Analysis of EMBs' Autonomy*Dependent variable:*

	<i>De Facto</i> Autonomy (1)	PEI Concept (2)
EMB Governmental		-2.322 (1.857)
Party Oversight	0.503* (0.200)	5.150 (4.647)
Mandate Sec.	-0.401*** (0.082)	-4.709* (2.018)
V-Dem Polyarchy	0.200* (0.092)	-0.343 (2.133)
GDP per capita PPP	5.342*** (0.266)	71.508*** (11.627)
De Facto Autonomy	-0.00000 (0.00000)	0.00005 (0.0001)
Constant	-2.226*** (0.246)	29.627*** (6.971)
Observations	157	157
R ²	0.844	0.585
Adjusted R ²	0.838	0.568
Residual Std. Error	0.493 (df = 151)	11.244 (df = 150)
F Statistic	162.971*** (df = 5; 151)	35.238*** (df = 6; 150)
Significância:		*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05 Modelo A: R ² = 0.84, F = 163*** Modelo B: R ² = 0.59, F = 35.24***

Source: author

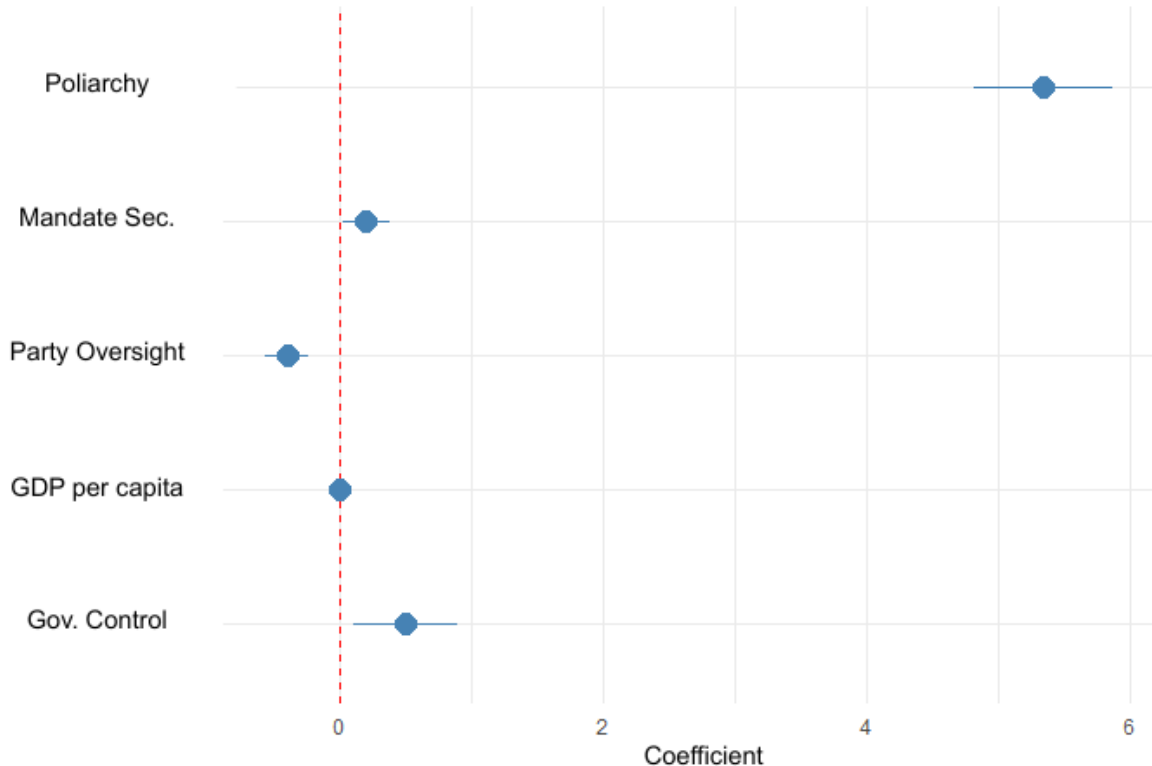
Model A: *De Jure* Rules → *De Facto* Autonomy

