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Why incumbents perpetrate election violence during civil war

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Abstract
Civil conflict increases incumbents' vulnerability, expands their coercive capacity, enervates public good provision, and stifles public opposition. Consequently, we expect that elections held during civil conflict will feature more incumbent-perpetrated election violence. We test our argument with disaggregated data on election violence, generating two principal findings. First, elections held during civil conflict are more likely to feature violent coercion by incumbents. Second, this effect does not depend on the conflict's intensity or political salience, but is endemic to conflict-affected societies as a class. This raises questions about the nature of elections in conflict-affected societies and the relationship between forms of political violence.

Introduction

Elections serve simultaneously as instruments of democratic representation and conflict management. They legitimize leaders and allocate power, while funneling political competition into peaceful channels. Yet as the empirical record sadly makes clear, incumbents and their challengers too often combine the use of electoral campaigning and violence to pursue their political ends, sometimes with massive human costs (Daxecker and Jung, 2018; Von Borzyskowski, 2019) and dismantling efforts focused on development and institutionalization (Birch et al., 2020). The deleterious effects of election violence have been demonstrated to range from delegitimizing electoral democracy (Hafner-Burton et al., 2018) and harming post-conflict peace agreement implementation (Joshi, 2014) to reducing access to antiretroviral HIV therapy (Pyne-Mercier et al., 2011) and promoting sexual violence (Bjarnegård, 2018).

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Recent research on the causes of electoral violence has highlighted domestic political institutions and international democracy promotion as important drivers of incumbents' decisions to resort to violence and citizens' decisions to respond in kind. A newer strand of this research asks how civil conflict, either now or in the recent past, alters the incentives of actors to commit election violence. This is an important question since, according to our data, roughly 25% of elections in the developing world since 1990 have occurred either during or within two years of a civil conflict. Does the experience of civil war worsen electoral practice? While theoretical treatments of the subject suggest it does (Höglund et al., 2009), empirical assessments have split on the question (Birch and Muchlinski, 2017; Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015), leaving scholars with a series of pressing unanswered questions.

We address one of these unanswered questions in this paper: *does the rate of incumbent-perpetrated election violence increase during and after civil conflict?* We focus on incumbents because their power over the electoral process and access to the security sector uniquely position them to undermine democracy through violence. Concentrating on only one electoral actor also allows us to generate precise hypotheses regarding the impact of civil conflict on the actor's propensity to use election violence.

We contend that civil conflict enhances violence's attractiveness as a tool of electoral manipulation. Our theoretical framework suggests that civil conflict makes incumbents more politically vulnerable, more reliant on the security sector for their survival, and less likely to be punished for election violence by a polarized electorate. These changes make election violence more likely during civil conflict. Finally, we investigate whether the effect of conflict is contingent on the political salience and military strength of non-state armed actors.

An important contribution of this paper is its call for more specific definitions of election violence that discipline theory building and facilitate the empirical delineation of civil conflict from election violence. The definition we advocate also allows us to match our hypotheses about incumbents as a specific electoral actor with granular data on those same actors. Our analysis yields two main findings. First, incumbent-perpetrated election violence is far more frequent during civil conflict yet this effect does not outlast the conflict itself. Second, the impact of conflict on election violence does not significantly depend on the nature of the conflict's political or military challenge to the incumbent. We interpret these two findings to mean that conflict-affected societies are more prone to election violence as a class, which our argument explains as the result of distorted governance incentives and enhanced coercive tools available to incumbents. Crucially, this is different from arguing that conflict-affected societies are simply more violent, a distinction blunter definitions of election violence are unable to uncover.

Our paper contributes to the study of election violence in three ways. First, we contribute to our understanding of the impact of civil conflict on democratic practice. Elections in the midst of civil conflict have a heightened baseline risk of election violence committed by incumbents, but this effect does not outlast civil conflict. Second, we follow previous scholars in suggesting that different forms of political violence influence each other, at least contemporaneously. Our findings illustrate the need for further research into these interconnections. Finally, our paper raises critical questions regarding the conceptual and empirical definition of election violence and demonstrates one means of parsing new, more granular data to meet these challenges.

The study of civil conflict and election violence

The study of election violence has flourished in the last decade, attracting scholars interested in political violence and comparative democratization.[1] Several recent studies have leveraged events-

based data on a broad definition of social violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, finding that elections' destabilizing effect depends on the environments in which they are held (Goldsmith, 2015; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015). Harish and Little (2017), in contrast, argue that societies holding elections experience lower overall social violence, although violence peaks in election years.

In contrast, another group of scholars has defined election violence as a distinct form of violence that is causally related to the election and that occurs in its temporal vicinity. This literature emphasizes the domestic-institutional drivers of election violence. One strand focuses on the dangers of unpopular incumbents in unconsolidated democracies. Hafner-Burton et al. (2014) argue that vulnerable incumbents resort to violence to bolster their flagging prospects, particularly when constraints on their power are weak. Birch and Muchlinski (2017), however, suggest this result is sensitive to the operationalization of election violence; they instead suggest a tipping point of unpopularity beyond which using violence becomes a dominant strategy for incumbents. A related strand of research focuses on the broader political milieu in which elections take place. For instance, recent literature discusses how Kenya's founding elections in 1992 quickly turned violent, directly owing to the policies and strategies employed by the previous authoritarian regime, thus creating "political legacies" that undermined the democratic processes (Brosché et al., 2020). Fjelde and Höglund (2016) contend that winner-take-all electoral rules incentivize violence, again by raising the stakes of losing power. This effect strengthens in the face of ethnic exclusion, consistent with Kuhn's (2015) analysis of ethnic voting and pre-election violence. Ruiz-Rufino and Birch (2020) argue that autonomous election management bodies reduce electoral conflict in democratizing regimes by increasing electoral competition and thereby reducing incentives for violence. Furthermore, Von Borzyskowski and Kuhn (2020) identify that incumbents are likely to wage violence on more informed electorates as a part of their campaign strategy, because tactics of non-violent electoral manipulation are ineffective with this population. As evidence, they show that Zimbabwe's ruling party inflicted violence on school teachers because they were informing the community at large about the dire state of the country's education system. Wahman and Goldring (2020) empirically demonstrate the pervasiveness of pre-election violence in African states among constituencies with low levels of competitiveness, which they attribute to the prevalence of locally dominant political parties, thereby strengthening the scholarly consensus on the debilitating consequences of a lack of political competition for African democratization.

