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Electoral violence: An introduction

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Abstract

Elections are held in nearly all countries in the contemporary world. Yet despite their aim of allowing for peaceful transfers of power, elections held outside of consolidated democracies are often accompanied by substantial violence. This special issue introduction article establishes electoral violence as a subtype of political violence with distinct analytical and empirical dynamics. We highlight how electoral violence is distinct from other types of organized violence, but also how it is qualitatively different from nonviolent electoral manipulation. The article then surveys what we have learned about the causes and consequences of electoral violence, identifies important research gaps in the literature, and proceeds to discuss the articles included in the special issue. The contributions advance research in four domains: the micro-level targeting and consequences of electoral violence, the institutional foundations of electoral violence, the conditions leading to high-stakes elections, and electoral violence in the context of other forms of organized violence. The individual articles are methodologically and geographically diverse, encompassing ethnography, survey vignette and list experiments and survey data, quantitative analyses of subnational and crossnational event data, and spanning Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Keywords

conflict, democracy, elections, violence

Introduction

The institution of elections is virtually ubiquitous in the contemporary world. With the exception of a handful of states, including Brunei, China, Eritrea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and South Sudan, citizens today have the opportunity to elect their leaders in national elections. Elections are held even during periods of armed conflict; for example, since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, voters have gone to the polls eight times. In theory, the employment of elections to select leaders ought to provide a nonviolent alternative to the use of force to adjudicate between rival claims to rule, and it ought to be a mechanism that allows citizens greater say over how they are governed. Yet in practice, these expectations often fail to conform to reality. Many elections,

especially those in democracies not yet fully consolidated, are fraught with significant levels of violence during the campaign period, on polling day or in the aftermath of voting. Electoral violence can result in casualty tolls that meet the threshold of civil war within days or weeks; when this occurs, it can undo years of peacebuilding and development work, it can undermine democratic institutions, and it can even trigger civil war. Post-election violence after the 2010 polls in Côte d'Ivoire led to more than 1,000 civilian deaths, one million internally displaced people and 100,000 refugees in neighboring countries. Recent elections in

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Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe were similarly accompanied by high levels of conflict. Violence, even at levels below that witnessed in the most egregious cases, undermines the democratic character of elections by substituting free choice with coercion and by deterring participation. When force intrudes into electoral processes, something is seriously amiss with democratic institutions.

Given the substantive relevance of electoral violence as a problem, it is important for academic researchers to have a clear understanding of its prevalence, causes, and dynamics, as well as what can be done to prevent it.[1] The study of electoral violence has grown out of two largely independent streams in political science – the literature on conflict and political violence, on the one hand, and the literature on electoral misconduct, on the other.

Scholars of security and conflict first became interested in elections following work on democratization and its conflict-inducing risks that implied a potential relationship between elections and violence (Snyder, 2000; Mansfield & Snyder, 2005). Subsequent research further examined elections as a trigger for civil war and the potentially destabilizing consequences of elections after the end of civil war (Brancati & Snyder, 2013; Cederman, Gleditsch & Hug, 2012; Chacón, Robinson & Torvik, 2011; Cheibub & Hays, 2017; Flores & Nooruddin, 2012, 2016; Matanock, 2017), the short- and long-term electoral implications of civil war (Balcells, 2012; Costalli & Ruggeri, 2015), and the relationship between patterns of political violence and the electoral cycle (Davenport, 1997; Goldsmith, 2015; Harish & Little, 2017).

Working largely separately, scholars of elections outside the Western world have long been interested in the subversion of electoral processes through practices such as clientelism, vote-buying, and intimidation (Birch, 2007, 2011; Mares & Young, 2016; Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2013). Electoral violence is conceptualized as one of several tools elites can use to influence election outcomes (Birch, 2011, 2020; Daxecker, Di Salvatore & Ruggeri, 2019; van Ham & Lindberg, 2015; Mares & Young, 2016; Norris, Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2015; Schedler, 2002). Yet this literature has until recently focused more on particularistic rewards, neglecting the possibility that the determinants and implications of coercive strategies could be quite distinct (Mares & Young, 2016).

