ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Rob Blair
Assistant Professor of Political Science and International and Public Affairs
Brown University

Eric Kramon
Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs
GWU
Two questions

• Why does electoral violence occur? (And why does it matter that we get the answer right?)

• How to prevent electoral violence?
Spotlight on three studies

• Rosezweig, Steven C. 2015. ”Dangerous Disconnect: Elite Misperception and the Outbreak of Violence in Electoral Competition.” Yale University.


EXPLAINING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE
Three classes of explanations

1) Violence works
   • Top-down; instrumental benefits

2) Violence feels good
   • Bottom-up; expressive benefits

3) Violence doesn’t work, but politicians *think* it does
First class of explanations

Violence works

• Politicians use violence to:
  • suppress turnout among opponents or swing voters, or intimidate them into changing their vote (Bratton 2008 on Nigeria; Acemoglu et al. 2013 on Colombia; Collier & Vicente 2012 on Sub-Saharan Africa more generally)
  • change the composition of the electorate itself (Harris 2013 and Kasara 2014 on Kenya)
  • polarize and mobilize voters along ethnic or religious lines (Wilkinson 2004 on India; Travaglianti 2014 on Burundi)
  • improve their own position in post-electoral bargaining (Hafner-Burton et al. 2014)

• This class of explanations (generally) accounts for violence instigated by politicians from the “top down”
Second class of explanations

Violence feels good

- Voters use violence out of fear, hatred, resentment (Kapferer 1988 on Sri Lanka; Petersen 2002 on Eastern Europe in general)

- This class of explanations (generally) accounts for violence instigated by voters from the “bottom up”
Third class of explanations

Politicians just *think* violence works

• Of course, these explanations are not mutually exclusive
  • Maybe violence works for politicians precisely *because* it feels good to voters
  • i.e. Maybe the “top” and “bottom” are interconnected

• Nor are they exhaustive
  • Maybe violence doesn’t work at all. Maybe politicians just *think* it works
  • i.e. Maybe the top and bottom are *dis*connected
Evidence for this “dangerous disconnect”
Rosenzweig (2015)

• Survey experiment with 483 eligible voters in three Kenyan cities in 2014

• Designed to test if voters are more likely to support politicians who use or threaten violence

• Voters were read vignettes about politicians that randomly varied in (a) their ethnicity and (b) their use or threats of violence

• Politicians were read similar vignettes as well
Rosenzweig (2015)

Why a survey experiment?

• If any of the above theories are correct, then voters who are exposed to violence should be different from those who aren’t

• This is equally true of victims and perpetrators
Rosenzweig (2015)

Findings

• Violence and threats of violence don’t work—in fact, they reduce voters’ support

• Voters were:
  • less likely to vote for violent candidates
  • less likely to think neighbors would vote for violent candidates
  • less to likely to think violent candidates would win

• But politicians themselves believed violence was (at worst) irrelevant or (at best) effective
Rosenzweig (2015)

Implications

• From academic perspective, suggests violence might be a result of misperception

• From policy perspective, suggests we might reduce violence by giving politicians information about voters’ preferences, or about more effective campaign strategies
  • i.e. Maybe we don’t need to convince politicians that violence is wrong. Maybe we just need to convince them that it doesn’t work
Rosenzweig (2015)

Limitations

• Just three cities in just one country in just one year

• Vignettes about violence rather than actual violence

• Self-reports of support rather than actual votes
  • Though Rosenzweig also finds that actual turnout for incumbents was lower in areas affected by violence

• Study conducted after 2008 violence
  • Voters’ preferences may have changed since then
  • Or voters may have become more attuned to the “right” answers to questions about violent candidates
Nevertheless…
• This isn’t just an academic exercise. It **matters** that we get the explanation right

• Top-down explanations require top-down solutions, and vice versa
PREVENTING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE
Approaches to reducing electoral violence

• Bottom up
  • Help voters coordinate to prevent politicians (or other community members) from using violence
  • Help convince people not to engage in violence
  • Address underlying grievances that politicians manipulate in order to mobilize violence

• Top down
  • Address incentives that drive politicians to mobilize violence
  • Promote the emergence of an independent and effective security sector that can prevent violence and punish perpetrators
Collier & Vicente (2014)

