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Steven C. Rosenzweig
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Introduction

> He protects their interests and from their enemies by giving them pangas [machetes].
>
> —Kenyan County Assembly Member

> I need a leader who can preach peace, not provide pangas to the youth.
>
> —Kenyan voter, Narok County

Violence is frequently viewed as an unfortunate yet unsurprising by-product of electoral competition in divided societies in the developing world, an unsavory but effective tactic for the politicians that use it. Wilkinson and Haid (2009, 2), for example, describe politically motivated ethnic riots as "a particularly brutal and effective form of campaign expenditure," while Klopp (2001, 503) refers to the "raw, Machiavellian success" of instigating ethnic clashes as "an effective short-term strategy for 'winning' multi-party elections." If politicians choose to employ violence, the argument goes, it is because they benefit electorally from doing so. Yet the efficacy of violence as an electoral tactic is far from certain, as is the ability of politicians to accurately infer its relative costs and benefits. As one review of the literature on election-related violence noted, existing research "seek[s] to explain when and where electoral violence happens" without adequately addressing "whether the use of violence actually advances the goals of those who deploy it" (Staniland, 2014, 113). Answers to the former question are incomplete, however, without satisfactory answers to the latter.

This book focuses on the question of how violence affects election outcomes and whether these effects are in line with how politicians – and, by extension, scholars – perceive them. In doing so, it demonstrates

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that – contrary to the conventional wisdom – violence is a costly electoral strategy, triggering significant voter backlash that undermines its effectiveness. Politicians fail to fully perceive these costs, and this misperception leads them to employ violence as an electoral tactic even when its efficacy is in doubt. Election-related violence can therefore be explained not solely by the electoral benefits it provides, but by politicians' misperceptions about its effectiveness as an electoral tactic.

A theory of violence resulting from elite misperception, as I describe below, can explain the incidence and persistence of election-related violence, even where its efficacy as an electoral tactic is questionable. It can also explain cross-national variation by focusing our attention on how and why misperceptions about the effects of violence emerge and persist over time, with particular attention to the outsized role of founding elections – the first elections held after a transition to multiparty competition – in shaping the likelihood of violence in elections for years to come. The findings presented in this book suggest that political elites' misperceptions about voter preferences can play an important role in determining why some countries suffer from recurrent bouts of election-related violence while others do not.

The empirical focus of the book is on Kenya, a prominent case in the literature. But the insights generated here likely apply to a wide range of cases where election-related violence is prevalent, particularly those where (1) elites are central actors in initiating violence and (2) elections are competitive enough to offer voters a real choice at the polls. In such contexts, politicians must negotiate a trade-off between the potential benefits of violent coercion and the costs of voter backlash against their use of violence, since voters are free to select alternative candidates when casting their ballots. While the literature has focused its attention on the electoral *benefits* of violence, the findings presented here suggest we must more carefully analyze its *costs*. We should also reevaluate the extent to which political elites are able to accurately assess the relative costs and benefits of violence and other electoral tactics, a task that the evidence indicates is much more challenging than commonly assumed. Encouragingly, the findings of this book suggest that violence need not be inherent to hotly contested elections in divided societies. If violence is more costly than politicians tend to believe, then efforts to combat it need not counter but rather *appeal* to politicians' electoral self-interest; simply bringing their beliefs about voter preferences in line with the reality should reduce the chances that they choose a violent approach.

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1.1 ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

Election-related violence is common throughout the world (Human Rights Watch, 1995*a*; Fischer, 2002; Bekoe, 2012; Staniland, 2014; Birch, 2020; Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund, 2020). Not just a feature of authoritarian regimes, such violence is common in places that hold competitive elections – the focus of this book – as well. It occurs in countries as diverse as Kenya, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Jamaica, Indonesia, Côte d'Ivoire, and India, the world's largest democracy. In fact, as multiparty elections – however imperfect – have spread around the world, election-related violence is becoming an ever more prominent form of political violence.[1] With the ballot box being the primary means to power in most countries, violence is particularly likely to arise from electoral conflict rather than direct contests for power or over the nature of the regime. In a reflection of the increasing importance of election violence as a form of political violence in recent years, the number of intrastate wars (and deaths associated with them) has gone down steadily since the end of the Cold War (Gleditsch et al., 2002), whereas incidents of election-related violence increased markedly from 1989 to 2007 before reducing slightly thereafter (Daxecker and Jung, 2018). In fact, 50 percent of elections between 1990 and 2012 saw at least three incidents of violence, with deadly violence occurring in just under a third (Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund, 2020).[2] In short, while elections are meant to be a peaceful means of determining who rules, they frequently fail to meet that ideal, and election-related violence has become an increasingly important phenomenon to study and better understand (Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund, 2020).

