

## Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception

Existing theories of election-related violence often assume that if elites instigate violence, they must benefit electorally from doing so. With a focus on Kenya, this book employs a wide array of data and empirical methods to demonstrate that – contrary to conventional wisdom – violence can be a costly strategy resulting in significant voter backlash. The book argues that politicians often fail to perceive these costs and thus employ violence as an electoral tactic even when its efficacy is doubtful. 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. The book also shows that violence in founding elections – the first elections held under a new multiparty regime – has long-lasting effects on politicians' (mis)perceptions about its usefulness, explaining why some countries' elections suffer from recurrent bouts of violence while others do not.

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-35488-2 — Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception  
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# Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception

*The Logic of Violence in Electoral Competition*

STEVEN C. ROSENZWEIG

*Boston University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-1-009-35488-2 — Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception  
 Steven C. Rosenzweig  
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009354882](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009354882)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009354905

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First published 2023

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Rosenzweig, Steven C., 1985– author.

TITLE: Voter backlash and elite misperception : the logic of violence in electoral  
 competition / Steven C. Rosenzweig.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge  
 University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022062006 | ISBN 9781009354882 (hardback) |  
 ISBN 9781009354905 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Voter intimidation – Kenya – Case studies. |

Political violence – Kenya – Case studies. | Political crimes and  
 offenses – Kenya – Case studies. | Presidents – Kenya – Election – Case studies.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC JC328.6 .R68 2023 |

DDC 362.88/931096762–dc23/eng/20230315

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022062006>

ISBN 978-1-009-35488-2 Hardback

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*To Jen, for your unconditional love and partnership over all  
these years.*

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## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>List of Tables</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Election-Related Violence	3
1.2 Existing Explanations	8
1.3 Violence as a Result of Elite Misperception	11
1.4 Empirical Strategy	14
1.5 Plan of the Book	18
2 Election-Related Violence in Kenya and around the World	21
2.1 Election-Related Violence around the World	22
2.1.1 Varieties of Violence in Electoral Competition	23
2.1.2 Motivations for Violence in Electoral Competition	28
2.2 Election-Related Violence in Kenya	30
2.2.1 A History of Election-Related Violence	31
2.2.2 Colonial and Early Independence Kenya and the Roots of Ethnic Conflict	33
2.2.3 Elections and Violence in the Multiparty Era	35
2.2.4 The Central Role of Political Elites	38
2.2.5 The Case of Kenya in Comparative Context	40
2.3 The Special Role of Ethnicity in Political Violence	41
3 Theorizing Election-Related Violence: Toward a Theory of Elite Misperception	44
3.1 Structural Explanations	46

3.2	Strategic, Microlevel Explanations	50
3.2.1	Violence as Coercion	50
3.2.2	Violence as Persuasion	56
3.3	Violence as a Result of Elite Misperception	58
4	Violence and Election Outcomes	75
4.1	Violence and Election Outcomes in Kenya in the 1990s	76
4.2	The 2007/08 Post-election Violence and 2013 Election Outcomes	80
4.3	Summary of Findings	84
5	How Violence Affects Voting: Coercion, Persuasion, and Backlash	86
5.1	Violence as Coercion	87
5.2	Violence, Persuasion, and Voter Backlash	91
5.2.1	The Effect of Violence on Vote Choice	93
5.2.2	Testing Potential Mechanisms of Persuasion	105
5.2.3	The Effects of Ethnic Rhetoric on Voting and Violence	109
5.2.4	Implications for Voting and Elections in the Real World	113
5.3	Summary of Findings	114
6	Elite Misperception and Election-Related Violence	115
6.1	Politicians' (Mis)Perceptions about the Effects of Violence and Ethnic Rhetoric on Vote Choice	115
6.1.1	Politicians' Perceptions about the Effect of Violence on Vote Choice	117
6.1.2	Politicians' Perceptions about the Effect of Ethnic Rhetoric on Vote Choice	119
6.2	Is It Actually "Misperception?" Addressing Alternative Explanations	121
6.3	Are Politicians' Misperceptions due to Lack of Information?	124
6.4	Summary of Findings	128
7	Voter Backlash, Elite Misperception, and Violence beyond Kenya	130
7.1	Elite Misperception, Founding Elections, and Cross-National Variation in Election-Related Violence	132
7.2	Case Studies of Elections and Violence beyond Kenya	135
7.2.1	Indonesia	137
7.2.2	Pakistan	140
7.2.3	Ghana	143
7.2.4	Nigeria	147
7.2.5	Brazil	151
8	Conclusion	156



*Contents* ix

<i>Appendix A Sampling Strategy for the Survey in Nakuru, Kisumu, and Narok</i>	165
<i>Appendix B Supplementary Analyses</i>	167
<i>Appendix C Candidate Vignettes and Outcome Questions</i>	175
<i>Appendix D Politician Information Experiment Memo and Contact Scripts</i>	181
<i>References</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	199

