WHEN GOVERNMENTS USE ELECTION VIOLENCE TO STAY IN POWER

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About the Laboratory on International Law and Regulation

(ILAR)

The Laboratory on International Law and Regulation (ILAR) is an international, interdisciplinary laboratory that explores when and why international laws actually work. Among scholars, this question has triggered a lively debate that ILAR is engaging with better theories and evidence. ILAR research examines a wide array of issues from environment and energy to human rights, trade and security issues. The ILAR team looks at these issues from the international perspective and also through comparisons across countries.

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Abstract: When are governments most likely to use election violence, and what factors can mitigate government incentives to resort to violence? How do the dynamics of election violence change in the pre- and post-election periods? We present a new theory explaining the propensity of governments to engage in election violence before, during, or after an election, as well as which factors mitigate government incentives to use violent electoral tactics. We show that the election violence in pre- and post-election periods are related but follow distinct logics. Our argument is tested with cross-national evidence on elections, government use of pre- and post-election violence, and post-election protests from 1981 to 2006, and illustrative case studies from Iran and Zimbabwe.
On paper, Azerbaijan is a multiparty democracy, and has held periodic multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections since the country regained independence in 1991. Despite the nominal existence of democratic institutions, tactics of electoral manipulation used by the government include overt election fraud, violence, and intimidation. Opposition supporters, opposition candidates, and journalists risk torture, arbitrary arrest, and political imprisonment—all strategies the government uses to “win” elections.¹ For example, in the run up to the 2005 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, facing the possibility that the “color revolutions” of Georgia and Ukraine would spread, the government repressed speech and freedom of assembly, arrested journalists, and attempted to prevent the opposition from campaigning. The police detained over a thousand activists before the election, and jailed hundreds without cause.²

After the election, amid accusations of fraud, the government announced that the ruling party won an overwhelming majority, with the next largest opposition coalition winning only eight parliamentary seats. The elections were condemned by reputable international observers, who documented fraud in more than 43% of observed precincts.³ Immediately following the elections, opposition supporters began to protest the results, assembling more than 7,000 people. Riot police and military forces disbursed the protesters using clubs and water cannons, and several opposition politicians were beaten.⁴ In the end, despite international and domestic backlash, the president and ruling party remained in

Election violence includes events in which incumbent leaders and ruling party agents employ violence against the political opposition and potential voters before, during, or after elections. Figure 1 depicts the yearly number of elections characterized by pre- or post-election violence from 1960 to 2006 in the developing world. The spread of elections across regime types and the prevalence of election violence raise a number of questions: When are governments most likely to use election violence, and how does this vary in the pre- and post-election periods? Does pre-election violence lead to more or less post-election violence? And perhaps most importantly, what variables can mitigate government incentives to resort to violence?

The determinants of election violence and how to prevent it remain poorly understood, in part due to an absence of direct measures of election violence and in part due to a lack of theoretical or empirical attention to differences in pre- and post-election violence. This article attempts to address both issues by building on existing theoretical and empirical work in the fields of democratization and human rights; elections, regime type, and political repression; election violence; tactics of election manipulation; and the relationship between political protest and government sponsored repression.

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6 Note that the term "incumbent leaders" refers to the principal instigator of state sponsored election violence. Other scholars sometimes use "regimes," "governments," and "the state" to describe similar actors. Opposition leaders may engage in the strategic use of election violence, but we refer to opposition explicitly.
7 Note that we use the term "developing world" to refer to the countries included in our study. A more accurate term would include all countries that hold elections but that are not stable long-term democracies.
8 Because this topic touches on so many different literatures, all relevant studies are not summarized here. The core works on human rights and elections and/or election violence include: Christian Davenport, 'Liberalizing Event or Lethal Episode: An Empirical Assessment of How National Elections Affect the Suppression of Political and Civil Liberties', Social Science Quarterly, 79 (1998); Christian Davenport, 'From Ballots to Bullets: An Empirical Assessment of How National Elections Influence
We assume that election violence is a possibility in all countries that hold elections but that do not yet have fully consolidated democratic political institutions. For convenience, long-term consolidated democracies are excluded from the empirical analysis, but this decision is not essential to our theory or our empirical results. A feature of our study is that we disaggregate election violence into several component parts, allowing a more nuanced examination of the pre- and post-election periods and the relationship between pre-election violence and post-election dynamics. This approach is distinct from existing studies which tend to operationalize election violence as any form of human rights abuses that occur in a country during the same calendar year as an election. Although there are a number of articles and books that touch on election violence, no studies that we know of have attempted to address these questions directly using election-specific data for a comparably broad set of countries.

Using cross-national data on elections and state-sponsored election violence from 1981 to 2006, we present and test a new theory of when incumbent governments throughout the developing world are likely to use election violence, as well as which factors are likely to decrease leaders’ incentives to use election violence. We argue that leaders are strategic in their choice to engage in election violence, even those who have demonstrated


their willingness to use political repression against their own citizens.

Specifically, we argue that information about political competition plays an important role in government decisions about whether to use election violence, but that the motivations for leaders to engage in election violence differ in the pre- and post-election periods. In the immediate pre-election period, we argue that incumbent governments are more inclined to use violence when the ruling political party or incumbent candidate cannot be confident of victory in the election. Governments are more likely to engage in pre-election harassment of the opposition and violence against citizens when facing a potential electoral threat rather than a predictable victory.

However, an unpredictable election is not sufficient to induce an incumbent government to use pre-election violence. Even when he or she has reason to believe that an election threatens survival in office, institutional constraints can make violent strategies more costly or risky. Therefore, we argue that these constraints can reduce the incentives for governments to use pre-election violence, even when pre-election threats to their power are clear.

In the immediate post-election period, we argue that the dynamics of violence follow a similar but distinctive logic. Even after election day is over, governments can be threatened in the post-election period by mass uprising and post-election protests. At the extreme, protests can force incumbent governments out of office. Given post-election protest, governments often respond with violence against protesters, attempting to eliminate a secondary threat to their hold on power that can be triggered by elections. But like in the pre-election period, governments without strong institutional constraints on their rule are more likely to use violence against post-election protestors. Because post-election protest does not occur randomly, we also investigate the relationship between pre-

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10 Authors.
election violence and post-election dynamics.

In the remainder of the article, we briefly summarize how our argument builds on existing research across several distinct research agendas, outline our theory and hypotheses in greater detail, introduce our empirical strategy, and present our findings.

**Democracy, Elections, and the Rise of “Illiberal” Democracies**

Scholars of comparative politics generally agree that holding elections does not mean that a country is democratic. In fact, less than half of the governments that now hold direct elections for national office do so within a context of consolidated democratic political institutions and respect for human rights. Yet there is little debate that elections, like protections for human rights, are necessary for democratic governance.

As elections have spread to most countries in the world, regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic have attracted more scholarly attention, and the labels for these “hybrid regimes” have proliferated, including “illiberal democracy,” “semi-democracy,” “electoral authoritarianism” and “competitive authoritarianism.” Across all of these regimes, elections are not necessarily an institution of democracy, but can also serve as means for incumbents to stay in power, often while attempting to maintain a

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11 Authors’ calculation.
“semblance of democratic legitimacy.”  