The aim of this special issue is twofold: first, we establish electoral violence as a strategy used by political actors to influence the course and outcome of electoral contests, and provide a conceptual approach for understanding the distinctiveness of electoral violence. Second, we address noteworthy gaps in scholarly understanding of this topic. Whereas previous research has advanced knowledge pertaining to the institutional, social, and international underpinnings of electoral violence, as well as having identified important consequences for political behavior and attitudes, important gaps remain. The special issue contributes novel insights in four domains: the micro-level targeting and consequences of electoral violence, the formal and informal institutional determinants of electoral violence, how the stakes of elections are formed and influence the prospects of electoral violence, and how electoral violence is shaped by other forms of organized violence.

The distinctiveness of electoral violence

Electoral violence is levied by political actors to purposefully influence the process and outcome of elections, and it involves coercive acts against humans, property, and infrastructure (Bekoe, 2012; Harish & Toha, 2019; Höglund, 2009). It can happen in all parts of the electoral cycle, including at the announcement of elections, party primaries, and voter registration (Seeberg, Wahman & Skaaning, 2018; Söderberg Kovacs, 2018), and it can be promoted by both state and non-state actors (Taylor, Pevehouse & Straus, 2017; Staniland, 2014). This conceptualization has the strategic use of violence at its core, but alternative and complementary perspectives exist, as developed below.

Electoral violence covers a range of different manifestations and outcomes, but the concept is unified by its coercive component. Research from the African context suggests that harassment and intimidation are more common than lethal violence (Straus & Taylor, 2012: 17–18, 24), despite the fact that lethal violence is generally better covered and less subject to underreporting in the media-based sources that underlie many of the cross-country sources capturing electoral violence (von Borzyskowski & Wahman, 2019).[2] However, violence associated with elections can generate significant casualties and form part of an escalatory process toward civil

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[1] For recent surveys, see Daxecker & Jung (2018), Laakso (2019), and von Borzyskowski (2019a).

[2] Threats and intimidation can be made publicly and privately, incurring different reporting biases and leaving some forms of violence more difficult to detect.

war (Christensen & Utas, 2008; Ron, 2001). A survey of relevant datasets indicates that a substantial proportion of elections across the globe witness at least some violence. The Countries at Risk of Election Violence (CREV) data estimate that over three quarters (78%) of elections in countries deemed to be at risk of violence experience at least ten violent events (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017), while the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) data report more than three violent events in over 50% of elections, and deadly violence in approximately 30% of elections (Daxecker, Amicarelli & Jung, 2019).

In order to bring the key features of electoral violence into clearer focus, we first discuss electoral violence as strategy, and proceed to distinguishing it from other cognate practices, namely non-electoral violence and nonviolent forms of electoral manipulation.

Electoral violence as strategy

The strategic perspective dominates existing literature on electoral violence, with scholars seeking to uncover the incentives and strategic settings that make violence an attractive tactic for political leaders (e.g. Birch, 2020; Daxecker, 2012, 2014; Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2014; Smidt, 2016; Wilkinson, 2004). Electoral violence is typically selected from among available tools to achieve electoral ends, even if the use of force may simultaneously deliver on other goals, as when land is forcibly taken from a political opponent to reward a political ally. The goals of violence generally include political exclusion, be it exclusion from candidacy (via attacks on candidates); from campaigning (via attacks on or obstruction of campaign events); from the provision of electoral information (via attacks on media outlets, election observers, and NGOs involved in voter education); from electoral participation and free electoral choice (via the intimidation, coercion, and/or the displacement of voters); from electoral victory (via attacks on polling stations and poll workers or the destruction of polling materials); or from power (via post-electoral protests contesting the outcome of the election).

Admittedly, there are challenges to gauge the strategic intent of violence. There are several reasons for this. First, political actors have incentives to hide their (illegal) involvement (Burchard, 2015: 12–13). For this reason, political leaders often rely on violence specialists (such as militia groups or criminal gangs) for security and outsource coercion to such groups (Raleigh, 2016; Staniland, 2015). In addition, while being public in its nature, electoral violence can be effected in private to avoid detection (Toros & Birch, 2019). Second, even when the overall objective is to influence the electoral process, the motivations for the individuals involved as instigators and perpetrators of electoral violence can be different from group and leadership goals. This makes electoral violence – like all forms of political violence – multilayered and diverse (Söderberg Kovacs, 2018: 9). Acts of violence may be driven by private motives, such as revenge dynamics unrelated to the electoral process, or tie in with local power struggles, disconnected from the national-level electoral dynamics. The outsourcing of coercion to violence specialists – militia groups or criminal gangs – adds another layer of motives. While such groups may have their own goals in relation to the election, violent practices may also be a socialization tool to maintain internal cohesion, yielding a situation where motives related to the election outcome and socialization are intertwined (Christensen & Utas, 2008; Laakso, 2007; Rasmussen, 2018).

