Fighting and Voting: Violent Conflict and Electoral Politics

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Abstract
Two recent research programs–one on the sources of democratic consolidation and another on the causes and consequences of violent conflict–have tended to evolve in relative isolation. The contributions to this special issue of Journal of Conflict Resolution help to bridge this gap, through explicit theoretical and empirical analysis of the relationship between fighting and voting. Armed conflict and electoral politics may be strategic substitutes, in that political actors may optimally choose to submit to the ballot box or instead attempt to impose their will by force; or they may be strategic complements, in that actors use violence to bolster their electoral aims, or use electoral returns as sources of information on underlying preferences that they exploit in armed campaigns. In either case, the distribution of popular support for contending parties can shape not only the incidence but also the type of armed conflict, and it can also influence the incentives of parties to invest in institutional mechanisms that mitigate commitment problems and help to bring violent conflicts to an end. The contributions to this issue illuminate these themes and demonstrate the value of bringing these separate research programs into closer dialogue.

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Why does democracy persist in some countries, while it never emerges in others—or emerges, only to fall victim to periodic episodes of violence, coups, or revolutions? Why do armed groups fight—often for long periods, despite the clear costs that fighting imposes on nearly all parties to a conflict—yet sometimes agree to end the fighting and submit to the results of elections?

These important questions are at the core of two recent research programs, one on the sources of democratic consolidation and the other on the causes, consequences, and dynamics of internal conflict. Yet, despite the obvious relationship between these areas of research, they have tended to evolve in relative isolation.[1] This special issue attempts to bridge the gap and thus to answer a set of interrelated questions that bear on one central theme: how does violent conflict relate to electoral politics?

Several central themes emerge. First, when fighting and voting are viewed as strategic substitutes—so that political actors choose between submitting to elections or electing instead to fight—the level of popular support can shape the attractiveness of armed conflict, though in sometimes surprising ways. Fighting may be more attractive precisely when opposing parties are more equally matched on electoral grounds, so that a key intuition about democratic consolidation—that it occurs when all actors have some minimum positive probability of winning an election—need not always hold. However, different distributions of prewar electoral support may also be associated with different *types* of armed conflict. For example, geographic zones in which supporters of an opponent are massed may be more attractive targets for aerial bombings, while assassinations and "face-to-face" killings may be more likely to occur in zones of electoral parity. Thus, the relationship between fighting strength and electoral support may be conditional on the type of conflict involved, the latter topic being a key theme in the recent literature on the dynamics of violence during civil wars.

Second, when violent conflict and electoral politics are viewed as strategic complements—so that politicians use violence in part to advance electoral aims—the distribution of electoral support can also shape patterns of violence. For example, many contemporary civil wars involve widespread displacement of civilians. While often understood in the context of the dynamics of the war itself, patterns of displacement can also reflect levels of prewar electoral support, with civilians living in zones that have widely supported opponents in elections plausibly being more attractive candidates for displacement. Moreover, by endogenously shifting the distribution of popular support, displacement can itself play an electoral role. This "gerrymandering by moving people" (Klopp 2001; see Kasara 2009) is only one of the many ways that political actors may use violence to affect electoral outcomes, however. The contributions to this special issue suggest several other interactions between electoral politics and violence.

Finally, while elections can themselves engender violence, they may sometimes help end armed conflicts as well; when and where elections play this role is thus an important question for research. War is often viewed as an efficiency puzzle, since all parties to a conflict could generally make themselves better off by agreeing to

forego a fight. Explanations for why war nonetheless occurs focus, inter alia, on dynamic commitment problems: even if negotiated settlements distribute material benefits or institutional (de jure) power in proportion to the military power of the warring groups at the time of settlement, the advent of peace may, with time, tend to empower one party to the conflict—say, incumbents—at the expense of another—say, insurgents. If so, incumbents may have future incentives to renege on the terms of negotiated settlements; anticipating this, insurgents may continue fight to forestall adverse shifts in the distribution of power (Powell 2009).