- Bottom up 1: Community-level interventions


- The Setting
  - Nigeria’s 2007 elections
  - Prior elections marred by violence and voter intimidation
Collier & Vicente (2014)

Program

• Action Aid International, Nigeria Chapter

• Goal: Reduce voter support of politicians that use violence

• Mechanism: Lower perceived threat to rejecting violent politicians through collective action

• Theory of change:
  • Voters may hide true beliefs about violent politicians if they think that others support them
  • Intervention helps voters coordinate to reject violent politicians
Collier & Vicente (2014)

Campaign

- Slogan: “No to election violence! Vote against violent politicians!”

- Displayed on campaign materials (hats, posters, t-shirts, leaflets, stickers, etc.)

- Town meetings and popular theater
  - Meetings help minimize collective action problem
  - Theater helps target youth (and others who usually do not show up for meetings)
Collier & Vicente (2014)

Evaluation

- Campaign randomly assigned to take place in some villages but not others

- Measurement
  - Surveys
  - Postcard campaign
    - People in sample villages given a pre-stamped postcard
    - Postcard asks organizations to work to prevent violence
  - Journalists contracted to keep diaries in sample villages

Figure 3: Postcard
dr calves

Figure 4: ... coded 1; otherwise they were given value 0. The intensity score is between 1 and 5, from lowest to highest intensity.
Impact

• Voters in campaign areas perceived less violence

• 37% of all people returned the postcard; those who experienced the campaign were 8 percentage points more likely to do so

• Campaign increased voter turnout by 7-11%

• Campaign increased vote share of incumbent in gubernatorial elections

• Journalists reported 47% less violence in campaign areas
Collier & Vicente (2014)

Open questions

• Would the results extend elsewhere?

• How best to measure election violence?

• What were the most important parts of the campaign?
  • A lot happened in this campaign
  • We could break down the different components to see what matters most or if we need them together

• Do these kinds of campaigns have longer-run effects?
  • If we went back today, would campaign areas still look different?
  • Is this sustainable?
Collier & Vicente (2014)

Broad takeaway

- Campaigns that focus on voter coordination can be effective
- But we need more evaluations
Bottom up 2

Asunka et al. (2015)

- Bottom up 2: Monitoring and observation


- The Setting
  - Ghana’s 2012 elections
Asunka et al. (2015)

Program

• Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO)

• Goal: Deter violence, intimidation and other forms of electoral malfeasance by monitoring and reporting on activity at polling stations

• Theory of change:
  • There are “audience costs” associated with violence
  • Monitors can make it more likely that violent politicians bear these costs
CODEO’s approach

- Observers randomly assigned to monitor polling stations
- Observer shows up early in the morning and stays at the station all day
- Observers are accredited by the Electoral Commission and by law must be allowed to observe voting
- Observers use cell phones to send SMS messages to central office if irregularities occur
- Central office is in regular communication with the media and security services
- Observers do **not** intervene if voter intimidation or violence (or anything else problematic) occurs
Asunka et al. (2015)

Evaluation

• Random assignment of one observer to polling stations (1,000 monitored stations in the sample)

• We know that parties in Ghana are well organized at the local level
  • Evaluation designed to determine whether parties move violence and intimidation to areas in constituency where observers are not present

• Measurement
  • Send interviewers to collect information about violence and intimidation in polling stations with and without observers
Asunka et al. (2015)

Impact

• Observers reduce reports of voter intimidation and violence during the voting process at the stations that they monitor (by 60 percent)

• But, in electorally competitive districts, local party agents coordinate to intimidate voters near polling stations without observers
  • This reduces, but does not eliminate, the overall effect of observers on levels of violence and intimidation
Open questions

• Can monitoring also be used to deter violence and intimidation in the community (or anywhere that is not the polling station)? Or before/after election day?

• Will these results extend elsewhere?
  • To places with more violence?
  • To places with weaker civil society and media?
Asunka et al. (2015)

Broad takeaways

- Efforts by civil society to monitor political spaces and activities can reduce electoral violence

- Experimental design can be used to evaluate how actors on the ground respond to programming
  - Allows us to examine unintended consequences
  - Provides information that can be used to improve the program
Top-down solutions

• Target elite incentives
  • Implications of Rosenzweig (2015): Do not try to convince elites that violence is wrong. Convince them that it is not politically useful.
  • We are not aware of any evaluations of programs designed to do this.