Our argument builds on this research by focusing on election violence as an important tactic used by governments that allow elections but work to minimize uncertainty about their hold on power.

This literature also provides a number of reasons why leaders hold elections even when they are not committed to democracy. There are many explanations for the diffusion of elections to countries that are not democratic and the adoption of electoral institutions by autocratic leaders. For example, elections help incumbents allocate patronage and divide or control the opposition; facilitate a non-violent transfer of power to a chosen successor; act as a response to international pressure for democracy; or allow governments to “reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty.”  

We do not offer an alternative explanation for why elections occur within autocracies, but focus on one important aspect of this phenomenon: the use of election violence by governments against their citizens.

**Elections and Repression**

The relationship between democracy and human rights is enshrined in numerous international agreements, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Countries including the United States and most European states promote democracy in part because of the idea that full protections for human rights require democratic government:

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15 Schedler, ‘The Menu of Manipulation’. Adam Przeworski also notes that this trend is not new, and electoral authoritarian regimes “were the prevalent form of political organization throughout history” *‘Force, Wealth, and Elections’, Ms. New York University* (2009), p. 6.
18 Author.
democracy increases liberty, freedom and security for citizens. Mountains of evidence show that stable liberal democracies are much more likely than other types of governments to respect human rights,\textsuperscript{20} although political transitions often include high levels of coercion and democratizing governments do not always respect human rights.\textsuperscript{21}

Yet, as elections have spread to nearly every country in the world, so have complaints about the role of violence in democratization and the use of violence as an electoral tool. Scholars have argued that that elections increase political polarization and potentially increase human rights abuses in countries without well-developed respect for the rule of law,\textsuperscript{22} and argued that politicians in democracies can have strong incentives to use violent electoral tactics.\textsuperscript{23} By contrast, others have argued that elections in illiberal states eventually bring about broader political participation, civic engagement, and political accountability, all of which will improve respect for human rights over time.\textsuperscript{24}

Cross-national statistical studies of repression and elections are abundant, but

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Paul Collier, \textit{Wars, Guns, and Votes} (New York: Harper, 2009); Davenport, ‘State Repression and Political Order’; Snyder, \textit{From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Zakaria, ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’.
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existing data has hampered previous efforts to distinguish between elections in which incumbents use violence from those that do not – leading to contradictory findings.\(^{25}\) In addition, existing work has largely focused on explaining when human rights abuses increase during election years, rather than on explaining variation between elections in the use of various forms of election violence.

There are several prominent studies that come to different conclusions about the relationship between repression and elections. In his path breaking study of 49 countries from 1948 to 1982, Christian Davenport found that authoritarian governments were statistically more likely to reduce censorship and political restrictions during national election years, perhaps in an effort to legitimize the regime by giving citizens access to political leaders. He found no relationship between elections and political repression in transitional or democratic countries.\(^{26}\) In a follow on study, Davenport found that governments also tend to reduce media restrictions during election years, perhaps as a way to institutionalize dissent.\(^{27}\) David Richards, however, in a study of elections in 74 countries (including some autocracies) from 1981 to 1987, found that the presence of national elections had no effect on general levels of government respect for human rights in an election year one way or the other.\(^{28}\) Focusing on democracies, David Cingranelli and Mikhail Filippov argued that both incumbents and opposition leaders strategically choose to engage in or ignore poor human rights practices in the absence of proper electoral incentives.\(^{29}\) Their study demonstrates that, among democracies, certain electoral rules – such as the election of members of parliament through low magnitude proportional

\(^{25}\) Contradictory findings may also be due to differences in case selection.  
\(^{26}\) Davenport, ‘From Ballots to Bullets’.  
\(^{27}\) ‘Liberalizing Event or Lethal Episode?: An Empirical Assessment of How National Elections Affect the Suppression of Political and Civil Liberties’.  
\(^{28}\) ‘Perilous Proxy’.  
representation districts – are associated with better protections for human rights.

It is also important to note that this study does not address the relationship between civil war, elections, and political repression, which is a promising but separate research agenda.30

What is clear from the research agenda on elections and repression is that there is a strong connection between stable liberal democracy and government protection for certain human rights, but that a growing number of elections are taking place in very illiberal places where democracy has yet to be consolidated. The research to date does not use measures of election-specific violence perpetrated by incumbent governments nor does it separate the pre- and post-election periods, and instead relies on aggregate annual measures of human rights abuses, which may or may not be related to election violence.

Protest and Repression

Post-election violence, as we argue below, is often a response to post-election protest. Thus, examining protest in the post-election period is, we argue, essential for understanding the use of election violence in the period immediately following an election. From 1960 to 2006 there were over 300 unique cases of post-election protest.31 While there is a rich literature on how various kinds of protests can increase the use of repression generally, and a smaller literature on the role of elections in sparking protests, few studies have examined election protests and election-specific violence together.

Existing research on protest has found evidence that government repression (though not specifically election violence) provokes various forms of public dissent,

including protests, strikes, demonstrations and rebellions. Another productive discussion addresses the decision by governments to respond to protest (though not specifically to post-election protest) with repression or accommodation. Many studies have found that the use of repression has led to protests. Davenport documented that governments tended to respond to domestic threats such as protests with repression and that they were more likely to apply censorship and political restrictions as the frequency and intensity of dissent rose, though Carey found that only guerilla warfare increased the risk of political repression, whereas non-violent or spontaneous forms of dissent, such as demonstrations, riots and strikes, do not create threats substantial enough to warrant a violent government response. Other studies have shown that the relationship between repression and dissent is non-linear: governments overreact to small demands with violence but as demands increase governments often use more constraint with dissenters. In some cases, government repression and accommodation in response to protests have been substitutes.

A separate but relevant research agenda focuses on elections that provoke post-election protest. The most relevant finding for this study is that, for some scholars, manipulated elections can serve as a focal point for collective action, and post-election

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35 Sabine C. Carey, ‘The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent’, *Political Studies*, 58 (2010).
37 Moore, ‘The Repression of Dissent’.
protest (or the threat of protest) can be an important part of self-enforcing democracy.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, election fraud and election violence in the pre-election period may actually make post-election protest more likely, thus raising the stakes in the post-election period and potentially making post-election violence more likely. We build upon this work to investigate the unique role that post-election protest plays in governments’ decisions to use election violence.

\textbf{Argument and Expectations}

Why some leaders throughout the developing world more likely than others to employ election violence? Which institutions can reduce this tendency? Although there are many factors that contribute to election violence, we argue that information available to the incumbent government prior to and after an election is a central factor, as are legal constraints on a government’s ability to engage in election violence without consequences. Incumbent leaders do not all possess the same information or face the same constraints.

Information about the strength of the political opposition in the specific election cycle works together with institutional constraints on the government to influence their decision to engage in election violence. However, governments tend to be shortsighted in how they respond to available information about their electoral competition because their decision to employ pre-election violence to “win” an election amplifies the risk of protest in response to the election, and thus increases incentives for further government violence in the post-election period. In order to take advantage of the most accurate data on human

rights abuses, our study is limited to 1981-2006, and we include all countries that hold elections but that are not yet stable long-term democracies. The list of the 140 countries in our sample is included in the online appendix.