The first step of the mediation analysis assesses the extent to which formal institutional characteristics influence the practical autonomy of EMBs. The results from Model A indicate strong explanatory power of the *de jure* variables over *de facto* autonomy ($R^2 = 0.84$; $F(5, 151) = 162.97$; $p < 0.001$), thus empirically validating the first link in the proposed causal chain. As expected, party oversight exerts a significant negative impact on the operational autonomy of EMBs ($\beta = -0.40$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the presence of formal mechanisms of partisan control substantially reduces the practical independence of electoral bodies. In contrast, institutional guarantees related to the security of the chief officer's tenure show a positive effect ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < 0.05$), though with lower magnitude.

Surprisingly, governmental control over EMBs is positively associated with *de facto* autonomy ($\beta = 0.50$; $p < 0.05$), challenging the conventional assumption that linkage to the executive undermines

institutional independence. This finding may reflect contextual arrangements in which democratically legitimate governments invest in functional EMBs as a means of consolidating their own authority (Kerr, 2020). Additionally, the level of polyarchy shows a strong and positive effect ($\beta = 5.34$; $p < 0.001$), confirming that more consolidated democracies tend to have electoral institutions that are more autonomous in practice. Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of the model's predicted values and residuals.

Figure 2 – Model A



Source: Author

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Model B: Outcome equation in the mediation framework

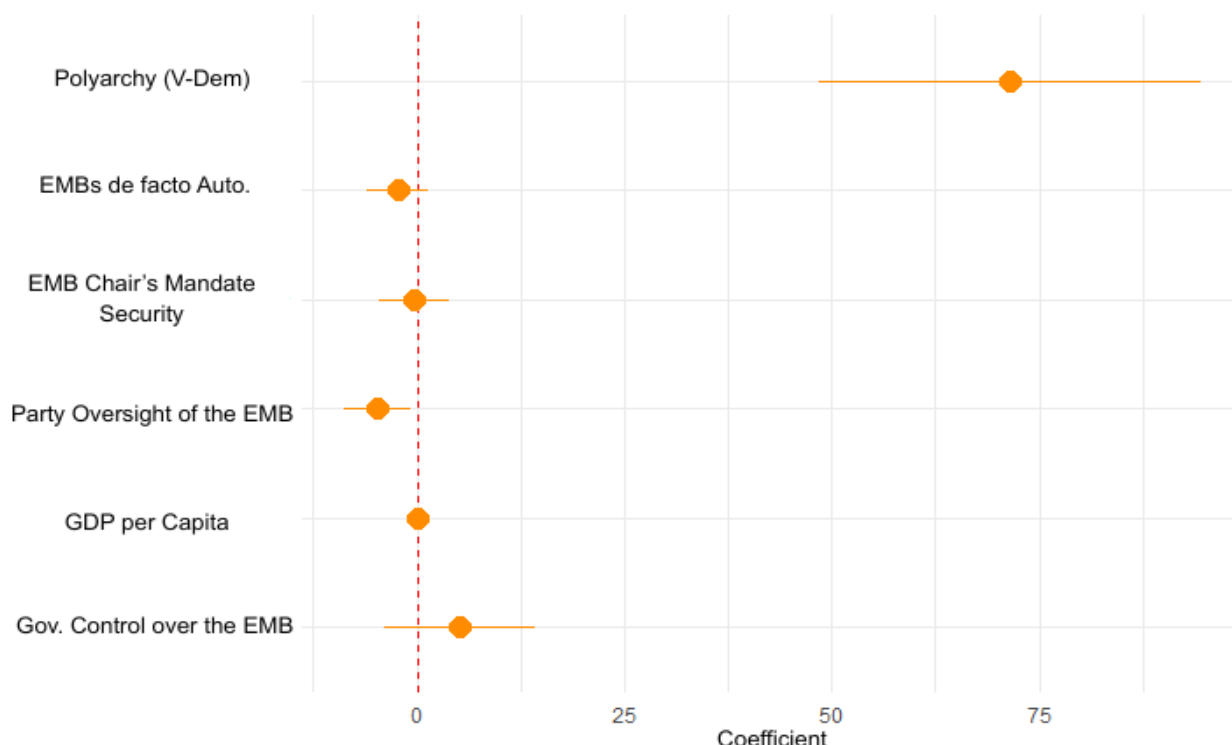
The second stage of the analysis tests the full causal chain, simultaneously incorporating both the *de jure* variables and the mediator (*de facto* autonomy) as predictors of electoral integrity. The model shows a good overall fit ($R^2 = 0.59$; $F(6, 150) = 35.24$; $p < 0.001$), explaining more than half of the variance in the dependent variable. *De facto* autonomy exhibits a strong positive association with electoral integrity ($\beta = 6.04$; $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the central argument that the practical independence of EMBs is a crucial determinant of election quality.

