Elections have become standard practice in most of the world. Voting is aggressively promoted by the international community, demanded by popular movements, and heralded as a sign of legitimacy by elected governments. The push for elections in war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan was justified as providing a mechanism for conflict resolution, while the Arab Spring has opened electoral politics in previously authoritarian regimes. International democracy promotion, the collapse of authoritarian regimes, and economic growth in the developing world all suggest that elections will be an enduring feature of politics for the foreseeable future.

Yet the rise of electoral politics does not necessarily bring with it peace or stability. If the problems of institutionalization and revolution dominated the study of political development during the Cold War,1 the developing world is now faced with a mixture of violence and voting that creates political orders lying uneasily between unambiguous war and peaceful politics. Whether in the Philippines, Pakistan, or Russia, electoral competition is intertwined with violence: pro-state militias target the supporters of opposition parties; states use security forces to repress dissidents and intimidate the electorate; political parties build armed wings; insurgents attack voters and candidates; and local elites use elections as a front for pursuing feuds and rivalries.

In a world where the formal mechanisms of electoral politics have become de rigueur, the grim intersection of violence and voting is the central challenge to
meaningful democratization. The international community confronts the dilemma of how to monitor and support electoral politics without either being manipulated or inadvertently triggering violence. Politicians, armed groups, civil society actors, and average citizens must navigate a complex, often lethal, political environment that bears trappings of democracy without upholding its substance. Coercion and elections can be enduringly compatible. Though increasingly salient in recent years, this is not a fleeting or transient issue: both successful and failed democratization efforts have often involved violence, whether the street-fighting wings of political parties in Weimar Germany, the “pocket armies” of politicians in 1950s Burma, or clashes between rival parties in 19th century England.²

This article uses three excellent books, as well as an overview of other important research, to make sense of what we know—and don’t know—about electoral violence. It advances two core arguments, one about the causes and the other about the consequences of electoral violence. First, electoral violence has been poorly conceptualized. The term is used to refer to wildly different phenomena, from crackdowns by security forces to violence perpetrated by political parties’ armed wings to insurgent targeting of politicians during campaigns. This has created a conceptual and empirical muddle that undermines explanations for the causes of “electoral violence.” I introduce a new typology of these varieties of electoral violence to improve theory, measurement, and comparison. It shows that scholars need to dramatically broaden how electoral violence is understood: it does not just involve rioting thugs controlled by cunning politicians, but can also include coups, insurgencies, brutal state crackdowns, and local clashes fueled by community rivalries.

Second, an exciting but neglected research frontier is studying the consequences of electoral violence. Violence sometimes achieves the goals of those who use it, but can also generate unexpected, path-dependent consequences. I identify a number of areas in which electoral violence may have important causal effects, ranging from the “normalization” of armed political parties to insurgency resulting from electoral militarization to the reconfiguring of armed patronage networks. Electoral violence needs to be recast as an independent variable rather than solely as an outcome.

Voting and Violence in the Post-Cold War World

The first wave of recent research on electoral violence was dominated by arguments inspired by India and Eastern Europe. Steven Wilkinson and Paul Brass looked to the Indian context to argue that a politicized state, salient social cleavages, and electoral politics combined to encourage politicians to foster communal rioting for political reasons.³ Their claims were challenged by Varshney’s focus on the primacy of local community structure, but both sets of arguments emphasize the nitty-gritty of local- and state-level politics and seek to explain relatively short, discrete incidents of violence carried out by thugs, criminals, and mobs using light weapons.⁴ This is the dominant, if often tacit, conceptualization of electoral violence in the literature. Other influential
research, linked to the rise of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe, points to the dangers of rapid political liberalization without sufficient institutionalization. Illiberal democracy could emerge from electoral politics, fostering nationalist and ethnic outbidding and the undermining of meaningful democratic practice. In this broad first wave, violence both within and between states was seen as being driven by the domestic imperatives of political leaders and was carried out by thugs and militias.

The three books under review are indebted to this first wave but also challenge it, often without realizing they are doing so. They each outline a composite argument: electoral violence emerges when mobilization from below combines with international democracy promotion from above to put serious pressure on previously stable authoritarian regimes. The books draw heavily on Africa’s experience after the Cold War, where international leverage has been far greater than in India and other canonical cases of electoral violence. This post-Cold War international environment has shaped how domestic politics operate, with conditionality and election monitoring inducing at least a façade of electoral democracy. These international strategies, however, often have had unintended consequences that can encourage violence.

These works break from the first wave by incorporating international political and economic pressures on domestic regimes and by including a diverse array of types of electoral violence. Yet these works do not take advantage of their own rich empirical materials to reframe the study of electoral violence in a more ambitious and wide-ranging way. The first wave remains theoretically and conceptually dominant, even as the evidence in this second wave challenges its basic assumptions.

Will Reno’s *Warfare in Independent Africa* offers a long historical sweep but is driven by what he sees as the rise of a new form of political violence in Africa that is characterized by state patronage, manipulation by politicians, and inability to mount an armed challenge to the status quo from beyond the system. A complicated politics has emerged in which regimes sometimes deploy violence to balance the international pressures for democratization with their desire to stay in power. They neutralize insurgent challenges by making violence part of mainstream politics. Despite the many grounds for possible rebellion, insurgency has become diverted and diffused into patronage-laden, illiberal, and often violent democracy.