**Pre-Election Violence**

Elections put authoritarian leaders in a bind: they can bring a number of advantages, such as validating a leader’s hold on power, but elections can also introduce unwelcome uncertainty.39 It is well established in the international relations literature that threats to power often prompt governments to respond with political repression of various types.40 Leaders thus have incentives to use election violence targeted against political opponents and their supporters when they believe that elections may pose a real threat to their hold on power.41 And, if a government believes that it is popular enough to win the election outright, election violence is unnecessary, risky, and even counterproductive.42

Prior to elections, the incumbent government infers the strength of the electoral challenge they will face based on available information. When incumbents run in elections in which they perceive they may not be able to win outright, we expect them to be more willing to use election violence than when it is clear that they and their party are popular.

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42 Note that the margin of victory acceptable to many electoral authoritarian leaders is much higher than the majority required to stay in power (Alberto Simpser, ‘Making Votes Not Count: Strategic Incentives for Electoral Corruption’, PhD Dissertation (Stanford University, 2005)).
For example, the UN-administered 1993 elections in Cambodia were the country’s first potentially democratic, multi-party elections. The incumbent government’s Cambodian People’s Party, however, faced a strong challenge from the royalist FUNCINPEC party, and thus sought to use violence in an effort to intimidate their candidates and supporters. According to one opposition party operative, “the State of Cambodia is creating the terror because they know that Funcinpec will win.”43 The Cambodian government was responsible for over 70 documented killings – and more than 100 injuries – of members of the political opposition prior to the election.44 The perpetrators were affiliated with the government and the political parties that were most threatened by democratic elections: the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP), led by Prime Minister Hun Sen; and the party affiliated with the “Khmer Rouge”, which boycotted the elections.45 Ultimately, the incumbent party’s fears were justified, as they fell far short of a majority and only managed to join the ruling coalition when CPP leader Hun Sen threatened to reignite the country’s civil war.

The inverse of this logic also applies. When leaders feel confident that they can win an election outright, even electoral autocrats who have the ability to engage in violence against opposition groups or voters often choose not to employ it. In advance of the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, incumbent president Daniel Ortega campaigned enthusiastically and by all accounts was under the impression he would win, and most public opinion polls said he would. As a result, he thought he had no need to use violence and the elections that year were relatively peaceful. Unbeknownst to him and to most observers of Nicaraguan politics, public opinion polls in the post-conflict country were wildly inaccurate, and in a surprise –

and peaceful – outcome, Ortega lost to Violeta Chamorro.46

The election in Nicaragua also illustrates that the threats posed to authoritarian leaders by elections are not always clear, and the absence of reliable information may itself pose a threat. A defining characteristic of many regimes is that the flow of information is restricted and expression is limited. When information is restricted, leaders cannot always be confident about the strength of the opposition or whether they are facing a real electoral threat. Thus, there are two ways that information can present a threat. First, reliable public opinion polls may not be available or may be known to be inaccurate. As a result, leaders have difficulty estimating their actual popularity. Second, polls may exist and show that a leader or the incumbent party is unpopular. This leads to our first hypothesis, 

H1: Leaders who anticipate an electoral threat to their hold on power prior to an election are more likely to engage in pre-election violence than leaders who possess information suggesting they can be confident of victory before elections.

Yet a number of incumbents who face electoral threats never turn to violence to stay in power. A leader’s choice to act on this information by using violence is constrained by the anticipated consequences of engaging in election violence. These consequences often take the form of domestic institutional checks or other methods of pressuring the incumbent leader.

Election violence can be especially risky for leaders if it can lead to legal or political prosecution. Human rights abuses – such as murder and torture – are in most cases illegal and unpopular among citizens. Perpetrators of these crimes risk getting caught and punished, either while they are in office, or after they step down. For example, Charles Taylor, former (elected) Liberian president and suspected war criminal, has been charged by the International Criminal Court for terrorizing the civilian population, and Taylor faces

a serious risk of going to jail. Legislatures and domestic courts may also punish leaders for perpetrating violence, while international treaty bodies and non-governmental organizations may pressure the international community to intervene. The Iranian leadership's violent crackdown on opposition supporters following the 2009 presidential elections increased the resolve of other governments to impose economic sanctions.47 A UN-backed tribunal sentenced former Khmer Rouge leader, Kaing Guek Eav, for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including his role in overseeing the torture and death of more than ten thousand people in the 1970s – a time in which he had no reason to believe he would one day be held accountable. 48 Election violence becomes a more viable strategy when consequences are not anticipated.

Thus, our second hypothesis focuses on the factors that can mitigate a leader's decision to use election violence even if their available information suggests the possibility of an electoral threat. We consider domestic consequences, such as courts, and international consequences, such as human rights treaties.49

H2: If the government may suffer serious institutional consequences for committing election violence, leaders, even when they perceive a threat, are less likely to use violence in the pre-election period.

Post-election Violence

49 This line of reasoning is related to literate that highlights international consequences for domestic policies, such as Judith Kelley’s study of the role of international institutions in shaping ethnic policies in Europe (Judith Kelley, 'International Actors on the Domestic Scene: Membership Conditionality and Socialization by International Institutions', International Organization, 58 (2004).), or work on international organizations and democratization by Jon Pevehouse Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); 'Democracy from the Outside-In? International Organizations and Democratization', International Organization, 56 (2003).) and Daniela Donno ('Who Is Punished? Regional Intergovernmental Organizations and the Enforcement of Democratic Norms', International Organization, 64 (2010).),
Not all election violence happens prior to or during election day, and threats to an incumbent sometimes arise in the immediate post-election period. In fact, pre-election violence can provoke post-election protests, creating a potentially risky sequence of events in which the rule of the government is challenged in the streets and the incumbent government must choose whether to use force against protesters. Thus, using violence as well as fraud in the pre-election period can be especially risky for an incumbent because it increases the probability that citizens respond through protest. In the immediate post-election period, public demonstrations of dissent are a possible threat to the incumbent government, leading some governments to respond with violence against post-election protestors. Post-election protests are an additional way elections can reveal or provoke a threat to the incumbent government, even after they have won re-election, because protest can force the resignation of the incumbent, new elections, or other power transitions.

Since the use of post-election violence is often a response to protests, in order to understand the logic of post-election violence, we must also estimate which factors make post-election protest more likely. Consistent with our argument about the use of pre-election violence, we follow existing literature in arguing that the public is more likely to protest an election result when they believe the election was fraudulent or when the government has engaged pre-election violence: both fraud and pre-election violence make election protests more likely.

H3: Post-election protest is more likely when there is pre-election violence and/or pre-election concerns about fraud.

