Voting for peace, mobilizing for war: post-conflict voter turnout and civil war recurrence

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Voting for peace, mobilizing for war: post-conflict voter turnout and civil war recurrence

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ABSTRACT

In democratic elections around the world, high levels of voter turnout are frequently praised as a sign of democratic legitimacy and consolidation. However, while popular participation should be lauded in many circumstances, under certain conditions it can also have nefarious side effects. In post-conflict countries, high levels of voter turnout may make it easier for militants to return to arms because everyday people are invested in the political process and the electoral outcome. Through the use of survival modelling, this study finds that voter turnout is positively correlated with civil war recidivism in post-conflict first elections. Even when elections are not particularly contentious or when structural factors (such as level of development) are auspicious, voter turnout continues to have a positive and statistically significant relationship with recidivism.

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conflict processes; civil war; first elections; voter turnout; electoral mobilization

First elections in post-conflict environments have long been a source of hope for aspirant democratizers. While the post-conflict peace is always fragile,1 first elections offer a moment of promise for citizens of countries emerging from civil war. However, although election timetables have become a routine feature of peace agreements and peacekeeping operations, scholars have increasingly found that post-conflict elections do not always lead to democratization, and indeed, can often be the site of renewed conflict.2 These studies have focused on numerous issues related to elections that may make the resumption of civil war more feasible in post-conflict environments. While this body of work has identified a number of structural factors that can make elections problematic, they have not given much attention to the role that mass political behaviour plays in the resumption of civil war. Specifically, this article argues that high voter turnout in first elections in post-conflict countries may contribute to the resumption of civil war because high levels of participation may enable insurgents to restart conflicts.

In studies of electoral politics in democratic regimes, voter turnout is considered a form of mass mobilization. This mobilization is often viewed as positive for democratic processes3: the more citizens are engaged in the political process, the more democratic
the system must be. This belief has been expanded to post-conflict elections, and the assumption persists that high levels of voter turnout in such elections indicate a strong commitment to democracy on behalf of citizens. Experts frequently point to high levels of voter turnout as a measure of mass-level commitment to peace. However, in post-conflict environments, high levels of participation may be dangerous for peace. If the onset of civil war is modelled on the ease of resorting to insurgency, then a politically engaged population may make it more feasible for elites to organize for the resumption of conflict.

The first section of the article discusses the traditional ways in which voter turnout has been analysed, and cautions against overly optimistic assessments. Under certain conditions, high voter turnout may be just as problematic as it is hopeful. The second section reviews the theoretical foundations of post-conflict democratization and recidivism, and presents mobilization as an additional condition that may contribute to the onset of renewed hostilities. The third section discusses alternative explanations for the relationship between voter turnout and conflict recurrence. The fourth section presents the empirical models for testing these hypotheses and analyses the results of these models. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for both practitioners and scholars of post-conflict peacebuilding and democratization.

**Popular assumptions about voter turnout**

Most analyses of post-conflict elections have assumed that high levels of voter turnout are a measure of support for peace and the democratic process. In a study commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development on the role of elections in post-conflict settings, high turnout is praised in various cases, and low turnout derided, regardless of the overall outcome of the election. Overall the authors claim that “[the] turnout rates in sample countries have been unusually high, indicating the populations’ yearning for peace, as well as an interest in change”. However, for the 1995 Haitian presidential elections, the authors describe the turnout (31%) as “disappointing”. This conventional wisdom on voter turnout in post-conflict environments originates in studies of consolidated democracies: Citizens who vote reveal that they are politically engaged with the state and are socialized into the democratic process. This logic may be even more compelling in post-conflict states where citizens are weary of violence. A high level of voter turnout may reveal mass support for the status quo, even if elections are less than perfect or do not result in desired outcomes. Following this argument, low voter turnout would indicate a signal of discontent with the democratic process or the peace deal.

