A Review of Election Violence: Methodological Approaches for Future Research.

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Abstract- Research questions and interesting puzzles continue to emerge from election violence studies. Recently, there have been questions about the role of community leaders, social groups, and influencers in shaping violent elections as opposed to political elites. Other emerging research questions relate to the long-term psychological effects of exposure to election violence. The paper demonstrates how scholars can use methods such as social network analysis, panel experiments, and focus groups to address questions about the causes and effects of election violence. This review proposes these diverse methodological approaches and justifies why they may provide a strong foundation for future research. The complexity of election violence, as well as emerging research questions within the literature, require that the predominantly used approaches be complemented with other promising ones.

Keywords: election violence, social network analysis, experimental methods, focus groups.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Election violence is a coercive act or threat aimed at disrupting, manipulating, or undermining election processes. It is often perpetrated by both state and non-state actors to influence election outcomes (Birch, 2020; Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a; Harish & Toha, 2019). It includes physical harm against people, property, and infrastructure, as well as threats, intimidation, and harassment (Bekoe, 2012; Norris et al., 2015). It can occur pre-election, during the election, and post-election (Birch et al., 2020). Aside from deaths, injuries, trauma, and destruction of property, election violence stalls democratization. In the longer term, election violence erodes trust in political institutions, damages social cohesion, and increases risks of broader political instability or armed conflict (Burchard, 2015; Höglund, 2009).

This methodological review provides an up-to-date synthesis of the literature on election violence. It contributes to the existing literature an argument for methodological approaches that can improve studies of election violence. I bring to the forefront less-utilized research methods that can complement election studies. This review paper proposes that social network analysis, panel experiments, and focus groups can complement existing approaches to solve emerging puzzles and research questions on election violence. Social network analysis can map the relationship between actors, elites, and community members to identify micro- and macro-level patterns that lead to violent elections. Scholars can use panel experiments to study the long-term association between exposure to election violence and psychological factors such as trauma, depression, social trust, and social capital. Focus groups offer an opportunity to discuss the effects of election violence on individuals with direct experience and exposure. The complex nature of election violence requires diverse methodological perspectives to tackle its causes, dynamics, and short and long-term individual-level effects. This methodological review provides a foundation for future research by highlighting the impact that social network analysis, panel experiments, and focus groups can bring to election studies. The paper identifies key research questions and empirical challenges scholars can consider for future research.

II.   THE CAUSES OF ELECTION VIOLENCE

Existing literature, mostly through historical analysis and regression models, has identified institutional, social, and international factors as the main causes of election violence. Literature on institutional factors argues that regime type, electoral systems design, robust government institutions, and independence of election management bodies often shape the propensity for violent elections (Birch et al., 2020; Burchard, 2015; Daxecker, 2014; Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). Social factors highlight land patronage, ethnic and religious divisions, high unemployment rates, ethnic polarization, exclusion of social groups from the election process, and gender inequality. (Bardall, 2020; Bjarnegård, 2018; Fjelde & Höglund, 2016a; Joireman, 1997; Klaus & Mitchell, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; United States Institute of Peace, 2010). Studies on the international

determinants of election violence have primarily focused on whether international election observers (IEOs) increase or decrease the risks of violent elections (Asunka et al., 2019; Daxecker, 2014; Kelley, 2012; Smidt, 2016; von Borzyskowski, 2019).

Election violence remains one of the most dynamic forms of political violence. It is characterized by complex causal factors that change temporarily and spatially (Bekoe, 2012; Birch et al., 2020). The strategies and tactics actors use evolve as a function of socio-political contexts (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014; Staniland, 2014). Actors that instigate violence during elections include incumbent and opposition-party elite, state security, ordinary citizens, and sometimes armed groups that may or may not be affiliated with political parties (Bekoe, 2012; Matanock & Staniland, 2018). Research also exists on the timing and targets of election violence. Recent scholarship, usually through regression analysis of election violence data, finds that violence is mostly predominant in the pre-election period and geographically polarized election areas due to the goal of incumbents and opposition elites contesting for territory by incumbents and opposition elites (Wahman, 2023; Wahman & Goldring, 2020).