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51 Carey, ‘The Dynamic Relationship Between Protest and Repression’; Carey, ‘The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent’. Although her focus is on protests generally not election protests specifically.
Of course, electoral autocratic governments sometimes choose to respond to election protests with violence. Recent years have seen multiple examples of election protests resulting in the ouster of the incumbent or the cancelling of the election, Côte d’Ivoire in 2010 and Kenya in 2007 being but two of the more recent examples. As shown in Figure 2, an increasingly large share of protests result in the ouster of the incumbent or the cancelling of an election.53

[Figure 2 Here]

Given the large share of protests that successfully result in new elections or a new leader, it is perhaps most surprising that some governments choose not to respond to protests with violence, as in Mexico following the disputed 2006 elections or following the closely contested 2004 elections in Taiwan. We argue that one important reason why incumbents choose not to respond with violence is that some face institutional consequences for engaging in post-election violence, particularly when violence targets peaceful civilian protests. Following the 2010 controversy of elections in Côte d’Ivoire, for example, in addition to arresting former president Laurent Gbagbo for his actions after the election, the government issued warrants for many of his associates, and requested a formal investigation by the ICC.54

Our fourth hypothesis is similar to H2, and suggests that consequences also constrain incumbents in the post-election period from responding to protests with violence. *H4: If the government is likely to suffer serious institutional consequences for responding violently to post-election protest, leaders are less likely to use violence against protestors in the post-election period.*

In the next section we evaluate each of these hypotheses using new cross-national

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53 See also authors.
data on the use of election-related violence.

Cross-national Analysis

In order to assess the observable implications of our argument, we employ a cross-national analysis, using data on elections from 1981-2006. Most of these data come from the newly available National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset, collected by Hyde and Marinov.\(^{55}\) These data contain information on elections for all non-Western democracies with a population over a half-a-million, including detailed information on the existence and type of election violence for each election event, as well as on post-election protest.\(^{56}\) By taking advantage of these data, we are able to conduct more direct tests of the factors driving election violence than existing cross-national studies, most of which rely on aggregate annual indicators of various forms of human rights abuses on entire country populations,\(^{57}\) or aggregate counts of demonstrations or protests.\(^{58}\) We are also able to explore important variations in the behavior of electoral autocratic governments.

Although much progress has been made with these annual and more aggregate measures, our approach has a distinct advantage. Unlike annual measures of political repression that gauge the level of any type of human rights abuses in a country during a year, we measure election-specific violence perpetrated by the government and distinguish between pre- and post-election violence against civilians and opposition parties. And we are able to make distinctions among electoral autocratic regimes and the types and quality of information they possess that could inform their election strategies. Since we are able to make these distinctions, our data provides a nuanced account of

\(^{55}\) ‘Which Elections Can Be Lost?’.

\(^{56}\) A complete list of the countries in our sample is available in our online appendix.


electoral violence that differs from existing approaches, and also cover more countries over a longer time period. Table 1 provides summary information for each of the variables used in the subsequent analysis.

(Table 1 Here)

**Explaining Pre-Election Violence**

In order to measure violence during the campaign period and on election day we create a variable, *Pre-Election Violence*, which equals one if, in the pre-election period, the government engaged in election-specific violence against civilians (coded from *Nelda33*) or harassment of political opposition members (*Nelda15*) and zero otherwise.

In order to test our first hypothesis, we assess whether reliable information existed immediately prior to the election that suggested that the incumbent would lose the election. Rather than utilize actual election results—which would introduce severe endogeneity bias—we take advantage of the fact that many incumbents, news organizations, and NGOs conduct polls on candidate popularity in the pre-election period. Since these polls are reflective of the type of information available to the incumbent about the likely threat posed by the election, unfavorable polling should increase incentives to use pre-election violence. We intentionally equate a lack of reliable polling data with information that the incumbent may lose, as we expect both circumstances to act as potential threats to incumbents. We create a variable, *Polling Unfavorable*, which equals one if the polls suggested a close race or were negative for the incumbent, or if reliable public opinion polls were not available. It equals zero if reliable pre-election polls existed and favored the incumbent (*Nelda26*).

Another way to assess whether the incumbent expected to lose the election is to

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59 The codebook for each of these variables is available at http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/.
60 We also estimate our results by excluding cases without reliable polls. The results remain consistent and are available in our online appendix.
look at public statements made by the incumbent and opposition leaders prior to the 
election. This is an accurate way to assess the expectations of the incumbent: the 
incumbent wins over 90% of the cases in which pre-election statements suggest victory 
for the incumbent (authors’ calculation). We create a second variable, Victory Uncertain, 
which equals zero if there were pre-election statements from official sources suggesting 
that the victory of the incumbent was assured, and one otherwise (Nelda12). We expect 
both variables to have a positive and statistically significant relationship with pre-election 
violence.

In order to evaluate our second hypothesis, we assess the likely consequences for 
governments who use pre-election violence. There are many situations in which an 
incumbent may expect serious consequences for violence, and the goal of this exercise is to 
evaluate which types of constraints are most likely to mitigate incentives for governments 
to use election violence. We evaluate four measures of constraints that may reduce the 
probability that an incumbent will act on incentives to engage in pre-election violence.

First, we use Executive Constraints, from the Polity IV dataset.\textsuperscript{61} This index ranges 
from one to seven and measures the extent of institutionalized constraints on the decision-
making power of chief executives, and includes such components as the independence of 
the judiciary and the degree of legislative opposition to executive action.

Next we use a more specific measure of the ability of the judiciary to act as a check 
on other branches of government. Legal systems which are able to overrule decisions of the 
executive or legislature provide some check on a leader’s excess. In some cases, they may 
also be able to provide a tangible penalty in the form of imprisonment or other legal 
consequences. The Institutions and Elections Project (IAEP) includes a measure of judicial

\textsuperscript{61} Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jaggers, ‘Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and 
Management, University of Maryland (2002).
independence. We construct a binary variable, Courts, based upon their data, which indicates whether an independent court can rule on executive or legislative actions.

A third source of potential accountability stems from international actors. Governments that use violence to manipulate elections often find themselves criticized or sanctioned by other democracies, international organizations, and NGOs. Such criticism may lead to consequences in the form of economic sanctions, reduced foreign aid, and less investment. Membership in international treaties may increase costs on repressive leaders. Although few treaties have credible enforcement mechanisms for human rights violations, they often empower nonstate actors with tools to pressure repressive governments and may therefore impose indirect costs on repressive leaders. Treaties may also shape elite-initiated agendas and support domestic human rights litigation that can hurt incumbent governments. The variable, Treaties, is a count of the number of treaties that a country has ratified by the current year. These data are from the UN, the African Union, the European Union and the Organization of American States – in some cases, states that have ratified a regional treaty is also be subject to the jurisdiction of its associated human rights court.

Finally, we examine the number of NGOs, a logged count of the number of NGOs that a country’s citizens have membership in each year. These data were culled from the Union of International Associations. Many of these organizations are watchdogs, as well as service providers. They keep an eye on government activities, publicize their contraventions and lobby for better protections for human rights. Like treaties, more NGOs should increase the anticipated consequences, and thereby decrease the use of election

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63 Author.
64 Beth A. Simmons, Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
65 Author.
66 Author.
violence.