Electoral (or election-related) violence has been defined as "violent or coercive acts carried out for the purpose of affecting the process or results of an election" (Söderberg Kovacs, 2018, 5) or "a subtype of political violence that either aims to influence electoral processes in the run-up to election day or takes place as a violent response to elections because of concerns over electoral conduct" (Daxecker and Jung, 2018, 54),

[1] V-Dem data from 2020 shows that all but a handful of countries hold elections – imperfect as they may be – to select national leaders, and the modal country is one that holds competitive (if flawed) elections of the type that are the focus of this book (Coppedge et al., 2021).

[2] The figures cited by Birch et al. come from the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) dataset (Daxecker, Amicarelli, and Jung, 2019).

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and I largely follow these definitions in this book. In practice, of course, it is often impossible to definitively ascribe motives to, or understand the specific role played by, the political actors allegedly involved in strategically fomenting violence (Horowitz, 2001, 236–238; Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund, 2020). Thus, what constitutes violence that "aims to influence electoral processes" and can therefore be characterized as election related is not always clear cut; it implies making choices about how to categorize particular violent incidents that invariably result in some Type I or Type II error.

Inherent to a motive-based definition is the idea that the violence at question is targeted at *elections themselves* – rather than, say, a regime that happens to be holding an election. In other words, violence specifically meant to influence voting would constitute electoral violence, but insurgent attacks on government institutions not tasked with administering or adjudicating elections or armed criminal groups battling the security forces – even if they occur around election time – would not.[3] Similarly, as per Paul Staniland's typology (Staniland, 2014), intra-systemic violence (i.e., violence used to influence election outcomes) would count, whereas anti-systemic violence (i.e., violence aimed at replacing the political system at large) – even if timed around elections – would not.

Leaving the issue of what constitutes *election-related* violence aside, there is also the question of what we categorize as violence in the first place. Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund (2020) define it as "coercive acts against humans, property, and infrastructure" that are "levied by political actors to purposefully influence the process and outcome of elections" (4). Yet, this leaves open the question of what constitutes a "coercive act." Furthermore, some actions that might be considered coercive – such as verbal threats or a display of weaponry – are not necessarily acts of *violence* in and of themselves. Given the greater ambiguity around what constitutes coercion – as well as the fact that the logic of making (perhaps empty) violent threats versus carrying out actual violence may differ – I narrow the concept of violence in this book to physical acts of violence against people and property. This includes murder, maiming, and rape of groups and individuals such as opposition politicians,

[3] Harish and Toha (2019) distinguish between voter-, candidate-, and government agency-targeted violence. But while the focus in this book is on how voters respond to violence, the violence they respond to could be targeted at any of these potential targets.

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supporters, and government officials. It also includes property destruction (for instance via arson) of homes, businesses, places of worship, or political party and/or candidate offices.

An additional consideration that scholars have often cited in defining what constitutes election-related violence is its timing (e.g., Höglund, 2009; Straus and Taylor, 2012). Notably, the definitions cited above do *not* cite timing as a defining factor. In reality, violence intending to affect election outcomes – for instance by changing local electoral demography for future elections (Steele, 2011; Harris, 2013; Kasara, 2016) – can occur at any time, including years in advance of an election, or in the aftermath of a recent election as politicians look to shape the electorate for the future.[4] Voters may also consider violence perpetrated years earlier – including in the aftermath of previous elections – when making their decision about who to vote for in a given electoral cycle. Söderberg Kovacs (2018) argues that

> [w]hile we agree that electoral violence can take place at all stages of the electoral process – notably before, during and after an election – it is close to impossible to pin down the exact time period this includes (and excludes) in the context of new and emerging democracies in developing states. . . . The strategic electoral game is an ongoing process and an integral part of party politics itself. (6)

I concur, and I therefore follow Söderberg Kovacs and others in choosing not to narrow the focus to violence that occurs within a specific timeframe around an election.