Reno argues that “the behavior and organization of rebels and state forces reflect changes in the wider political context in which they fight” (p. 3). Different types of armed groups have emerged because of the different international norms and domestic challenges with which they have had to contend (p. 4). Anti-colonial and “majority rule” rebels dominated the 1960s and 1970s, confronting Portuguese colonialism and then the white-ruled regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa. These rebels operated in an international conflict that encouraged unity, and they faced counterinsurgents structurally unable to co-opt the opposition. As a result, “during the period 1961–74, political programs were central to the recruitment and discipline of rebel fighters” (p. 38). This “helped limit majority rule rebel fragmentation and strengthened the positions of ideologically focused and politically articulate leaderships” (p. 80).
After this initial wave of disciplined insurgents, rebel movements began to fall prey to proxy warfare and co-optation by regimes. There were some exceptions that overthrew corrupt authoritarian regimes by mobilizing popular support and maintaining organizational cohesion. These “reform rebels” emerged in the 1970s and especially 1980s, taking advantage of the weaknesses and dysfunctions of their opponents. In Uganda, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, insurgents were able to navigate a complex, divided international environment and to build new links with local communities that allowed these movements to become socially embedded. The reform rebels who seized power were, however, “scarce” (p. 160) exceptions in a broader context of proxy warfare (p. 153).

This process accelerated in the 1990s when the end of the Cold War caused massive changes in how regimes could distribute patronage and manage domestic opposition. Government leaders tried to hold onto power in the face of conditionality and commodity price shocks. The collapse of patronage-dominated authoritarian regimes triggered two potential outcomes. The first was state failure, as in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In these states, Reno argues that a new class of “warlord” rebels emerged who were “products of prewar violent systems of personal rule in which presidential power depended on personal control over economic resources, including in illicit trades, to be doled out to loyal associates” (p. 166). These were environments of brutal civil war.

The second, and more common, outcome was the rise of the “parochial” rebels who are central to electoral violence in Africa. They have localized interests, articulate few consistent political positions, and exist in a symbiotic relationship with politicians and the state. Reno argues that

The advent of democratic competitive elections has catalyzed parochial rebel violence in some countries, as competition for office weakens old mechanisms of control and causes politicians to rely more on armed groups to entrench their authoritarian electoral regimes and to protect ethnically defined communities behind the multiparty façade (pp. 209–10).

Patronage-based regimes have been particularly vulnerable (p. 217).

In Congo-Brazzaville and Kenya, “competitive elections in this context also pressed opposition politicians and communities to recruit parochial rebels to protect their interests” (p. 222). In Nigeria, the “civilian electoral regime thus reinforces the role of the political godfathers, the senior politicians who finance elections and organize violence through using their offices to divert state assets, exempting others from the enforcement of laws, and through the allocation of state contracts” (p. 229). In the Niger Delta, despite rampant local grievances, parochial rebels’ “struggles are often geared toward gaining better positions within Nigeria’s politics of patronage” (p. 228) rather than mobilizing for anti-systemic change. Electoral violence has preempted and de-fanged insurgency (p. 224).

The militarization of electoral politics has major implications for democracy. It “turns voters into supplicants to whoever is the strongest local power broker or the politician-protector of their ethnic community, rather than demanding and critical
individuals who are actually able to exercise a choice” (p. 218). In these contexts—which Reno notes are not universal (p. 239)—democratic accountability has been subverted alongside the possibility of radical change driven by violence. The international system’s pressures for liberalization have sometimes succeeded but in other cases have spawned a new politics of violence that has “co-opted banditry and outlaw behavior as part of its mechanisms of control” (p. 167).

Dorina Bekoe’s edited volume, Voting in Fear, offers important echoes of Reno’s argument. It provides an exceptional collection of new quantitative and qualitative evidence on elections and violence in Africa between 1990 and 2008. It is impossible to do each chapter justice, but a general theme emerges: electoral violence varies substantially within Africa, but it is generally perpetrated by incumbent regimes facing electoral threats in a context of weak institutions and a stalled “transition” to democracy.

The starting point for the volume is an original dataset by Scott Straus and Charlie Taylor, which examines African national elections between 1990 and 2008. It finds that roughly 10 percent of African elections have involved the highest level of violence and a further 10 percent have involved substantial, though lower, violence. Another 38 percent had limited violence, and 42 percent had no substantial violence (p. 23). Incumbents are the primary perpetrators of violence, and most of this violence occurred in the pre-election period (though post-election violence is more likely to escalate) (pp. 23–31). Importantly, the likelihood of violence has not gone down over time (p. 28).

The case chapters of the book flesh out a similar story: liberalization—often induced by external actors—intersects with regime strategies of survival to encourage violence. Timothy Sisk argues that in both Sudan and Nigeria, patronage and neopatrimonialism raised the stakes of electoral competition and facilitated the rise of state-linked violent actors who cooperated with political elites to try to capture state power (pp. 39–74). His chapter summarizes the volume’s theme by arguing that “an underlying instigator of violence is the slipping of an incumbent regime’s grip on power; when threatened by challengers, the government turns to election-related violence as a way to maintain power with the veneer of electoral legitimacy” (p. 68).