We argued that not all electoral autocrats act the same: these constraints should mitigate an incumbent’s incentive to use violence when facing an electoral threat. Thus, we include interactions of each constraint variable with Unfavorable Polling and Victory Uncertain. We expect the interactions to be negative and statistically significant, indicating that negative consequences for using violence should mitigate the effect of election-related threats on pre-election violence.

If we were to estimate the effect of these variables on election violence, we would be likely to obtain biased estimates because more democratic countries are likely to have more competitive elections and lower levels of repression. Similarly, it is likely that more repressive regimes, in general, are also more likely to engage in repression during an election. Thus we run the risk of simply estimating which regimes are more likely to be repressive, rather than which regimes use election-specific violence per se. We address these estimation problems in several ways. First, we include a control for the level of democracy prior to the election using the Polity2 variable from the Polity IV project. Second, we control for the pre-existing level of government repression by including a measure of physical integrity rights, Physical Integrity, from the CIRI dataset. This variable is an index (0 to 8) that measures the annual level of government sponsored repressive activity, coded mainly from Amnesty International reports. For both these variables, we use the pre-election moving average of these variables to avoid biasing our estimates. We also

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67 Poe and Tate, ‘Repression of Human Rights to Personal Integrity in the 1980s’.
68 Marshall and Jaggers, ‘Polity IV Project’. Note that when we include Executive Constraints in our model, we exclude Polity2 as a control. Since these two variables are highly correlated, we do this to avoid biasing our estimates.
70 The Polity Project often chooses to adjust its coding in response to electoral changes. As a result, including a measure of Polity2 from the year of the election would commit the error of controlling for an outcome variable.
include fixed-effect estimates where feasible and cluster our standard errors by country.\textsuperscript{71}

Our estimation approach is represented below for each election $i$ in country $j$:

$$P(\text{Pre-Election Violence}_{ij} | \text{Polling Unfavorable}_{ij}/ \text{Victory Uncertainty}_{ij}) = \beta_1 (\text{Polling Unfavorable}_{ij}/ \text{Victory Uncertainty}_{ij}) + \beta_2 \text{Physical Integrity}_{\text{avg}} + \beta_3 \text{Polity2}_{\text{avg}} + \phi \mathbf{x}_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij},$$

where Physical Integrity$_{\text{avg}}$ and Polity2$_{\text{avg}}$ are the three year lagged moving averages of these variables and $X_{ij}$ is a vector of additional control variables. Because wealth and population may influence the use of violence and are included in existing studies, we include GDP (log) and Population (log), from the World Development Indicators.\textsuperscript{72} To help account for leader-specific factors that may influence the likelihood that incumbents will use election violence, like time in office and experience, all models include Leader Tenure and Leader Age from the Archigos dataset.\textsuperscript{73} We also include Civil War from the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset\textsuperscript{74} because internal conflict is correlated with human rights violations.\textsuperscript{75} Fraud and Demonstrations are included in all models to account for other potential determinants of pre-election violence.\textsuperscript{76} Fraud is from the NELDA data, and measures whether there were concerns, before the election, that it would not be free and fair (Nelda11). We use the common measure of Demonstrations found in many other models of political repression, which is a count of the total number of anti-government demonstrations, anti-government

\textsuperscript{71} Fixed effects estimates are included in the online appendix for all estimates except for those models with very small sample sizes, as noted in each table. Results for these estimates remain largely consistent and are available in the online appendix.


\textsuperscript{75} Dunning, ‘Fighting and Voting’; Poe, Tate, and Keith, ‘Repression of the Human Right to Personal Integrity Revisited’.

\textsuperscript{76} The inclusion of Fraud and Demonstrations do not influence the substantive interpretation of the other variables.
strikes and riots during a year (based on Banks CNTS coding\textsuperscript{77}); this allows us to isolate post-election protests from other demonstrations. Our base models estimate these parameters using a logit model with clustered standard errors.

\begin{itemize}
\item As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, \textit{Unfavorable Polls, Victory Uncertainty,} and \textit{Executive Constraints} significantly influence the probability of \textit{Pre-Election Violence} in a manner that is consistent with our first two hypotheses. Specifically, \textit{Unfavorable Polls} is associated with a significant increase in the probability of \textit{Pre-Election Violence}. However this effect is mitigated when an election is associated with a high level of \textit{Executive Constraints}, and increased when incumbents face few constraints. Similarly, \textit{Victory Uncertainty} is associated with an increased probability of \textit{Pre-Election Violence}, an effect which is also decreased by \textit{Executive Constraints}.
\end{itemize}

\textit{Executive Constraints} has the most consistent negative effect on \textit{Pre-Election Violence}. The three other measures for constraints – \textit{Courts, Treaties,} and \textit{NGOs} – yield more varied results, but also show some support for our second hypothesis. Specifically, when polling is unfavorable to the incumbent, \textit{NGOs} decrease the probability that the government will use pre-election violence. Similarly when pre-election statements indicate an uncertain victory, \textit{Courts} are also associated with a reduced probability of pre-election violence. However, \textit{Treaties} are not associated with a significant change in the predicted use of election violence for either measure of threat, and \textit{Courts} are associated with an increase in the probability that an incumbent faced with \textit{Unfavorable Polls} will resort to pre-election violence. This finding is only weakly significant, and may be an artifact of the data, as \textit{Courts} are mostly time-invariant.


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To make the substantive interpretation clearer, Figure 3 presents simulations of the predicted probabilities of pre-election violence based on these models. Each point estimate indicates the change in the probability of Pre-Election Violence associated with a change in each measure of electoral threat to the incumbent: Victory Uncertain and Polling Unfavorable. These simulations demonstrate that these results are substantively meaningful. When Executive Constraints are weak, elections with Victory Uncertain and Polling Unfavorable are both associated with close a 50% probability of violence.

[Figure 3 About Here]

In the next section we relax several assumptions in order to check whether the results are robust to alternative specifications. One of these assumptions is that the probability of an electoral challenge is conditionally unrelated to other factors which might increase the use of election violence. One potential challenge to this assumption is the fact that the institutional characteristics of a government are plausibly related to the likelihood of electoral competition and to electoral violence. Although we include Polity2, this may not be sufficient if the true model includes interactions or non-linearities. As a result, we include two additional specifications.

The first alternative specification utilizes nearest neighbor matching. This approach compares observations that are similar in each of our covariates. Given certain assumptions, this method allows us to be more confident that, even when we compare countries with similar institutional characteristics, electoral challenges and constraints remain significant determinants of the existence of pre-election violence. This approach also helps verify that our results are not sensitive to modeling assumptions.78

Second, we use a two-stage approach in which we first estimate the level of repression in a country in non-election years, and then include this estimate as a control.

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variable in our model of election violence. The idea behind this approach is that if it is possible to estimate the level of violence that would occur in a country year in the absence of an election, any remaining variation in our dependent variable should only be related to election specific characteristics. If our results remain robust to this alternative model, we can be more confident that our results are not an artifact of the fact that repressive regimes are more likely to use violence during an election.