Like Söderberg Kovacs (2018), Daxecker and Jung (2018), and others, I define election-related violence primarily by its strategic purpose rather than its timing (while acknowledging the difficulties associated with attributing motives to particular acts of violence in practice). I deviate somewhat from common definitions of the concept, however, by homing in on physical acts of violence to the exclusion of the more ambiguous (and possibly distinct) concept of "coercion." Election-related violence, for the purposes of this book, may therefore be defined as *physical acts of violence carried out for the purpose of affecting the results of an election.*

[4] Patterns of postelection violence in Kenya in 2007/08, for instance, looked similar in many ways to previous bouts of *pre*-election violence in terms of its targeting and geographic focus, suggesting a similar logic in which politicians sought to take advantage of the postelection chaos to shape the electoral environment for the future.

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Related to the question of timing is the fact that the logic of elite misperception described in this book – whereby violence triggers voter backlash against the politicians who use it, but, failing to perceive this, they continue to employ it despite its costs – applies most straightforwardly to what has been called "pre-election" violence, that is, violence in the run-up to voting. As noted, however, (1) even postelection violence is often geared toward shaping future elections and (2) voters may take into account the participation of politicians in previous bouts of violence when deciding for whom to vote, including postelection violence that may have occurred in previous electoral cycles. The theory should therefore apply to election-related violence carried out at any point in time.

As described in greater detail in Chapter 2, election-related violence can take a number of different forms. In more authoritarian regimes, violence may be perpetrated by the state itself through the use of the police and other security forces. In cases of genuine (if imperfect) electoral competition that are the focus of this book, however, violence usually takes one of three forms. First, violence may be perpetrated by militias directly affiliated with political parties or individual candidates for office, as in Bangladesh (Husain, 2002), Sri Lanka (Höglund and Piyarathne, 2009), Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2022), or Indonesia (Wilson, 2010). Second, violence may be perpetrated by criminal gangs or armed groups allied with particular parties and candidates, as with gangs in Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Reno, 2011), Kenya (Klopp and Kamungi, 2008; Waki Commission, 2008; Mueller, 2011; Dercon and Gutiérrez-Romero, 2012), and Jamaica (Sives, 2010), and paramilitaries in Colombia (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos, 2013). Finally, civilian riots may be instigated by politicians for political gain, either directly or through the use of inflammatory rhetoric, as in India (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004; Berenschot, 2012), Bangladesh (Datta, 2004), Sri Lanka (Kearney, 1985), and Indonesia (van Klinken, 2007). Violence may be more coordinated or spontaneous, more grassroots or hierarchical in its organization. Still, the most significant outbreaks of election-related violence tend to result from the maneuverings of political elites (Human Rights Watch, 1995*b*; Wilkinson, 2004), and it is such violence that is the focus of this book.

In Kenya, the primary case that I analyze, violence has taken all of these forms and has been a feature of politics since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in the early 1990s. In all, approximately 2,000 people were killed and 400,000 displaced in politically motivated

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ethnic violence throughout the 1990s (Human Rights Watch, 2002), with numerous reports indicating that the violence was largely instigated and organized by both senior and local politicians from the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) seeking to maintain their hold on power (Human Rights Watch, 1995*a*, 2002; Akiwumi, Bosire, and Ondeyo, 1999*b*; Klopp, 2001). Large-scale violence reoccurred around the contested 2007 election, most dramatically in its aftermath, resulting in more than 1,100 deaths and more than 650,000 people displaced (Waki Commission, 2008; Lynch, 2009). Despite being more limited in scale and less highly publicized than earlier outbreaks, communal violence killed 500 and displaced 118,000 in the run-up to elections in 2013 (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In elections in 2017, violent incidents occurred in multiple parts of the country, including in its aftermath stemming from conflict over contested results (KNCHR, 2017*a*,*b*).