Catherine Boone and Norma Kriger show how the use of land as a crucial patronage tool laid the basis for violence in Zimbabwe and Cote D’Ivoire, along with multiparty elections, weak institutions, and state fiscal crises (pp. 76–78, 106–07). This richly detailed chapter is especially insightful in showing how land distribution—backed by coercion—can be used to pay off supporters, undermine opponents, and even eliminate the citizenship rights of opposition supporters. Their warning that “elections alone do not guarantee or produce democracy in Africa or elsewhere” (p. 106) suggests that meaningful democratization requires more than the formal apparatus of electoral politics.

Susanne Mueller examines the militarization of elections in Kenya from the early 1990s through the 2007 election. She argues that the explosion of violence surrounding the 2007 election was driven by three factors. First, there was decreasing state control over violence. Second, weak and highly personalized institutions could not provide an
autonomous or credible check on the excesses of politicians and their armed followers. Finally, winner-take-all politics were fueled by ethnicity and patronage, raising the stakes of electoral victory (p. 146). Mueller identifies how the state’s political leaders intentionally “privatized” violence in order to pursue their political interests (pp. 150–51). The Kenyan experience maps onto the Nigeria, Sudan, Cote D’Ivoire, and Zimbabwe cases, while fitting into the broader findings from Straus and Taylor.

Bekoe’s volume, however, does not just compile cases of patronage-laden regimes turning to violence to stave off rising electoral challenges. Lahra Smith’s chapter on Ethiopia focuses on the use of government coercion after the 2005 election, showing how direct state repression—rather than privatized delegation to thugs and party youth wings—was used to break the back of the opposition through strategic targeting of opposition leaders and social constituencies. The opposition did not deploy much violence, and, to the extent it did, it focused on security forces (who committed the vast majority of the violence) rather than other ethnic groups (pp. 192–94).

Bekoe’s chapter examines efforts to manage conflict through postelection political agreements (PPAs) in Togo and Zanzibar (pp. 117–44). These arrangements involve power-sharing, international involvement, and a plan for reform to which both the government and opposition agree (p. 199). Bekoe argues that PPAs are most likely to succeed when the international community is credibly involved, reforms proceed appropriately, and there are mechanisms for recurrent interaction between the key parties. PPAs need to be actually implemented; otherwise, they are scraps of paper unable to create real change. Finally, Franklin Oduro provides an unusual and insightful discussion of policy efforts (including his own) to forestall election violence in Ghana’s 2008 election. He argues that tightly contested areas were more likely to experience violence, propelled by weak institutions and social tensions (pp. 218–21). Yet he identifies a wide variety of state and non-state policies that prevented the escalating conflict that we see in other cases.

Judith Kelley’s book is very different from the Reno and Bekoe volumes. She seeks to understand how international election monitoring has affected the quality of elections. The book takes on a fascinating variety of topics, from the murky “shadow market” for election monitors to the long-run effects of monitoring. There is not a general theory here; instead, it uncovers important puzzles and helps us understand broad trends. For Kelley, like Reno and the contributors to the Bekoe volume, the rise of electoral monitoring has a crucial international component: “the breakthrough in election monitoring depended both on the pre-existing normative environment and on the systemic shift in power and priorities brought by the end of the Cold War” (p. 27). For the ascendant, wealthy West, “democracy and good governance became more salient criteria for external political and financial support” (p. 29) than the old Cold War guidelines. The new international politics of democratization have radically shifted the incentives facing regime leaders in the developing world, at least when they are reliant on the wealthy democracies for aid and security.

Monitoring Democracy offers several important findings about when and how violence breaks out. First, “about one-fifth of all the elections included in this study
had high pre-election violence, which was often deadly” (p. 86). This is similar to Straus and Taylor’s findings from Africa. Second, violence tends to be accompanied by other forms of irregularities; electoral manipulation is not an either/or strategy (p. 86). It appears that regimes are not strategically substituting violence for vote-rigging or legal manipulation; instead, violence is part of a broader bundle of irregularities.

Third, and most strikingly, high levels of pre-election violence are actually correlated with greater levels of endorsement by monitors (pp. 72–73). Kelley attributes this to what she calls the “Stability Bias”: if there is violence before an election but the election day itself is calm, monitors do not want to rock the boat by condemning the election, hoping to forestall further violence. Indeed,

They may fear that they face a choice between optimizing stability by endorsing fraudulent elections, or risk contributing to post-election violence by supporting claims that the election was rigged. This is especially true if the incumbent party has shown its capacity to wreck havoc in the pre-election period, but then to pull off a calm election day (p. 160).

Examples include Nigeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Election monitors may be manipulated by the strategic use of regime violence.8

Kelley offers a positive, if mixed, view of how electoral monitoring can improve the quality of elections. But violence poses a major challenge to monitoring, despite it being “the most prominent tool in the liberal effort to promote democracy and create a more stable and just world” (p. 155). Winner-take-all systems, existing violent conflict, and incumbents who go searching for undiscerning monitors can all undermine the effectiveness of monitoring. Electoral violence can be deployed as a form of political survival judo.

Taken together, these books offer an impressive composite argument about electoral violence in the post-Cold War world, especially in Africa. Violence is caused by the intersection of liberalization pressures from above with patronage, armed groups, winner-take-all politics, and weak institutions on the ground. The international community can help to limit conflict but is often surprised by the unintended consequences of its policies.9

What Exactly is Electoral Violence?

Despite its strengths, this second wave of research misses the opportunity to move beyond influential earlier work. There are two key problems that need to be overcome in future research on the causes of electoral violence.