More formally we estimate the following first stage model on all non-election years for the countries in our sample:

\[ Physical Integrity_{it} = \beta Polity2_{it} + \beta GDP(\log)_{it} + \beta Population(\log)_{it} + \beta Leader Tenure_{it} + \beta Civil War_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \]

We then use the predicted level of Physical Integrity from this first model as a control in a baseline model of election violence:79

\[ P(Pre-Election Violence_{ij}) = \beta Polling Unfavorable_{ij} + \beta Physical Integrity_{ij} + \beta Physical Integrity_{avg} + \beta Polity2_{avg} + \phi X_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \]

The results using alternative specifications (Table 4) are consistent with our prior results on pre-election violence: incumbents are more likely to use election violence when they face electoral challenges and minimal constraints.

[Table 4 about here]

Finally, as an additional step to ensure that our results are not just driven by unmodeled variation between countries, we re-estimate our results with fixed-effects. These results, available in the online appendix, remain consistent.

**Explaining Post-Election Protest and Violence**

Understanding post-election violence is even more complicated. Government sponsored election violence in the post-election period is frequently a direct reaction to

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79 In order to obtain accurate standard error estimates, we bootstrap the entire system of equations (Angelo J. Canty, 'Resampling Methods in R: The Boot Package', *R News*, 2 (2002).)
public protest. Post-election protest, in turn, can be ignited by pre-election violence and/or election fraud. Although post-election protests can pose a threat by bringing about new elections or transitions in power, only some incumbents respond to post-election protest with violence. It is this variation that H3 and H4 attempt to explain.

We measure Post-Election Protest with a variable that equals one if there were election-related riots or protests after the election, and zero otherwise. In Table 5 (Stage 1), we estimate the effect of Pre-Election Violence and Fraud on the occurrence of protests, controlling for GDP, Leader Tenure, Leader Age and Civil War. Consistent with other scholars and our third hypothesis, we find that both pre-election fraud and violence are strong predictors of post-election protest. Figure 4 provides predicted probabilities of these results.

These results suggest that the use of election violence in the pre-election period, even if an incumbent wins the election, may backfire in the post-election period. By using pre-election violence and fraud, incumbents risk sparking post-election protest. Since these protests increase the risk that a leader will be removed from office, incumbents have an especially strong incentive to repress these protests. As with pre-election violence, however, threats to an incumbent’s survival are not sufficient to induce violence, even in the face of mass protests. When incumbents are likely to face severe consequences for engaging in violence, they are less likely to crack down on post-election protests.

Post-Election Violence equals one if an incumbent represses post-election protest

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80 ‘Which Elections Can Be Lost?’.
82 We also estimate these results with fixed effects. The results are available in our online appendix and remain consistent.
activity and zero otherwise. Since the decision to use violence and the decision to engage in protests are likely related (per the results in Stage 1), we estimate the effect of consequences on election violence using a bivariate probit model, which allows for the joint determination of these outcomes, again including the same set of covariates.\footnote{Jeffrey M Wooldridge, *Econometric Analysis of Cross Section and Panel Data*, second edition. (The MIT Press, 2010).}

The results in Table 5 (Stage 2) and illustrated in Figure 5 show that *Executive Constraints* and *Treaties* reduce the probability that a government will respond violently to post-election protest. However, *Courts* and *NGOs* are not significantly related to the probability that a government will choose to repress post-election protests, again suggesting that domestic constraints are potentially stronger than international constraints.

**Illustrative Cases**

In the remainder of this article, we illustrate these very different pre- and post-election dynamics that incite violence using two cases. Space limitations prevent us from illustrating the full range of cases in our data (that would be a book length effort). We have chosen two cases to illustrate specific examples in which the incumbent government had reason to believe they faced a threat in the pre-election and election-day period (pre-election information in Zimbabwe) or in the post-election period (post-election protests in Iran). In the elections covered in Zimbabwe and Iran, the governments chose to use violence. In neither case did they face serious institutional constraints on their power. We focus on these cases to show over-time and within-case variation in the use of election violence in the period immediately surrounding an election. In both cases, our theory leads us to expect a spike of extreme violence but for different reasons and at different times. We show these spikes, graphing detailed monthly data on instances of election violence that we collected from analysis of all reports available on Lexis Nexus, as well as supplemental materials by NGOs and election watchdogs, concerning the periods leading up to and after
Pre-Election Threats and Violence in the Case of Zimbabwe

Robert Mugabe is one of world’s longest ruling dictators. He has been president of Zimbabwe – a nominal parliamentary democracy – since the country gained independence in 1980. Since 2000, Mugabe and his political party associates in the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) have faced significant opposition from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and their leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who have posed a threat to Mugabe and his party. In addition to using direct electoral fraud, ZANU-PF has regularly rigged elections in their favor by terrorizing political opposition members and supporters. In Mugabe’s words, “We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint fight with a gun?”

To illustrate the pattern of election violence in detail, Figure 5 maps monthly data that we collected on state-sponsored violence before and after elections in Zimbabwe and shows the increase in politically motivated violence, both in terms of the number of events and number of people affected, across four elections: the 2000 parliamentary elections, the 2002 presidential elections, the 2005 parliamentary elections, and concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008, which included two rounds.

Prior to the 2000 elections, Mugabe’s hold on power was unquestioned. He won the 1996 presidential elections with more than 90% of the vote. The opposition was not perceived to be particularly strong, and according to observers, the 2000 elections were the

84 Research assistants were asked to search all available news reports and human rights reports for cases of election-related and government sponsored human rights abuses in the pre-and post-election periods (one year before and after election day). These data include the date of the incident, the alleged perpetrator, the reported victim, and the number of people affected. These data and sources will be available on the corresponding author’s website. We thank ____for invaluable research assistance.
first in which any opposition party posed a real challenge to ZANU-PF dominance. During the 2000 election, police, intelligence officials, war veterans, and ZANU-PF supporters murdered, tortured and intimidated MDC supporters: the government reportedly killed more than 30 people for political reasons. Violence began several months prior to, and spiked during, the election (see Figure 5). Several months before the election, voters successfully defeated an attempted referendum on constitutional change, which was seen as a personal blow to Mugabe. Mugabe also embarked on a campaign to restrict and discredit international election observers, and refused to credential more than 20,000 domestic election monitors, ostensibly in order to reduce the probability that he would be caught and condemned for election manipulation. These actions took place in the absence of likely consequences for violence: Zimbabwe’s courts remain weak and executive constraints remain few. The government has not signed the treaty prohibiting torture and places many restrictions on the activities of NGOs.

In every election since 2000, the MDC has threatened Mugabe. In response, his government has engaged in a campaign of election-related violence against the MDC. In 2002, prior to and during the presidential election, ZANU-PF ran torture camps across Zimbabwe to “reeducate” opposition supporters. The Times of London reported that the violence campaign led to dozens of deaths and disappearances and hundreds of abductions, assaults and torture victims. As in 2000, violence began several months prior to the election, and hundreds of people were victimized in the months immediately following, including 344 members of the Young Women’s Christian Association who were arrested during a peaceful post-election protest. Not included in these figures are MDC supporters

87 Leo Schlink, "Murders in Mugabe torture camps, paper reports." Mercury (Hobart, Australia), March 4, 2002.
who fled Zimbabwe after the election, fearing persecution.