Scholars also have studied how external democracy assistance conditions election violence, with mixed conclusions. Daxecker (2014) finds that international scrutiny makes election days more peaceful but shifts violence to earlier in the campaign. International scrutiny also incentivizes party boycotts (Beaulieu, 2014) and post-election riots and protests aimed at garnering attention to electoral fraud (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009; Daxecker, 2012). Smidt (2016) agrees, but reports different effects of international observation on incumbents vs. opposition parties. Von Borzyskowski (2019) detects a short-term exacerbating effect of election observers but also finds that long-term capacity-building helps quell violence. Recent studies shed light on the individual level-effect of international peacekeeping operations in mitigating election violence. Smidt (2020) provides empirical evidence for the case of Côte d'Ivoire, where exposure to peacekeeping operation-sponsored election education was associated with fewer instances of election violence at a subnational level and reduced propensity to election violence at the individual level.

Other scholars connect current or recent civil conflict directly to the propensity for election violence. Dunning (2011) contends that electoral competition and political violence are complements, not substitutes: actors use violence to pursue their electoral goals and use electoral results to assess the forms of violence best suited to their aims. Höglund (2009: 420–21) contends that

"conflict-ridden" societies suffer from a series of pathologies—continuing insecurity and cultures of impunity among them—that incentivize the use of violent coercion during elections. Similarly, Höglund et al. (2009) find that conflict probably transforms the actors, institutions, and stakes of elections in ways that raise the risk of electoral violence. Taken together, these accounts stress that civil conflict transforms the incentives of electoral contestants in ways that make them more likely to commit violence.

Extant empirical research, however, offers surprisingly scant evidence that election violence worsens during or after civil conflict. Salehyan and Linebarger (2015: 28–29) find little support for their hypothesis that civil war raises the incidence of social violence. Taylor et al. (2017) conclude that, while the social cleavages opened by previous bouts of social conflict raise the risk of election violence today, current civil war does not. Studies using more specific indicators of election violence are split. Hafner-Burton et al. (2014) conclude that civil conflict makes election violence more likely, but Birch and Muchlinski (2017) find no effect.

Meanwhile, scholars of civil war have asked whether and how armed non-state actors during civil conflict participate in electoral politics. Matanock and Staniland (2018), for example, emphasize that insurgents engage in electoral disruption when their goals are orthogonal to the issues at stake in national politics. Steele (2011) shows how Colombian paramilitary groups attempted to displace citizens strategically based on municipality-level voting returns. Using data from Afghanistan, Condra et al. (2018) suggest that insurgents use violence to depress turnout while avoiding backlash from harming civilians. Birnir and Gohdes's (2018) analysis of Peru suggests that insurgent violence against civilians may support their electoral aims.

Despite these gains, our understanding of civil war's effect on election violence remains limited, resulting in the conflicting results described above. In particular, two dilemmas have constrained our progress. First, until recently, scholars of election violence have lacked disaggregated data to test theories of specific actors' choice of violence as an electoral strategy, with the exception of single-country studies of civil war. Cross-national studies, meanwhile, often relegate the relationship between election violence and civil conflict to the theoretical background or rely on broader measures of violence that obscure precisely which actors become more violent during elections. Second, since the study of civil conflict and election violence developed separately—with peace scholars more focused on the link between elections and civil conflict and scholars of comparative democratization more focused on domestic political processes and election violence—scholars have not yet developed a clear conceptual-empirical distinction between the two phenomena. Few studies examine whether definitions of election violence and civil conflict might overlap, which risks double-counting identical events (e.g., a paramilitary attack on an opposition party) as both phenomena. We advocate more careful conceptualization and greater attention to measurement approaches to help advance this research agenda.

Defining election violence and civil conflict

Extant scholarship principally relies on two different measures of election violence: while the first captures general social violence around elections, the second focuses on election violence as a separate analytic category. We prefer the latter approach. If we cannot define election violence as a specific phenomenon, we must theorize elections' effect on a diffuse range of behaviors committed by a wide array of actors; this undermines our ability to test intuitions regarding specific actors' behaviors. Separately, we must distinguish election violence from civil conflict or risk tautology: if our measures overlap, we risk the same acts of violence being counted as both dependent and independent variables.

Civil conflict is usually defined as a *state* of violent contestation of sovereignty between the state and one or more armed actors that produces a sufficient number of casualties per year (Themnér, 2018: 1). In contrast, definitions of election violence focus first on *acts* of violence, rather than a broader status of armed contestation. Election violence differs from other forms of bloodshed by virtue of its status as an instrument of electoral manipulation. Scholars propose two criteria to substantiate this connection empirically. The first is temporal: the act must occur in a window of time around the election, usually six months before, the month of, and three months after the election (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018; Daxecker et al., 2019: 717). Earlier analyses of election violence relied heavily on this temporal link with the implicit assumption that most violence around elections is linked to the election substantively (Birch and Muchlinski, 2017: 3; Salehyan, 2007). In time, scholars added a substantive criterion: the act must be related to the election in a direct way (Daxecker et al., 2019: 717). An example of using violence to influence outcomes directly would be malapportionment driving incentives for both incumbents and opposition parties to increase violence in under-represented districts since local leaders would have lesser influence over electoral outcomes given high population and heterogeneous voter preferences in such districts (Daxecker, 2020).This definition of election violence forms the conceptual backbone of cross-national measures of election violence, including the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA; Hyde and Marinov, 2012), the Countries at Risk of Election Violence (CREV; Birch and Muchlinski, 2018) and Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV; Daxecker et al., 2019). Approaches to measuring election violence sometimes vary in the acts they include, however: ECAV, for example, includes non-violent coercion, while CREV includes *threats* as well as actual *acts* of violence. Datasets also vary in their level of disaggregation.

Nevertheless, this dominant definition of election violence depends critically on differentiating acts of electoral violence from other violent incidents, relying on a reading of the perpetrators' intent to supply the causal link to the election. Violence during an election season must plausibly represent an attempt to manipulate the election. Civil conflict intensifies this dilemma by introducing at least one non-state armed actor that battles the state. This creates a problem of simultaneous intentions: violence committed by various actors during an election may simultaneously be intended to disrupt elections and to further their military aims. For example, governments might mount new military campaigns against armed non-state combatants before an election to minimize their threat to the electoral process: such attacks may be reasonably regarded as acts of both civil war and election violence.