Electoral and non-electoral violence

Electoral violence is distinct from other forms of organized violence in that the institutional frameworks surrounding elections shape the ways in which violence intervenes in the electoral process. The actors, practices, and institutions provided by the electoral framework affect how and why electoral violence arises, and influence both its timing and targets. Thus, electoral violence 'would not have occurred or would at least have manifested itself differently in the absence of an electoral contest' (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016b: 8).

A main challenge for the study of electoral violence is that it often takes place in contexts where other forms of organized violence are already pervasive, and where coercion, violent actors, and weapons abound. Armed conflict constitutes one such context. When governments face an insurgency, they have the choice of allowing the political wings of armed opposition actors to compete in elections, or barring them from competition. Insurgents or rebel groups, for their part, engage with electoral politics in different ways and face the choice of whether to boycott or to abandon (sometimes temporarily) armed resistance and stand in elections (Dunning, 2011). In some instances, armed opposition actors continue to wage a military campaign, while simultaneously fielding political candidates in the election (Coburn & Larson, 2014; Heger, 2015; Matanock & Staniland, 2018; Steele

& Schubiger, 2018).[3] When violence is leveraged to influence elections by actors that concurrently seek to overthrow the government or establish territorial control, it can have spillover effects on broader conflict dynamics. For instance, violence against voters and candidates can depress voter turnout and demonstrate the government's failure to run secure elections, thereby undermining the government's overall legitimacy and ability to win the war (Birnir & Ghodes, 2018; Condra et al., 2018). Conversely, the intensity and form of conflict can shape spatial patterns of electoral violence, not only during the course of armed conflict, but also years after (Harish & Toha, 2019).

Electoral violence can also unfold in the context of violent communal conflict. Communal conflicts pit non-state groups organized along communal identities (often ethnicity or religion) against each other. These can be localized and disconnected from electoral dynamics, spanning issues such as resource scarcity, land-use or local authority (von Uexkull & Pettersson, 2018). However, the introduction of electoral processes often creates incentives for elites to manipulate ethnic or religious cleavages for electoral benefits (Wilkinson, 2004). Such manipulation can trigger communal violence that serves electoral ends, but with long-lasting effects on intercommunal relations and the potential for renewed violence outside of the electoral arena.

Finally, electoral violence often intersects with criminal violence. On the one hand, electoral violence is sometimes pursued by criminal gangs on behalf of political actors that seek to avoid detection (Barnes, 2017). On the other hand, criminal actors often rely on protection agreements with political elites; the holding of elections can threaten these agreements and lead to violent electoral competition among criminal actors (Trejo & Ley, 2018).

Elections held in countries where one or several of the above forms of organized violence is present are likely to see different manifestations of electoral violence. However, a common theme across these contexts is that the introduction of electoral processes changes the incentive structures of the state and non-state actors involved in ongoing organized violence (Harish & Little, 2017). While most organized violence is pursued outside the electoral arena and with non-electoral goals, such as

overthrowing the existing political system or establishing territorial control, elections introduce an additional element of competition that violent actors usually cannot afford to ignore; instead they often seek to influence the electoral process with violent tactics.

Electoral violence and electoral manipulation

Electoral violence also constitutes a distinct form of electoral manipulation. Just like other forms of electoral malpractice, such as tampering with the registration process, vote buying or electoral fraud, electoral violence aims to manipulate the electoral process (Birch, 2011; Lehoucq, 2003). Yet there are qualitative considerations that distinguish electoral violence. First, violence induces fear of physical injury and actual loss of life, resulting in psychological effects on individuals and society which are different from the impacts expected from fraud, vote-buying, and other varieties of electoral manipulation. Second, there are costs associated with the instigation of violence that are less relevant for other forms of manipulation strategy. Electoral violence is unlikely to go undetected by international observers, who are more prone to condemn violence than, for example, vote-buying, and observer condemnation can lead to loss of international legitimacy and donor support (Daxecker, 2012, 2014; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Smidt, 2016; see also González-Ocantos et al., 2020). While research shows contradictory effects of violence on support for the party carrying out violence (Collier & Vicente, 2012; Bekoe & Burchard, 2017; Birnir & Ghodes, 2018; see also Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020), violence is without a doubt a strategy associated with risk for political leaders: once unleashed it is a difficult instrument for politicians to regulate, and revenge and counter-attacks can cause violence dynamics that spiral out of control. As discussed below, the contributions of this special issue uncover some of the strategic conditions that make electoral violence more or less costly.