The US State Department accused ZANU-PF of manipulating the electoral process in the 2005 elections through corruption and intimidation, including unlawful killings, politically motivated kidnappings, and state sanctioned actions by the security forces to torture members of the opposition, union leaders, and civil society activists. Overall, the level of election violence witnessed in legislative elections has been lower than in presidential elections, ostensibly when Mugabe faced a greater threat. Like the previous elections, Mugabe sought to limit independent observation, denying entry to election observers from the United States, the Commonwealth, Australia, Japan, the European Union, Britain and other European countries who were intensely critical of Zimbabwe's previous elections. Mugabe's use of violence was somewhat lower than in the other elections in Figure 5, in part because the ZANU-PF also relied on the politicization of food-aid during a period of severe economic crisis, which we did not code as a form of election violence. Suspected supporters of the MDC were turned away without food assistance and told to return after the election. In this election, the party also employed the support of traditional leaders, who threatened their subjects with eviction if they failed to vote correctly.

The 2008 elections marked the first concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections. Before the 2008 presidential election, Mugabe, facing growing unpopularity,

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93 Peta Thornycroft, “Zimbabwe voters ‘were gripped by terror’” *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 4, 2005.
banned all political rallies and arrested his competitor – presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai – ostensibly for violating the ban while attending a prayer meeting. Tsvangirai was severely beaten, sustained a massive head injury, and was denied access to necessary medical treatment.94 Nevertheless, the challenge posed by Tsvangirai and the MDC was greater than in any previous election, and the MDC won a parliamentary majority for the first time. The government delayed the release of the results of the presidential election for more than a month, a move perceived to be an effort to remedy Mugabe’s worse-than-anticipated performance. When official election results were finally announced, ZANU-PF received 43% of the vote and MDC received 47%, just shy of the 50% majority needed to win the first round outright. A runoff was negotiated at the same time that Mugabe’s agents instigated a deadly wave of violence against MDC supporters. Due to the degree of violence directed toward his supporters, with more than 85 confirmed murdered and thousands injured, Tsvangirai chose to boycott the runoff in an effort to avoid risking the lives of more of his supporters in this “violent, illegitimate, sham of an election process.” Mugabe responded: “Only God, who appointed me, will remove me, not the M.D.C., not the British.”95

Consistent with our hypotheses, and as in a number of other elections in our study, Mugabe allowed electoral competition, yet when facing a electoral threat, turned to election violence to minimize the likelihood that he would be caught and punished. Throughout his tenure, he has face few institutional constraints on his power.

Surprising Election Results, Post-Election Protest, and Violence in Iran

The 2009 election in Iran, in contrast with Zimbabwe, present a case in which the highest levels of violence occurred in the month after the election, as a response to public protest against fraudulent results. The previous 2005 Iranian presidential election was held

without widespread protest or increases in election violence. President Mohammad Khatami stepped down in 2005 after serving the maximum two terms. In a race in which all candidates for the presidency must be approved by the Guardian Council, the mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, won after two rounds of balloting.

Typically, the Iranian process of candidate screening by the Guardian Council guarantees that most candidates are prohibited from running, including many would-be opposition candidates. Yet in 2009, popular sentiment turned against incumbent president Ahmadinejad, and polls conducted prior to the election suggested that one of the permitted candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, could force a runoff election. Figure 6 maps monthly data on state-sponsored violence before and after the June 12, 2009 election, illustrating the increase in election violence in terms of the number of events and number of people affected.

[Figure 6 here]

Following the election, both candidates declared victory. In an abnormally rapid vote "count," authorities declared the incumbent president the winner. Protests erupted and millions of people took to the streets to dispute the fraudulent results. The protests threatened the legitimacy of the regime and the government responded with sweeping human rights violations. On June 14th, plainclothes forces attacked a Tehran University dormitory and reportedly killed five student protesters. On June 16th, the government banned foreign journalists from the streets; and arrested almost 100 people, including former government ministers and senior political figures. Riot police dispersed protests in Tehran and were videotaped killing Neda Agha, a young bystander who became an icon for the anti-government movement. Protests continued and the government responded with more violence. Over the next few months 4,000 protesters would be arrested, and others would be killed as a direct consequence of election-induced violence.
Undeterred, President Ahmadinejad was sworn into office in August. Meanwhile, government controlled courts began show trials, with many detainees allegedly coerced into confessing that they participated in a foreign-backed attempt to overthrow the government. Security officials shut down the offices of a committee collecting information about torture and other abuses against protestors and detainees. Journalist Ali Reza Eshranghi was sent to prison, followed by academic Kian Tajbakhsh and other prominent intellectuals, political figures and journalists. Many were sentenced to death.96

The leaders of Iran responsible for the political violence, like the leaders of Zimbabwe, had few reasons to fear punishment for their policies of abuse. There are very few public constraints on the executive’s authority, the courts are not independent, and were complicit in the postelection violence. Iran belongs to few human treaties and allows NGOs little independence or access.

Secrecy surrounding the tallying of the votes means that what actually unfolded is unknown, but observers speculate that the Iranian leadership, having already screened the presidential candidates, was uncomfortable with any results that would have suggested a close election. Facing a worse-than-expected performance by the incumbent, they engaged in a hurried falsification of the results. In short, the elections revealed that the opposition candidates posed a greater threat to Ahmadinejad than anticipated, and perceived election fraud provoked a post-election protest movement that further threatened the regime’s grip on power. In response to this threat, the government diffused protests by committing widespread violence against the protesters, detaining and killing leaders of the opposition movement, and creating a climate of fear.

Overall, elections in Iran and Zimbabwe, as well as similar case studies of elections in other countries, confirm that political violence is a tactic used by governments to

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manipulate elections in the pre-election period and suppress dissent in the post-election period, and such election violence is most likely when threats to the regime are high and perceived consequences are low.

**Conclusion**

Using a new dataset on elections that is able to distinguish between electoral and non-electoral violence, separate pre- and post-election violence, and distinguish some important variation in the information that autocratic (and non-democratic) regimes possess, we have evaluated the conditions under which governments are most likely to use violence as an electoral strategy for all elections held in the developing world, 1981-2006. We have shown, in contrast to previous research, that incumbent leaders are more likely to resort to violence, harming political opposition candidates, voters, and citizens when they anticipate the possibility of an electoral threat but few consequences for violence. However, we have also shown that pre-election violence can backfire in the post-election period by increasing the probability of post-election protest, once again threatening the regime. However, once post-election protests are initiated against the incumbent regime, constraints on the executive can reduce incentives for the government to respond with violence. Using new monthly data and illustrative case studies on human rights abuses in Zimbabwe and Iran (both governments that faced threats but few institutional consequences for election violence during the period of this study), we provided further support for our findings that governments are likely to use election violence when they are more threatened. Whether an increase in international or domestic consequences for engaging in election violence in Iran or Zimbabwe could lessen future violence awaits further evaluation.