First, the books show, but do not analyze or theorize, important variation in the forms of violence and the identity of the actors involved in “electoral” violence. Reno’s parochial rebels do everything from capturing voting booths to sustained campaigns of assassination. This is not the simple rioting that work on communal violence in India has emphasized, nor the behavior of state security forces to target the opposition that
research on “competitive authoritarianism” deals with. The case studies in the Bekoe volume vary dramatically in the nature of electoral violence, including land invasions and intimidation by security forces and organs of the ruling party in Zimbabwe, ethnic cleansing by local armed groups backed by the state and parties in Kenya, direct state repression in Ethiopia, and a state apparatus turning on itself in coups and defections in Cote D’Ivoire. Sisk’s discussion of violence in Nigeria’s 2007 national election alone lists an extraordinary profusion of tactics, from assassination to intimidation to arrests (p. 55).

This complexity is not categorized in the qualitative evidence, nor is it captured in the quantitative research. The Straus and Taylor data in Voting in Fear identifies whether the incumbent or opposition perpetrated violence, its level of severity (on a scale from none to generalized and highly violent), and when it occurred (pre-election and post-election) (pp. 28–30). Kelley’s data are based on reports of violence related to elections by the US State Department and various election monitoring organizations. She further categorizes the data according to timing, distinguishing between pre-election and election-day violence. In another major quantitative project, Hyde and Marinov measure whether there were post-elections riots or protests, whether the government used violence against protesters, whether civilians were killed in “significant violence relating to the election” before, during, or after the election, and whether government forces harassed candidates. Though superior to previous work, these remain blunt categories that are likely to miss much of the action on the ground.

This diversity exists more broadly in the literature. For instance, Wilkinson focuses on riots, Sidel on strongmen intimidation and vote-rigging, and Arriola on post-election repression by state security forces. Important variation can be seen even within a single election campaign. The 2013 election in Pakistan included at least five distinct forms of violence: Pakistani Taliban bombings of campaign rallies and assassinations of politicians, repression by security forces in Baluchistan as pre-election “pacification,” intimidation by thugs linked to parties, the capture of ballot boxes by party workers, and bomb blasts and shootings by armed political parties in Karachi all can plausibly be coded as electoral violence, but with different perpetrators, goals, and tactics.

“Electoral violence” includes very different political phenomena. This diversity has major implications for explaining its causes. What leads an insurgent group to send suicide bombers into an election rally is almost certainly different than why the youth wing of a ruling party decides to rough up members of the opposition on a street corner. Deploying the military against protesters to forestall a democratic transition is likely to be caused by different factors than a ruling party linking up with a local political godfather to capture a polling booth. The variation within violence may be as important as the difference between violence and non-violence. There are multiple mechanisms that could plausibly lead to violence, non-violence, and varieties of violence.

The second problem with existing work is that it can be very hard to tell what makes violence “electoral.” The coding rules in even the best datasets are ambiguous.
For instance, Hyde and Marinov are interested in post-election riots and protests “at least somewhat . . . related to the handling or outcome of the election”\textsuperscript{17} and significant violence “relating to the elections that resulted in civilian deaths.”\textsuperscript{18} Understanding whether an incident is election-related is determined by whether “reports connect the violence or harassment to the election in any way.”\textsuperscript{19} Straus and Taylor seek violence “directly tied to an impending electoral contest or an announced electoral result” (p. 19). The very selection of cases in Reno and Bekoe is driven by the belief that they have something to do with electoral politics.

These efforts to define electoral violence are interpretively loaded, since “related” and “tied” are not self-evident. Knowing whether violence is electoral hinges on making a judgment about why a particular act of violence is, or is not, linked to electoral dynamics. As Brass has forcefully argued, this approach is open to major biases, especially in work that relies on government sources (such as the US State Department, which Kelley uses) and journalistic coverage.\textsuperscript{20} The danger is coding events that “look like” scholars’ assumptions of what electoral violence is, while possibly ignoring other events that are intertwined with elections in ways unfamiliar to the coders. An implicit, but possibly biased or incomplete, set of concepts and theories shapes the data generation process.

In response to these problems, one option is to abandon electoral violence as a dependent variable and simply examine whether and how elections influence violence writ large. Elections could be folded into the broader study of civil war and political violence, and electoral violence as a concept would disappear. Yet the authors reviewed, and the broader literature, are guided by the intuition that there is something worthwhile and qualitatively distinctive about electoral violence that can be meaningfully distinguished from other types of violence.

**Varieties of Electoral Violence**

If electoral violence is to be a meaningful area of study, we need to disaggregate it in order to create a set of concepts that can be measured, compared, and theorized. This avoids the unproductive lumping that occurs when ethnic cleansing by a national army and local cattle wars both get identified as electoral violence. A focus on actors and their interests provides a starting point for more careful assessment of when violence is aimed at shaping electoral outcomes, rolling back electoral politics altogether, or using elections as a cover to pursue other goals.