• Promote security sector reform
  • Improve the performance of domestic police forces.
  • Increase coordination and cooperation between civilians and the police when violence occurs.
  • We can discuss examples from Liberia and Colombia in the Q&A.
What have we learned?

• Electoral violence takes many forms and has multiple potential drivers
  • Programs must be designed accordingly

• Very few RCTs address electoral violence directly

• But the evidence we do have suggests potential for both bottom-up and top-down solutions
Benefits of RCTs

• How effective is electoral violence as a campaign strategy?

• Which interventions work to prevent electoral violence?

• How should we allocate resources and deploy programs?

• Do programs have (adverse) unintended consequences?

• What is the relative cost effectiveness of different programs?
Many open questions remain…

• Are the studies discussed today representative or are they outliers?
  • RCTs in this area are new and we need to do more

• Which contributing factors are most important to address?
  • What should our programs focus on?

• Election violence occurs at many points in the electoral process (pre, election day, and post)
  • Do different factors contribute to violence in these different periods?
  • Will a program that works at one point in the process work at others as well?

• Many other questions…
THANK YOU
APPENDIX
“Mr. Peter Chege plans to run for Governor in the next elections in 2017. Mr. Chege is 51 years old and a member of the Kikuyu tribe. He is currently serving as a County Assembly Member, having previously served one term as a District Councillor. While in office, he focused on issues in the health sector. If elected, he promises to create jobs, reduce corruption, and improve the quality of primary education. In the last election campaign, he was said to have provided youths with pangas to defend against attacks from members of other tribes.”
REFERENCES
Acemoglu et al. (2013) on Colombia


• “...In this paper we develop a new perspective on the establishment of the monopoly of violence. We build a model to explain the incentive of central states to eliminate nonstate armed actors (paramilitaries) in a democracy. The model is premised on the idea that paramilitaries may choose to and can influence elections. Since paramilitaries have preferences over policies, this reduces the incentives of the politicians they favor to eliminate them. We then investigate these ideas using data from Colombia between 1991 and 2006. We first present regression and case study evidence supporting our postulate that paramilitary groups can have significant effects on elections for the legislature and the executive. Next, we show that the evidence is also broadly consistent with the implication of the model that **paramilitaries tend to persist to the extent that they deliver votes to candidates for the executive whose preferences are close to theirs** and that **this effect is larger in areas where the presidential candidate would have otherwise not done as well**. Finally, we use roll-call votes to illustrate a possible “quid pro quo” between the executive and paramilitaries in Colombia.”
Asunka et al. (2015) on Ghana

  • “We study the effects of election observers on electoral fraud and violence. With an experimental research design and polling-station data on fraud and violence during Ghana’s 2012 elections, we show that observers reduce fraud (by 6 percent) and violence (by 60 percent) at monitored polling stations. We also find that local electoral competition conditions party agents’ strategic response to observers. In single-party dominant areas, parties use their control over local political networks to relocate fraud to unmonitored polling stations. In competitive areas, party activists relocate violence to unmonitored stations — a response that requires less local organizational capacity. The results highlight how local party organization and electoral incentives shape the manipulative electoral strategies employed by parties in democratic elections.”
Bratton (2008) on Nigeria


  - “Vote buying and political intimidation are characteristic dimensions of African election campaigns. According to survey-based estimates, almost one out of five Nigerians is personally exposed to vote buying and almost one in ten experiences threats of electoral violence. But when, as commonly happens, campaign irregularities are targeted at the rural poor, effects are concentrated. These effects are as follows: **violence reduces turnout; and vote buying enhances partisan loyalty.** But, perhaps because most citizens condemn campaign manipulation as wrong, compliance with the wishes of politicians is not assured. **Defection from threats and agreements is more common than compliance**, especially where voters are cross-pressured from both sides of the partisan divide.”
Collier & Vicente (2012)