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978-1-009-35488-2 — Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception  
Steven C. Rosenzweig  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

## Figures

4.1	Map of violence in Kenyan parliamentary constituencies, 1992–1997	<i>page 78</i>
5.1	Effect of violence on vote choice	97
5.2	Effect of violence and ethnic rhetoric on support for candidate-endorsed policies	99
5.3	Attributed responsibility for violence described in the vignettes	102
5.4	Effect of violence and ethnic rhetoric on support for candidate-endorsed policies, violence affected vs. unaffected respondents, coethnics only	104
5.5	Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' private goods provision	106
5.6	Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' ability and effectiveness	108
5.7	Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' ability and effectiveness (coethnics only)	109
5.8	Effect of violence on the salience of ethnicity and security	110
5.9	Effect of ethnic rhetoric on vote choice and violence	112
6.1	Politicians' perceptions of the effect of violence and ethnic rhetoric on vote choice	117
6.2	Politician perceptions vs. voter preferences over violence and ethnic rhetoric	121
6.3	Difference in politician perceptions vs. voter preferences over violence and ethnic rhetoric	122
6.4	Effects of providing information to MP candidates on preelection violence	127
7.1	Sankey diagram of violence in founding and subsequent elections	134
B.1	Balance on attributed violence treatment (main voter survey)	167

B.2	Balance on coethnic vs. non-coethnic treatment (main voter survey)	168
B.3	Balance on ethnic rhetoric treatment (main voter survey)	168
B.4	Balance on violence and ethnic rhetoric treatments (politician survey)	169
B.5	Effect of defensive violence on vote choice	170
B.6	Effect of violence on support for candidate-endorsed policies among young, less educated men	172
B.7	Politicians' perceptions of the effect of violence and ethnic rhetoric on vote choice	173

## Tables

1.1	Summary of empirical analysis: research questions, methods, and data	<i>page</i> 16
4.1	Violence and KANU election outcomes, 1992–1997	80
4.2	Alleged perpetrators of 07/08 election violence and 2013 electoral performance	82
5.1	Effect of violence on voter turnout in Kenyan elections, 1992–1997	89
5.2	Descriptive statistics for Kenyan voter survey, $N = 483$	95
5.3	Experimental design	96
5.4	Conjoint experiment design	101
7.1	Founding election violence and violence in subsequent elections	135
B.1	Pretreatment covariate balance for violence and ethnic rhetoric treatments, policy endorsement experiments	169
B.2	Effect of violence on KANU election outcomes, 1992–1997	171
B.3	Effect of any prior violence on KANU election outcomes, 1992–1997	171
B.4	Effect of any prior violence on voter turnout in Kenyan elections, 1992–1997	172
B.5	Mean likelihood of supporting candidates across treatment groups, with 95 percent confidence intervals	173

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978-1-009-35488-2 — Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception  
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## Preface

This is not the book I expected to write when I embarked on field work for my dissertation in the fall of 2013. At the time, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto – both of whom had been indicted by the ICC for their alleged involvement in the large-scale outbreak of violence in the aftermath of the 2007 general election – had recently been elected president and deputy president of Kenya. Given their electoral victory, and the apparent lack of electoral consequences for the violence, I formulated a theory of election-related violence positing that, especially in a highly polarized political environment with substantial animosity between competing groups, violence may increase candidates' support among a segment of the population by signaling certain traits – strength, commitment to the in-group, or an ability to provide protection or to get things done – that voters may seek in a candidate for office. I laid out this theory in my dissertation prospectus and designed a series of experiments meant to test its observable implications.

As the data came in, it became increasingly clear that my initial thinking was not at all in line with reality. Rather than increasing support among some segment of the population, or signaling certain traits that voters might find attractive, allegations of violence appeared to significantly undermine support for candidates for office, even among their coethnic base. Furthermore, violent candidates were viewed as less likely to deliver on the sorts of outcomes that voters most desired. In short, rather than providing some advantage, violence appeared associated with a significant electoral cost, the benefits of direct coercion aside. Given that most voters are not subject to direct coercion from violence themselves, the effects of violence on public opinion seemed substantial enough to

constitute a cost that would militate against the effectiveness of violence as an electoral tactic.

Thus began my quest to understand why – despite the questionable efficacy of violence as an electoral tactic – it remained such a common tool employed by politicians seeking office in Kenya, and my attention turned to the beliefs of the candidates themselves. Were they aware of the potential for voter backlash against violence, or did they fail to perceive this and therefore overestimate its potential benefits relative to its costs? As is clear from the foregoing, I found the latter to be the case, and I found a new direction that, over the years, eventually led to the completion of this book.

Thankfully, by simply following the data, I ended up coming to a much more hopeful conclusion than my initial theorizing suggested. My hope is that the findings in this book provide – in addition to shedding light on the causes and consequences of election-related violence – some useful food for thought on potentially new, innovative approaches to combating such violence in places where it is endemic or on the rise.