Moreover, literature exists on the strategic incentives for political elites and the consequences of election violence on the political system. Scholarship on incentives for using election violence stresses the role of electoral competition, ethnicity, regionalism, and territoriality in shaping decisions to employ violent tactics (Asunka et al., 2019; Basedau & Moroff, 2011; Birch et al., 2020; Daxecker, 2014; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014; Smidt, 2016; Wahman, 2023; Wahman & Goldring, 2020). On the other hand, research has stressed that using violence during elections has short-term and long-term effects on political behavior, attitudes, and stability. (Bratton, 2008; Burchard, 2015; Gutierrez-Romero, 2014; Rauschenbach & Paula, 2019; Rosenzweig, 2023).

III.   THE EFFECTS OF ELECTION VIOLENCE

Existing literature features two categories for the consequences of election violence. The first examines the aggregate or national-level effects of deploying violence, while the second looks at the individual-level effects of the use of violence in the context of elections. Studies on the aggregate or national-level effects of election violence treat the nation-state as the unit of analysis and explore the consequences that countries bear when actors use violence during elections (Bekoe, 2012; Birch & Muchlinski, 2018; Burchard, 2015; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). Studies on the latter focus on the individual as the unit of analysis by examining effects such as, but not limited to, political participation, psychological or personal well-being, and the social or institutional trust of individuals affected by violence (Bekoe &

Burchard, 2017; Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Harish & Little, 2017). There are fewer studies on the effects of election violence at the individual level as compared to cross-national studies. Since my proposed methodological approaches relate to examining individual–level effects, I highlight some of the studies on election violence and its consequences to individuals.

One area of emphasis in the literature has been the effects of election violence on voter turnout. Research findings are quite mixed on the effects of election violence on voter turnout. While Burchard (2015), Bekoe & Burchard (2017) as well as Collier & Vicente (2014), using a quantitative approach, finds that the elite use of violence increases voter turnout, Höglund (2009) and Alacevich & Zejcirovic (2020) suggests a negative relationship between violence and voter turnout. Drawing on data from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alacevich and Zejcirovic (2020) find that violence against civilians during elections reduces turnout rates in subsequent elections. Overall, we should expect that when citizens are exposed to violence, it could lead to negative attitudes towards the political system. In Sub-Saharan Africa, victims of violent elections, on average, seem to become disinterested in politics in general (Söderström, 2018).

Aside from voter turnout, other aspects of the political psychology of election violence have been explored. How does the use of violent tactics during elections impact social, institutional, and political trust, as well as emotions such as fear, anxiety, and trauma? A panel survey analysis before and after the 2007 Kenyan elections showed that victims of election violence became less trusting of police and institutions of security. (Gutierrez-Romero, 2014). Analysis of the same election showed higher levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms in individuals exposed to violence than those who were not. (Gutierrez-Romero, 2014). One area that has been less explored is the gender dimension of the effects of election violence. The psychological implications of election violence on women can be more severe than on men.

This paper makes a methodological contribution to the literature on election violence. Social network analysis, panel experiments, and focus groups are promising research methods for emerging research questions on election violence. Currently, qualitative methods–oriented scholars often use historical analysis to explore violence during elections, while quantitative–oriented scholars leverage regression analysis to study the causes, dynamics, and effects of election violence. While qualitative methods are widely accepted as suitable for unraveling causal mechanisms in specific cases, quantitative analysis has been used to enhance the external validity of theories, identifying broad correlates of election violence cross-nationally and sub-nationally. Mixed-method approaches that leverage both methods have also proven helpful in explaining causation while aiming toward generalizability.

This special issue encourages election violence scholars to use social network analysis, panel experiments, and focus groups to study the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of election violence. I discuss how researchers can use these methods to answer interesting research questions that confront election studies. While scholars have broadly employed some of these methods for research on political violence, these approaches carry more potential for election violence studies than are currently utilized

IV.   SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Scholars in sociology and anthropology began to use social network analysis (SNA) in the early 1970s (Zachary, 1977). Later, Snow et al. (1980) hinted at the potential of the study of social networks to understand social movement mobilization. SNA models study relationships between entities and how such relationships shape social phenomena. In SNA, the social relationships among the individuals or entities in a subgroup or 'community' are denoted by graphs, where each individual represents a node or point on the graph (Zachary, 1977; Zahedinejad et al., 2020). Edges or lines then depict relationships between two nodes, such as family, kinship, and friendships.[1]

These patterns and relationships between societal entities are termed 'network structure.' A community in SNA is a set of nodes that are more densely connected than other nodes in the network (McPherson et al., 2001). In a network, one may be interested in the density or sparsity, clustering, fragmentation, or hierarchy of graphs (Ward et al., 2011). At the individual level, we may focus on the path lengths, connectivity, centrality, or the dependence of nodes on others for access to distant nodes (Ward et al., 2011). Based on algorithms and metrics used to study these networks, social scientists can infer the implications of such interactions on the occurrence of social phenomena (White & Smyth, 2003).