- “Post-Soviet African democratization has introduced elections into contexts that often lack restraints upon the behavior of candidates, resulting in the emergence of voter intimidation, vote-buying, and ballot fraud. We propose a model of electoral competition where, although some voters oppose violence, it is effective in intimidating swing voters. We show that in equilibrium a weak challenger will use violence, which corresponds to a terrorism strategy. Similarly, a nationally weak incumbent will use repression. However, a stronger incumbent facing local competition will prefer to use bribery or ballot fraud. We discuss the applicability of the model to several African elections.”
Collier & Vicente (2014) on Nigeria


• “Elections are now common in low-income societies. However, they are frequently flawed. We investigate a Nigerian election marred by violence. We designed and conducted a nationwide field experiment based on anti-violence campaigning. The campaign appealed to collective action through electoral participation, and worked through town meetings, popular theatres and door-to-door distribution of materials. We find that the campaign decreased violence perceptions and increased empowerment to counteract violence. We observe a rise in voter turnout and infer that the intimidation was dissociated from incumbents. These effects are accompanied by a reduction in the intensity of actual violence, as measured by journalists.”
Hafner-Burton et al. (2014)


• “When are governments most likely to use election violence, and what factors can mitigate government incentives to resort to violence? How do the dynamics of election violence differ in the pre- and post-election periods? The central argument of this article is that an incumbent’s fear of losing power as the result of an election, as well as institutionalized constraints on the incumbent’s decision-making powers, are pivotal in her decision to use election violence. While it may seem obvious to suggest that incumbents use election violence in an effort to fend off threats to their power, it is not obvious how to gauge these threats. Thus, a central objective of this article is to identify sources of information about the incumbent’s popularity that can help predict the likelihood of election violence. The observable implications of this argument are tested using newly available cross-national evidence on elections, government use of pre- and post-election violence, and post-election protests from 1981 to 2004.”
Harris (2013) on Kenya


- “In this paper, we examine patterns of violent ethnic targeting during Kenya’s 2007-2008 post-election violence and estimate the impact of that targeting on local ethnic demography. Specifically, we focus on patterns of arson, one of the key types of violence used to displace certain ethnic sub-groups. We find that patterns of arson are related to the presence of ethnic outsiders in the region, and even more strongly related to measures of land quality, accessibility of targets, and local electoral competition. By comparing ethnic composition before and after the post-election violence, we show that arson caused a significant decrease in the number of Kikuyu registered to vote in the Rift Valley, and that other ethnic groups do not experience this decrease. This result supports narrative accounts of ethnic targeting during Kenya’s 2007-2008 post-election violence, and provides systematic evidence of the effects of the post-election violence on local ethnic composition in Kenya. A placebo test confirms the robustness of our results.”
Rosenzweig (2015) on Kenya

• Rosezweig, Steven C. 2015. ”Dangerous Disconnect: Elite Misperception and the Outbreak of Violence in Electoral Competition.” Yale University.

• “What accounts for the outbreak of violence in electoral competition? Why do elites instigate violence, and how does it affect voting behavior? Most theories of elite-instigated political violence make a crucial yet untested assumption: that if politicians employ violence as a tactic, it must afford them some genuine electoral benefit. Combining evidence from a series of survey experiments with voters and politicians, qualitative interviews with political elites, and observational data on violence and election outcomes in Kenya, I show that, in fact, violence is often the result of strategic miscalculation on the part of elites. In particular, I find that politicians overestimate the electoral benefits of violence and—more crucially—underestimate its costs, particularly with respect to their core voters. The results highlight an overlooked explanation for violence in electoral competition and undermine widely-held assumptions about politicians’ ability to infer the efficacy of their campaign tactics.”
Travaglianti (2014) on Burundi


• This paper explores why and under which conditions pre-electoral violence occurs within ethnic groups. While electoral competition is generally expected to produce violence between members of different ethnic groups, I advance the claim that violence can also be organized to control a party’s own ethnic group, through the coercion of coethnic voters and the demobilization other coethnic candidates. I discuss my theory by looking at subnational patterns of violence preceding the 2010 municipal election in Burundi. Using fieldwork interviews and a new dataset of geo-localized violent events, sociopolitical factors, military resources, and historical election results across all municipalities, I show that violence by the ruling party was most intense in proximity to the winning threshold and spiraled between the largest parties competing for control of the same ethnic group.”