## Acknowledgments

I owe a debt of gratitude to numerous people in my professional and personal life for helping me to complete this book.

First and foremost, I must thank my exceptional dissertation committee: Thad Dunning, Kate Baldwin, Sue Stokes, and Steven Wilkinson, for their generous advice and support over the years. From its inception, they have offered incredibly valuable and incisive feedback that has vastly improved the project, as well as encouragement when the going got tough. Special thanks go to Thad for taking such a deep interest in my work and development as a scholar, and for acting as a tireless advocate on my behalf.

Other current or former Yale faculty who provided advice and assistance during my time as a graduate student include Ana de la O, Susan Hyde, Ken Scheve, Tariq Thachil, and Libby Wood. Thank you to all.

I had the great fortune and pleasure of going through the Ph.D. program at Yale with incredibly talented and genial colleagues. Particular thanks go to Lionel Beehner, Rob Blair, Natália Bueno, Dan Feder, Germán Feierherd, Nikhar Gaikwad, Malte Lierl, Tumi Makgetla, Constantine Manda, Lucy Martin, Gareth Nellis, Pia Raffler, Niloufer Siddiqui, Rory Truex, Guadalupe Tuñon, Mike Weaver, and Beth Wellman for their feedback, support, and friendship over the years.

The political science department at Boston University (BU) has provided an excellent intellectual home for me since the fall of 2017. Thank you to all my colleagues for creating such a warm and welcoming environment, and especially to Taylor Boas, Neta Crawford, Katie Einstein, Tim Longman, Cathie Martin, Max Palmer, and Spencer Piston for their advice along the way.

I've benefited from many valuable discussions about this project with scholars outside of Yale and BU, especially Leo Arriola, Danny Choi, Kim Yi Dionne, Jean Ensminger, Andy Harris, Mai Hassan, Jeremy Horowitz, Nahomi Ichino, Kathleen Klaus, Eric Kramon, Adrienne LeBas, Aila Matanock, Eoin McGuirk, Ken Opalo, Lily Tsai, and Lauren Young. Sarah Birch, Jeremy Horowitz, Adrienne LeBas, Gabrielle Lynch, Ken Opalo, and my BU colleagues Taylor Boas and Tim Longman participated in a terrific book conference (held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic) in November 2020. Thank you for taking the time to provide such detailed and useful feedback.

For my field research in Kenya, I am indebted to Faizan Diwan for his invaluable advice on survey implementation, as well as to my excellent teams of research assistants and survey enumerators: Christine Auguste, Anthony Kigera, Joshua Kubutha, James Mwangi, Carolyne Ngenyura, and Elyvalet Yegon in Nakuru; Moses Nyabola, Nicholas Otieno Moi, Sam Ouma, and Denish Owiti in Kisumu; Alex Kosen, Stanley Nkoitiko, Daniel Saidimu, and Bob Turasha in Narok; and Cecil Abungu, Imani Jaoko, and Amina Mohamed in Nairobi. Luis Francheschi at Strathmore University was instrumental in helping me find my Nairobi-based research team. Nicholas Mwenda and Tom Wolf at Ipsos Kenya were helpful partners in implementing my survey questions on their quarterly, nationally representative survey. Financial support for the research was provided by Yale's MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, the Leitner Program in Political Economy, and the Council on African Studies, as well as Boston University through a faculty start-up grant.

Thanks go as well to Rachel Blaifeder, who served as an excellent editor at Cambridge University Press, for her helpful advice and enthusiasm for the manuscript, and to Jadyne Fauconier-Herry for supporting the publication process there. I'm also grateful to Rachel's predecessor Sara Doskow for expressing interest in the initial proposal.

Finally, and most importantly, I must thank my family. Thank you to my in-laws and the entire Breckheimer clan for their unwavering support during this very long process; to Steve Blitz, for his constant encouragement; to my brothers, Kenny and David Rosenzweig, for always making me laugh and ensuring I never take myself too seriously; to my late father, Jeffrey Rosenzweig, for stoking my interest in the world beyond our borders; and to my mother, Lizanne Rosenzweig, for instilling in me the empathy for others that I hope always guides my work. As for my three boys, Jeremy came into the world as my dissertation was nearing its completion, Asher while I worked to transition the dissertation into a book,

*Acknowledgments*

xix

and Dylan just as I completed final revisions with the book under contract. All have brought indescribable joy and perspective into my life. The greatest thanks by far goes to my wife and partner, Jen, who has demonstrated superhuman patience and selflessness while I pursued the Ph.D. and completed the book. From New Haven to Nairobi, to Boston and beyond, and over the many years in which I've pursued this project, I never would have made it here without you.

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978-1-009-35488-2 — Voter Backlash and Elite Misperception  
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