

Effects of Violence on Voter Turnout in Sub-Saharan Africa¹

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Because of its coercive nature, many researchers have assumed that election-related violence has a depressive effect on voter turnout. Out of fear for physical safety or the desire to keep out of harm's way, potential voters might remain home and abstain from the polls in the face of violent threats. The empirical record, however, does not substantiate this assumption. After examining violence and voter turnout in nearly 300 elections held in sub-Saharan Africa from 1990 to 2014, we find no significant aggregate effect of pre-election violence on voter turnout. A closer look at the nature of election violence and its intended targets explains this finding. Violence entrepreneurs strategically employ violence for a multitude of sometimes conflicting reasons. For some audiences, coercion is used to mobilize support, and for others, it is used to prevent electoral participation. And sometimes violence is used to displace potential voters and change the partisan competition of constituencies.



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Introduction

Over the last ten years, the phenomenon of electoral violence has gained considerable attention from policy makers, practitioners, and academics. This field of study has now produced many works investigating the underlying rationale, dynamics, and consequences of electoral violence (e.g., Höglund 2009; Bekoe 2012; Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Burchard 2015). Recent research indicates that, at least in the case of incumbents, violence is frequently used as a strategy when a politician is uncertain about the likelihood of victory or fears the loss of a political position, particularly in an environment of weak institutions and few consequences of violence (Hafner-Burton et al. 2014). The dominance of pre-election violence, in particular, indicates that the purpose of the violence is to influence the election through intimidation, harassment, assassination, or other large-scale acts of aggression. In certain cases, pre-election violence has resulted in a politician's withdrawal from the contest (e.g., Morgan Tsvangirai in Zimbabwe in 2009) or a boycotting of the election by the opposition party (e.g., in Burundi in 2010)—mostly to the benefit of the party most responsible for the violence. Beyond these national-level effects, however, the influence of electoral violence—specifically, the effect of pre-election violence on voter turnout—has been unclear.

The working assumption by the policy and academic communities is that voter turnout is negatively affected by pre-election violence. Indeed, the possibility of lower voter turnout in the face of pre-election violence is one of the driving factors behind the electoral security framework developed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID's *Electoral Security Framework* asserts that voter turnout is suppressed when insurgents delay or discredit an election; when candidates attempt to “capture an election”; when political parties boycott the polls; or as a direct consequence of electoral violence (USAID 2010, 6). Similarly, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) guide *Elections and Conflict Prevention* states that voter turnout may be decreased by the use of violence by political parties or armed groups in order to ensure a particular outcome (UNDP 2009, 5). Scholars also assume that voter turnout is generally negatively affected by electoral violence: Höglund (2009, 412) states that “voter turnout may be influenced if large sections of the population refrain from casting their vote due to fear of violence.” Individual case studies of Nigeria's 2007 election also start from an assumption that violence affects voter turnout (e.g., Bratton 2008; Collier and Vicente 2011). Thus, from both a policy and an academic perspective, it is accepted as fact that violence leads to fewer people showing up at the polls.

Despite this inclination to view pre-election violence as a suppressant of voter turnout, it has not been clear how—or even if—this takes place. Politicians and political parties that employ electoral violence are often interested in affecting the results of an election, not in suppressing voting per se. In Zimbabwe's 2008 election, violence was used to punish opposition supporters, as well as to persuade people to vote for the ruling party (Human Rights Watch 2008). In Ethiopia's 2010 election, many were intimidated into voting for the government

(Human Rights Watch 2010). In Kenya, violence was also used to turn out voters. A closer look at the data is needed to determine the motivations and effects of pre-election violence.

Voter Turnout and Pre-Election Violence

Under a democratic system in which political participation is voluntary, voter turnout is the sum effect of citizen involvement in the formal exercise that selects a country's political leadership. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA 2017), average voter turnout in Africa is 65 percent. High voter turnout generally reflects an energized constituency that sees value in the effort required to cast a ballot, while low voter turnout may reflect a paucity of electoral options or low interest in the outcome of the election. Low voter turnout may also indicate that voters lack confidence in the electoral process or in the legitimacy of the existing regime. In either case, voters may refrain from voting if they believe their vote will have little effect on the outcome (Karp and Banducci 2008; Birch 2010).

Some (e.g., USAID 2013) argue that low voter turnout signals trouble in a young or fragile democracy and that electoral violence is a direct cause. Unfortunately, however, in this context the meaning of voter turnout is particularly difficult to interpret. Countries transitioning to democracy from authoritarian regimes may not have the necessary safeguards in place to ensure a free or fair vote, and in some cases, turnout can be coerced and artificially inflated.

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Data Analysis

Our primary motivation was to examine how pre-election violence affects voter turnout. We began our analysis with the assumption that instigators of violence use it to deter participation due to the simple fact that voting becomes more cumbersome when the threat of violence looms. Following this logic, we hypothesized that pre-election violence should deter participation and therefore decrease turnout, all else being equal.

We tested our hypothesis using multiple methods and different levels of data, building upon the African Election Violence Database assembled by Straus and Taylor (2012). For the years 1990–2008, Straus and Taylor categorized the level of violence during the six months prior to an election and the three months after an election for each election in sub-Saharan Africa. The categories were 0 for cases in which no violence occurred; 1 for cases in which voter intimidation and harassment occurred; 2 for cases in which violent repression, including political assassinations and fatalities, occurred; and 3 for elections in which large-scale violence took place with at least twenty reported fatalities. Using the same scheme, we updated the data set to cover elections that were held through 2014. For the purposes of our analysis, we collapsed the four categories into a dummy

variable; however, in order to address the concern that the severity of electoral violence could also have an impact on voter turnout, we conducted all analyses using both our binary treatment and Straus and Taylor’s original scheme, which treats electoral violence as an ordinal-level variable.

