

Observing Electoral Violence

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Book Proposal

Summary

This book explains why political actors use electoral violence as opposed to other forms of electoral manipulation to steal elections, and how electoral violence uniquely influences the domestic and international responses to stolen elections. The observability of violence, as the title of the book suggests, I argue, is key to understanding both of these pressing questions. Electoral violence, unfortunately, is a recurrent feature of elections, undermining polls in about one-third of countries in the world today, including well-established democracies like India and the United States, as well as weakly-democratic and authoritarian states, such as Bangladesh and Zimbabwe.

The observability of violence, I argue, provides an incentive for candidates to use violence to steal elections because it allows political actors to detect whether the agents they enlist to manipulate elections for them do so and reduces these agents' likelihood of shirking in turn. The observability of violence also raises people's awareness that elections have been stolen. Domestically, this increased awareness reduces the likelihood that protests will occur against elections because it amplifies the threat posed by the physical harm aspect of violence. Internationally, it has the opposite effect. It increases the likelihood that international actors will curtail foreign aid and investment due to the risk that violence poses to their transactions, among other reasons.

I test these arguments quantitatively using original data on the observability of electoral fraud and electoral violence based on international electoral monitors reports. Using these reports, I measure the observability of electoral violence in comparison to electoral fraud based on extent to which reports from different agencies agree as to the level of violence and fraud in an election. The agreement is higher for violence due to its observability. The analysis draws on other original data on post-election protests as well well-established datasets on foreign aid and investment to understand the international consequences of electoral violence. The statistical analyses span 185 countries over a 30-year period between 1989-2020. Preliminary analyses confirm these arguments. These analyses are further supported with scores of interviews with international aid agencies, electoral monitors, as well as politicians and their agents.

XXThis book makes a number of innovations in the study of electoral violence. It is one of only a few academic studies that does not explain why political actors use electoral violence to steal elections in terms of the same factors as fraud (e.g., competitiveness, stakes and permissiveness), and that does not see violence as a means of last resorts. The book is unique in seeing the observability of violence as an incentive to its use violence rather than

as a deterrent, and in differentiating the observability of violence from the physical harm aspect of violence in terms of its effects. XX

These innovations have important policy implications. If observability provides an incentive for political actors to use violence to steal elections, it follows that observability can also provide the key to ending it. The answer, though, does not lie in making violence less observable. This, were it even possible, would create other perverse outcomes. The analysis suggests that increasing the severity and enforcement of sanctions for all forms of electoral manipulation is the way forward. At the domestic level, this requires strengthening the rule of law. At the international level, fortunately, the incentive to impose sanctions are aligned with the incentives of political actors to use electoral violence since international actors are reluctant to provide aid or investment to violence-torn states. Current initiatives to reduce electoral violence, such as crowd-sourcing and peace messaging, are likely to have little deterrent effect without a strong sanction mechanism.

The book consists of seven chapters. The argument presented is split over two chapters: Chapter 2 explains how the observability of violence motivates candidates to use violence to steal elections, while Chapter 4 explains how the observability of violence affects responses to stolen elections. Chapter 3 provides a statistical test of the argument presented in Chapter 2, while Chapter 5 and 6 provide statistical tests of the argument presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of the findings.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I establish in this chapter the questions posed in the book –why political actors use electoral violence to steal elections rather than other forms of electoral manipulation, and how electoral violence uniquely influences domestic and international responses to stolen elections. I also present in this chapter the importance of these questions in real-world terms and in terms of the academic literature. To structure the remainder of the book, I also briefly summarize my argument in this chapter about how the observability of violence affects the use of electoral violence and reactions to stolen elections, and discuss my approach to analyzing these questions.