As expected, the direct effect of the EMB Governmental variable becomes statistically insignificant in the full model ($\beta = -2.32$; $p = 0.21$), suggesting that its impact on electoral integrity is mediated by *de facto* autonomy. In contrast, party oversight retains a significant and robust negative effect ($\beta = -4.71$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that this institutional component exerts a direct influence on the erosion of electoral integrity, even when controlling for operational autonomy. This pattern of results

supports a partial mediation: while part of the effect of formal rules operates through autonomy, other dimensions, especially mechanisms of party control, directly affect perceptions of integrity.

These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that the impact of institutional design is neither mechanical nor uniform. The effectiveness of formal rules depends on EMBs' actual capacity to operate independently, but it may also be constrained by institutional structures that directly affect trust and the credibility of the electoral process (Garnett; James, 2020).

Figure 3 - Model B



Source: author

The remarkable consistency between the theoretical expectations and the empirical results across both models strengthens the robustness of the evidence presented. The observed pattern aligns with the classical model of partial mediation (Baron; Kenny, 1986; Imai et al., 2011): in Model A, *de jure* institutional rules substantively explain variation in the *de facto* autonomy of EMBs; in Model B, *de facto* autonomy exerts a positive and highly significant effect on electoral integrity, while part of the direct effects of the *de jure* variables, notably governmental control, become statistically insignificant, suggesting that their influence occurs primarily through practical autonomy.

Substantively, the results indicate that the impact of institutional design on election quality does not stem solely from the existence of formal rules, but depends on the ability of EMBs to exercise those rules with real independence. Still, the persistence of the direct effect of party oversight in Model B points to multiple causal pathways, indicating that certain *de jure* rules, especially those involving direct political interference, may affect electoral integrity independently of operational

autonomy. Future research may explore these nuances using more advanced mediation techniques or longitudinal data that allow for more precise inference about temporal causality.

These findings challenge simplistic institutionalist conceptions that assume a linear relationship between the formal independence of EMBs and electoral quality. The positive association between governmental control and *de facto* autonomy, combined with the strongly negative effect of party oversight, suggests that electoral integrity depends less on legal independence per se and more on the ability of electoral bodies to operate beyond the direct influence of political actors. This result aligns with neo-institutionalist approaches that emphasize the importance of constraining veto points and political access channels as a means of ensuring institutional effectiveness (Tsebelis, 2002; McCubbins; Noll; Weingast, 1987).

In particular, the detrimental effects of party oversight warrant attention, as such mechanisms, often justified as instruments of accountability, appear, in practice, to increase opportunities for political capture and undermine the operational autonomy of EMBs. This finding carries important normative implications for the design of electoral reforms. Rather than focusing exclusively on the creation of formally independent bodies, institutional reforms should consider the degree to which EMBs are exposed to partisan interference. Reducing the direct involvement of political parties in institutional oversight may, as the data suggest, represent a more effective path to strengthening electoral integrity (Garnett; Zavadskaya (2021).

4 Finals considerations

This paper investigated the causal mechanisms linking the institutional design of electoral authorities to the integrity of electoral processes, with an emphasis on the mediating role of *de facto* autonomy. By proposing and testing a sequential mediation model, we provide robust empirical evidence for a relationship that is often assumed, but rarely examined systematically, in the comparative literature on electoral governance.