Social network modeling can be used to study micro-level causes of election violence in ways that other methodological approaches cannot. For instance, network algorithms can detect the mode through which violent rhetoric flows from influential and highly connected community members to others before violence is used. In a related study, Unankard et al. (2014) used data from Twitter to predict election outcomes by incorporating sub-event detection and sentiment analysis in users' social networks to analyze and visualize political preferences. Election violence scholars can also use SNA to study whether the density of social networks predicts the likelihood of election violence. For example, how does the geographic distribution of social networks shape the spread of violence during election periods? Studies on political polarization could also benefit from SNA. Studies exist on the link between

election violence and political polarization (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; McCoy et al., 2018; Piazza, 2023). Belcastro et al. (2020) and McClurg (2006) used social media networks to study how political polarization and violent rhetoric shape election violence.

Dorff et al. (2020) study of multi-actor intrastate conflict in Nigeria seems a good case study of how SNAs can be used in studies related to violence. The research puzzle Dorff et al. (2020) presents is 'why do traditional approaches fail to explain who fights whom, when, and how in multi-actor civil wars?' First, the authors conceptualized armed actors as nodes and the battles fought amongst actors as edges in a dyadic network. They then used the Additive and Multiplicative Effects (AME) model to analyze the evolution of relationships amongst armed actors and how these relationships predict the likelihood of dyadic conflict. ASE accounted for relational patterns such as reciprocity and transitivity within the conflict network.

The research identified strong reciprocity effects. (Dorff et al., 2020) et al find that armed groups are more likely to attack actors who previously attacked them compared to other armed groups in the network. Community detection algorithms also detected conflict communities where armed actors in proximity to each other were more likely to engage in dyadic conflict. Dorff et al. (2020) The application of SNA to intrastate violence in Nigeria contributed to the literature in two ways. First, SNA contributed to explaining the path-dependent nature of conflict dynamics amongst multiple actors, in addition to the literature that focuses on group-level attributes of armed groups. Second, this model seems to better predict methods that treat dyadic interactions as independent.

A few cautionary notes are important when one intends to use SNA. First, SNA models that use large network data may become overly complicated and may not always reflect real-world scenarios. Users of SNA often employ algorithms and metrics that detect communities amongst networks and the degree of density amongst the nodes. Mathematicians and network scholars are yet to agree on which algorithm provides the best results. It is often, therefore, left to users to choose algorithms based on their case study. For example, the Girvan-Newman algorithm that uses edge betweenness to detect communities can become computationally cumbersome and less effective for community detection as the network size increases (Choudhury et al., 2013; Despalatović et al., 2014). On the other hand, the Louvain method that optimizes modularity sometimes fails to detect smaller communities within larger networks (Campigotto et al., 2014; Kanavos et al., 2022). Scholars should make such considerations based on knowledge of the approach and substantive knowledge of the topic under study.

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[1] A tutorial on SNA is beyond the scope of this paper. See Zachary (1977) and Ward et al. (2011) for a more in-depth introduction.

Secondly, SNA models focus on structural relationships between entities and may overlook social, political, and cultural factors that affect human interactions. For instance, Santos et al. (2014) argue that, while SNA is a powerful tool for analyzing social phenomena, it requires additional approaches to incorporate cultural factors in its modeling. Similarly, Keller's (2018) work on the analysis of elite networks provides an approach for researchers to account for the influence of socio-political factors on elite interactions using advanced SNA techniques like exponential random graph models. In the case of election violence, we would want our SNA models not to overcome the social, institutional, and international factors that other scholars have found to influence violent elections. Scholars can overcome these limitations by triangulating SNA with other qualitative and quantitative methods, such as ethnographic studies, interviews, and surveys, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of election violence.

In addition, collecting network data is more complex than collecting other types of data used in political science (Ward et al., 2011). This difficulty is due to the relational nature of network data, which requires information not just about individual actors, but also about the connections between them. In the context of election violence research, this might involve mapping relationships between political parties, community leaders, security forces, and civilian groups. Such data collection often requires specialized survey instruments, time-intensive snowball sampling techniques, or the analysis of large-scale digital traces (Borgatti et al., 2009). Furthermore, network data collection in conflict-prone areas may be hindered by security concerns, issues of trust, and rapidly changing political landscapes. Researchers must also grapple with ethical considerations, such as maintaining respondent anonymity while preserving network structures, and the potential for network mapping to inadvertently reveal sensitive information (Robins, 2015). Despite these challenges, network data collected appropriately can offer unique perspectives on the dynamics of election violence that might be missed by traditional data collection methods.