Chapter 2: Why Violence for Stealing Elections

In this chapter, I explain how the observability of violence allows political actors to know whether the agents they rely on to steal elections for them do so and eliminates the problem of moral hazard inherent in this relationship. To distinguish violence from fraud, I present in this chapter a typology that shows the degree to which different forms of fraud (e.g., ballot stuffing and vote buying) and violence (e.g., assaults; killings; property damage) are observable. I argue that political actors use violence to alter the outcome of elections because they

cannot rely on the agents that they recruit to commit fraud for them to do so. Fraud agents have incentives to shirk their commitments to varying degrees depending on their ideological affinity with a candidate, a candidate's likelihood of winning, the effort required to commit fraud, and so forth, and the hidden nature of fraud makes it difficult for political actors to monitor their behavior. Since violence is overt, however, political actors can observe whether the agents they recruit to commit violence for them do so, reducing these agents' incentive to shirk in turn.

Chapter 3: Analyzing Why Violence for Stealing Elections

In this chapter, I test the implications of my argument about the observability of electoral violence as the reason for its use in terms of electoral monitors. Electoral monitors exacerbate the moral hazard problem inherent in electoral fraud by making it more difficult for political actors to commit fraud. Thus, I expect electoral monitors to be associated with an increase in electoral violence, but only when the costs of being sanctioned for manipulating elections are low given the observability of electoral violence. Preliminary analyses, which use propensity score matching methods to address the issue of selection bias, confirm this argument. For these analyses, I compile original data on the frequency and size of electoral monitoring and the potential and severity of sanctions for stolen elections based on US State Department statements as well as foreign aid obligations, and draw on multiple, pre-existing measures of electoral violence.

Chapter 4: The Distinct Consequences of Electoral Violence

I theorize in this chapter about how the observability of electoral violence affects domestic and international responses to stolen elections and distinguish the observability aspect of electoral violence from the physical harm aspect of it. I also distinguish the effects of electoral violence from electoral fraud in this chapter and situate my argument within the existing literature. The physical harm aspect of electoral violence, I argue, ought to reduce the likelihood of protests and curtail foreign aid and investment because it increases the odds of persons being harmed if they protest in the case of the former and undercuts the value of aid and investment in the case of the latter. The observability of electoral violence, meanwhile, raises people's awareness that elections are stolen. While this, I argue, ought to increase the likelihood of protests in the case of fraud, in the case of electoral violence, it should reduce it by heightening the physical harm aspect of election violence.

Chapter 5: Analyzing the Domestic Consequences of Electoral Violence

In this chapter, I test the relationship between electoral violence and protests against elections. I separate out the effect of the observability of electoral violence from the physical harm aspect of electoral violence based on the agreement of electoral monitors regarding the level of fraud and violence in an election. I expect there to be greater agreement among

electoral monitors regarding electoral violence than fraud. The analysis is based on 2,300 elections between 1989 and 2020 and 1,032 reports by electoral monitors that have pledged to uphold democratic standards in electoral observation. Preliminary results from a small sample of reports coded find support for these findings. The analysis shows, as expected, that higher agreement regarding the level of fraud increases the likelihood of protests while higher agreement regarding the level of violence decreases it.

Chapter 6: Analyzing the International Consequences of Electoral Violence

I test the relationship between electoral violence and foreign aid and investment in this chapter. Both the observability and the physical harm aspects of electoral violence ought to reduce foreign aid and investment. The observability of violence increases international actors' awareness that elections have been stolen, while the harm aspect raises the financial risk of extending aid or investment to countries. Preliminary analyses show that the difference in the amount of aid distributed to countries versus the amount of aid promised to countries in the previous year is significantly higher (i.e., less aid), the greater is the level of electoral violence in countries (but not greater in the case of electoral fraud). The analysis also shows that more agreement among electoral monitors regarding the level of violence in countries, the less foreign aid and investment countries receive after an election, suggesting that both the observability and the physical harm that electoral violence entails have negative economic repercussions for countries.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this chapter, I bring together the findings from the different chapters and discuss their implications for different strategies used to control electoral fraud and electoral violence in countries.