First, we demonstrated that formal rules affect electoral integrity primarily through their impact on the practical autonomy of EMBs, rather than through direct effects. The observed pattern of full mediation, in which the effects of *de jure* institutional variables become statistically insignificant when controlling for *de facto* autonomy, provides compelling support for the proposed theoretical mechanism. This finding addresses persistent gaps in prior studies, which often posit the effectiveness of formal rules without examining the intermediate links (Norris, 2014; Hyde; Marinov, 2012; Garnett; James, 2020).

Second, the results reveal counterintuitive institutional effects that deserve attention. The fact that EMBs formally subordinated to the executive tend, on average, to exhibit greater operational autonomy challenges the normative assumption that legal independence ensures better institutional performance. This finding suggests that in certain contexts, especially in consolidating democracies or settings with low state capacity, formal linkage to the government may provide resources, stability, and political backing that enhance EMBs' ability to act, even at the expense of formal independence. This hypothesis opens a promising research agenda for future investigations combining quantitative data and case studies.

Finally, the findings of this study have important theoretical and normative implications. Theoretically, they reaffirm the importance of analyzing the causal mechanisms that connect institutions and outcomes, rather than assuming direct relationships between rules and democratic quality. Normatively, they caution against overly formalistic electoral reforms that create independent bodies on paper while neglecting their actual capacity to resist political pressures and operate effectively. In contexts of institutional fragility, ensuring *de facto* autonomy, through mandate protection, safeguards against partisan interference, and adequate operational conditions, may be more decisive for electoral integrity than the mere codification of formal rules.

These findings carry significant implications for the design of electoral institutions:

First, regarding the risks of party oversight, the consistently negative effect of party supervision on both autonomy and electoral integrity suggests that these mechanisms, originally conceived to promote accountability, may in practice facilitate political interference. Reformers should reconsider the direct involvement of political parties in electoral governance. Second, with respect to formal independence, the pursuit of *de jure* independence may be insufficient, and, in some cases, counterproductive, for ensuring clean elections. Reform efforts should focus on strengthening operational autonomy through budgetary protections, technical professionalization, and insulation from informal political pressures. Third, the centrality of the political context must be acknowledged. The strong association between polyarchy and electoral integrity reinforces the idea that electoral institutions function within broader political ecosystems. Technical reforms should therefore be accompanied by wider efforts to strengthen democracy itself.

This study presents certain limitations that suggest promising directions for future research. The cross-sectional nature of the data prevents analysis of institutional change over time. Future longitudinal studies could examine how specific reforms affect trajectories of autonomy and integrity. Additionally, the limited sample size and the potential endogeneity between institutional and political variables call for caution in interpreting causal relationships. Complementary qualitative research, especially in-depth case studies, could help elucidate the micro-level mechanisms through which party oversight undermines practical autonomy. Finally, the measurement of *de facto* autonomy remains a methodological challenge. Future developments in institutional assessment methodologies, such as elite surveys, discourse analysis, or event-based inference, could enhance our ability to capture the informal dimensions of EMB independence.

In summary, this article demonstrates that the quality of elections depends less on the existence of formal rules and more on the capacity of electoral authorities to operate with effective independence in practice. The analytical distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* institutional autonomy, and the empirical demonstration of their frequent disconnect, offers a significant contribution to the study of political institutions and democratic reform. As democracies face growing challenges to electoral integrity, understanding these institutional mechanisms becomes not only academically relevant, but urgently necessary for designing resilient institutions capable of preserving public trust in democratic processes.

The findings of this article have significant implications for the institutional design of electoral authorities. First, regarding the risks of party oversight: the consistently negative effect of political party presence in formal control mechanisms, both on practical autonomy and on electoral integrity,

suggests that such arrangements, though often framed as accountability tools, may in practice enable undue interference and institutional capture. Electoral reforms should therefore seriously reconsider the direct involvement of parties in the governance of EMBs.

Second, with respect to formal independence: while legal autonomy is desirable, it may be insufficient, and at times even counterproductive, for ensuring electoral integrity. Reformers should prioritize strengthening operational autonomy by investing in budgetary protection, technical professionalization, tenure security, and safeguards against informal political pressure.