<div align="center">V.   EXPERIMENTAL METHODS</div>

Panel surveys and field experiments could be applied to increase the internal validity of election violence research. Survey and field panel experiments can contribute to solving some of the emerging puzzles in the body of literature (Collier & Vicente, 2014; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020). Panel experiments collect data from the same individuals across different time frames (Lavrakas, 2008). Scholars interested in the long-term effects of election violence can use panel experiments to study the behavior, psychology, and well-being of individuals previously exposed to election violence across multiple time frames. This method can capture political behavior and the psychology of people exposed to violence. Scholars may then be able to make inferences on how violent exposure shapes individuals, society, and the political system in the long term.

Blattman's (2009) A panel survey experimental study of voting behavior amongst former combatants in Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group showed that witnesses of violence were about 27% more likely to vote in the next election, and former abductees were 50% more likely to become leaders of their community. Also, a panel survey study of the legacy of political violence on generations of the same households of Crimean Tatars found that descendants of victims of deportation, hunger, and starvation identified strongly with their ethnic group and held hostile attitudes towards the Russian state (Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017).

A mixed-method research design that incorporates experimental designs could achieve high internal and external validity. A mixed-methods approach using social network analysis, for instance, and panel experiments provides a good opportunity to study micro-level causes, dynamics, and long-term effects of election violence simultaneously. Network analysis can identify influential and highly connected community members (nodes) that increase the risk of election violence, as well as communication and behavioral patterns that shape violent elections in some communities and not others. Concurrently, panel experiments can be used to make causal inferences on how social networks impact the political attitudes, preferences, and behavior of the communities embedded within them. Panel experiments used in a mixed-methods study can also explore temporal changes in social networks and their influence on voter turnout, election violence, as well as other aspects of election behavior.

Due to the complex nature of election studies, most studies on election violence draw conclusions that predict a correlation between certain independent and dependent variables instead of causality. Causal inferences in this area are quite rare. Compared to other methods used in election violence studies, panel experiments, when conducted vigorously, can offer high reliability and internal validity when employed to make causal inferences on the long-term effects of election violence. Since panel experiments control for confounders that are likely to influence the dependent variable when implementing experimental treatments, researchers can establish strong causal inferences (Druckman et al., 2011). Research can use repeated experimental trials of panel experiments to examine the durability of the treatment effects observed in such quasi-experiments.

Panel experiments are not without challenges. First, attrition can lead to the loss of experimental subjects over time, such that it is difficult to accept treatment effects at a higher confidence level or generalize results to a broader audience. Researchers can address this by providing incentives, providing privacy and safety assurances, and maintaining regular communication with participants (Hill, 2004). One can also use shorter time intervals between experimental trials to ensure more consistent participation

(Hill, 2004). Moreover, panel experiments are resource-intensive. Panel experiments require huge financial and time investments for a researcher to track the same subjects consistently over a long period. Scholars can address this challenge by planning meticulously to ensure the efficient use of resources, especially when studying the long-term effects of exposure to election violence. Additionally, stark differences in the socio-political contexts of various electoral environments make it challenging to replicate experimental findings outside the sampling frame explored in the original study. In some sense, this is not necessarily a shortfall of panel experiments regarding external validity. However, Druckman et al. (2011) argue that if researchers are primarily interested in testing causal mechanisms rather than estimating population parameters, then concerns about external validity become less critical. The focus should be on whether the experimental setting allows for a fair test of the theoretical propositions, rather than on whether the sample is representative of a larger population.

Measuring hard-to-observe forms of election violence, such as intimidation, threats, coercion, and sexual violence, presents significant challenges (Klopp & Kamungi, 2007). Strategies for researchers that intend to use panel experiments to improve measurement include using multiple data sources (Aarvik, 2015; Meier, 2011), conducting targeted surveys and interviews with affected populations (Bjarnegård, 2018; Matanock & Staniland, 2018; Dercon & Gutiérrez-Romero, 2012), employing innovative survey methods like list experiments (Blair & Imai, 2012; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2020), using ethnographic and qualitative methods (Diphoorn, 2013; Berenschot, 2011; LeBas, 2006), and collaborating with local civil society organizations (Mendeloff, 2015; Obi, 2020; Kanyinga et al., 2013). While these approaches have limitations, combining them and continually refining and adapting them to local contexts can help build a more comprehensive and accurate picture of election violence in all its forms.