What we know about electoral violence

What do we know about the causes and consequences of electoral violence? Work on the causes of electoral violence has emphasized institutional, societal, and international determinants.

In terms of institutions, research has established the importance of level of democracy and strength of institutions (Birch, 2020; Burchard, 2015; Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2014). Previous research also demonstrates how the risk of violent elections is affected by variations in the electoral process and type of election

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[3] These choices are related to Staniland's (2014) distinction between actors with intrasystemic goals, where actors operate within the existing system to take over power, and antisystemic goals, where actors set out to challenge the status quo and fundamentally alter the political order.

(Bhasin & Gandhi, 2013; Burchard, 2015; Claes, 2016; Collier & Vicente, 2012, 2014; Fielding, 2018; Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2014; Robinson & Torvik, 2009; Salehyan & Linebarger, 2015; Taylor, Pevehouse & Straus, 2017; Wilkinson, 2004). Several accounts suggest that violence is more prevalent in competitive electoral contests (Asunka et al., 2019; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2014; Taylor, Pevehouse & Straus, 2017; Salehyan & Linebarger, 2015; Wilkinson, 2004), although evidence remains mixed (Birch, 2020). Relatedly, while some studies confirm that competitive voters and areas are targeted more (Wilkinson, 2004; Evéquoz, 2019), others have found that voters in opposition strongholds experience higher levels of violence (Rauschenbach & Paula, 2019; Gutiérrez-Romero, 2014). Research also explores the consequences of electoral institution design (Alesina, Piccolo & Pinotti, 2018; Burchard, 2015; Claes, 2016; Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a). Majoritarian elections have been shown to produce high-stakes electoral contests associated with greater levels of electoral violence (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a). Recent work has drawn attention to earlier parts of the electoral process, highlighting how intraparty competition can lead to violence in the nomination process (Seeberg, Wahman & Skaaning, 2018).

Regarding societal factors, scholars have linked ethnic polarization, the exclusion of ethnic groups from power, and parties representing particular ethnic or religious identities to greater incentives for electoral violence (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a; Kuhn, 2015; Nellis, Weaver & Rosenzweig, 2016; Nellis & Siddiqui, 2018; Wilkinson, 2004). Furthermore, land patronage can provide elites with powerful tools for violent electoral mobilization (Boone, 2011; Boone & Kriger, 2012; Klaus & Mitchell, 2015). Research has also begun to uncover the gendered patterns of electoral violence. For instance, research suggests that men and women confront different risks, with men more commonly subject to physical violence, and women more often facing acts of intimidation and psychological abuse (Bardall, 2011; Bjarnegård, 2018).

International factors also matter. Examining the effects of international election monitoring, scholarship has shown that the presence of observers can displace violence as strategy (Daxecker, 2014), and that monitors can facilitate post-electoral mobilization (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019b). Research has also examined the consequences of international interventions such as the provision of democracy aid or violence prevention strategies (Birch & Muchlinski, 2018; von Borzyskowski, 2019a).

In scholarship on the consequences of electoral violence, research has primarily focused on individual-level effects on political behavior and attitudes. This micro-level emphasis stands in contrast to work on causes, which has privileged more aggregate and structural explanations. The largest body of work focuses on effects on behavior, in particular turnout (Bekoe & Burchard, 2017; Bratton, 2008; Burchard, 2015; Höglund & Piyaranthne, 2009). More recently, research has examined the effects of violence on political attitudes, including satisfaction with democracy (Burchard, 2015), trust and social capital (Dercon & Gutiérrez-Romero, 2012; Höglund & Piyarathne, 2009), and political knowledge (Söderström, 2018). Some studies have examined more aggregate-level consequences of violence, including for incumbent victory (Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2018), for vote shares (Alesina, Piccolo & Pinotti, 2018; Condra et al., 2018), and for political speech (Alesina, Piccolo & Pinotti, 2018). This literature finds that violence can depress participation and (thereby) help perpetrators win certain elections (Bratton, 2008; Condra et al., 2018), despite the fact that it is widely condemned by voters (Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Rosenzweig, 2016); at the same time, it can also have numerous negative side-effects, including the stifling of free speech and the erosion of trust.