Substantial evidence suggests that local and national politicians have been directly complicit in organizing, financing, directing, or inciting the violence of the last 30 years. Much of the violence from 1991 to 1998 was carried out by organized ethnic militias that had specifically trained for their missions and were allegedly paid by KANU politicians for each person they killed or home they destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 1995*a*; Akiwumi, Bosire, and Ondeyo, 1999*b*; Laakso, 2007). In addition to their direct (though behind-the-scenes) involvement in the clashes, KANU politicians laid the groundwork for conflict with the use of violent, ethnicized rhetoric (Klopp, 2001). Politicians played a similar role in more recent outbreaks of violence, including in 2007, with leaders on both sides of the contest allegedly holding meetings, providing financing, forming alliances with criminal gangs, and inciting their supporters to attack perceived supporters of the opposing party (KNCHR, 2008; Waki Commission, 2008; Mutui, 2011). Importantly, the violence in Kenya is not a purely local phenomenon outside the control of political leaders. Interviews with politicians at various levels of government revealed a widespread acknowledgment that top party officials have the ability to tamp down on local conflict should they so choose.[5]

Why is violence a common feature of elections in Kenya and other parts of the world? Why do politicians employ violence as an electoral tactic, and how does it affect voting?

[5] Interviews with more than five dozen Kenyan politicians, conducted from July 2014 to June 2015.

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1.2 EXISTING EXPLANATIONS

In seeking to answer these questions, the literature has focused on the structural conditions that make violence a possible and potentially attractive tactic, as well as on how it may be strategically used to help parties and candidates win elections. In other words, structural theories have posited the social, economic, and political conditions that make election-related violence more likely in some places than others, while more microlevel, strategic explanations focus on why parties and candidates choose to employ violence when structural conditions make it a viable option.[6]

Structural theories have identified numerous conditions that increase the likelihood of election-related violence, usually by raising the stakes of election outcomes (Mueller, 2008; Boone, 2011; Fjelde and Höglund, 2015; Birch, 2020; Klaus, 2020) or hampering the effectiveness and impartiality of electoral administration and enforcement of the law (Mueller, 2008; Burchard, 2015; Claes, 2016). Work in this vein has argued, for example, that the likelihood of election-related violence depends on the strength of democratic institutions and levels of corruption (Mueller, 2008; Burchard, 2015; Kanyinga, 2018; Birch, 2020); electoral rules and institutional design (Burchard, 2015; Fjelde and Höglund, 2015; Claes, 2016; Daxecker, 2020); rule of law and legal accountability (Mueller, 2008; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski, 2013; Burchard, 2015; Kanyinga, 2018); the nature of the party system (Wilkinson, 2004; Fjelde, 2020; Wahman and Goldring, 2020); international election observation (Daxecker, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019); and systems and patterns of land tenure and ownership (Kanyinga, 2009; Boone, 2011; Klaus and Mitchell, 2015; Klaus, 2020).

Other theories – including the theory of elite misperception I posit in this book – assume a context in which structural conditions make violence possible, but seek to explain why office-seeking parties and candidates choose violence in place of, or in addition to, nonviolent tactics. In doing so, existing research on the strategic use of violence by parties and

[6] Politicians may also, in some circumstances, strategically instigate violence with nonelectoral goals in mind, for instance, to allow themselves or their allies to seize land, or for other forms of financial gain. However, for the purposes of evaluating the theory of elite misperception put forward in this book, (1) it makes sense to focus on the *hard* cases for the theory, that is, those where winning elections *does* appear to be the primary aim and (2) even if politicians' primary aim is nonelectoral, they still must contend with the electoral effects from employing violence (at least in the competitive electoral contexts the theory applies to), so insights on those electoral effects are still relevant.

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candidates has focused on how violence may help them win elections.[7] Such explanations can be categorized into two overarching mechanisms by which it might: *coercion* and *persuasion*.