Table 1 outlines seven distinct types of electoral violence. Each type is determined by the actor engaged in the violence and the goal of that actor.\textsuperscript{21} The top row identifies four political categories of actors: state security forces, non-state actors linked to the regime, non-state opposition groups, and politically unaligned local groups. The nature of the actor shapes the kinds of violence we are likely to see. States will use formal security forces, while state-backed non-state groups are likely to claim that they are autonomous from the state (creating “deniability” for the government) and may at
times escape government control. The difference between the two can seriously complicate accountability and transparency, while potentially also leading to unexpected escalation of conflict. Local actors are likely to use fairly limited violence, while opposition groups may be in a position to do everything from low-level intimidation to full-scale anti-regime insurgency.

The left column of Table 1 classifies whether an actor in question is seeking to win or maintain power within the context of the democratic political system (intra-systemic) or whether instead the actor seeks to overthrow the status quo order (anti-systemic). Though there can be ambiguity in what goals an actor is pursuing—especially since goals are often not achieved—any analysis needs to begin with the simple question of who is acting and what is their broad goal. Most existing work devotes its attention to the intra-systemic category, with violence being pursued within a polity’s “rules of the game”: this is where cunning politicians and roving bands of thugs operate to get an edge in weakly institutionalized environments. But the electoral process can also be a target of actors who want to overthrow or radically reform a country’s political system. Violence may be aimed at destroying the rules of the game, not winning within them. This anti-systemic category ranges from the Pakistani Taliban’s onslaught against politicians to hard-line South African security forces’ support for militias in an attempt to unsettle the democratic transition. These are well-armed variants of a “disloyal opposition.” The unaligned category refers to local actors opportunistically using violence to pursue their parochial interests in the context of electoral politics, which does not necessarily involve clear intra- or anti-systemic goals, but which can contribute to persistent social militarization.

These seven types of violence are not mutually exclusive. We can see a state directly engaged in violence and sponsoring non-state allies, while an insurgent group targets the electoral process itself, and the armed wing of an intra-system opposition party clashes with ruling party supporters in contested constituencies. An election may

Table 1 Types of Electoral Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Non-State Ally</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Unaligned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intra-Systemic Goals</td>
<td>Security forces deployed to manipulate election to maintain power [A]</td>
<td>Non-state ally used to help ruling party win elections [B]</td>
<td>Intimidation and protection against regime supporters [C]</td>
<td>Local actors pursue parochial interests by taking advantage of electoral competition [G]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Systemic Goals</td>
<td>Parts of state seek to prevent or overturn electoral system using violence [D]</td>
<td>Non-state groups try to prevent or overturn electoral system in order to preserve power of their state allies [E]</td>
<td>Insurgents target electoral process to undermine democratic system and to destroy regime [F]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
involve a number of these different types, or only one, or none at all. Acts of violence (as well as broader campaigns of violence) can be measured and compared according to who engages in the violence and with what goal. The typology can incorporate everything from anti-democratic coups to local thuggery to insurgent offensives.

**State Security Forces and Pro-State Armed Groups** Governments and non-state allies attempting to manipulate and control results within an electoral system carry out the two most common types of violence. Existing literature lumps these two categories of actor together as “incumbents,” but there is a major difference between the use of the secret police and the deployment of non-state armed groups. While most electoral violence is carried out within the constraints of the system (intra-systemic violence), there are other types of violence carried out by parts of the state apparatus and their non-state allies that are anti-systemic, aiming to prevent or roll back the consolidation of a democratic system.

I begin with intra-systemic violence by governments and their non-state armed allies. Direct government repression (cell A in Table 1) occurs when the state’s security forces and members of the ruling party threaten opposition candidates, their supporters, and other perceived adversaries with violence. The aim of intra-systemic state violence is to win the election. Violence is carried out by men in uniform, agencies within the security apparatus, and members of the ruling party. The violence in Ethiopia against protesters in 2005 is a clear example, as is the intimidation of the opposition by state security forces in Zimbabwe. Sisk notes that Sudan’s National Security Service was deeply involved in violently altering the landscape in the run-up to Sudan’s 2010 elections (p. 66). The security institutions of “competitive authoritarian”25 regimes coercively manipulate the electoral environment to make the system work reliably for the regime.

Direct state repression, however, is not the only way that governments can use violence. They can “privatize” violence to non-state actors as an electoral strategy (cell B). This is often an attempt by regimes to tip the balance while trying to escape responsibility for violence. Militias, private armies, youth and activist groups, and other political networks act as the protected, but non-state, shock troops of the regime. Police, military, and security forces stand by as they operate or even actively support them. In 2007 Kenya, for instance, the government tried to claim that violence was simply an explosion of local ethnic tensions, but strategically deployed its security forces in ways that facilitated cleansing of opposition supporters. The delegation of violence to non-state actors is particularly interesting because it can lead to growing armed group power and political influence: sometimes armed groups escape the control of the government and either turn against it or establish their own autonomy, even as such a strategy may allow the government to deny or obfuscate its responsibility.

There are two variants of this form of non-state electoral violence. One involves the government supporting armed political parties and politicians. In Pakistan’s Karachi, the electoral clout of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) has made it a valuable ally for provincial and central governments and led to coercive restraint. In the Philippines, local strongmen are often protected against law enforcement—and
even given control over those security forces—because of their ability to generate votes and cash. Parties, party armed wings, and local political notables are protected and supported as pillars undergirding the government. This is often a bargained relationship that involves powerful armed groups with their own interests and organization. Mainstream political actors can also have, and use, guns.