Despite what we have learned, several gaps in knowledge remain. First, with some notable exceptions (such as Wilkinson's 2004 seminal book and the 2018 edited volume by Söderberg Kovacs and Bjarnesen), research on the causes of violence has prioritized the national level. This means that we understand how aggregate societal or institutional factors create the conditions for electoral violence, but not how these same factors play out within countries. For this a more disaggregated approach is required. A second consequence of the aggregate-level focus of most existing literature is that it has not yet sufficiently developed theories that explain the various perpetrators and targets of electoral violence. While elites may be the ones orchestrating violence, empirical work highlights a range of perpetrators, such as agents of the state, political candidates, local partisan ethnic groups, militias, gangs, and youth groups (e.g. Agbiboa, 2018; Angerbrandt, 2018; Berenschot, 2011; Mutongwizo, 2018). In terms of targets, much theorizing has focused on the ethnicity and competitiveness of voters, neglecting other dimensions, including the micro-dynamics that shape perceptions of the stakes involved in elections. Finally, data and methods gaps have restricted our understanding of electoral violence. There certainly has been progress compared to ten or 15 years ago, when

most work consisted of case studies or cross-national statistical analyses. For example, several disaggregated datasets on electoral violence are now available and allow scholars to analyze the subnational implications of theoretical arguments (Birch & Muchlinski, 2019; Daxecker, Amicarelli & Jung, 2019).[4] Systematic individual-level data on citizens' perceptions of the electoral process provided by the Afrobarometer, including fear of electoral violence, are another important public good for scholars of electoral violence. Yet more innovation is needed. For example, ethnographic accounts can push forward theorizing on perpetrators, and experimental designs allow for more solid causal inferences.

Contributions of the special issue

The articles in this special issue are methodologically and geographically diverse, encompassing ethnography, cutting-edge survey vignette and list experiments, quantitative analyses of subnational and crossnational survey and event data, and spanning Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The articles jointly contribute to fill the gaps identified in the preceding section and advance research on electoral violence in four main areas: (1) the disaggregation of actors: the incentives faced by individual-level perpetrators and targets of electoral violence, as well as the consequences of violence for these actors; (2) the disaggregation of institutions: the formal and informal institutional foundations of electoral violence, including subnational institutions, and the ways in which formal and informal institutions interact at different levels to condition electoral violence; (3) the determinants of the stakes at play in elections and their effect on violence; and (4) how electoral violence is shaped by other forms of violent conflict.

Perpetrators and targets

A first theme advances knowledge of perpetrators and targets, including incentives for and consequences of electoral violence at the individual level. These contributions show that violence can be an expensive resource for perpetrators, and one they will use selectively against targets that are most likely to respond, least likely to protest, and most likely to be of use in delivering the ends envisaged. As articles by von Borzyskowski & Kuhn (2020) and González-Ocantos et al. (2020) show, poverty, urban–rural status, and political knowledge are important characteristics that influence targeting. Some

of the findings in this special issue suggest potentially troubling implications for voter information campaigns, showing that violence is likely to be targeted at groups who then anticipate threats and adapt their behavior accordingly (González-Ocantos et al., 2020; von Borzyskowski & Kuhn, 2020; Klaus, 2020; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Young, 2020). In the context of Guatemala, González-Ocantos et al. (2020) use list experiments to uncover the varying strategic considerations underpinning intimidation versus vote-buying. They establish intimidation as a strategy primarily used to demobilize voters who are unresponsive to vote-buying and where the risk of intimidation being reported is low. These considerations make poor and rural voters more vulnerable. von Borzyskowski & Kuhn (2020) find that among African citizens, informed voters are more often targeted with violence because they are harder to sway through alternative tactics. Based on an original survey fielded in Kenya, Klaus (2020) shows that despite increasing their trust in the state, citizens receiving land titles are more fearful of the electoral process. This means that the experience of electoral violence will in most contexts be highly differentiated, with some citizens having very little cause to fear it and others perceiving elections to be extremely dangerous events. Moreover, Wahman & Goldring (2020) show that the fact that competitive elections are more violent in the aggregate does not imply that perpetrators target voters in the most competitive areas.