Elections may sometimes play some role in mitigating such commitment problems, if they are accompanied by the development of courts (or at least independent electoral authorities), bureaucracies, and other actors that can place some checks on incumbent power. The question then becomes when actors have incentives to invest in such endogenous forms of "state capacity," which may arise as part of a peace settlement. One contribution to this special issue examines theoretically the incentives actors may have to invest in conflict-mitigating institutions, in the shadow of dynamic commitment problems; another analyzes empirically the predictors of postwar election timing and finds, inter alia, that past institutions positively predict the presence of postconflict elections.

Such insights demonstrate the payoffs to a more systematic integration of the separate literatures on democratic consolidation and the causes and consequences of armed conflict, as well as the dynamics of violence during civil war. This special issue suggests that further attention to the linked microdynamics of fighting and voting would shed light on important but previously separated questions. Together, the contributions to this issue therefore help lay out a new research agenda focused on the relationship between violent conflict and electoral politics. The rest of this Introduction discusses the contributions to the special issue in greater detail.

Fighting and Voting as Substitutes

How do political actors obtain desired ends? Broadly speaking, they may attempt to impose desired outcomes through force, or they may submit to collective decision-making procedures such as elections. Clausewitz (1976) famously wrote that the "only source of war is politics . . . war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means." On this view, fighting and voting can be seen as strategic substitutes, that is, as alternatives between which actors may choose as means to obtaining their desired ends. An important question thus becomes when actors will find it optimal to submit to elections or instead to resort to violence.

Of course, the choice between voting and other (possibly more violent) forms of politics may exist under formal democracies, even in the absence of large-scale civil war. After all, channeling grievances through legislatures or other formal channels is only one way to advance political demands under democracy. Popular mobilization, street protests, and ethnic riots can be seen as "alternative political technologies," in

the phrase of one set of special-issue contributors (Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011; see also Scartascini and Tommasi 2009). While, as discussed below, protests or violent mobilization can often be a strategic complement to formal claim making through voting or petitioning—that is, both forms of action can be useful to political actors in the same democratic polity at different moments in time, or to advance different kinds of objectives—protests and violent mobilization can also serve as substitutes for voting and other kinds of formal claim making.

For example, using survey data from Latin America, Machado et al. (this issue) show that the aggregate incidence of protest at the national level is negatively related to measures of "institutional quality," such as the effectiveness of lawmaking bodies, the extent of judicial independence, and the stability of the party system. Indeed, these authors argue that individuals pursue alternate means of expressing demands— either voting/petitioning or bribes, riots, or protests—depending on the degree of institutionalization of the formal political arena. Interestingly, political parties also appear to treat protest as a substitute for formal claim making: for example, in weakly institutionalized environments, individuals who agree with the statement that parties represent their interests well tend to be *more* likely to participate in protests than those who disagree with this statement, while in countries with stronger institutions, the reverse appears to be true. According to these authors, parties use blockades, protests, and other forms of pressure "from the street" as substitutes for other kinds of claim making, especially in weakly institutionalized environments.

To put this idea in the terms used by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, 2008), formal institutions such as elections may regulate the allocation of de jure power in society, but alternative political technologies shape the de facto balance of forces. Even under democracy, powerful actors may have incentives to invest in de facto power (for instance, through arming); after all, when bargaining under the shadow of power, arming might allow them to secure a better division of the pie. But arming can also increase the probability that actors can successfully impose their desired outcomes through force—which returns us to the basic Clausewitzean dilemma about when it is most attractive to pursue political ends through one means or another.

What, then, determines whether actors prefer to vote or prefer to fight? One of the intuitions linking voting and violence appeals to a symmetry between a group's probability of winning an election and its probability of winning a civil war. In formal models using "contest functions," for example, a group's probability of winning either a fight or a vote is taken to be an increasing function of the number of a group's supporters (see Garfinkel and Skaperdas 2007). In many contexts, the use of contest functions seems natural: after all, winning elections depends positively on popular support, and popular support would certainly seem to be useful to armed groups as well.

Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik argue in their contribution to this issue that if electoral strength is closely related to fighting strength, groups may find it optimal to fight precisely when they have more equal strength. This is because groups

without widespread popular support have a low probability of winning an election—but they also have a low probability of winning a civil war. Groups with weak support might thus rather play the lottery of elections than take a costly lottery over civil war outcomes, since the latter brings a lower expected utility than participation in elections (due to the additional cost of conflict). In the model developed by these authors, "democracy may *only* emerge as an equilibrium when support is asymmetric in the sense that one of the parties dominates the other. In contrast, when the support of parties is balanced, or in other words in circumstances when both parties have a good chance of winning power in democracy, fighting may occur." This view stands in tension with the powerful argument advanced by Przeworski (1991) that democracy can only persist when groups have some minimum probability of winning any given election and thus taking power in the future. It also appears at odds with the logic espoused by Machado et al., who argue that "actors who have little or no chance of having their interests taken into account in the formal decision-making process are more likely to take to the streets."

The underlying positive relationship between electoral support and fighting strength may correspond to some types of armed conflict but not others, however. Drawing on a typology in Kalyvas (2005), for example, Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) distinguish between symmetric and asymmetric civil wars. In the former, the military strength of both state incumbents and insurgents is roughly at parity at the outset of civil war; when both sides can deploy heavy weaponry and armor (i.e., they are matched at a "high" level of military technology), the resulting symmetric civil war is "conventional," whereas when the equally matched sides both lack advanced weaponry, the result is "symmetric nonconventional war." In asymmetric forms of civil war, however, while "rebels have the military capacity to challenge and harass the state, [they] lack the capacity to confront it in a direct and frontal way. Put otherwise, states can mount a devastating response to a direct armed challenge such that the rebels' only option is to fight asymmetrically" (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, 418-19).[2] In asymmetric wars, insurgents typically use an irregular technology of rebellion such as guerrilla warfare, in which small, lightly armed bands launch attacks, often from rural bases.

In such asymmetric conflicts, where rebels can draw on powerful technologies of insurgency despite their relatively small numbers, the relationship between electoral or popular support for the rebels and their military strength may be only weakly positive, if it is positive at all.[3] While insurgents maintain substantial popular support in some asymmetric civil wars (such as El Salvador in the 1980s or, arguably, Vietnam in 1966–1968), and while such support can clearly help insurgents by providing them material assistance, information, or the ability to "hide among the populace," support is also not necessary for long-lived irregular warfare, as arguably evidenced by cases such as Peru (1980–1996) or Nepal (1996–2006).[4] These observations may suggest an addendum to the idea of Chacón et al. that fighting should be more attractive when opposing forces are more evenly matched: even if democracy might be more likely to break down into symmetric warfare in such instances, fighting may

still be attractive for minority groups if alternative technologies of warfare favorable to insurgency are available.[5]

Even within a symmetric conventional war, moreover, variation in local popular support can drive the spatial distribution of distinct types of violence, as Balcells (2011) shows in her study of the Spanish civil war. Balcells seeks to explain why armed groups in a conventional civil war employ indirect violence—bombings, for example—in some geographic zones and direct violence, such as assassinations, killings, and other "face-to-face" forms of violence, in others. She argues that the success of direct violence depends on the collaboration of informants, or at least the active support of civilians who are strong supporters of the armed group that controls a particular piece of territory, a logic similar in some ways to the argument of Kalyvas (2006). Direct violence against opponents becomes more attractive to such supporters as the distribution of political support approaches parity, since violence then stands a greater chance of altering the status quo; indirect violence, on the other hand, is most effective in eliminating supporters of an opposing group where that group enjoys the strongest popular support, precisely because bombings and other forms of indirect violence are relatively indiscriminant.