A second variant is facilitating non-state violence to target the opposition. In Cote d’Ivoire, the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) regime “gave the greenlight” to youth militias to engage in ethnic cleansing and displacement, while in Nigeria groups like the “Bakassi Boys” are linked to political figures but not formally embedded in the state. The paramilitary wings of Shiite parties in Iraq were similarly used to create a “deniable” form of coercion that could alter the electoral playing field. If there are serious political costs to direct state repression, non-state allies may be valuable. The danger is losing control of them: armed political parties are unlikely to be puppets of governments, and local armed groups can pursue their own goals on the ground.

Anti-systemic violence by parts of the formal state (cell D) and by non-state allies (cell E) is harder to imagine, given that the regime in some sense is the system. Yet this type of electoral violence occurs when state/state-linked groups try to roll back or prevent a democratic electoral outcome by targeting the electoral process. The rules of the game are not manipulated; instead, they are being targeted for destruction. This occurred in early 1990s South Africa: elements of the state apparatus attempted to “spoil” electoral transitions by both directly deploying violence and supporting non-state armed groups to undermine the emerging democratic system. In Rwanda in 1993–94, hard-liners viewed elections as a profound threat and genocidally mobilized in response. In Burma/Myanmar in 1990, there was election-related violence as the military ruthlessly suppressed the democratic gains of the National League for Democracy (NLD). In Indonesia and the Philippines, militaries and security agencies under dictatorships allegedly sponsored “provocateurs” to trigger violence that could provide a pretext for preventing or reversing democratizing momentum. At an extreme, armed parts of the state can launch a coup to hold off electoral power, as in Thailand in 2006. Boone and Kriger show that the 2000s violence in Cote d’Ivoire involved a splintered state apparatus that sometimes was at war with itself. Non-state, pro-government actors may also be threatened by democratization and similarly mobilize, often in alliance with state elites.

These incidents were driven by the fear of elections and their outcomes. In anti-systemic violence, electoral politics threatens the power of elites within the state and triggers violence to revise and reshape how politics work. This may be most likely when the state itself is split, with competing factions able to mobilize for or against electoral politics. Such violence is clearly tied to elections, but it is not aimed at winning them per se. We need to conceptualize electoral violence much more broadly than simply bands of thugs beating up poll workers or party members launching an occasional riot; instead, democratic transition and survival can be intertwined with violence.
Systemic and Anti-Systemic Oppositions  States and their allies are not the only actors that use violence around elections. I focus on two very different kinds of opposition violence: violence used in an attempt to win an election within a democratic system (intra-systemic; cell C) and violence used in an attempt to destroy the electoral process itself (anti-systemic; cell F). Like state and pro-state violence, opposition violence can have different goals. The most common form of opposition violence is intra-systemic: building armed wings to protect candidates and rallies, roughing up regime supporters, and engaging in low-level intimidation and assassination in contested areas to win particular elections and stave off attacks. This tends to be a reaction against government violence, whether direct or by non-state regime allies, but it can lead to spirals of escalation that thoroughly militarize politics. Straus and Taylor note that challenger violence is more likely after an election than before it, suggesting that oppositions mobilize against electoral processes and results perceived as rigged or unfair (p. 33).

Reno shows that opposition parties themselves can become enmeshed in the same strategies of patronage and intimidation as those of the regimes they face; their use of violence can actually co-opt them. In the Bekoe volume, Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire provide examples of pro-systemic opposition violence, triggered in both cases by violence and intimidation from the ruling government and its non-state allies. In many areas of the Philippines, for instance, coercion is fairly mundane. It does not presage a rising tide of insurgency but instead is part of a bundle of strategies used by ambitious politicians. Some level of opposition violence can be an unpleasant but accepted part of the political rules of the game.

A different type of electoral violence that receives little attention in existing literature is employed by anti-systemic oppositions targeting a democratic system. This follows a different logic than the pursuit of electoral advantage and regime survival that dominates the books under review, but it can be enormously destructive. Civil wars can rage during elections and shape how electoral competition plays out. For instance, the parties targeted by the Pakistani Taliban in 2013 were unable to campaign in many areas of the country as their rallies were hit with bombs and their candidates assassinated. This altered the electoral landscape and played a role in determining the ultimate outcome of the historic election.

Anti-system opposition violence is not part of a grim but manageable game of electoral militarization and thuggery. Instead, it ruthlessly targets candidates, voters, and the core electoral process as part of a broader campaign to overthrow or escape from a regime. Straus and Taylor explicitly exclude civil war violence as electoral violence, but it is not clear why: civil wars are often waged over whether a state will be democratic, as opposed to an Islamist theocracy or an authoritarian party-state. This violence is unambiguously related to elections. In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram has launched an anti-systemic challenge that included killing politicians and targeting rallies and campaign offices in the run-up to Nigeria’s 2011 election. Al Qaeda in Iraq has ruthlessly targeted both Sunni and Shia candidates for elimination. Elections are integral to this violence, but as a target rather than an object to be manipulated.
In Weimar Germany, the street fighters of the fascists and communists used violence linked to elections as a way to carve out influence en route to an ultimate seize of power. Not all electoral violence involves trying to win an election.

**Local Actors and Electoral Violence** Finally, we can see violence related to elections by “unaligned” local actors (cell F). Unaligned actors are not clearly on one side of a national political cleavage the way that government, government allies, and opposition groups are. Instead, elections provide a means of pursuing local interests on the ground without explicit intra- or anti-systemic goals. As Stathis Kalyvas has pointed out for civil wars, the national “master” cleavages that dominate academic and journalistic accounts of conflict may be only loosely connected to what is actually happening in local communities. The real question is instead how master cleavages intersect with local cleavages to spur or prevent violence.