What is clear is that as elections have spread to nearly all countries, some incumbents – including those in countries like Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Iran, or Zimbabwe – have used a strategy of violence in an effort to rig election outcomes. We documented the
conditions under which such electorally motivated crimes are more or less likely. In effect, elections may exacerbate human rights violations in these places in the short term; without elections, the violations would probably be fewer.

Our results do not speak to whether or not leaders who use election violence actually succeed in staying in power, or whether periods of electorally induced political violence are inevitable parts of political liberalization. Many of the world’s longest-standing consolidated democracies, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, experienced periods of increased political repression surrounding elections. This history raises fundamental questions about the long-term relationship between political violence, elections, and democratization. Some scholars and pundits may be tempted to interpret the fact that leaders sometimes use political violence to manipulate elections as confirmation that elections are necessarily “bad” for countries without a history of elections and democracy. Yet our analysis does not support this conclusion.

Rather, several important implications follow from the evidence provided in this paper, some of which are relevant to ongoing concerns in policy communities about election-induced violence. In addition, the evidence should contribute to ongoing debates in comparative politics on the role of violence in political transitions, and within international relations on how governments and political agents can be motivated to curtail election violence. First, the countries that are most likely to experience election violence are precisely those places in which the incumbent government feels threatened by an organized and potentially powerful opposition. Although all repression is clearly detrimental to democracy in the short term, competition is necessary for democracy in both the short and the long term. If our analysis is correct, then more often than not, election violence is a

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97 The authors are undertaking this analysis in a separate article.
symptom of a threatened and potentially weakening incumbent government rather than a
sign that democratization – and future protection for human rights – is doomed.

Another implication of our analysis is perhaps even more important for policy-
makers. Scholars and pundits have deplored the global spread of elections as potentially
dangerous. Our analysis supports this complaint to some extent, but provides a potential
second-best option for countries that do not already have well-established rule of law. We
have shown that although electoral threats increase the probability that a government will
increase election violence, incumbents are sensitive to the consequences of doing so.
Accountability works best when it comes from strong domestic political institutions that can
provide constraints on executive action. When incumbents face an independent judicial
system or legislative body with oversight over their actions, they are less likely to use
election violence. However, we find some suggestive evidence that international
accountability, such as treaties and NGOs, may also constrain leaders in some circumstances.
Even if the accountability measures that we evaluate are relatively weak, they can still lessen
election violence, and it may be possible for international actors to impose still stronger
mechanisms of accountability. If elections continue to take place in nearly all countries in
the world, a focus on accountability for human rights abuses is especially important, and
may help reduce the use of election violence in institutionally hybrid regimes. More
optimistically, for countries without strong domestic political institutions or a history of
constitutional liberalism, an increase in credible mechanisms of accountability may be able
to serve as a short-term check on leaders until a more institutionalized form of democracy,
checks on the executive, and rule of law can develop.

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99 A number of organizations have focused attention in recent years to election-related violence. For
example, see the “Election Violence Education and Resolution” project sponsored by IFES,
http://ever.dd.ifes.org/.
100 Collier, Wars, Guns, and Votes; Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy'.
Figure 1: Election Violence Over Time

![Graph showing election violence over time]

*Figure is based upon data from Hyde and Marinov. Pre-election violence is a count of all elections in which the government harassed the opposition or used violence against civilians. Post-election violence is a count of all elections in which the government used violence against protestors following the election.*

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1 'Which Elections Can Be Lost?'.

Figure 2: History of Post-Election Protests and Protest “Success”

Successful protests include any case in which election protests contributed to an election being cancelled or an incumbent being deposed. Repressed protests are cases in which the government used violence against demonstrators.²

²As coded by Hyde and Marinov, ‘Which Elections Can Be Lost?’. 
Figure 3: Predicted Probability That an Incumbent Uses Pre-Election Violence

Each point indicates the simulated change in the probability of pre-election violence associated with a change in Victory Uncertain and Polling Unfavorable by levels of Executive Constraints, Courts, Treaties, and NGOs. All other variables are set at the mean. Shaded lines indicate the 95% confidence interval.
In stage one, each point indicates the predicted probability of post-election protests associated with a change in Fraud or Pre-Election Violence. In stage two, each point indicates the predicted probability that a government will crack down against protests by levels of Executive Constraints, Courts, Treaties, and NGOs. All other variables are set at the mean. Shaded lines indicate the 95% confidence interval. All estimates based on results shown in Table 5.
Figure 5: Variation in Political Violence by Election in Zimbabwe

The count of events and deaths are based upon a search all available news reports and human rights reports for cases of election-related and government sponsored human rights abuses in the pre-and post-election periods (one year before and after election day).
Figure 6: Variation in Political Violence in Iran, 2009 Presidential Election

*The count of events and deaths are based upon a search all available news reports and human rights reports for cases of election-related and government sponsored human rights abuses in the pre-and post-election periods (one year before and after election day).*
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<th>Mean Non-Violent Elections</th>
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*(avg) indicates the three year moving average of these variables.*
### Table 2: Logit Estimates of the Effect of Unfavorable Polls on Pre-Election Violence

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<td>Physint (avg)</td>
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<td>0.37*</td>
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<td>0.90**</td>
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Clustered standard errors in parentheses. +significant at 10%; *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%. All models are restricted to cases where the incumbent office is contested. Additional fixed effects estimates are available in our online appendix.
### Table 3: Logit Estimates of the Effect of Victory Uncertain on Pre-Election Violence

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<th>(4)</th>
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<td>Victory Uncertain*Exec Constraints</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
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<td>0.84*</td>
<td>0.84*</td>
<td>0.90**</td>
<td>0.99**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrations (Banks)</td>
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<td>Polity (avg)</td>
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Clustered standard errors in parentheses. *significant at 10%; **significant at 5%; ***significant at 1%. All models are restricted to cases where the incumbent office is contested. Additional fixed effects estimates are available in our online appendix.
Table 4: Robustness Checks for the Effect Pre-Election Threats on Pre-Election Violence

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<th>Two-Stage (4)</th>
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<td>-0.37*</td>
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<td>2.18*</td>
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<td>Victory Uncertain*Exec Constraints</td>
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<td>-0.29+</td>
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Clustered or bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses. +significant at 10%; *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%. All estimates additionally control for Physical Integrity_{avg}, GDP (log), Population (log), Leader Tenure, Leader Age, and Civil War and are restricted to cases where the incumbent office is contested.
Table 5: Logit Estimates of Protest and the Violence Against Protesters

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<td>1.05**</td>
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</table>

Clustered standard errors in parentheses. +significant at 10%; *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%.

Stage one is based on a logit estimate of post-election protest. Stage two is a bivariate logit estimate of the violence against protestors in which the errors from model one are assumed to be correlated with the errors in models 4-7. All estimates control for Physical Integrity_avg, Polity2_avg, GDP (log), Population (log), Leader Tenure, Leader Age, and Civil War (Model 4 excludes Polity2 due to co-linearity with Exec Constraints). Stage two estimates are restricted to cases in which the incumbent remains in office after the election.