Balcells thus predicts a positive relationship between indirect violence and levels of prewar electoral support for an enemy group, while the incidence of direct violence is hypothesized to increase in the level of political parity between factions in a locality. The author tests these predictions with self-collected microlevel data from 1,710 municipalities in Catalonia and Aragon, during the period of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939), and finds a strong association between levels of prewar electoral support and the incidence of different types of violence. The prediction that face-to-face or direct violence is more likely where electoral parity is greater is also consistent with the evidence presented by Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik (2011), who draw on data from the early period of La Violencia in Colombia and find that "in situations where support for the parties was evenly balanced we . . . observe conflict, whereas where one of the parties was dominant, we observe peace." (An addendum to this is that while La Violencia in Colombia seemed to feature abundant direct violence of the type described by Balcells, it did not seem to be characterized by indirect violence, such as bombardments, in geographic zones dominated by the liberals or the conservatives).

Fighting and Voting as Complements

Political actors may also use violence to advance their electoral interests. Wilkinson (2004), for instance, has shown how patterns of Hindu–Muslim violence in India respond to the political incentives of state-level elected politicians: where incumbent parties or coalitions do not depend on minority (Muslim) voters, they lack incentives to prevent Hindu–Muslim riots. Such riots can be electorally useful, particularly to upper-caste Hindu nationalist parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who aim to prime the Hindu–Muslim political cleavage and thereby attract Hindu lower-

caste voters. Wilkinson and Haid (2009), for example, show that Hindu–Muslim riots that took place in 2002 in the western Indian state of Gujarat broke out disproportionately in the most competitive seats and resulted in substantial subsequent vote swings toward the BJP. Drawing on qualitative evidence suggesting that riots were planned as part of an electoral strategy, Wilkinson and Haid (2009) refer to ethnic riots as a ''particularly brutal form of campaign expenditure.''

On such accounts, fighting and voting can be strategic complements, rather than substitutes. If so, the relevant question is not whether political actors opt to participate in elections *or* engage in armed conflict but rather why and how they engage in both voting *and* fighting. Consideration of the interrelationship between electoral politics and violence, an important feature of many polities particularly in the developing world, thus leads to a rich set of questions about the micropolitics of fighting and voting. The contributions to this special issue are relevant to such an analysis in a number of different ways.

One striking way in which electoral incentives might shape violence is through strategic displacement of civilians. In this issue, drawing on data from the municipality of Apartadó, Colombia, Steele describes the dramatic shift from leftist to rightist politics in northwestern Colombia during and after the 1990s and argues that this was due to the displacement of citizens who had previously voted for the left. This allowed, in Steele's words, ''paramilitary and state forces to wrest control from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—and dramatically change the politics of the region.'' Thus, violent displacement of civilians endogenously shaped the distribution of electoral support. In some ways, this outcome is consistent with that described by Kasara (2009), who suggests in a different context that electoral incentives drove patterns of displacement in Kenya's Rift Valley Province during the crisis following the disputed 2007 election; it also recalls accounts of how paramilitaries in Colombia influenced elections by intimidating voters or engaging in fraud, as argued by Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos-Villagran (2009) in a recent article. Yet here, Steele (2011) argues, armed groups used electoral results to infer political loyalties and then undertook cleansing of opponents to win territorial control; while displacement later had electoral consequences, the need to identify opponents and collaborators, driven by the logic of the civil war, drove the initial displacement. In other words, electoral results served as a proxy for the distribution of underlying support, which was useful to armed groups engaged in a struggle for control of land.

The articles published in this special issue may thus open up new ways of linking electoral contestation to the dynamics of violence during civil wars. A large and important recent literature on the latter topic has emphasized that the political factors that may shape the onset of war should be separated analytically from the dynamics of conflict during war; this is because patterns of violence during irregular civil wars are viewed as endogenous to the war itself, that is, as shaped by local patterns of collaboration during the war, rather than by the grand political cleavages that existed at the onset of war (Kalyvas 2005, 2006). By showing that patterns of conflict during the war can reflect the distribution of prewar electoral support for various political

groups, the articles by Balcells, Chacón et al., and Steele help push forward the link between electoral politics and the dynamics of war.