When it comes to elections, local elites, factions, and networks may try to manipulate governments and opposition parties, capture their resources and prestige, or become free agents whose support must be purchased with concessions from national forces. Elections can be a mechanism through which local actors, ranging from landlords to political families to organized crime, deploy violence to achieve parochial agendas. As Sisk notes, in Sudan, control over cattle became politicized and violent as part of electoral contestation (p. 65). In Zimbabwe and Cote D’Ivoire, local feuds over land were pursued under the cover of broader political issues. In India, localized caste and land conflicts can be wrapped up in state- and national-level electoral politics. In Karachi, turf battles and organized criminality are linked to electoral competition.

This kind of electoral violence does not have a clear effect on political stability. On the one hand, if they become locked into the systems of violent patronage identified by Reno, these local actors can actually become system-maintaining forces. Violence may be stabilizing, another mechanism of co-optation and “violence management.” On the other hand, local violence can unexpectedly spiral from below and put serious strain on a government by triggering mass mobilization, insurgency, or intra-regime splits. These local actors are the least-studied part of the electoral violence literature, in part because of the challenge of studying localities and generating reliable information about who the players are and what they want.

**Disaggregating Electoral Violence** A key implication of my typology is that there are distinct logics of electoral violence, depending on who is committing the violence and with what goal. Searching for “the” cause of electoral violence is problematic because there are multiple modes of electoral violence and multiple mechanisms driving them. The typology introduced here provides one possible basis for developing tighter theory and gathering more fine-grained data for better understanding what governments, oppositions, and local groups are trying to do when they use violence in an electoral context.
The Consequences of Electoral Violence

Both the first and second waves of research on electoral violence seek to explain when and where electoral violence happens. However, politics do not end after violence occurs. Instead, electoral violence can have hugely important causal consequences: once parties are armed, states are targeting opposition candidates, armed groups have broken free of regime control, or local feuds have escalated, the political rules of the game may fundamentally change. The consequences of electoral violence, in its various forms, are just as important and interesting as the causes. This section identifies key issues that can help structure future work in this area.

The most basic question is whether the use of violence actually advances the goals of those who deploy it. My typology is built around different goals, from winning close elections to rolling back democratic pressures from below. Sometimes these actions succeed, but they may also end in failure for the actors pursuing the strategy. We can imagine a number of possible outcomes resulting from strategies of electoral violence. Incumbent and pro-regime violence can work as planned. Smith’s chapter on Ethiopia argues that violence by the Ethiopian regime against post-2005 electoral protests helped the regime break its opposition for the 2010 election (p. 195–97). The Burmese military violently shattered the democratic movement of 1988–90 after the 1990 elections and reinvigorated its hold on power for another two decades. In India, the mobilization of communal riots during the 1980s and 1990s helped the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dramatically increase its vote totals, and to lead a national government in the late 1990s.39

Yet government-linked violence can also backfire and trigger surging mobilization that draws massive international and domestic criticism. Attacks on student protesters in 1998 Indonesia by factions of the military, for instance, were unable to prevent pro-democracy momentum; similar attempts at undermining the democratic system by South African hard-liners also failed. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism was eventually blunted, and former Gujarat Chief Minister and current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been highly controversial because of his complicity in Gujarat’s 2002 riots. In addition to domestic criticism, the international attention that Kelley and Reno describe is another possible source of sanction against politicians and governments that directly or indirectly deploy violence. Regimes are not all-powerful actors able to omnisciently achieve their goals.

Among opposition groups, it is possible that voters will be turned off by the adoption of violence, at least if it were not perceived as defense against the state. The evidence from the books under review suggests that opposition violence is usually reactive to state repression, but there is no guarantee that such a response will bear dividends. Opposition violence can provide a pretext for further state crackdowns or trigger spirals of violence that lead to civil war. It may also allow the government to gain the support of threatened elites and middle classes by claiming that it is holding back the deluge.40 In the anti-systemic context, we know remarkably
little about how militant attacks on electoral processes affect their prospective supporters: they may signal resolve and power but can also be a form of overreach.

Sustained electoral violence is also likely to change daily political practices. Patronage is distributed by local strongmen and armed parties, campaign rallies and grassroots campaigns are undermined by intimidation and threats, and parties may build both violent and non-violent strategies into their electoral campaigns. Violence becomes “normalized” as part of the rules of the game, undermining representation and democratic voice among the majority of citizens who lack coercive capability. Armed brokers may control patronage resources as well as coercion. Violence can allow new social blocs to rise in influence, changing the balance of political power in new and often unpredictable ways, as has occurred in Karachi since the birth of the MQM.41

What new research needs to explore is when the ballot box can provide a check on coercion: when are voters able to overcome the politics of violence and when, instead, are they co-opted or demobilized by it? Violence may freeze out popular sentiment, narrowing the political space even as formal electoral processes regularly operate. In turn, armed actors (including the state) may collude with one another in political and economic bargains that routinize violence as part of the political system. The median voter is not at the root of policy choices, even in the United States, and this is especially true in environments characterized by endemic violence, coercion, and corruption.42 We particularly need more rigorous studies of local politics to understand how citizens and politicians navigate this complicated environment.43

