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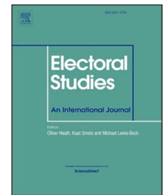

Election type and the logic of pre-election violence: Evidence from Zimbabwe☆

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ABSTRACT

Election violence is often conceptualized as a form of coercive campaigning, but the literature has not fully explored how electoral institutions shape incentives for competition and violence. We argue that the logic of subnational electoral competition – and with it incentives for violence – differs in presidential and legislative elections. In presidential elections, *national-level* considerations dominate incentives for violence. Presidential elections are usually decided by winning a majority of votes in a single, national district, incentivizing parties to demobilize voters with violence in strongholds. In contrast, election violence is subject to *district-level* incentives in legislative elections. District-level incentives imply that parties focus on winning the majority of districts, and therefore center violent campaigning on the most competitive districts. We test our argument with georeferenced, constituency-level data from Zimbabwe, a case that fits our scope conditions of holding competitive elections, violence by the incumbent, and majoritarian electoral rule. We find that most violence takes place in strongholds in presidential elections, especially in opposition strongholds. In contrast, competitive constituencies are targeted in legislative contests.

1. Introduction

Election campaigns are often characterized by a mix of licit and illicit campaign strategies, particularly in countries in the Global South. An emerging literature is investigating the subnational determinants of both types of strategies. Recent work on licit campaigning explores the subnational geography of rallies, large public meetings, candidate visits, and promotional materials, among others (Fox, 2018; Langston and Rosas, 2018; Rauschenbach, 2015). Work on illicit campaigning examines practices of vote buying, intimidation, and violence as part of electoral campaigns (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2012; Gutiérrez-Romero, 2014; Rauschenbach and Paula, 2019). We connect these literatures by incorporating electoral institutions into our theory on the subnational logic of campaigning with violence.

The core insight of our paper is that electoral institutions, in particular election type, determine which subnational locations will be targeted with violence. In presidential elections, *national-level incentives* dominate. In such elections, candidates must win a majority of votes across a single national district, and it therefore does not really matter where a candidate wins those votes. Rather than focusing on districts that are competitive, parties will employ violence in other parties' strongholds to demobilize rival party voters. In rival party strongholds, parties have the greatest chance of demobilizing their opponents' supporters while also minimizing the risk of targeting their own supporters. In contrast, in legislative elections with single-member districts (SMD) (which are common in Africa), *district-level* incentives dominate

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campaigns, since candidates and their parties must focus on winning individual districts. Violence, just like regular campaign activities, should therefore be concentrated in the most competitive districts.

Our research makes three contributions. First, we develop a theory of election violence that takes seriously the logic of election campaigns. Although pre-election violence is typically conceptualized as a form of coercive campaigning (Birch et al., 2020), prior work has largely privileged non-electoral and non-institutional explanations. In line with the national- and district-level logics sketched out above, we develop divergent predictions for patterns of violence in presidential and legislative elections. We test them empirically in Zimbabwe, a country that fits our scope conditions of holding minimally competitive elections, a violent incumbent party, and majoritarian electoral rule. As a competitive authoritarian regime, the incumbent in Zimbabwe has advantages in the use of violence over the opposition and we therefore center our theory on incumbents' incentives for violence (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2020); however, we discuss implications for countries with greater opposition capacity for violence after presenting our results. Until 2008, Zimbabwe also held legislative and presidential elections on separate dates, allowing us to distinguish district-vs. national-level logics while holding many confounders constant. We find that legislative elections experience more violence in competitive districts than in strongholds, while strongholds rather than competitive constituencies are targeted in presidential elections. Distinguishing among strongholds, we find that opposition strongholds experience most violence in presidential contests. In the empirical section and the appendix, we discuss and address threats to causal inference, validate independent and dependent variables, and present additional model specifications. Our results are consistent across many robustness tests.

Second, we develop empirical expectations at the constituency-level, i.e. the theoretically most relevant units. Past work on election violence has often focused on competitiveness at the level of the election or the level of the voter (Gutíerrez-Romero, 2014; Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). An aggregate analysis is per definition unable to tell us why violence happens in some locations but not others. A focus on individuals, on the other hand, is problematic because it assumes that perpetrators can target voters individually and ignores that violence intends to intimidate beyond the immediate target. Joining an emerging literature on the subnational determinants of election violence (see Birch et al., 2020), our argument focuses on electoral districts and the partisan makeup of those districts. We theorize about the actors and units most relevant for the decisions being taken (Arjona, 2019, p. 215), i.e. incumbents considering the use of violence.

Third, we contribute to work on campaigning, in particular other forms of voter demobilization. The literature on campaigning is primarily case-specific and rarely aims to generalize beyond those cases. Our argument on the divergent logic of targeting in presidential and legislative elections is applicable to other forms of demobilization that vary subnationally, such as negative campaigning (Lau and Rovner, 2009; Walter et al., 2014), restrictions on voting rights (Biggers and Hanmer, 2017), or procedural problems on polling day (Harris, 2021; Pettigrew, 2017).

2. The subnational determinants of election violence

An emerging literature recognizes the importance of local conditions for patterns of election violence. One subset of work examines how non-electoral characteristics – in particular land rights – become instrumentalized during elections. This work finds that land grievances create the conditions for violent mobilization during elections (Boone, 2011; Klaus and Mitchell, 2015; Klaus, 2020). Work on the competitiveness of elections and violence, on the other hand, puts election-specific factors at the forefront. Formal theoretical work expects that swing voters should be targeted with violence (Chaturvedi, 2005; Collier and Vicente, 2012; Robinson and Torvik, 2009). Focusing on subnational units in various contexts, Asunka et al. (2019), Evéquoz (2019), Harvey (2016), and Wilkinson (2004) show that competitive subnational units experience more electoral violence. However, others find evidence of targeting in strongholds. Rauschenbach and Paula (2019) show that violence is used to demobilize voters in opposition strongholds in Sub-Saharan Africa, a finding Wahman and Goldring (2020) confirm for Zambia. And for at least some elections in Zimbabwe, LeBas (2006) and Fielding (2018) suggest that violence targeted incumbent strongholds in an attempt to intimidate intra-party rivals and consolidate the incumbent party. The evidence on electoral competitiveness and violence is thus mixed, and inconsistent with theoretical predictions.