VI.   FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are qualitative methods that assemble small groups of people to discuss thoughts, attitudes, opinions, perceptions, and experiences (Krueger, 2014; Greenbaum, 1998). Though focus groups have immense potential for studying the short and long-term effects of election violence, election violence scholars seldom employ them. Researchers can bring together individuals in communities affected by election violence to study the short and long-term effects of exposure. Victims of election violence, especially forms such as harassment, intimidation, and sexual abuse, can better share their experiences and help trace perpetrators of such violence if several victims meet as a group to discuss their experiences. Also, a researcher could create focus groups of community leaders and politicians to discuss the causes

of election violence from their perspective and pathways to prevent or mitigate it. Gender-based violence against women politicians and voters, a hard-to-examine form of election violence due to stigmatization and stereotyping of its victims, can be examined using focus groups to examine why, how, and when women are subjected to distinct forms of violent acts in the context of elections (Bjarnegård et al., 2022; IFHR & The Kenyan Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Considering the study of political violence in general, focus groups have been minimally applied to political violence research. Examining protests, for instance, van Bezouw et al. (2019) argue that focus groups can provide insights into how citizens' attitudes towards protests are being negotiated and shaped by social interactions and the effects of such interactions on the propensity to participate in protests. In a study of exposure to political violence and its effects on psychological well-being, Jones & Kafetsios (2005) used a mixed-methods approach, including a focus group of adolescents and their parents, to explore the impacts of specific types of war-related events on psychological well-being and the role of social and political context in moderating these effects in Bosnia. The qualitative analysis using focus group interviews revealed that the subjective meaning of personal loss and other war experiences shaped the variations in the severity of trauma and anxiety among individuals in Goražde and Foča.

Focus groups are ideal for exploring the effects rather than the causes of election violence. In this case, privacy plays an essential role as study participants share the impact of election violence on their lives. However, the one weakness of focus groups is the inability to handle issues of privacy, sensitivity, and confidentiality (Greenbaum, 1998). The researcher may not be able to prevent other study participants from leaking information revealed through focus group discussions. This could prevent participants of studies that employ focus groups from sharing information about violence, as it may result in personal harm to themselves if shared information reaches perpetrators. A Finnish study supports this claim. A focus group study involving two Finnish youth reform schools revealed that focus group participants willingly shared information regarding staff-to-peer violence but refrained from sharing information regarding peer-to-peer violence due to the fear of retaliation. (Pösö et al., 2008).

Stigmatization and stereotyping in some societies may inhibit focus group studies that seek to uncover the effects of exposure to election violence, especially in cases that involve sexual violence. Discussing the impact of violence during elections has had on people in a group setting may discourage victims from sharing experiences in much detail due to fear of stigmatization and stereotyping. As a result, data collected through focus groups may be affected by social desirability bias. Despite these limitations, focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to learn the

individual and collective experiences of people who live in communities affected by election violence.

VII. CONCLUSION

This methodological review has explored several emerging frontiers and promising methods for advancing research on election violence. Key takeaways include adopting methods to examine micro-level causes and effects of election violence. Social network analysis, panel experiments as well and focus groups provide a micro-level approach to analyzing subnational variations and local dynamics; examining election violence in non-traditional settings and spaces; conducting longitudinal and historically-informed research on the long-term consequences and legacies of election violence; and utilizing mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data and analysis, including innovative measures for hard-to-observe forms of violence.

Looking forward, emerging research puzzles in election studies warrant that less-utilized approaches be used in tandem with existing methods to advance election violence research. A study of election violence usually aims to propose policy-relevant suggestions that can be applied to prevention and mitigation strategies. Prioritizing policy-relevant and actionable research can inform the design and evaluation of interventions and ensure that findings are effectively communicated to decision-makers. Considering that, regarding knowledge of the causes of election violence, scholars ought to consider mixed methods approaches that reveal micro-level factors that shape recurring patterns of violent elections. Similarly, scholarship on the effects of election violence ought to move beyond research on the short-term effects of election violence to consider the long-term psychological effects on persons exposed to election violence. Scholars should consider the proposed methods to achieve these goals.

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