Ending Conflict with Elections

Elections can engender violence (Snyder 2000), as the discussion in the previous section suggests. Yet, many armed conflicts also end in elections, particularly but not exclusively in the post–cold war period. When, then, might actors engaged in violent conflict agree to end the fighting and submit to elections? Several contributions to this special issue bear on this important theme.

Recent explanations for the onset and duration of civil war have focused on commitment problems (Fearon 1995, 2004; Powell 1999, 2006, 2009; Skaperdas 1992).[6] From this perspective, war is viewed as an efficiency puzzle: armed conflict tends to impose substantial social as well as economic costs, and all parties could typically be made better off in the absence of war. This is not to deny that elections, or other means of making collective decisions in the absence of war, can also be costly.[7] Yet, making political decisions through legislatures, parties, voting, and the like must almost certainly involve a lower social cost than does civil war. Why, then, does inefficient conflict occur, and why can it be so difficult to end? Essentially, if ending a conflict consolidates the de facto power of one party to a conflict—for example, an incumbent government—this incumbent may have future incentives to renege on the terms of any negotiated settlement; anticipating this, insurgents may refuse to agree to lay down their arms in the first place (Fearon 2004). If the shift in the distribution of power associated with peace is large and rapid enough, incumbents may be unable to use one-time payments to compensate their insurgent adversaries, who will also (correctly) discount any promises of future payments (Powell 2009).

How can such dynamic commitment problems be overcome? McBride, Milante, and Skaperdas (2011) offer a model of the relationship between "state capacity"— which includes institutions such as the courts, the bureaucracy, and so on—and the incentives for peace. These authors first point out that between the extremes of institutional order, in which actors can make fully credible commitments, and the Hobbesian state of nature, in which they cannot, lie a range of intermediate possibilities. For example, greater state capacity and even imperfect third-party enforcement by outsiders (e.g., international institutions) may both allow at least some *degree* of commitment to agreements. While opposing actors might continue to invest in arming under conditions of peace—since the distribution of de facto power influences bargaining positions under peace—the extent to which actors need to arm, and thus the durability of the peace, may reflect the *extent* of commitment allowed by third-party enforcement or the level of state capacity. A key innovation in McBride et al. is then to view state capacity as potentially endogenous to investments by armed actors themselves. Modeling the incentives actors may have to make such investments, these authors find that the likelihood of surpassing the threshold level of investment at which peace can take hold is decreasing in the price of

investment and the discount factor.[8] On the other hand, unlike many other conflict models, here the probability of peace is increasing in the "prize" that is at stake; these authors view the latter result as particularly important, as it may help explain the negative association between per-capita national income and the presence of civil war.

If we view elections as costly investments, then McBride et al.'s model may also provide a way to think about when armed groups would agree to elections as a means of ending conflicts. After all, even remotely fair or free elections often *require* exactly the investments in courts (or at the least independent electoral authorities) and bureaucracies that McBride et al. propose as the empirical referents for the concept of "state capacity." Like the *podesta* in late medieval Genoa (cf Grief 1998) or the institutions of third-party enforcement associated with successful peace-building missions (Doyle and Sambanis 2000), the institutions necessary for successful elections may themselves increase the capacity for commitment. On this reading of McBride et al., the investments that actors make in elections may themselves elevate the chances for sustained peace.

Brancati and Snyder (2011) conduct an exhaustive empirical probe of these and other hypotheses, undertaking a quantitative analysis of all civil wars that have ended since World War II. These authors find that the institutional capacity of countries to conduct elections positively predicts early postconflict elections, providing perhaps some verification of the claim that institutions play a role in making elections less threatening for actors emerging from a conflict. These authors also find that international factors—especially those international institutions that promoted democracy in the wake of the cold war—play a key role in shaping post-conflict election timing. Of course, whether the holding of elections then increases the chances that peace persists remains an open question. Snyder (2000) argues that under some institutional conditions, the holding of elections elevates the chances for civil war; in a similar vein, Brancati and Snyder (2009) suggest that elections held soon after the end of civil wars can sometimes spark the reinitiation of conflict.