The violent conduct of elections in Afghanistan furnishes a canonical example. The Taliban, in the seventeenth year of insurgency following its removal from power, threatened Afghanistan's October 2018 parliamentary elections multiple times during the election season. In particular, it claimed that the elections represented a "malicious American conspiracy" to bolster an illegitimate government (Gul, 2018). This was no idle threat: by the time of the elections, the Taliban had murdered at least 10 candidates for parliament (Salahuddin, 2018). At the same time, the Taliban, the government of Afghanistan, and international forces continued attacks on each other in the run-up to the election. Were these attacks acts of civil conflict, of election violence, or both?

The simultaneous-intentions problem poses an obstacle to estimating the relationship between civil conflict and election violence. A simple correlation between these two forms of violence may be a result of measurement error if certain events are coded as both election violence and civil conflict. We require therefore a definition of incumbent-perpetrated election violence that more cleanly differentiates between election violence and the government's waging of civil conflict on the other. We define incumbent election violence as *acts of violent coercion by official organs of the state against opposition parties and citizens used to manipulate the election process.*

This definition ameliorates the simultaneous-intentions problem and lessens the risk of finding a tautological link between civil conflict and election violence. First, it excludes all violence against non-state armed actors, since we cannot be certain that such acts do not also qualify as civil war violence. The definition excludes military campaigns during election season, for example. We only include acts against citizens and opposition parties, the two other central sets of actors in an election and, along with incumbents, the main objects of analysis in research on election violence.[2] Second, we exclude violence by pro-state armed groups, such as paramilitaries or unofficial militias. These groups might be directed by incumbents, but also act autonomously. We prefer a more conservative definition concentrating on the official organs of the state, such as the military and police.

Incumbent-perpetrated election violence during civil conflict

Our theoretical framework centers on incumbent-perpetrated election violence. Doing so does not diminish the importance of other electoral actors, such as opposition parties and citizens groups. Instead, theoretical parsimony demands a concentration on a single actor type. Governments and opposition parties, for example, possess different instruments of power, and organizational constraints. Not all incumbents run for re-election but even when they do not, they usually have clear preferences for the outcome of the next election.[3] Furthermore, incumbents administer and compete in elections while simultaneously controlling the security sector, making them the pivotal electoral actor.

General effects of conflict

We assume that incumbents are self-interested and focused on maintaining political power for themselves, chosen successors, or their political party. An incumbent chooses a mixture of three strategies to obtain the election results she desires.[4] First, she might hold clean elections, running on her overall record of providing public goods and advancing human development. Building this kind of performance legitimacy is difficult in many of the contexts in which incumbents must compete today, however. Weakly institutionalized bureaucracies with limited capacity to deliver services to citizens are further crippled by shrinking fiscal spaces owing to small tax bases (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016). A variant of this first strategy is to provide club goods that benefit only narrow segments of society linked to the incumbent by geography, ethnicity, or religion (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). This strategy of targeted redistribution relies on catering to core supporters who can provide electoral victory (Nichter, 2018). Another reason for incumbents to hold less violent elections could be driven by their alliance with strong party organizations which increases incentives for using a cost-effective mobilization strategy compared with a violent strategy (Fjelde, 2020).

The incumbent's second electoral strategy is to manipulate the election using non-violent means. Incumbents can exclude opponents from radio and television, ban particular candidates or parties, or even steal the election outright. Such a strategy might be attractive for those who fear their weak governing record will guarantee an electoral loss. Incumbents might also manipulate elections to demonstrate their strength and demoralize future potential opponents (Simpser, 2013). This strategy is more likely to deliver electoral victory, but risks citizen protests, international condemnation, and the refusal of opposition parties to accept the results.

A third strategy for governments is to manipulate an election violently. Governments can attack opposition rallies and assassinate political enemies. The incumbent's control of the state security

sector and its power to contract with gangs or terrorist groups make this strategy multilayered (Birch et al., 2020). This reinforces electoral violence as an inherent feature of electoral strategy (Birch et al., 2020). Violent electoral manipulation also comes with risks, however. Violence against civilians and opposition parties might turn the public against the government and invite condemnation from international actors.

We argue that incumbents are more likely to commit election violence during civil conflict because the relative attractiveness of these three re-election strategies shifts. First, incumbents are more vulnerable. Weakly constrained and electorally vulnerable incumbents are more likely to use violence to manipulate elections (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). We adopt the same logic but expand our definition of vulnerability. Civil conflict poses a potentially existential threat to the regime. Military failure could also mean the loss of valued national territory and with it any natural resources it holds, as in Sudan's loss of South Sudan after 2011. Furthermore, incumbents face increased political pressure from within their regimes during civil conflict. Civil war probably increases the risk of coup attempts, in part owing to the military's dissatisfaction with civilian leaders (Bell and Sudduth, 2017; Powell, 2012). This vulnerability might make an incumbent more willing to use election violence as a means of neutralizing one threat to her power.

Second, incumbents probably sharpen their general repressive capacity during civil war, a capacity that remains at their disposal during election season. The "law of coercive responsiveness"—the proposition that existential threats to the political status quo result in a repressive government response—has found strong empirical support (Davenport, 2007; Regan and Henderson, 2002).[5] This logic suggests that incumbents broadly intensify violent political repression during conflict. We contend that this enhanced reliance on violent repression to fight internal rebellion also boosts the availability of violence as a means of winning elections.

Our third mechanism linking civil conflict and incumbent-perpetrated election violence is related to the last: incumbents' ability to provide public goods deteriorates relative to their repressive capacity during conflict. Civil conflict by definition represents a deterioration of the state's coercive power, since it no longer holds a monopoly on the use of force. Yet within the state, institutions dedicated to violent coercion rise in power relative to those dedicated to public good provision. Spending on the military rises relative to social spending during civil conflict (Collier et al., 2003), ongoing violence weakens the pre-existing infrastructure for public good provision, and the state's capacity to attend to public needs in rebel-controlled territory diminishes. Conflict also elevates the political power of leaders of institutions dedicated to violence—such as the military, police, and intelligence services—relative to leaders in social development. This shift in the state's priorities in turn makes election violence a more attractive and readily available means of keeping power.