Finally, the centrality of the political context must be emphasized: the strong association between levels of polyarchy and electoral integrity underscores that electoral institutions do not operate in a vacuum, but within broader democratic ecosystems. Technical reforms must be embedded in broader strategies of democratic consolidation.

Although innovative in proposing a transnational causal mediation model, this study faces limitations that open promising avenues for future research. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to make inferences about temporal dynamics and ongoing institutional reforms. Longitudinal studies could explore how changes in EMB design affect autonomy and integrity trajectories over time. Moreover, the potential endogeneity between institutional and contextual variables requires careful causal interpretation. Complementary qualitative investigations, especially comparative case studies, could deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which, for instance, party oversight compromises EMB independence. Finally, measuring *de facto* autonomy remains a methodological challenge. Future investments in institutional assessment techniques, including elite surveys, discourse analysis, or event-based inference, could improve our capacity to accurately capture the informal dimensions of administrative independence.

In short, this study shows that electoral quality depends less on the formal existence of rules and more on the ability of electoral authorities to operate with effective autonomy. The analytical distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy, and the empirical demonstration of their frequent disconnection, constitutes a relevant theoretical contribution to the study of political institutions and democratic reform. As both consolidated and emerging democracies face increasing pressures on the integrity of their electoral processes, understanding the institutional mechanisms that sustain or undermine that integrity becomes not only academically important, but urgent for designing resilient institutions capable of preserving citizen trust in democratic regimes.

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Regras formais importam? Autonomia *de facto* e integridade eleitoral em perspectiva comparada

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Resumo. Este artigo investiga os mecanismos que conectam o desenho institucional *de jure* dos Organismos de Gestão Eleitoral (OGEs) à integridade eleitoral, mediados pela autonomia *de facto* dessas agências. Embora a literatura frequentemente assuma que regras formais mais robustas conduzem a maior qualidade eleitoral, poucos estudos testam empiricamente se tais regras de fato ampliam a autonomia operacional dos OGEs e, por extensão, a integridade eleitoral. Com base em dados de corte transversal provenientes de três fontes, o *Project of Electoral Integrity* (PEI 10.0), a *Electoral Management Survey* (EMS 2.0) e o *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem), conduzimos uma análise de mediação causal por meio de regressões sequenciais. Os resultados indicam que a supervisão por partidos políticos e a ausência de garantias institucionais para a permanência da liderança dos OGEs estão negativamente associadas à autonomia operacional, que por sua vez influencia positivamente a integridade eleitoral. Ademais, os efeitos diretos das variáveis *de jure* sobre a integridade tornam-se estatisticamente insignificantes quando a autonomia *de facto* é incluída no modelo, fornecendo evidências de um mecanismo de mediação. Este estudo contribui para o debate comparativo sobre governança eleitoral ao demonstrar que o impacto do desenho institucional depende, sobretudo, da capacidade efetiva dos OGEs de operar de forma independente de interferências políticas.

Palavras-chave: Integridade Eleitoral; Autonomia institucional; Organismos de gestão eleitoral; Governança eleitoral comparada.

Do Formal rules matter? De facto autonomy and Electoral Integrity in comparative perspective

Abstract. This article investigates the mechanisms connecting the *de jure* institutional design of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to electoral integrity, mediated by these agencies' *de facto*

autonomy. While the literature often assumes that stronger formal rules lead to higher electoral quality, few studies empirically test whether such rules actually enhance EMBs' operational autonomy and, by extension, electoral integrity. Drawing on cross-sectional data from three sources, the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Project (PEI 10.0), the Election Management Survey (EMS 2.0), and the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem), we conduct a causal mediation analysis using sequential regressions. The results show that political party oversight and the lack of institutional guarantees for EMB leadership tenure are negatively associated with operational autonomy, which in turn positively influences electoral integrity. Furthermore, the direct effects of *de jure* variables on integrity become statistically insignificant when *de facto* autonomy is included in the model, providing evidence of a mediation mechanism. This study contributes to the comparative debate on electoral governance by demonstrating that the impact of institutional design depends primarily on EMBs' effective capacity to operate independently from political interference.

Keywords: Electoral Integrity; Institutional autonomy; Electoral Management Bodies; Comparative electoral governance.

Appendix