From the perspective of Powell (2009; see also Powell 2004), one reason that elections may be associated with conflict may be that elections sometimes bring a large and rapid shift in the distribution of power. Anticipating (or reacting) to such a shift, actors disadvantaged by the results of an election may find it optimal to fight, particular in the absence of mechanisms that allow those actors to credibly secure a large enough take in the future flow of benefits, under the new democratic order. Thus, future research should attempt to distinguish the conditions under which postconflict elections do and do not increase the likelihood of continued peace.

Conclusion

Scholars of comparative politics have recently emphasized that the emergence and persistence of democracy takes place in the shadow of the threat of coups or revolutions (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2006); others have analyzed the ways in which

violence in the form of ethnic riots can be electorally useful to politicians under democracy (Wilkinson 2004). Such contributions have placed the focus of analysis on electoral politics, while acknowledging the central role that violence can play in shaping the character of elections.

At the same time, a large literature on the causes and consequences of armed conflict as well as the dynamics of violence during civil wars has tended to de-emphasize electoral politics. For scholars working in this vein, war is not simply the continuation of politics by other means. Rather, civil wars have dynamics that are proper to the war itself: patterns of civilian collaboration during irregular civil wars, for example, can shape the logic of violence during conflict itself (Kalyvas 2006). While the original cleavages that existed at the start of a war are acknowledged as important, the emphasis in this important literature has been on how war itself reshapes social and political cleavages.

The contributions to this special issue reflect the value of bringing these research programs into closer dialogue. While war does not simply continue politics by other means, warfare can also reflect the underlying distribution of power revealed by pre-war elections, and the logic of violence can be shaped by prewar electoral configurations. Moreover, the choice is not always between fighting and violence: sometimes, elections and violence act as complements, with elected politicians or their militias using violent actions to shape electoral outcomes. Understanding the interaction between electoral politics and violent conflict thus constitutes an important research agenda, one this special issue seeks to advance.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. An important exception is Snyder (2000). Several other authors who have examined the relationship between voting and violence are discussed below.
2. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) note that another kind of asymmetric conflict, in which the rebels rather than the state possess a preponderance of the military strength, characterizes successful military coups.
3. Another reason small groups may have military power disproportionate to their electoral strength is that military action may involve severe collective action problems, which might be more easily overcome by small groups (Olson 1965; though see Wood 2003). While

collective action problems obviously affect voting as well, they may be less severe, so that small groups stand little chance in electoral contests but have a relatively higher probability of imposing their desired policies through force.

4. Even in El Salvador, where the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) did maintain substantial support, the insurgent-linked political party lost the first postwar elections in 1994; of course, this could reflect the massive casualties inflicted on the FMLN's support base during the war, as well as possible strategic voting considerations (see Ellman and Wantchekon 2000).

5. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) note the impact of the cold war on shaping the feasibility of insurgency; this work may also suggest hypotheses about the conditions under which asymmetric electoral support might lead to armed conflict.

6. Another common rationalist explanation for war includes imperfect information over the capacities or resolve of opponents (Fearon 1995), yet this appears to be an implausible explanation for the failure to end long-lasting conflicts (Fearon 2004, Powell 2009).

7. As Fearon (2006) emphasizes, elections are quite an expensive way to organize the aggregation of preferences.

8. The latter result follows, in contrast to Folk Theorem intuitions, from the dynamic nature of the environment and the inability to use history-dependent strategies that is implied by the Markov-perfect solution concept; as McBride and Skaperdas (2007, 2009) explain, eliminating an opponent through war today brings high current costs but rich future rewards, which are more attractive to more patient players. Note also that once the threshold is reached, investments are higher under higher discount factors. Therefore, the overall effect of the discount factor is ambiguous.

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