Most straightforwardly, violence may be used to *coerce* voters, preventing them from voting or forcing them to vote against their preferences.[8] As a purely coercive tool, politicians may use violence to reduce voter turnout, especially among supporters of the opposition (Chaturvedi, 2005; Bratton, 2008; Collier and Vicente, 2012, 2014; Condra et al., 2018; von Borzyskowski, Daxecker, and Kuhn, 2021). They may also use it to persuade voters to change their vote for fear of reprisals (Wantchekon, 1999; Ellman and Wantchekon, 2000; Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos, 2013), or to displace voters in order to produce a more favorable electorate in a given locality (Steele, 2011; Harris, 2013; Kasara, 2016). Importantly, while the number of voters directly affected by violent coercion is likely to be, in most cases, relatively small,[9] violence can also shape election outcomes by influencing the voting calculus of a much larger – and therefore more electorally relevant – group of voters: those that are aware of, but not directly affected by, the violence. It is therefore crucial to understand how violence influences this pivotal group of voters.

Several theories of election-related violence look beyond direct coercion to posit that violence may be used not just to coerce but to *persuade* voters to support them at the polls, for example, by shaping voter preferences or demonstrating candidates' willingness and ability to provide what voters want. For instance, in contexts where group identities are highly salient and intergroup animosity is exceptionally high, members of a particular group might obtain some expressive benefit from violence committed against a hated out-group. Thus, a politician responsible for such violence might benefit from increased support among members of the in-group to which he provided the "good" of out-group violence

[7] As per the above discussion of what constitutes election-related violence, the focus here is on intra-systemic (not anti-systemic) violence (Staniland, 2014).

[8] Note that while the focus here is on violence targeting voters, violence may be targeted at rival politicians or government institutions as well (Harish and Toha, 2019). As long as such attacks are aimed at influencing election outcomes – and they affect voters' decision-making calculus – they are relevant to the analysis in this book. To be sure, even when targeting politicians or government officials, those who employ violence must contend with its consequences for their standing with voters.

[9] Bratton (2008), for example, finds that just 4 percent of voters overall, and 13 percent in the most affected region, experienced instances of intimidation in the quite violent 2007 elections in Nigeria.

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(Horowitz, 1985; Petersen, 2002). Violence may also be used to signal certain candidate traits that particular segments of the electorate value (Vaishnav, 2017). Politicians might use violence to signal, for example, that they are willing and able to defend their coethnics against security threats from other groups, or to signal their toughness or ability to get things done. In addition, many studies have argued that politicians in ethnically diverse societies instigate intergroup violence in an attempt to shore up their support among coethnic voters by polarizing the electorate along ethnic lines, particularly when such voters may lean toward other parties on the basis of policy preferences or cross-cutting identities (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Horowitz, 2001; Klopp, 2001; Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004).

Alternatively, violence could be an indirect by-product of other tactics that politicians find useful, such as the use of heated ethnic rhetoric. Even if violence per se is not an explicit strategy of politicians seeking to rally their coethnic base, the heated ethnic rhetoric such candidates employ in their appeals to the in-group may increase intergroup animosity and the likelihood that violence breaks out (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Horowitz, 1985; Benesch, 2011).

Existing explanations for election-related violence share two untested assumptions, however, that this book seeks to address. First, in search of a rationale for why elites choose violence, existing theories assume that if elites instigate violence, that they must benefit electorally from doing so. They therefore focus almost exclusively on the benefits of violence without seriously considering its costs, thereby providing an incomplete picture of the effects of violence on election outcomes. This focus remains despite limited evidence that violence is in fact an effective tactic for winning elections, as well as the real possibility that voters may use the ballot box to reject violent candidates at the polls. Existing explanations also turn on the assumption that political elites accurately assess the relative costs and benefits of violence and act accordingly, that is, that they have adequate information about its efficacy as an electoral tactic and objectively assess that information when deciding what strategy to pursue. Such accounts discount the possibility that politicians misperceive voter preferences and the efficacy of various campaign tactics, which a growing body of research suggests is more common than the literature has tended to assume. In contrast, this book posits a theory of violence that takes seriously the possibility that violence may generate voter backlash that undermines its effectiveness as a means of winning elections, but that political elites – failing to perceive this – overestimate its

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