Fourth, civil conflict weakens public opposition to the use of violence during elections, lowering the incumbent's political costs of committing such violence. Previous research on incumbent-perpetrated election violence suggests that, although it improves her chances of winning the election, it might also increase the risk of post-election protests, which in turn could result in the incumbent's resignation (Hafner-Burton et al., 2018). During conflict, we argue that these risks fade. Conflict polarizes the electorate, generating hostility against other identity groups (Beber et al., 2014), reducing political tolerance (Hutchison, 2014), and expanding support for more hawkish political parties (Berrebi and Klor, 2008). Incumbents can capitalize on the changed political mood by invoking nationalist or ethnic sentiment as a justification for election violence. Election violence during conflict, then, generates fewer risks for incumbents than election violence during peacetime, since an incumbent can count on some political support for violent repression.

This discussion suggests that elections held in civil conflict are more likely to feature government violence: governments have more capacity, fewer constraints, and fewer alternatives to keeping power.

H1: All else equal, incumbents are more likely to perpetrate election violence during civil conflict than during peacetime.

What of post-conflict elections? Scholars have debated the effects of these elections, with differing levels of optimism (Brancati and Snyder, 2013; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012, 2016; Matanock, 2017). These studies have not specifically concentrated on election violence, however. We contend that conflict's effect on elections should outlast the formal conclusion of fighting. The mechanisms we propose above probably do not diminish rapidly after a conflict ends: instead, conflict wreaks major socio-political change (Wood, 2008). Incumbents also remain vulnerable to extra-systemic change, particularly coups, leading incumbents to "coup-proof" their regimes, which in turn endangers economic reconstruction (Girod, 2015). Post-conflict voters also probably remain polarized as well, since traumatic experiences might reshape political preferences and behaviors (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017). Furthermore, the relative balance of public good provision vs. coercive capacity potential may prove difficult to change quickly after a conflict ends: military spending, for example, remains high after civil conflicts end (Collier et al., 2003). Health outcomes decline long after wars end (Ghobarah et al., 2004), further diminishing incumbents' capacity to win re-election on the basis of performance alone. This logic suggests strongly that the impact of civil conflict on an incumbent's capacity and willingness to use election violence outlasts the conflict's formal conclusion.

H2: All else equal, incumbents are more likely to perpetrate election violence during post-conflict elections than peacetime elections.

Contingent effect of conflict

To this point, our theoretical framework has concentrated on a general effect of civil conflict on incumbents' use of election violence. Yet not all civil conflicts are created equal: instead, they vary in their intensity, duration, and political aims. This variation in civil conflict raises the possibility that particular kinds of conflict magnify its effect. We consider two such possibilities. First, some civil conflicts present a politically salient challenge to the state because of their symbolic importance or potential to pose a genuine existential threat to territorial integrity, while others represent a mere irritant. In India, to take one example, armed conflict over the status of Kashmir is tremendously salient to its political class and larger population. Yet the Naxalite rebellion garners far less national political energy. Second, some insurgencies field well-equipped armies capable of inflicting major losses on the state: others field a small, rag-tag group at a dramatic military disadvantage. In Colombia, the military prowess of the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) relative to the Colombian state varied over time: after starting its life as a small group of landless peasants, it grew in power in the 1980s and 1990s, but then diminished in power again after the early 2000s.

Our theoretical framework suggests that more politically salient and military formidable challenges to the state will magnify the effect of civil conflict. More politically salient armed challengers probably leave incumbents feeling more vulnerable, strengthen their coercive capacity more, and polarize voters more decisively. Incumbents presiding over

politically salient conflicts fear bad news from the frontlines: since the issues at stake are existential for the country, such bad news renders an incumbent more vulnerable to criticism. These incumbents are likely to respond by cracking down more decisively on political dissent generally, leaving a stronger repressive apparatus in play during electoral campaigns. Finally, more politically salient challenges should more heavily weigh on voters' minds, as well, polarizing the electorate more decisively.

> H3a: All else equal, incumbents more frequently perpetrate election violence during conflicts with high political salience than during either peacetime or conflicts with low political salience.

An insurgency's military prowess also should intensify the effect of civil conflict on election violence. We expect that the greater the challenge of the conflict, the more vulnerable incumbents become. Incumbents also more earnestly revise the workings of the state to confront stalwart military challenges, while weaker insurgencies inspire less effort of this kind. We might therefore expect incumbents to repress dissent more generally during militarily intense conflicts and more aggressively build a garrison state in which the security sectors hold more resources and political importance.

> H3b: All else equal, incumbents more frequently perpetrate election violence during conflicts featuring military powerful challengers than during either peacetime or conflicts with militarily weak challengers.

Research design

Our unit of analysis is an election for national executive office. We rely on NELDA for our list of elections (Hyde and Marinov, 2012).[6] We exclude elections occurring in countries that were already members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 1990.

Dependent variable

Testing our hypotheses requires a more precise coding of election violence than has previously existed, as discussed above. Our solution to the simultaneous-intentions problem depends on our ability to differentiate both the perpetrators and targets of acts of election violence, requiring more finely parsed data, so as to identify incumbent violence against opposition parties and groups of citizens.

The last decade has seen a surge in cross-national data collection on election violence. Unfortunately, most datasets on election violence do not provide such a disaggregated coding. NELDA codes pre- and post-election violence, emphasizing the importance of separating election violence from civil conflict, yet does not itself distinguish among different perpetrators or targets. CREV does disaggregate the number of violent incidents dyadically, but also groups together opposition parties and non-state armed groups into one category, which limits our ability to remove violence including insurgent groups from our dependent variable.[7]

We instead rely on ECAV, which is an event-level dataset that records electoral-related acts of contention occurring in 1200 elections in 140 unconsolidated democracies between 1990 and 2012

(Daxecker et al., 2019). ECAV improves on past data on election violence by judging each event by a substantive and temporal criterion: news reports and/or statements by the contestants themselves must establish a connection to an election and the event must occur either six months before or three months after an election. Each event is categorized as violent or non-violent, allowing us to remove non-violent contestation from all subsequent analyses. ECAV also codes each event's perpetrator and target, each of which can be the state, opposition party, group of citizens, non-state armed actor, other, or unknown.