An important insight from work on competitiveness is that the electoral importance of subnational units is crucial for decisions on targeting with violence. But with some exceptions (notably Daxecker 2020; Fjelde and Höglund 2016; Malik 2018; Müller-Crepon 2021), this literature has ignored the role of electoral institutions in determining which locations will be competitive under what conditions. The literature on traditional campaigning - while not focused on violence – provides valuable insight into how election type affects parties' campaign activities, in particular whether they focus on marginal constituencies or strongholds. Majoritarian electoral rule typically produces party systems with few effective parties. Such contexts incentivize party competition over independent voters, ignoring party supporters because these voters have few alternatives but supporting "their" party (Althaus et al., 2002; Bowler and Farrel, 1992). Evidence from general elections in the United Kingdom - a country with SMD in legislative elections - shows that campaign activities focus on marginal districts (Fisher and Denver, 2009; Middleton, 2018).[1] These findings are also consistent with the few studies that emphasize local dynamics of violence in countries with majoritarian rule (Müller-Crepon 2021; Wilkinson 2004). In contrast, campaign dynamics in presidential elections have a more national orientation than in legislative elections. In these contests, campaigns may prioritize strongholds to demonstrate their popularity rather than potentially wasting time and resources in localities with fewer supporters (Langston and Rosas, 2018) and to mobilize supporters to turn out (Rauschenbach, 2015). Evidence from Ukrainian elections confirms a constituency logic in legislative elections, while the presidential election followed a national logic (Birch, 2007). Different types of elections thus imply different logics of subnational campaigning. We develop the implications of this insight for campaigning with violence below.

3. Election type and incentives for violence

We aim to identify the subnational determinants of pre-election violence in competitive authoritarian regimes. In such regimes, elections are held regularly, but "incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results" (Levitsky and Way 2002, p. 53). Incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes hence have advantages in the use of violence compared to the opposition, including control over the security forces, access to resources to contract nonstate armed groups for violence, and considerable influence over the judiciary, enabling them to escape or limit sanctions for violent behavior.[2] Having controlled

[1] Most research on the subnational allocation of campaign resources focuses on the US. This work finds that campaign activity concentrates on highly and densely populated areas, where turnout fluctuates (Althaus et al., 2002, p. 53), in swing states (Althaus et al., 2002, p. 53), and in states that yield the greatest rewards in the electoral college (Bartels, 1985). While these findings are instructive for legislative elections elsewhere, the electoral college system used in U.S. presidential elections is unique, limiting generalizability. Other countries select presidents in a single national district.

[2] While much of the literature expects that incumbents more often use violence, Collier and Vicente (2012) theorize that weak challengers have greater incentives for violence and find suggestive evidence for Nigeria. As we show in our empirical section (and consistent with NGO reports, see Human Rights Watch, 2005,2008), the incumbent is responsible for most of the violence (80%) in Zimbabwe.

power for a long time, incumbents also have the party bases and coercive structures necessary to orchestrate violence throughout the country. Moreover, the dominance of incumbents reduces the risk of retaliation by the opposition, meaning that incumbents can allocate violence where they deem it most effective for their electoral strategy. Based on these characteristics of competitive authoritarian regimes, we expect that patterns of pre-electoral violence are predominantly a function of the incumbent's campaign strategy.[3] Our main theoretical intuition is that different types of elections have implications for incumbents' subnational campaigns and how they allocate violence.

We conceptualize violence before or during elections as a strategy to demobilize voters. While violence could in principle be used for other purposes, including to mobilize party supporters, we follow the widely shared assumption that it is most rational for incumbents to use violence for demobilization.[4] Our argument focuses on electoral districts and their partisan makeup as main units of analysis. Electoral districts are theoretically meaningful units of analysis because candidates and parties organize their campaigns along those units. We distinguish three theoretically relevant types of electoral constituencies; incumbent strongholds, opposition strongholds and competitive constituencies.[5] Among voters, we can similarly distinguish incumbent supporters, opposition supporters and independent voters. We recognize that the partisan orientation of districts and voter preferences are not the same thing. Incumbent strongholds can be populated by voters other than incumbent supporters. However, we expect that district and voter preferences correlate closely. We therefore operate under the assumption that more incumbent supporters live in incumbent strongholds, while more independent voters live in competitive constituencies, and more opposition voters live in opposition strongholds than in other locations.[6] These assumptions likely reflect considerations made by parties, whose campaign logic we try to mirror. While parties would in principle prefer to target violence individually, it is usually too costly for them to identify targets with such precision. Parties therefore rely on more aggregate and publicly available information on the partisan identities of areas in which voters reside. This assumption is particularly warranted in the African context, where ample evidence demonstrates the low capacity of parties to track voter preferences and votes (Bratton et al., 2016; van de Walle, 2003). Presumably, then, parties rely on informational shortcuts such as previous election results to estimate the partisan identity of geographic areas, as qualitative evidence from Ghana and Zimbabwe underscores (Rauschenbach, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2008).[7]

Pre-electoral violence entails potential benefits and risks. If pre-electoral violence has the intended consequence, individuals who otherwise would have voted for the opposition will abstain. Since violence has deterrent effects beyond the immediate target, other opposition voters may also decide to abstain. A major risk in inciting violence, however, is that it could scare off the wrong voters, including those who might have otherwise supported the perpetrator of violence at the polls. This is why we expect parties to be first and foremost preoccupied with directing violence at the "correct voters" when deciding where to incite pre-electoral violence. All things equal, we expect that it is most difficult to identify voter preferences in competitive or swing districts since those districts contain voters with most heterogeneous preferences.

3.1. *Presidential elections*

In most presidential elections, presidents are directly elected and the entire country is treated as a single electoral district. Countries with presidential systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (and also those elsewhere) elect their president with either plurality or absolute majority. In these elections, it does not matter how many electoral districts a party wins, but that it reaches a national plurality or majority.[8] Districts nevertheless provide valuable information on the partisan identity of voters residing in them. Since incumbents' goal is to demobilize opponent supporters, we expect them to direct more violence at strongholds than at competitive districts in presidential elections.