Our data set contained a total of 287 observations of elections in 47 countries. We conducted separate analyses of legislative voter turnout (including both singular and concurrent elections, for a total of 191 elections) and executive voter turnout (again, including both singular and concurrent elections, for a total of 166 elections). In our sample, average voter turnout in Africa for presidential and legislative elections was nearly the same: 66 percent and 63 percent, respectively.

Table 1 reports average voter turnout by election type (executive or legislative) and incidence of electoral violence. These data come from the pooled data set that includes all elections in all countries with available data. The differences in average turnout are not statistically significant. Complicating our data analysis was the fact that some countries in our sample have historically had violent elections (Kenya and Zimbabwe) and others have never had them (Botswana, São Tomé, and Príncipe). In these extreme cases, the key independent variable shows no variation, so absence or presence of violence cannot explain variation in voter turnout over time. Our solution was to perform an isolated analysis of countries that do demonstrate variance in the absence or presence of electoral violence over time. This removed approximately 40 percent (19) of the countries in our sample and left us with data from 28 countries to examine.

Table 1. Voter Turnout and Violence, Pooled Sample

Election violence	Executive turnout	Legislative turnout
Violence before election	67.4% (<i>n</i> = 101)	62.4% (<i>n</i> = 102)
No violence before election	63.7% (<i>n</i> = 65)	63.8% (<i>n</i> = 89)
t-test	<i>t</i> = -1.45, <i>p</i> = 0.15	<i>t</i> = 0.53, <i>p</i> = 0.59

Table 2 reports voter turnout by type of election and whether violence took place before the election or not for our isolated sample. While turnout was on average lower in legislative elections where violence occurred, the difference is not statistically significant. Based on this descriptive analysis, thus far there appears to be no significant difference in voter turnout between violent elections and nonviolent elections.

Table 2. Voter Turnout and violence, isolated sample

Election violence	Executive turnout	Legislative turnout
Violence before election	65.6% (<i>n</i> = 66)	59.0% (<i>n</i> = 58)
No violence before election	62.3% (<i>n</i> = 46)	59.3% (<i>n</i> = 58)
t-test	<i>t</i> = -1.19, <i>p</i> = 0.23	<i>t</i> = 0.11, <i>p</i> = 0.90

In addition to performing descriptive analysis, we tested our hypothesis using generalized least squares (GLS) regression analysis on our isolated sample. Due to the structure of our data set— elections nested within countries and variation in number of elections per country resulted in unbalanced short-panel data—we addressed dependency within panels/countries (Gelman and Hill 2006). By including random effects in our model, we accounted for unspecified country-level effects that could potentially bias our estimates.

We ran several regression analyses with voter turnout as our dependent variable and election violence as our key independent variable. To identify the relevant control variables, we relied specifically on the literature on voter turnout and African voters. Much of the broader literature on voter turnout focuses on how institutional, political, and socioeconomic factors affect voter turnout (Blais 2006; Geys 2006). Proportional electoral institutions are generally found to increase voter turnout, whereas plurality/majoritarian electoral institutions tend to decrease it (Banducci and Karp 2009). We determined type of electoral system using a categorical variable, where the values 1–4 correspond to plurality, majoritarian, mixed, and proportional representation electoral rules, respectively.

We ran separate random-effects GLS regressions for executive and legislative turnout with controls for electoral system, type of election, political climate, and socioeconomic status. In all model specifications, the coefficient for violence was negative but insignificant. In none of the models did it come close to reaching significance. In both executive and legislative elections the “youth” bulge was significant and negative, meaning that countries with younger populations overall have lower than average voter turnout rates compared to countries with older populations. In executive elections, incumbent participation was significant and positive (for one of the models), meaning that when an incumbent executive runs for re-election, voter turnout increases. This may reflect intense mobilization efforts that incumbent presidents undertake, in part due to their access to state resources. For legislative elections, this finding was inconsistent across our two measures of political environment.

Based on our cross-national analysis, election violence does not appear to affect voter turnout in the aggregate.

Conclusion

Electoral violence has many motivations. In Kenya, for example, violence has been used to suppress, motivate, or punish voters. Moreover, different actors have fomented the violence. In early elections, the Kenyan government was the main perpetrator, but violence was also used by opponents in later years and at the subnational level in 2013. In addition, the impact of electoral violence on voter turnout can vary because voters react to violence in different ways: they may flee the country or stay home but not vote or they may adjust their vote. Voter response can depend on how widespread the violence is, how much risk the voters are willing to bear, and how they view the election. The rate of violence preceding the 2013 Kenyan election was higher than that preceding the 2002 and

2007 elections, yet voter turnout was higher. However, the 2013 elections were also publicized as an opportunity for the country to move beyond the violence of 2007; they were managed by a more respected electoral commission and commissioner, framed by a relatively well-received new constitution, conducted under the aegis of a well-respected and newly reformed judiciary, and monitored by a national and international institutions.

Does pre-election violence, then, suppress voter turnout, as we hypothesized? Our overall conclusion is that over time and across countries in Africa, electoral violence does not result in lower voter turnout. Indeed, it has no perceptible overall effect. Pre-election violence and its intended effects are specific to each situation—resulting in either suppressing voters or pushing them to turn out at the polls—congruent with the goals of the perpetrators and electoral environment. Pre-election violence, it seems, can achieve many objectives, depending on the political and social context. This finding suggests the need for a more nuanced analysis—one that looks more closely at the rhetoric surrounding specific elections, the motivations behind electoral violence, and the coercive powers of the perpetrators of violence.

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