ECAV provides the most careful differentiation of election violence and civil conflict among datasets of election violence. It allows a conservative solution to the simultaneous-intentions problem. ECAV's codebook emphasizes that not all violent events during armed conflict are coded as election violence: instead, without evidence of a clear link to the election it is excluded (Daxecker et al., 2018: 4, 23). Nearly half of ECAV's codebook is dedicated to case-by-case justifications of the inclusion or exclusion of violence within states in civil war. ECAV's event-level coding of perpetrators and targets further reinforces our confidence. ECAV allows us to reduce the number of acts most vulnerable to the simultaneous-intentions problem by first including only incumbent-perpetrated violence and then removing any violence against non-state armed actors, unknown actors, and other actors. We do not eliminate this problem entirely, of course. Previous accounts of election violence emphasize the ability of actors to obscure who is actually behind particular incidents (Daxecker et al., 2018: 4, 23), an effect that might intensify during conflict.[8] Still, ECAV improves substantially on previous attempts. With these advantages in mind, we code one dichotomous variable, *incumbent-perpetrated election violence*, that takes on a value of 1 if the incumbent committed at least one incident of election violence against the opposition or citizens.

Conflict status

We code *conflict status* using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD), which codes civil conflict as occurring when at least one non-state armed actor violently challenges the state, causing at least 25 battlefield deaths per year (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Themnér, 2018). We collapse the ACD to a country-year format, which allows us to capture how many conflicts occurred in a particular year, what year those conflicts began, and when they ended, if they did.[9] Our theory also implies that the effect of civil conflict on election violence may well outlast the civil conflict. To test this intuition, we code whether an election occurred soon after a country exited civil conflict. We code elections as occurring in a post-conflict context when they take place within two years of a conflict ending. According to our data, since 1991, 17% of elections in unconsolidated democracies occurred during conflict, while another 7% occurred during the first two years after conflict. Our models set peacetime elections as the base category and insert dummy variables for whether or not the election was held during *civil conflict* or during the *post-conflict* period.[10]

Our theoretical framework also suggests that conflict's effect on incumbent-perpetrated election violence is contingent on the political salience and military strength of insurgents. We employ several measures to test this intuition. To capture political salience, we first measure conflict *type*, also with data from the ACD, classifying whether it was fought for *control of center* (i.e. insurgents wish to replace the central government) or *territory* (i.e. secession). We also measure whether any non-state armed actors established an *insurgent political wing* in the year of the election, regardless of whether it was legal, relying on data from the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013). We assume that conflicts in which insurgents wish to replace the regime or field a political wing are more politically salient. To capture military strength of rebellion, we use three variables. First, we measure conflict intensity with the ACD, capturing whether

the civil conflict met the threshold for *war*, meaning that it resulted in over 1000 battle-related deaths in that year, or whether it was a minor conflict. Second, we code for *high rebel mobilization capacity*, capturing the ability of rebels to mobilize personnel relative to the state. Third, we code *territorial control*, which captures whether any insurgent groups possessed effective control over some portion of the national territory in the year of the election. These last two variables come from the Non-State Actors Dataset. We presume that wars and conflicts in which insurgents more effectively mobilize or control territory are more militarily strong.

Control variables

We estimate all of our models with two sets of controls: one basic, minimal set that maximizes the number of elections included and one full set that loses observations owing to missing data but instills more confidence that we have avoided a spurious link by ignoring potential confounding variables.

The basic set of control variables includes several characteristics of the electoral process. From NELDA, we control for *fraud suspicions*, which captures whether there were significant fears that the election would not be free or fair, and *incumbent vulnerability*, which captures cases in which the government did not publicly express its confidence in victory. We also code for whether the election was for the *executive*, meaning that the office of head-of-government was being contested. Each of these variables, which are binary, should increase the risk of election violence and plausibly rise in the face of civil conflict. The basic models also control for a country's *executive constraints* in the year before the election took place, as coded by the Polity IV project (Marshall, 2017) and consistent with previous studies of election violence (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). The basic models include a dummy variable for whether the election took place in *Sub-Saharan Africa*: because both election violence and civil conflict occur frequently in Sub-Saharan Africa, controlling for the region helps prevent a potentially spurious correlation between our key independent and dependent variables. Finally, our model controls for whether the prior election event featured election violence by any actor.[11]

Our full models include all the control variables from the basic set and add three more. We use data from the World Bank and the Quality of Governance dataset for the natural logarithm of *GDP per capita* and the natural logarithm of *population*, which we also lag one year. We also capture *incumbent tenure*, which captures the number of years that the incumbent has been in power, based on the Archigos data (Goemans et al., 2009).

Results

The resulting dataset includes information on 1200 elections in 140 unconsolidated countries between 1990 and 2012, inclusive. We begin first with tests of the general effects of conflict before moving (Hypotheses 1 and 2) before moving on to a test of the contingent effects of conflict (Hypotheses 3a and 3b).

The general effect of civil conflict

Table 1 presents our statistical tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2, which propose that election violence is higher during and after civil conflict. We estimate two models: one with our basic set of control variables and a second with a fuller set.[12] We employ a random-effects logistic regression estimator with robust standard errors clustered at the unit level.[13]

Table 1. The general effect of civil conflict on incumbent-perpetrated election violence.

DV = Pr(Incumbent-perpetrated election violence)

	1	2	3
Conflict status			
Conflict	1.182***	1.384***	0.842**
	(0.269)	(0.283)	(0.294)
Post-conflict	0.413	0.299	0.042
	(0.381)	(0.409)	(0.416)
Control variables			
Executive election	0.802***	0.713***	0.719**
	(0.241)	(0.267)	(0.259)
Fraud	0.847***	0.878***	0.773**
	(0.253)	(0.264)	(0.251)
Vulnerable incumbent	0.105	0.174	0.324
	(0.226)	(0.243)	(0.235)
Executive constraints	−0.067	−0.069	0.0557
	(0.066)	(0.076)	(0.087)
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.723**	0.679**	0.216
	(0.264)	(0.286)	(0.317)
GDP per capita			−0.410**
			(0.146)
Population			0.482***
			(0.0875)
Leader tenure			0.046***
			(0.0131)
Lagged election violence	1.061***	1.267***	1.183***
	(0.270)	(0.289)	(0.289)
First election	0.226	0.642*	0.649
	(0.350)	(0.383)	(0.381)
Constant	−3.367***	−3.564***	−9.075***
	(0.468)	(0.508)	(1.970)
N (elections)	1099	942	942
Countries	134	129	129

Note: robust standard errors, clustered by country, in parentheses.
*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Table 1 suggests strong support for Hypothesis 1 but no support for Hypothesis 2. The coefficient on civil conflict is positive and significant in both Models 1 and 2, indicating that governments become more likely to commit election violence during civil conflict. This effect does not depend on the set of controls used. We find little evidence that post-conflict elections are especially violent, however: in each model, the effect of our post-conflict indicator variable is statistically insignificant.