H1. *In presidential elections, more pre-electoral violence takes place in party strongholds than in competitive constituencies.*

Hypothesis 1 expects that violence is used to target non-competitive districts in presidential elections. An important question is whether incumbents aim to direct violence at rival voters in their own strongholds or at those in the opposition party's strongholds. As stated above, we expect parties to be concerned with minimizing the risks of demobilizing those voters who might have otherwise supported them. If identifying voters' preferences individually is too costly or impossible, incumbents should prefer inciting violence in the opposition's strongholds where the chance of demobilizing sympathizers of the rival party are highest. In addition, targeting rival party strongholds allows for demobilizing the largest number of rival party supporters with the least amount of violence. In competitive authoritarian contexts, more pre-electoral violence should therefore be targeted at the opposition than incumbent strongholds.

H2. *In presidential elections, more pre-electoral violence takes place in opposition strongholds than in incumbent party strongholds.*

3.2. *Legislative elections*

In contrast to presidential elections, where votes are won subnationally matters in legislative contests, particularly in elections with SMD.[9] Electoral systems are important for the context in which campaigns take place (Bowler and Farrel, 1992, p. 7). In legislative elections with SMD, the focus is on winning as many constituencies – and hence seats – as possible. Parties aiming to maximize the number of seats in a legislative election should invest more resources in more competitive districts (Snyder, 1989). The same rationale should apply to election violence as a coercive campaign strategy. If a party's lead in its stronghold is substantial, campaigning there with violence is unnecessary. As long as the lead is large enough to win a plurality in a constituency, gaining additional votes in its strongholds is irrelevant for the

[3] We discuss implications for regimes in which opposition parties have substantial capacity for violence in a separate section after presenting the results.

[4] For evidence consistent with violence as a demobilization strategy, see Boone (2011), von Borzyskowski et al. (2022), Bratton et al. (2016), and Rauschenbach and Paula (2019). Electoral violence could also be aimed at candidates (Harish and Toha, 2019) or take place in the context of ongoing armed conflict (Flores and Nooruddin, forthcoming; Matanock and Staniland 2018), although such violence likely still depresses turnout.

[5] The terms constituency and electoral district are used interchangeably.

[6] For evidence, see Rauschenbach and Paula (2019).

[7] If voting takes place along ethnic lines, identifying partisans is likely easier. However, ethnicity only adds an extra layer of information to aggregate election results in ethnically heterogenous localities. Moreover, targeting violence at individuals is costlier than directing violence at localities and will thus be applied only sparingly. Consequently, we expect similar subnational patterns of violence in countries where ethnicity is a stronger predictor for partisanship than in Zimbabwe.

[8] In some countries a simple plurality is enough to win an election while 50% + 1 vote are required in two-round systems. We recognize that some presidential systems employ additional criteria to ensure broad-based geographic support. While the geographic location of support in such elections matters more than in other presidential elections, we still expect geographic incentives to be less relevant than in legislative elections.

[9] SMD are used in 48% of African elections, and in 38% of elections in competitive authoritarian regimes. Calculations are based on the list of competitive authoritarian regimes in Levitsky and Way (2020), p. 53) and data on electoral system (IDEA 2021).

outcome. Of course, parties might also want to demobilize rival supporters, concentrated in opponent party strongholds, in legislative elections. However, as the number of rival supporters they would need to demobilize to flip the outcome in opposition strongholds is high, in particular compared to marginal constituencies, parties will focus on the latter. Considering the literal as well as reputational costs of violence, we expect that incumbents should incite most violence in competitive constituencies in legislative elections.[10]

H3. *In legislative elections, more pre-electoral violence takes place in competitive constituencies than in party strongholds.*

4. Case selection: elections and violence in Zimbabwe

We select Zimbabwe as the case for our analysis. Elections in Zimbabwe started to be competitive in 2000, which is when our analysis begins. Legislative elections in Zimbabwe use SMD and a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, while presidential elections use the entire country as a single district. Legislative and presidential elections were held separately until 2008, when it switched to concurrent elections. We expect our argument to hold in other countries, including those with concurrent elections. However, focusing on a single country with separate legislative and presidential elections allows for holding many confounders constant and hence more cleanly establishing the effect of election type on violent campaigning. Compared to other African countries, Zimbabwe's electoral and political institutions are fairly typical. Twenty-four of 50 African countries use majoritarian electoral rule, 17 use proportional representation, and 9 use a mixed system. In terms of political system, 42 have presidential systems. Combining these two dimensions, there are 22 African countries with presidential systems that use majoritarian electoral rule in legislative elections.[11] Outside of the African context, Zimbabwe's electoral system is used by 12 of the 32 competitive authoritarian regimes currently in place.[12]

Violence is commonplace in Zimbabwean elections and dominated by the incumbent. The literature on African elections expects incumbents to use more violence in general because they have control over the security apparatus and also have access to resources to subcontract violence to militias and other nonstate armed actors (Straus and Taylor, 2012). Across parliamentary and presidential elections, NGOs have documented that the incumbent ZANU-PF intimidated, harassed, or killed presumed opposition supporters (Human Rights Watch, 2005, 2008), suggesting that violence was widespread, committed primarily by the incumbent, and organized at the center.

Zimbabwe hence fits our scope conditions of competitive elections, violence by the incumbent, and majoritarian rule. For context, we briefly discuss elections and patterns of violence in Zimbabwe since 2000. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has been in power since independence in 1980. Elections remained virtually uncontested until the June 2000 legislative elections, which presented the incumbent with its first real challenge, and which were followed a surprising defeat in a constitutional referendum in February 2000. To coincide with Zimbabwe's movement towards a competitive authoritarian regime, we begin our empirical investigation with the 2000 elections. These elections were the first in which the newly formed opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) contested elections. In 2000, the MDC won 47% of the vote and 57 of 120 seats (Fielding, 2018). The 2000 elections experienced substantial violence by the incumbent party and its allies against the opposition MDC and those with unknown party affiliation (Kriger, 2005, pp. 28–30, LeBas, 2006, pp. 427–428).[13]

In the 2002 presidential contest, the MDC candidate received 42% of the vote compared to Mugabe's 58%, while the opposition secured 41 of 120 seats in the 2005 legislative elections. Pro-incumbent violence against opposition supporters was prominent before both elections (Scarnecchia, 2006, p. 222, Human Rights Watch, 2005, p.14; Laakso, 2007, p. 245; LeBas, 2014, p. 52). In 2008, the first concurrent elections, MDC candidate Tsvangirai claimed to have received an absolute majority and having won the elections. However, after delays and credible allegations of rampant fraud, official results showed the MDC with 47%, requiring a runoff. The incumbent party unleashed a massive campaign of violence against the opposition MDC (Human Rights Watch 2008, section VI, LeBas, 2014, pp. 54–55). Violence involved the "beating, torture, and deaths of hundreds of MDC activists and supporters" (LeBas, 2014, p. 54). Supporting our intuition that parties use informational shortcuts to infer partisan identity of voters, Human Rights Watch reports that the incumbent party "examined results posted outside polling stations to identify areas where people voted for MDC in large numbers […]" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p.16), in order to identify targets for their violence. This violence "was used to deter people from voting for the MDC and to persuade them to vote for ZANU-PF during the presidential runoff" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p.15). MDC candidate Tsvangirai ultimately withdrew from the runoff and Mugabe was reelected. Since 2008, the ZANU-PF has managed to hold on to power, although Mugabe was removed in an internal party coup in 2017.