The fear of being targeted and expectations of violence also have consequences for behavioral and emotional responses. Focusing on Kenya, Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas (2020) use a vignette experiment to show that voters are less likely to vote for candidates rumored to have used violence, but that this sanctioning effect is weaker for the poor and those who had been exposed to violence. Young (2020) examines the consequences of violence for the propensity to dissent and negative emotional responses in repressive environments. She demonstrates that opposition supporters with a greater sense of self-efficacy respond with anger rather than fear when presented with state violence. Offering a more positive picture, Smidt (2020) finds that election education campaigns by the United Nations in Côte d'Ivoire can make citizens less fearful of electoral violence and increase their sense of efficacy.

The institutional foundations of electoral violence

A second theme concerns the formal and informal institutional foundations of electoral violence. The

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[4] Subnational data on election results and the boundaries of electoral districts are also increasingly available (Kollman et al., 2011, 2017).

contributions explore the effect of authoritarian legacies (Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund, 2020), alternations in power (Ruiz-Rufino & Birch, 2020), party institutionalization (Fjelde, 2020), institutional biases (Daxecker, 2020), and informal networks of patronage (Berenschot, 2020). The strength and political inclusiveness of institutions are important mediators of the relationship between the instrumental aims of actors and their choice of political weapon. Strong and inclusive institutions can deter the use of force by promoting informed participation, representation, and transparency by means of credible democratic channels (Ruiz-Rufino & Birch, 2020; Fjelde, 2020; Smidt, 2020). Focusing on political parties, Fjelde (2020) demonstrates that more institutionalized parties reduce the risk of violence by facilitating nonviolent mobilization and constraining the use of force. Her contribution highlights parties as actors that can help us link elite preferences with the interests of local actors, something that is poorly explained by research prioritizing elites. In a cross-national study, Ruiz-Rufino & Birch (2020) show how alternation in power reduces electoral violence by serving as a mechanism to decrease the tensions between electoral winners and losers. Alternation in power is also endogenous to electoral management body performance, which points to the significance of conflict management and violence reducing efforts. Smidt (2020) confirms that these positive effects of conflict management can hold at the local level, indicating that aggregate and subnational expectations do at times converge.

By contrast, pervasive informal institutions, where patronage politics and lack of rule of law become means of de facto exclusion of certain groups from state resources, encourage actors to resort to violent means (Berenschot, 2020; Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund, 2020). Berenschot (2020), drawing on ethnographic evidence and within-country variation in India and Indonesia, demonstrates the significance of the type of patronage network, where ethnicized networks serve to sustain divisive politics. Patronage networks are thus important mid-level structures whose characteristics matter for elites considering the use of violence. Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund (2020), in a comparison of Kenya and Zambia, show how authoritarian regimes using more inclusionary governance strategies to maintain power, nurture dynamics that in multiparty elections reduce the risk of violence, while exclusionary regime strategies have the opposite effect. However, strong and exclusive institutions that deliver desired electoral results to incumbents without the need for them to resort to force may also be associated with less violence (Daxecker, 2020). In

a subnational analysis of malapportionment and violence in India, Daxecker shows that overrepresented districts are less likely to experience violence because they are more homogenous and biased in favor of incumbents. The alignment of strong institutions with peace and weak institutions with violence further suggests that it is the strength of democratic structures rather than their degree of democratic inclusiveness that really matters for conditioning the use of violence. Thus, even where institutions are in some respects exclusionary, they can help keep the peace if they are sufficiently strong. This is a perplexing and possibly worrying observation that merits further research.

High-stakes elections

A third theme pertains to the stakes in elections and their effect on violence. Articles examine the underlying conditions contributing to high-stake elections (Klaus, 2020) and question the conventional wisdom linking competitiveness to greater risk of violence (Wahman & Goldring, 2020; Daxecker, 2020). Klaus (2020) examines how the distribution of land rights in Kenya shapes people's trust in state institutions and perceptions of the electoral process. She finds that while land title recipients are more likely to trust the state, they also become more fearful of the electoral process and changes it might bring. Land reform might thus inadvertently raise the stakes of elections, and increase the potential for violence. Challenging the view that competitive elections experience more violence, which rests on macro-level assessments, Wahman & Goldring (2020) argue that parties use violence against minorities and core opponent voters in their own strongholds as a means of maintaining dominance. Their analysis of Zambia finds that incumbent and opposition strongholds experience more violence, especially in constituencies with good connectivity. Finally, Daxecker (2020) shows that the greater electoral influence of overrepresented constituencies reduces the demand for electoral violence in these areas. These contributions highlight the importance of establishing the microfoundations of arguments on high-stakes elections and violence that we noted in the previous section.