We explore these results more closely in Figure 1, which plots the predicted probability of incumbent-perpetrated election violence in peacetime, conflict, and post-conflict elections, leveraging our results in Model 2. We model two hypothetical situations for the predicted probabilities. In the less contentious scenario, the election does not raise fraud suspicions, the incumbent is
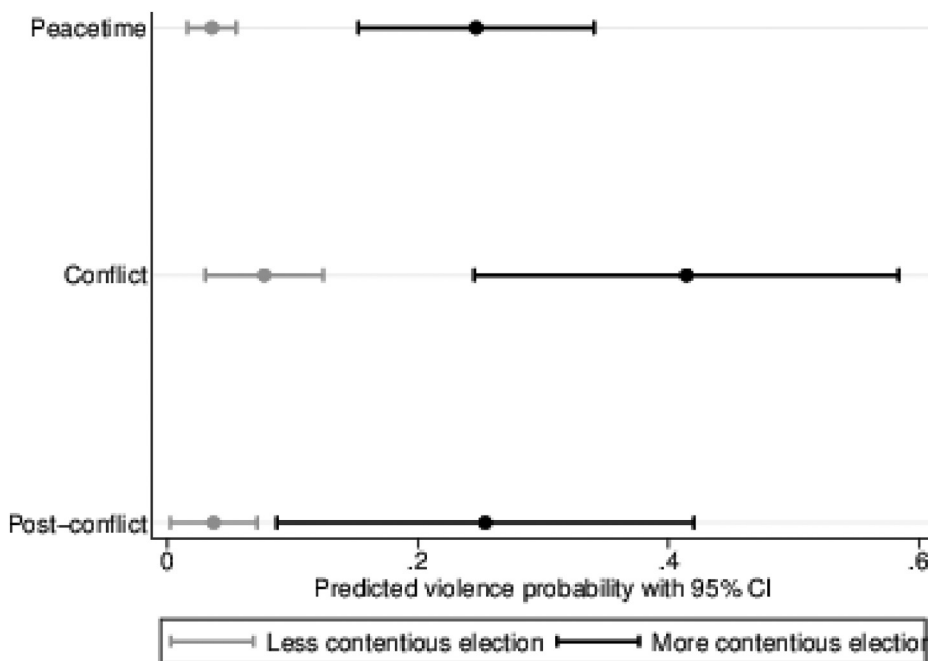
Figure 1. Predicted probability of incumbent-perpetrated election violence in peacetime, conflict, and post-conflict elections.

confident of victory, and the last election was not violent. In the more contentious scenario, the election does raise suspicions of fraud, the incumbent feels threatened, and the last election was violent.[14] We graph the predicted probability and 95% confidence interval. Figure 1 illustrates the effect of civil conflict on the probability of incumbent-perpetrated election violence. During peacetime, when an election is "contentious", the predicted probability of incumbent-perpetrated election violence increases from 0.04 to 0.08. However, when an election is held while an active civil conflict is on-going, a more contentious election increases the probability of election violence from 0.25 to 0.41. Not only is the underlying risk of violence considerably higher for conflict elections (0.25 compared with 0.04 for peacetime), but the increase in the risk of violence from a contentious election is also much greater in conflict elections (an increase of 0.16 compared with an increase of 0.04 for peacetime elections).

In contrast, post-conflict elections have nearly precisely the same probability of government violence against citizens and opposition parties as peacetime elections, clear evidence against Hypothesis 2. The finding that post-conflict elections do not experience more election violence than peacetime elections appears at first blush to contradict earlier research that suggests that post-conflict elections increase the risk of conflict recidivism (Brancati and Snyder, 2013; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012). We emphasize the differing aims of this research with previous scholarship, however. Flores and Nooruddin (2012), for example, report a contingent effect: elections are dangerous in post-conflict countries when they are held within 6 months to a year following the cessation of violence in countries with no prior experience with democracy. Our findings here, in contrast, compare post-conflict elections with peacetime elections and across countries with

different levels of democratic experience.[15] Finally, we study a different dependent variable, election violence, as opposed to conflict recurrence.

We return to Table 1 to examine our control variables. We find that pre-election suspicions of electoral fraud are positively correlated with incumbent election violence, regardless of the set of controls. The positive correlation for incumbent violence suggests that election violence and fraud are complements, rather than substitutes; incumbents who commit fraud are more likely to use violence as well.[16] Incumbents are also more likely to commit violence when the office of chief executive is being contested, as well as in in more populous countries with a longer tenured leader and previous experience of election violence. Higher income per capita reduces the probability of violence by incumbents. Incumbents are more likely to use election violence in Sub-Saharan Africa in our basic model, a result that dissipates when a fuller set of controls is inserted, suggesting that country size, leader tenure, and poverty help explain Africa's greater probability of government violence during elections. Interestingly, incumbent vulnerability does not predict election violence committed by any actor, which runs counter to previous results in the study of election violence (Birch and Muchlinski, 2017; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). The impact of executive constraints is also insignificant.

The contingent effects of civil conflict

Hypotheses 3a and 3b suggest that civil conflict's effect on election violence increases when the conflict is politically salient and insurgent groups pose a more severe military challenge to the state, respectively. We re-estimate our full model of government-perpetrated election violence (i.e. Model 2 from Table 1), substituting our conflict status variable with indicator variables for whether the election was held during conflict without the attribute in question or conflict with that attribute, with peacetime elections as the residual category. We display our results in Figure 2, which graphs the coefficient and 95% confidence interval for the conflict variables in each model. For example, the "rebel political wing" model plots the estimated effects of conflict both for when it does and for when it does not feature a rebel political wing.[17]

Figure 2 offers only limited support for Hypothesis 3a. More politically salient conflicts do have a larger effect on election violence than less salient conflicts, as expected, but for both variables the 95% confidence intervals for the two effect sizes overlap, meaning that the effects are not statistically different. The strongest evidence in favor of political salience concerns secessionist vs. control-of-center conflicts: the impact of civil conflict on election violence is statistically insignificant for secessionist conflicts, but positive and significant for control-of-center conflicts. Yet we cannot reject a null hypothesis that their effects are identical ($p = 0.71$). The impact of civil conflict does not seem to depend on whether insurgents form a political wing, as well, and the signs on both types are positive and statistically significant. Evidence for Hypothesis 3b is weaker still. The impact of war is statistically insignificant, while that for minor conflict is significant. For both rebel mobilization capacity and rebel territorial control, the effect sizes are nearly identical.