Our empirical analyses cover elections held from 2000 until first general elections and the presidential runoff in 2008. Before 2000, there was no meaningful opposition (Makumbe and Compagnon 2000). We exclude elections after 2008 since Zimbabwe switched to concurrent elections, which makes it more difficult to disentangle patterns in legislative and presidential elections. Table 1 summarizes the elections in our data. The table illustrates that elections in Zimbabwe were reasonably competitive, as shown in national-level margins, and experienced violence, thus fitting our scope conditions.

5. Data and variables

We construct a dataset consisting of all 120 electoral constituencies in Zimbabwe for the five elections in our data. Our data cover two legislative elections (2000 and 2005), two presidential elections (2002 and the June 2008 runoff) and one concurrent election (March 2008). Constituency-election-years are appropriate units because they are the locus of electoral competition in legislative elections with SMD.

The use of electoral districts creates challenges because both the boundaries and the number of constituencies can change over time. In the elections included in our data, constituency numbers and boundaries did not change in presidential elections in 2002 compared to the 2000 elections. In the 2005 legislative elections, changes were limited, with eight new constituencies created. Most problematic for our purposes is that the number of constituencies increased from 120 to 210 for the

[10] Note that this expectation holds regardless of whether incumbent parties can nationally organize and deploy violence. In situations where local candidates are responsible for campaigns, we would similarly expect embattled incumbents to have the greatest incentives to resort to violence. In our empirical case, NGOs report that the incumbent party organized violence at the center (Human Rights Watch 2005,2008), and additional analyses in appendix A3.6 are consistent with this evidence.

[11] Data for electoral rule and political system come from https://www.idea.int/data-tools/continent-view/Africa/44. Of these 22 countries, former British colonies hold concurrent elections (with some exceptions, including Zimbabwe), while former French colonies mostly hold them on separate dates (van Cranenburgh, 2008).

[12] Data on electoral systems and the list of competitive authoritarian regimes come from IDEA (2021) and Levitsky and Way (2020), p. 53.

[13] In addition to violence against MDC supporters, LeBas (2006) describes substantial violence in incumbent strongholds designed to prevent ZANU-PF defections. She also notes that ruling party violence in its own strongholds declined after 2000. A shift from intra-party factional violence in a hegemonic authoritarian regime to inter-party violence in a competitive authoritarian regime is consistent with our scope conditions.

Table 1
Overview of elections, national-level margins, and election violence included.

Election type	Date	% national-level victory margin	% constituencies w/ violence (ECAV)
Referendum	February 2000	32%	–
Legislative	June 2000	42%	32%
Presidential	March 2002	43%	37%
Legislative	March 2005	38%	8%
(Concurrent)[a]	March 2008	29%	8%
Presidential (runoff)	June 2008	–	10%

[a] We exclude the 2008 concurrent elections from our main analyses since it is more difficult to distinguish district-and national-level logics. In Appendix A2, we present models including these elections. Results remain robust.

general elections in 2008 and thereafter, creating 90 new constituencies by splitting many existing constituencies into much smaller ones.[14] We solve this challenge by identifying the geographically largest portion of each previous constituency that survived in 2008. In our analyses of the 2008 elections, we therefore only retain the 120 constituencies covering the largest portions of the 210 newly created constituencies. This strategy is more conservative than including all new constituencies despite not knowing very much about their prior electoral competitiveness. This approach also allows us to compare the same units over time. We include a dummy variable coded 1 for electoral districts whose boundaries changed. Data and shapefiles for constituencies and their boundaries were shared with us by Aurelien Evéquoz. Descriptive statistics and maps illustrating the distribution of key variables are shown in Appendix A5.

5.1. Dependent variables

Hypotheses 1–3 summarize how election type affects the risk of pre-election violence. To test the hypotheses, we create two dependent variables measuring the incidence of political violence before elections. Our first dependent variable measures election-specific violence with data from the Electoral Contention and Violence Data (ECAV), as described in Daxecker et al. (2019). Zimbabwe experienced 452 contentious events in elections from 1990 to 2012, the second-highest incidence in Africa after Kenya.[15] This violence was overwhelmingly committed by the incumbent.[16] The variable measures the incidence of pre-election violence in each constituency-election-year for six months before elections up until election day.

Our second dependent variable measures political violence in the run-up to elections with data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event data (ACLED) described in Raleigh et al. (2010).[17] One drawback of ACLED is that the data record all political violence rather than election-specific coercion as in ECAV, potentially including unrelated events such as food riots. An important advantage, though, is that ACLED codes events from national and local sources and should therefore be less susceptible to reporting bias. ACLED reports 1270 events for all five elections in the data; this higher number is a function of including all political violence and the fact that a larger set of sources is considered. The variable measures the incidence of violence in each constituency-election-year up until election day.[18] We discuss reporting biases and implications separately below.

The dependent variables based on ECAV and ACLED correlate positively with a correlation at the constituency level above 0.6. Because both dependent variables are counts that are overdispersed, we use negative binomial regression. All models cluster standard errors on constituencies.

5.2. Independent variables

How do incumbents identify the partisan identity and competitiveness of electoral districts? In countries like Zimbabwe, it seems unreasonable to expect that parties use public opinion polls to identify the most competitive areas. Rather, they rely on previous election results to estimate the competitiveness of constituencies. In line with previous work (Wilkinson, 2004), we therefore use victory margins in previous elections as measures of competitiveness.[19] Constituency-level election results come from the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) for all elections.[20] We calculate victory margins by subtracting the second-place party's votes from those of the winner and then divide raw margins by the total number of votes cast in each constituency. Note that this measure reflects *absolute* competitiveness, meaning that non-competitive constituencies could either be incumbent or opposition strongholds. We use absolute competitiveness to examine H1&H3. We use results for elections immediately preceding the current ones for all elections.