Another possible consequence of electoral violence is that the armed groups sponsored by governments will run out of control and turn on the regime. In India, Pakistan, and several cases of “warlord politics”44 in Africa, attempts to manipulate non-state violence have become far more complicated than expected. Electoral militarization can lead to blowback. Reno notes that “the appearance of armed factions associated with past and present governments, conceived in part as instruments to bolster these governments, came to be the principal threat to their security” (p. 244). In India’s Punjab, attempts to manipulate a radical Sikh preacher as a strategy to fracture a Sikh regional party spun wildly out of control and created a decade-long insurgency.45 The existing literature too often paints a strategic picture in which governments can deploy and reel back armed groups, but there are likely to be conditions under which violence accelerates beyond regime control. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it may be difficult to put back in.46

Bringing electoral violence into the study of civil conflict is a promising way of making the civil war subfield more explicitly political. Instead of focusing purely on patterns of violence, organization, and war outcomes, we can explore how the political goals and incentives of states and armed groups are affected by electoral processes. Elections provide information to combatant groups that they can use for targeting, and under certain circumstances electoral politics can undermine post-conflict peace.47 Pakistan, Nigeria, Colombia, and the Philippines provide examples of how elections and killing can feed into one another over long periods of time.
Militarized state building may also be affected by electoral violence. Governments need to make hard decisions about how to deploy coercion, which groups to target, and which areas to try to monopolize or to *de facto* rule indirectly. The electoral position of armed actors could make them valuable allies to be protected, or rivals to be repressed. State strategies toward armed groups are endogenous to the political interests of regimes, and elections are likely to be important in these calculations. As a result, militarized elections may be an equilibrium outcome rather than one-off aberrations.48

Finally, electoral violence can affect democratic consolidation. The street fighting of Weimar Germany did not do much to create a favorable image of democracy among many Germans. Violent elections are unlikely to create faith in democratic institutions and the desirability of the electoral project. Such violence may also provide both a motive and a pretext for security forces and militaries to become more involved in daily politics. In Thailand during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the extraordinary brutality of elections—with extensive state-sponsored killing of opposition politicians and flagrant manipulation of voting and the rule of law—contributed to recurrent political instability. Chaotic mass mobilization under weakly institutionalized environments increases the likelihood of military coups, and violent and contentious mass politics can lay the basis for enduring authoritarian consolidation.49 Yet in other cases, like the United Kingdom, violence did not derail democratization over the long-run. This raises the question of when electoral violence undermines the democratization process and when, instead, it can either facilitate, or at least not destroy, democratization (perhaps by challenging elite dominance or allowing a messy but useful incorporation of excluded classes).50 Electoral violence is not simply a result of politics but can also contribute to the rise of new political regimes and the reshaping of mass and elite preferences.

**Votes, Violence, and Politics**

Elections are now standard practice around the world. The levels and forms of violence related to them, however, are far from standard. It is remarkable how wide-ranging electoral violence is, touching on issues stretching from civil-military relations to local land conflicts. Though this complexity poses a challenge, it also shows how important and broad the politics of violence are. Electoral violence can undermine representation, build coercion and brutality into everyday political practice, shape regime- and state-building, and fuel insurgencies, local private armies, and security force politicization.

Electoral violence poses difficult dilemmas for policy making. Violent elections and their aftermaths in Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan, among others, make it clear that elections provide no guarantee of stability or legitimacy, even as internationally supported democratization in other countries has scored impressive successes. On balance, a move toward more international monitoring and democratizing pressure is likely to
improve the overall quality of elections. The problem is that in an important subset of cases, electoral politics is likely to trigger either large-scale warfare or less dramatic, but nevertheless sustained, violence around electoral contestation. Politicians and citizens trying to balance the virtues of democratic representation against the risk of spiraling violence face the same problem. The work under review shows that peaceful elections are quite common and that democracy in the developing world is not doomed to violence. Yet once unleashed, the legacies of conflict can be difficult to overcome, from gangs of armed young men to patronage networks dominated by strongmen and militarized political parties.

The key policy challenge lies in better identifying the cases in which elections may create focal points for manipulation, serious violence, and authoritarian rollback. Analyzing which actors have incentives to use violence, the extent of their ambitions, and their organizational capacity for actually producing violence is crucial to explaining which elections could trigger conflict. The typology of electoral violence in this article offers one way of categorizing who might deploy violence, how they might do so, and which forms of violence they are most likely to use. This article has also outlined a set of possible consequences of electoral violence that need to be considered when trying to manage electoral militarization. These analytical tools and future research are important because the key challenge to democratization in most of the contemporary world is not oligarchic landlords or repressive party-states. Instead, it is finding ways of turning formal electoral processes into meaningful political participation free of the shadow of the gun.

NOTES

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7. Ibid., 126–47.


18. Ibid., 16.


25. Levitsky and Way.


27. The basic logic here is similar to Wilkinson.


30. Sisk, 52–53.


34. As in the incumbent context, different opposition forces are lumped together in the best existing work. Straus and Taylor code challenger violence as involving “any party member, militia, or hooligan acting on behalf of a political party that does not control the executive,” Straus and Taylor, 20.
49. Huntington; Slater.
51. Kelley; Hyde.
52. Flores and Nooruddin, 568.