Figure 2 therefore supports a more general impact of civil conflict on the probability of incumbent-perpetrated election violence, rather than a contingent one, with the exception of conflict fought over the control of the central government. We do caution against over-interpreting these results, however. The five models presented in Figure 2 contain between 855 and 942 observations, of which roughly 170 observations are held during conflict. Our models then split those 170 observations into two groups, with at times small numbers in each group: for example, our estimates of the impact of war vs. minor conflict depend on only 31 observations for elections held in war vs. 138 for minor conflict, leading to large standard errors around the estimates.
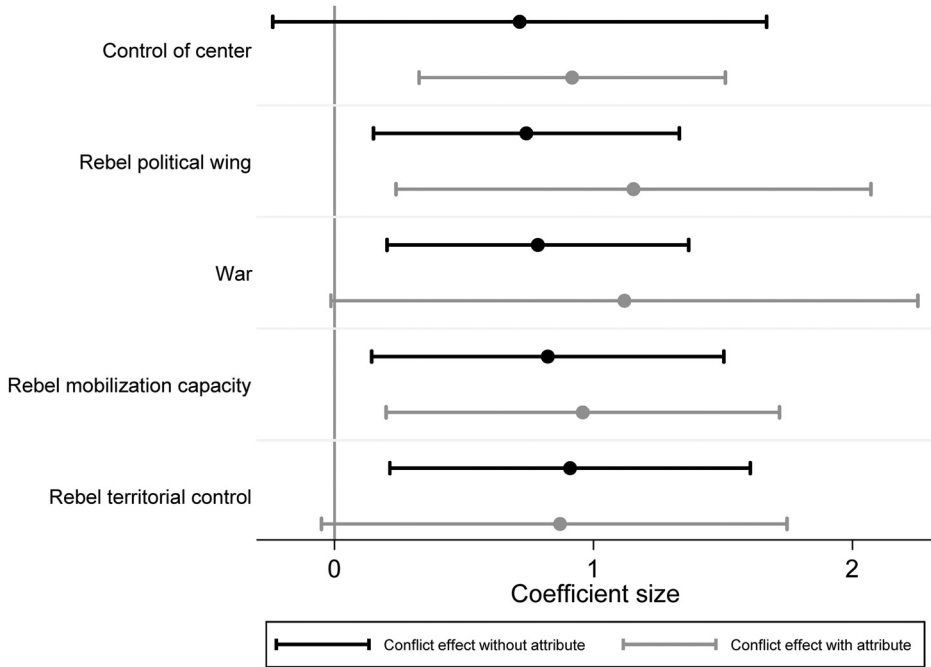
Figure 2. Civil conflict's effect on election violence is not contingent on its political salience or intensity.

Robustness

We consider three tests of the robustness of our results here.[18] With a few exceptions, our main results withstand each challenge.

First, we vary the window for post-conflict elections. Table 1's estimates define post-conflict elections as those occurring within two years of the conclusion of civil conflict, showing virtually no evidence of a higher rate of election violence during this window. The two-year window might prove too long if only elections held very soon after conflict prove more dangerous, meaning that we have under-estimated the risk of post-conflict elections. Alternatively, the window could prove too short if the post-conflict hangover is longer than only two years. We therefore re-estimate Table 1's models using one-year and five-year windows for post-conflict elections. Using a one-year window produces results nearly identical to those in Table 1. A five-year window, however, does provide weak evidence that post-conflict elections are correlated with a higher risk of election violence by incumbents: in our basic model, our post-conflict election dummy variable is positive, substantively large, and statistically significant. This effect dissipates with our full set of control variables, however.

Second, we re-estimate our models in Table 1 with random-effects negative binomial models that model the underlying event count instead of the binary dependent variable used in Table 1, which could miss the impact of civil conflict on the number of electoral violence incidents that occur. Our findings for conflict are robust to this modeling strategy: civil conflict results in more violent election violence committed by incumbents.[19]

Third, as discussed above, given concerns about unobserved unit heterogeneity that might generate spurious correlations, we implement the Mundlak formulation for random effects models (see Bell and Jones, 2015). Another alternative is to include unit fixed effects instead of random effects but this comes at the costs of experiencing all countries that have never experienced election violence (or those who have never enjoyed a peaceful election). The fixed models dramatically reduce the number of countries in our estimation sample from 136 to 76 (from 1159 to 727 country-year observations), leading to an increase in the uncertainty of our estimates. However, given that our results are robust to using a Mundlak formulation of the random effects model, we are satisfied that our results are not being driven by endogeneity from unit heterogeneity.

Conclusions

Scholars of comparative democratization and political violence have dramatically augmented our understanding of election violence over the last ten years. Yet both conceptual and empirical barriers have limited our understanding of how civil conflict affects the propensity of incumbents to manipulate elections violently. This paper attempts to address these limitations. We contend that civil conflict shifts incumbents' cost–benefit calculus toward election violence by increasing incumbents' vulnerability, bolstering their general repressive capacity, undermining their ability to provide public goods, and providing new opportunities to manipulate a more polarized electorate. Furthermore, these effects should outlive conflict itself, leaving countries at a higher risk of electoral violence for years. We also argue that more politically salient and militarily powerful insurgents should intensify this effect.

Our analysis supports only the first of these hypotheses. In short, the dominant finding of this research is a general effect of civil conflict on incumbent-perpetrated election violence that dissipates after conflicts end. Governments are much more likely to commit acts of election violence when elections are held during civil conflict. This effect is robust to different sets of controls and estimation methods. Yet post-conflict elections are not at a higher risk of election violence. Finally, evidence for the hypothesis that more politically salient and militarily challenging conflicts intensify the impact of conflict on election violence is weak: the effect of conflict is contingent on it being fought over the control of the central government, but not on other attributes.

Our findings represent both good and bad news for students of conflict and democracy. More pessimistically, our findings reveal a strong correlation between civil conflict and election violence. Countries holding elections during conflict not only confront armed challengers to the state, challengers who often target the electoral process, but incumbents are also more likely to violently manipulate elections to remain in office. More broadly, we suggest that civil conflict hollows out the practice of electoral democracy. More optimistically, post-conflict elections are not more likely to feature election violence, suggesting that conflict's impact on electoral practice context-specific.