In addition to absolute competitiveness, we use a second indicator, incumbent victory margins, which distinguishes whether strongholds supported the (national) incumbent or the opposition. We use this variable to examine H2. To create this measure, we first determine which party had won the previous national elections, i.e. the identity of the national incumbent party. In Zimbabwe, as mentioned before, ZANU-PF won all elections in our analyses. We thus calculate the victory margin between the ZANU-PF in each electoral district and the strongest constituency-level opposition competitor (usually the MDC) by simply subtracting votes for the strongest opposition party from incumbent party votes and then divide raw incumbent margins by the total number of votes cast in each constituency.[21] Negative values of incumbent victory margin indicate opposition strongholds, values close to zero characterize competitive constituencies, and incumbent strongholds are reflected by positive values.

To examine divergent patterns of violence in presidential and legislative elections outlined in our hypotheses, we create a dummy variable

[14] The 2007 boundary delimitation exercise was contentious and new constituencies were primarily in rural areas, which had traditionally supported the ruling ZANU-PF (Booysen and Toulou, 2009). In appendix A4, we show that new districts were more often created in districts supporting the incumbent party, indicating gerrymandering. The appendix also shows maps with electoral district boundaries before and after the 2007 delimitation (figure A4).

[15] We remove events before 2000 and after 2008, nonviolent events, those occurring after election-day, and those without subnational location information, retaining 236 violent events committed before or on election-day for the four elections. The most common events included attacks, killings, clashes, intimidation, and violent protests.

[16] Of all events, 79% are committed by pro-government forces, including police, militias, youth groups, ZANU-PF party members and supporters, among others. Of the remaining events, 10% pursue opposition interests, and 11% of events did not allow establishing the actors' alignment with government or opposition. In appendix A3, we also establish that the theorized patterns are similar if we restrict the analysis to events that can conclusively be linked to incumbents.

[17] Data available at https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard.

[18] Three elections warrant additional discussion; these are discussed in detail in appendix A2.

[19] ACLED provides information on riots, violence against civilians, battles, protests, and strategic developments. We exclude protests and strategic developments since those are nonviolent (Raleigh et al., 2010, p. 656). To make the data comparable to ECAV, we consider only events taking place in the six months before elections up until election day. We also omit events without precise location and date information.

[20] Data available at http://www.zesn.org.zw/.

[21] Incumbent victory margins correlate closely (corr = 0.95) with MDC vote shares since the MDC was the primary opposition party in all elections in the data. We prefer incumbent victory margins as our main measure because it tells us how closely contested elections were rather than only overall levels of opposition support.

coded 1 for the 2002 and June 2008 (runoff) presidential elections and interact this measure with absolute victory margins and incumbent margins. For absolute victory margins, we expect a positive and significant effect on violence in presidential elections, and a negative and significant effect in legislative elections. For incumbent victory margins, we expect a negative and significant effect of incumbent victory margins on election violence overall since both H2&H3 expect least violence in incumbent strongholds, but opposition strongholds should see most targeting in presidential elections.

5.3. Concerns about biases in key variables

Reporting biases in dependent and independent variables and concerns about reverse causality merit discussion. First, our dependent variables could be subject to reporting biases. This concern is most serious for ECAV, which relies only on reporting from national news. We know that these outlets cover densely populated and hence opposition-dominated areas better, which could mean underreporting of violence in predominantly rural incumbent strongholds. In contrast, ACLED draws heavily on NGO reports in Zimbabwe, including victims' testimonies, and violence reported in the local press, which should reduce the extent of reporting biases.[22] By specifying our models with dependent variables drawn from two independently coded datasets, including one that relies heavily on local sources, we expect to address the most serious concerns about reporting bias. In addition, we control for population density and nighttime light emissions in all models. These are the empirical indicators shown to correlate highly with underreporting and hence systematic measurement error in von Borzyskowski and Wahman (2021). To capture the importance of connectivity beyond population density, which could also be associated with biases in reporting, we also control for road density and distance from the capital. Finally, we note that reporting bias in our dependent variable would be most problematic for our hypothesis on presidential elections, which anticipates more violence in opposition strongholds. For our expectation on legislative contests, reporting bias should attenuate our results.

A second and distinct type of reporting bias could affect our independent variables. Using election results to estimate competitiveness in an authoritarian environment such as Zimbabwe is potentially problematic. If incumbents distort election results, as has been established for the Zimbabwean case (Bratton et al., 2016; Friesen), these results do not accurately reflect actual competitiveness. An important question is the direction of this bias and its likely implications for our estimates. In line with other work, we expect that official election results overestimate incumbent strength rather than underestimating it. If this is correct, this bias would be problematic for our first hypothesis because a positive correlation between victory margins and violence could be an artifact of overestimating incumbent strength, especially if most violence occurs in incumbent strongholds. Yet for our second hypothesis positing targeting in opposition strongholds, underestimating opposition strength would make it more difficult to establish the expected relationship. Similarly, our results for legislative elections most likely suffer from attenuation bias because we expect a negative effect of absolute victory margins on violence in these elections.

A third concern is reverse causality. If election violence demobilizes voters, election results would not accurately represent voter preferences. Specifically, if incumbents successfully demobilize voters in swing or opposition districts, results should again overestimate incumbent strength as just discussed. We address both concerns by validating our indicators of competitiveness with survey data in appendix A1. These validations show a positive correlation between support for the incumbent ZANU- PF in election results and survey responses.

[22] See ACLED working paper #5, p. 6, available at https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2017/12/ACLED_Reporting-Sources-Working-Paper-No.-5_2015.pdf.