Electoral violence in the context of other forms of violent conflict

Finally, articles provide insight into how electoral violence is linked to and shaped by the presence of other forms of organized violence (Krause, 2020; González-Ocantos et al., 2020; Smidt, 2020). Krause (2020)

focuses on communal violence triggered by elections in Nigeria and Kenya, and shows how the nature of communal conflict explains divergent patterns of sexual violence. Post-election violence in Nigeria involved short, intense battles between similarly strong groups, leading to more intense violence overall, while constraining the use of sexual violence. By contrast, the one-sided nature of electoral violence in Kenya played out in the form of attacks and massacres against minorities, including widespread rape and sexual violence. González-Ocantos et al.'s (2020) study of voter intimidation in Guatemala suggests that the legacies of a civil war with high levels of civilian victimization and lingering violence by non-state actors creates an environment where intimidation can easily be disguised. The article by Smidt (2020) on UN intervention in Côte d'Ivoire informs the larger debate on postwar peacebuilding and the role that peacekeeping has in building peace versus promoting democracy. Her findings suggest that peacekeeping may assist both democracy and peace by making elections more secure with investments in election education. These articles showcase the heterogeneity of electoral violence when it occurs in the context of other violence.

Looking forward

This special issue identifies a range of institutional and contextual factors that distinguish electoral violence from cognate political practices, and demonstrates that electoral violence is linked to the core aims of political competition: contestation, participation, and the quest for power. Episodes of electoral violence are thus integral components of political strategies. The special issue contributions point to several new promising areas of research.

First, in uncovering the dynamics of electoral violence, the special issue foregrounds spatial dimensions as being important for patterns of electoral violence, distinguishing for example urban and rural areas, or underrepresented and overrepresented electoral districts. However, we need to expand inquiry into other arenas of violence. For example, social media forms a space for threats and intimidation during election periods (Muchlinski et al., 2019). Additionally, studies on the gendered impacts of electoral violence show how female voters and candidates often face violence in the private space of their home, away from the public limelight (Bardall, 2011; Bjarnegård, 2018). Furthering insights into these dimensions would serve to question conventional assumptions about where electoral violence

manifests itself and the means through which electoral ends are achieved.

Second, the special issue underlines that the consequences of electoral violence go beyond vote choice, demonstrating effects on trust, threat perceptions, dissent, and emotions. Recent advances in data collection and innovative research designs have made it possible to examine patterns of targeting and its consequences in greater depth. However, the emphasis on short-term, individual-level consequences means that we have only a rudimentary understanding of the long-term implications. One reason for the neglect of lasting effects on individuals is the lack of panel survey data; another is the fairly recent introduction of elections in some parts of the developing world. But since most research accepts that election violence has structural causes, we would expect lasting consequences. Examining patterns in historical cases, such as election-related violence in the Southern United States (Epperly et al., forthcoming) or ongoing work on electoral violence in Victorian England, could be a promising avenue.[5]

One overarching policy implication emerges from the contributions of the special issue, in addition to the specific policy consequences highlighted by the individual articles. Elections are regular and cyclical in nature, making the timing of electoral violence more predictable than other forms of political violence and thus amenable to electoral assistance programming. But the causes of electoral violence commonly encompass a combination of immediate factors tied to elections, such as the prospect of alternation in power, and conditions that transform slowly, such as perceived historical injustices, or the institutionalization of party structures. For this reason, the prevention and mitigation of electoral violence require both short-term and long-term efforts, as well as a focus that moves beyond election-level factors and takes into consideration the broader social, economic and political issues. Targeted electoral violence prevention measures can help prevent the worst forms of violence, but eliminating violence from the range of strategies considered by electoral actors requires deeper changes in sociopolitical structures of inclusion and exclusion.

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[5] See http://victorianelectionviolence.uk/? page_id=109.

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