Our research suggests several broader lessons for the study of election violence. First, further study of the outcome of post-conflict elections is needed. We would caution against an interpretation of our findings as contradicting previous scholarship about the dangers of post-conflict elections (Brancati and Snyder, 2013; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012). Previous research did not compare peacetime with post-conflict elections, but rather different post-conflict elections with each other, and focused on civil conflict recurrence instead of election violence. Future research on post-conflict elections could examine whether they receive more international support in the form of, say, election observers or peacekeeping forces and how that support conditions their levels of election violence (e.g. Smidt, 2016, 2020, 2021). Second, scholars should continue to explore how civil

conflict threatens democratic practice. We have shown here that conflict probably makes electoral practice more violent. Unanswered questions abound for future inquiry. For example, does civil conflict deteriorate electoral integrity? If these effects exist, are they permanent? Do non-violent and violent electoral manipulation act as complements? Third, scholars should better differentiate their theories of electoral violence by perpetrators and targets and then test those theories against disaggregated data, in contrast to past studies that predicted a general rise in social violence during elections with less attention to who committed it. Finally, scholars should explore further how different kinds of political violence affect each other. Here, we show that civil conflict begets government election violence against citizens and opposition parties. However, why does election violence sometimes metastasize into more intense bouts of violence? Does international conflict leave incumbents with a freer hand to repress electoral competition violently? We hope that scholars will continue to explore these questions.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See Dresden et al. (2019) for a broader review of the scholarly literature on the intersection of political violence and democratic practice.
2. Acts of state electoral violence against citizens and opposition parties also suffer from a simultaneous-elections problem. For example, governments may target political parties sympathetic to or officially affiliated with insurgents as a means of weakening the armed opposition. We contend that such cases primarily serve to influence the election, although they may also have effects on military campaigns.
3. Rare is the election in which a politically disinterested caretaker government organizes elections. Based on NELDA data, only 11% of elections in developing countries since 1990 feature a transitional leadership whose sole task was to administer the election.
4. An implied scope condition of the argument is that incumbents do not abrogate elections. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point. In the NELDA data, only 3.15% of all the cases (85 out of 2696) in our dataset were held during conflict and did not follow the electoral calendar. If we limit the sample to only those elections that were held "on time", the results hold. See Online Appendix.
5. Ritter and Conrad (2016) caution that the relationship between dissent and repression vanishes once they correct for endogeneity.
6. Same-day election events, e.g. presidential and legislative elections held on the same day, are combined into a single observation.

7. The Social Conflict in Africa database also provides carefully disaggregated event data, although the geographic scope of its coverage is more limited than the election-violence datasets we discuss here (see Salehyan et al., 2012; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015).

8. ECAV also captures whether violence was pro- or anti-state in nature. We exclude all pro-state violence committed by anyone other than the state, such as paramilitary groups. This is the more conservative decision: if governments direct paramilitaries to engage in election violence during ongoing civil war, our measure will not capture it. The ECAV data suggest that such attacks are relatively rare, however: only 2.5% of pro-state incidents of election violence were committed by non-state armed actors.

9. In the first year a country experiences civil conflict after a period of peace, we compare the precise date of the outbreak of conflict with the date of the election. We leverage the conflict start and end dates to ensure that an election actually occurred during conflict, as opposed to taking place before the conflict began or after it ended.

10. We test the viability of our measures of election violence and civil conflict by leveraging disaggregated data from UCDP and ECAV. We classify all events of incumbent-perpetrated election violence by the week they occurred relative to the election and whether or not the election occurred during conflict or peace time. We also compare weekly incidents of incumbent election violence with civil conflict events. Our data suggest that incumbents engage in more election violence in the week of and week after an election when that election is held in conflict. They also show that civil conflict events do not peak around election time in the same way that election violence events do. These patterns suggest that our measures capture fundamentally different violent dynamics. Results are available in the Online Appendix.

11. One challenge of this choice, however, is that a lagged dependent variable is by definition missing for the first observation for each unit in a dataset with relatively few observations per unit: we would lose over 10% of our dataset with a conventional lagged dependent variable. We therefore insert a lagged dependent variable with three nominal categories: first election in the series; last election had election violence; last election did not have election violence. We make "no election violence" the residual category.

12. When we include a shorter set of controls, we retain 1099 of 1200 elections (91.5%) held in 134 developing countries during 1990–2012, the period for which we have data from ECAV for our dependent variable. When we add more controls, our sample includes 942 elections (78.5%) held in 129 countries.

13. To account for possible unobserved unit heterogeneity, we also follow advice by Bell and Jones (2015) and implement the Mundlak formulation for random effects TSCS models. The Mundlak formulation involves including group-means for any time-varying covariates (Bell and Jones, 2015). This allows the model to parse within- and between-group variation. The structure of our data poses two issues for use of this formulation. First, our dependent variable is dichotomous so using Mundlak requires estimation of a linear probability model instead of a logistic regression. Second, as with most TSCS datasets in political science, our number of units (~130 developing countries) is far larger than the average number of elections per country (7.5), and so most of the usable (and instructive) variation is between- rather than within-group. Nonetheless, our results hold (see Online Appendix).

14. In each scenario, we plot the predicted probabilities for an executive election held outside of Sub-Saharan Africa in a country with median levels of executive constraints, population, GDP per capita, and incumbent tenure.

15. One possible interpretation suggests that post-conflict elections attract more international support, which dampens the otherwise violent tendencies of these elections. Our data suggest that post-conflict elections are more likely to attract election monitors but that post-conflict elections with election monitors are not less prone to election violence than those without. Results are available in the Online Appendix.

16. Our data suggest that non-violent electoral manipulation does surge during conflict and post-conflict elections: prohibitions on opposition party candidates, for example, jump from roughly 12% of elections during peacetime to about 22% of elections during conflict, only dropping partially during post-conflict elections. Results are available in the Online Appendix.

17. Full results available in the Online Appendix.

18. All results are available in the Online Appendix.

19. The result is weaker but holds when we use the Mundlak formulation of a random-effects model in which the dependent variable is a log-transform of the event count ($p = 0.058$). See discussion below and in the Online Appendix.

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