5.4. Control variables

We control for several variables that could affect victory margins and/or the risk of violence, including population density, road networks, distance from the provincial capital, night light emissions, and spatial and temporal dependence.[23] Unfortunately, data for several of these variables are not readily available at the spatial resolution we require. We considered using PRIO GRID cells (Tollefsen et al., 2012). However, particularly in urban areas, grid cells are much larger than constituencies, which would be imprecise and distort information. Grid cells also do not follow existing administrative boundaries but rather are squares of equal size drawn across the globe. We therefore rely on administrative data for districts, for many of our controls. Zimbabwe has 59 districts. While districts are thus also larger than constituencies, especially in urban areas, constituencies are often nested within administrative districts and thus at least share similar boundaries.[24]

District-level data for controls on population density, the density of road networks, and distance from the closest provincial capital come from the xSub data (Zhukov et al., 2019). We spatially join constituency shapefiles with district shapefiles from GADM to merge these data.[25] For population density, we only have indicators for population size from 1995 to 2000, meaning there is little temporal variation. We use 1995 data for the 2000 elections, data from 2000 for all elections thereafter, and divide both by area size to calculate population density. More densely populated areas might offer more targets for violence. The density of road networks and distance form provincial capitals control for the connectivity and remoteness of constituencies and are time-invariant. We also control for economic development with nighttime lights data measured at the administrative district level. These data vary yearly and we control for the (logged) average nighttime lights in each constituency in the previous election as an indicator of economic development. [26]Finally, we control for the temporal and spatial autocorrelation. For temporal autocorrelation, we count the time since the last election violence event in each constituency, using data from ECAV.[27] To control for the spatial diffusion of violence beyond constituency boundaries, we include a spatial lag of the dependent variable. We include province fixed effects in all models and also present more restrictive specifications below and in the appendix.

6. Results

Table 2 presents our results for absolute victory margins across five models. These models allow us to explore H1 (presidential elections) and H3 (legislative elections). We estimate a pooled model for elections held in 2000, 2002, 2005, and the June 2008 runoff and include an interaction term between victory margins and presidential elections to distinguish patterns in presidential and legislative elections. Results in models 1–3 are based on our first dependent variable using data on

[23] These variables are "good controls," meaning that we expect that they could plausibly affect victory margins rather than being affected by them (Angrist and Pischke, 2008, p. 226).

[24] For example, Harare district contains 15 constituencies, but these constituencies are nested within the district, which covers approximately 961 square kilometers. If we instead used grid cells, the 15 constituencies would be split between two grid cells each covering approximately 2500 square kilometers in surface area. Information on control variables from the PRIO GRID would therefore be less precise and include surrounding rural areas.

[25] Available at https://gadm.org/index.html.

[26] District-level per capita GDP would be preferable but are missing for most areas in Zimbabwe in the G-Econ data (Nordhaus et al., 2006).

[27] We count the number of electoral periods without violence in each constituency since the 1995 elections, which ranges from 0 to 5 with five elections in the data. This approach is common in the study of political violence, but in robustness tests, we also use a lag of the dependent variable. For the 2000 elections, we use data on violence from the 1995 elections.

Table 2
Negative binomial regression of election violence, absolute victory margins.

Dependent variable	(1) ECAV	(2) ECAV	(3) ECAV	(4) ACLED	(5) ACLED
Absolute victory margins	−0.284	−1.643*	−1.647+	−0.659	−1.238+
	(0.577)	(0.795)	(0.951)	(0.684)	(0.695)
Absolute × presidential		2.511**	2.766**	0.876	1.357+
		(0.909)	(0.886)	(0.746)	(0.714)
Presidential election	0.457*	−0.538	−0.327	0.562+	0.650*
	(0.185)	(0.367)	(0.380)	(0.303)	(0.322)
Population density, log	−0.953	−1.078+	−2.758**	−1.956**	−2.938**
	(0.580)	(0.571)	(0.876)	(0.752)	(0.951)
Nighttime lights, log	0.862*	0.828*	3.856**	0.434	1.858**
	(0.351)	(0.331)	(1.016)	(0.334)	(0.513)
Road density	3.962	4.642		4.791	
	(4.094)	(4.161)		(3.790)	
Distance from capital	0.001	0.001		0.002	
	(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	
New constituency	−0.769+	−0.668	−0.918*	0.314	0.121
	(0.422)	(0.418)	(0.435)	(0.252)	(0.239)
Time lag	−0.581**	−0.574**	−0.213*	−0.385**	−0.322**
	(0.092)	(0.093)	(0.102)	(0.067)	(0.079)
Spatial lag	−0.063	−0.107	−0.231+	−0.109	−0.365**
	(0.099)	(0.103)	(0.130)	(0.157)	(0.130)
Province FE	✓	✓		✓	
Adm. District FE			✓		✓
Observations	460	460	460	460	460
AIC	731.1	727.7	693.5	1620.1	1563.1
BIC	813.7	814.5	883.6	1706.8	1749.0

Note: Standard errors are clustered by constituency.
**p < .01 × p < .05 +p < .1.

election violence from ECAV. Model 1 presents the effect of absolute margins and presidential election but omits the interaction. Absolute victory margins on their own have no significant effect, which is unsurprising since we hypothesize that legislative and presidential elections create diverging incentives for the use of violence. Model 2 adds the interaction term between victory margins and presidential elections to test H1 and H3. The interaction is positive and significant, showing that violence increases in less competitive constituencies in presidential elections, supporting hypothesis 1. The negative and significant coefficient of victory margins shows the effect in legislative elections, confirming H3 expecting that the risk of violence declines as electoral districts become less competitive. In model 3 with administrative district fixed effects, we exclude time invariant controls at the district level (road density and distance from provincial capitals), estimating the effect of temporal variation in victory margins and controls while accounting for administrative district-level heterogeneity. The coefficient for absolute victory margins is again negative and (weakly) significant, while the interaction is positive and significant. In models 4–5, we use political violence data from ACLED as the dependent variable. These results are somewhat weaker, but broadly consistent, increasing our confidence that patterns of violence indeed reflect our theoretical logic rather than biases in the data.

To interpret the interaction between victory margins and election type more meaningfully, Fig. 1 plots the predicted number of violent events when we vary absolute victory margins in presidential and legislative elections. The left panel shows the effect of victory margins in presidential elections, indicating that the predicted number of events increases as victory margins become larger. The opposite holds for legislative elections in the right panel, showing that the most competitive constituencies experience more violence, while the predicted number of events declines as constituencies become less competitive. These effects are statistically significant and substantively meaningful; the average number of violent events is 0.3 events, meaning that an increase in the expected number from events from 0.2 to 0.5 across the range of absolute victory margins is substantial.

The results in Table 2 cannot tackle the question of whether violence in presidential elections targets incumbent or opposition strongholds. In H2, we argue that opposition strongholds should be most attractive for targeting since it allows incumbents to demobilize the largest number of opposition voters at the lowest cost. In Table 3, we therefore replace

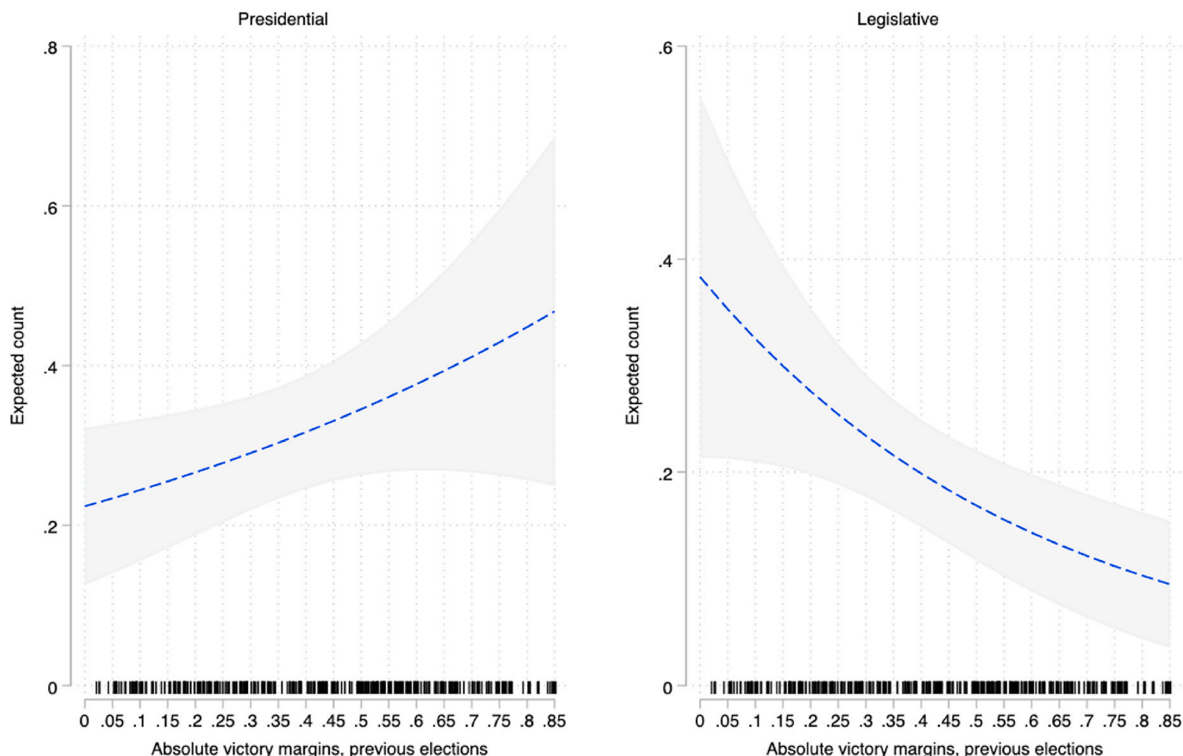

Fig. 1. Predicted number of election violent events, absolute victory margins (model 2, Table 2).

Table 3
Negative binomial regression of election violence, incumbent victory margins.

Dependent variable	(6) ECAV	(7) ECAV	(8) ECAV	(9) ACLED	(10) ACLED
Incumbent victory margins	−1.212**	−2.198**	−2.739**	−0.860*	−1.611**
	(0.418)	(0.557)	(0.608)	(0.389)	(0.482)
Incumbent × presidential		1.415**	1.237**	1.127**	1.382**
		(0.491)	(0.448)	(0.282)	(0.267)
Presidential election	0.479*	0.583**	0.933**	0.879**	1.199**
	(0.195)	(0.212)	(0.227)	(0.155)	(0.147)
Population density, log	−0.796	−0.592	−2.252**	−1.772*	−2.423**
	(0.553)	(0.551)	(0.747)	(0.749)	(0.882)
Nighttime lights, log	0.750*	0.708*	3.208**	0.346	1.382**
	(0.356)	(0.347)	(0.793)	(0.340)	(0.460)
Road density	2.444	1.693		4.482	
	(3.839)	(3.559)		(3.507)	
Distance from capital	0.001	0.001		0.002	
	(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.002)	
New constituency	−0.895*	−0.882*	−1.298**	0.278	0.003
	(0.433)	(0.425)	(0.426)	(0.246)	(0.246)
Time lag	−0.577**	−0.599**	−0.277**	−0.400**	−0.361**
	(0.091)	(0.092)	(0.103)	(0.066)	(0.077)
Spatial lag	−0.156	−0.128	−0.268+	−0.108	−0.375*
	(0.115)	(0.114)	(0.138)	(0.172)	(0.149)
Province FE	✓	✓		✓	
Adm. District FE			✓		✓
N	447	447	447	447	447
AIC	698.0	693.3	655.2	1586.4	1535.1
Observations	780.0	779.5	835.7	1672.5	1736.1

Note: Standard errors are clustered by constituency.
**p < .01 × p < .05 +p < .1.

absolute victory margins with incumbent victory margins. Negative values indicate opposition strongholds, values close to 0 are competitive constituencies, and positive values indicate incumbent strongholds. Table 3 presents results for incumbent victory margins across five models, mirroring the specifications in Table 2 with data from ECAV as the dependent variable in models 6–8, and ACLED events as a dependent variable in models 9–10. Model 6 estimates the effect of incumbent vote shares and presidential elections, omitting the interaction. We find that regardless of the type of elections, incumbent strongholds are least at risk for election violence. In model 7, we interact incumbent victory margins with presidential elections. The coefficient for the interaction is positive and significant. Restricting the effect of victory margins to within-district variation in model 8 produces similar results. Finally, models 9–10 for the second dependent variable with data from ACLED confirm these findings. We plot the effect of incumbent margins in presidential elections in Fig. 2 to ease interpretation.

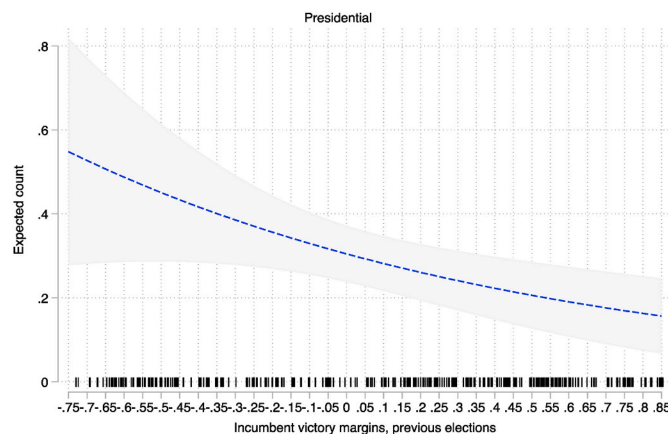

Fig. 2. Predicted number of election violent events in presidential elections, incumbent victory margins (model 7, Table 3).

Fig. 2 shows the predicted number of events across the range of incumbent victory margins for presidential elections (since we aim to test H2, we do not plot legislative elections again). In these elections, opposition strongholds (incumbent margins<0) are more often targeted with violence and the predicted probability of violence events declines as constituencies become more competitive (incumbent margins close to 0) and in incumbent strongholds (incumbent margins>0). This finding supports H2. We note once more that we expect targeting of opposition strongholds because the incumbent party has major advantages in the use of violence in Zimbabwe. In contexts with opposition that can employ coercion, incumbents and opposition may simultaneously target each other's strongholds.

Results from elections in Zimbabwe support our hypotheses. For presidential elections, we find that more violence happens in strongholds (H1) and that most of this violence takes place in opposition strongholds (H2).[28] For legislative elections, we confirm that competitive districts experience more violence (H3). Mixed findings on the incidence of violence in strongholds versus competitive districts in earlier research could be a result of ignoring the electoral institutional dynamics our study highlights.

7. Robustness

The appendix provides additional robustness tests that help corroborate our findings. We validate our independent variables (A1), showing that survey responses and election results correlate positively. We discuss elections that merit special discussion, such as the referendum in 2000 (A2). In additional model specifications, we present results for alternative operationalizations of the dependent variables, non-linearity in independent variables, results for election and constituency fixed effects, and controls for potentially influential constituencies (A3). We also explore changes in constituency boundaries and whether these changes reflect incumbents' aim to consolidate control (A4). Finally, we show descriptive statistics and maps of patterns in partisan orientation and electoral violence (A5).

8. Implications beyond Zimbabwe

We have analyzed the geography of electoral violence in Zimbabwe, a competitive authoritarian regime in which the incumbent dominates violence and elections are held using majoritarian rule. We now discuss implications beyond this case. First, in cases with more powerful opposition parties, we expect that incumbents are more limited in orchestrating violence across space, and also face a greater risk of retaliation by the opposition. In these contexts, we expect similar patterns overall; that is, more violence in strongholds in presidential elections, and a greater focus of violence in competitive districts in legislative elections. However, the differences between the two types of elections are likely less pronounced because incumbents have been in power for a shorter time, may have won elections by smaller margins, and likely lack the grass-root organization to organize violence centrally. In addition, facing an opposition that can use violence, incumbents may avoid opposition strongholds for fear of retaliation, suggesting more violence in competitive districts. In presidential elections, we may therefore observe an inverted-U shaped relationship between partisan identity and violence.

Second, with regard to the electoral system, we selected Zimbabwe as a case because it uses majoritarian rule and because it held presidential and parliamentary elections on different dates, allowing for a

[28] Our findings for presidential elections differ from Fielding (2018). Fielding's study finds that violence peaks in incumbent strongholds, but is limited to a single election (the 2008 presidential runoff) and uses districts rather than constituencies as units. The more limited sample and reliance on non-electoral units makes it difficult to compare our findings.

clean test of our argument. In other countries with presidential systems that hold elections on separate dates, such as Central African Republic, Côte D'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, or Yemen, the implications of our argument are straightforward. But our theory also applies to countries with concurrent elections, such as Haiti, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, or Zambia. In these elections, we expect incumbents to use violence in competitive districts and opposition strongholds, while the opposition targets competitive districts and incumbent strongholds. Distinguishing these patterns empirically will be more challenging but is still feasible with disaggregated data. In parliamentary systems with majoritarian rule (such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Jamaica, or Malaysia), competitive districts should most often be targeted, although an interesting extension would be to examine whether targeting *within* competitive districts follows a logic similar to our argument on presidential elections.

Finally, our argument may have implications for countries using proportional representation, with some caveats. While we would expect elections with PR to be less violent overall (consistent with Fjelde and Höglund, 2016), if violence takes place, it should have a national-level orientation and target strongholds. This expectation is consistent with Müller-Crepon (2021), who finds more aggregate dynamics in PR contexts.

9. Conclusion

We develop an argument on the geography of pre-electoral violence in presidential and legislative elections in competitive authoritarian regimes. We present the first subnational analysis of the logic of violent campaigning in presidential versus legislative elections. We analyze variation in the location of violence in a single country that used to hold legislative and presidential elections at different times, which allows us to explore how variation in election type affects campaign violence while holding many confounders constant. Supporting these expectations, we find that strongholds are the locus of pre-electoral violence in presidential elections, whereas competitive electoral districts experience more violence in legislative elections. Our results further establish that opposition strongholds in Zimbabwe suffer more from pre-electoral violence than competitive districts and incumbent strongholds. These findings offer a plausible explanation for contradictory results on the relationship between competitiveness and electoral violence in existing work on election violence.

We highlight two implications beyond election violence. First, in line with research on civil war, we emphasize the importance of information for determining patterns of violence (Kalyvas, 2006). Yet rather than striving for territorial control, government and opposition pursue electoral control. Since even countries with armed conflict often hold elections, these electoral incentives and how they influence actors' strategies deserve more attention. Second, the district-and national-level logics we outline are relevant for campaigning more broadly. Research on other forms of demobilization in the United States, such as negative campaigning, restrictions on voting rights, or procedural problems in election administration, has also emphasized the role of electoral competitiveness (Lau and Rovner, 2009, p. 294; Biggers and Hanmer, 2017; Pettigrew 2017). Yet our theory implies that institutional incentives need to be considered when generalizing these findings beyond the U.S. context.

For policy, our findings could assist policymakers in anticipating potential hotspots. Efforts to prevent violence during the campaigning period, such as the deployment of observers during the registration period, should pay particular attention to competitive districts in legislative contests and to opposition strongholds in presidential elections.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102583.

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