An example of this assumption is articulated in a comparison of the post-conflict elections of Angola and El Salvador. Both countries experienced devastating civil wars, lasting for 16 and 13 years, respectively. Both wars were largely fuelled by the Cold War, with one primary faction being funded by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union. The two wars ended in negotiated settlements one year apart from each other, in 1991 and 1992, with elections set up within a few years of the settlement. However, Angola’s voting-age population turnout in this first election was extremely high (87.51%), while El Salvador’s turnout was quite low (42.48%).

Angola’s high level of voter turnout was universally praised as one of the few optimistic aspects of the election. *The Washington Post* reported:
More than 90 percent of all registered Angolans turned out to vote—this after a registration campaign in which more than 90 percent of ... Angolans signed up. It was a remarkable outpouring in a nation beset by illiteracy and years of ruinous colonial and civil war.10

El Salvador’s voter turnout, in contrast, was reported as a dark spot in an otherwise successful election: “The relatively low voter turnout in the elections ... underscored the alienation from the political process felt by broad sectors of the country’s citizens.”11 Nonetheless, El Salvador never returned to civil war, while Angola plunged back into conflict just weeks after its 1992 election. While voter turnout does not explain these outcomes alone, more caution is needed when assessing the role of turnout in post-conflict first elections.

How voter turnout can lead to recidivism

In many post-conflict states, especially since the end of the Cold War, elections have become a crucial component of reconciliation and state building.12 However, there has been a considerable amount of recent scholarship finding that, under certain circumstances, elections in post-conflict settings can be harbingers of renewed hostilities. For example, both Brancati and Snyder, and Flores and Nooruddin have shown that the earlier elections are held after a ceasefire, the more likely conflict will erupt afterwards.13 These recent studies argue that elections themselves can be inherently destabilizing in post-conflict settings. No matter the outcome, elections result in winners and losers, and in many post-conflict environments winners and losers represent opposing factions from the war. Although particular conditions can make these elections less destabilizing, elections themselves create and enable electoral conflict.

One of the most prominent theories in the literature on civil war argues that conflict is caused by the existence of incentives for armed groups to rebel. A large literature has discovered that a number of variables associated with the feasibility of conflict (as opposed to ideological or conditional reasons for conflict) are associated with the onset of war.14 They argue that civil wars occur only when they are feasible – when the benefits of rebellion are high, opportunity costs are low, and insurgency has a military advantage.15 Voter turnout may be an additional measure of the ability of warring elites to organize and recruit their supporters. In many cases, elections in post-conflict settings can serve as flash points for the resumption of conflict. Citizens that are not engaged in the political process may be difficult to mobilize. While elites may wish to return to violence after disappointing elections, it may not be feasible if the population is not active and engaged.

Potential pathways from mobilization to war

There are several ways in which voter turnout might make the resumption of conflict more feasible in post-civil war contexts. First, when electoral participation is high, the atmosphere of the election can change significantly. When there are long lines at the ballot box, and the radio and television stations are reporting that everyone in the country is participating together in the act of voting, the electoral environment can become tense. Although the day of voting may produce a positive feeling of electricity – an excitement about the voting process – this atmosphere can quickly turn negative as the announcement of results draws closer. Such an atmosphere raises the stakes
of the contest, making an electoral loss all that much harder for elites and their supporters alike.

This pathway may best explain cases when war breaks out again directly following the election. As Brancati and Snyder argue about early elections: “previously warring factions are the most powerful political actors and continue to mobilize supporters along wartime constituencies. Former combatants, turned politicians, reignite warfare by rejecting the results of unfavorable elections and returning to war in the short term”.16 In contexts such as these, high levels of voter turnout likely contribute to this tinderbox environment, and may provide elites with extra incentive to reject electoral results and mobilize for war.

Another way in which high voter turnout can lead to recidivism is through the momentum created by electoral mobilization. Just as in every election, candidates and elite factions do their best to mobilize their supporters to the polls on election day. However, as Mansfield and Snyder argue (for interstate wars), “these elites typically find that their mass allies, once mobilized, are difficult to control”.17 This is especially true during first elections, when such electoral coalitions are relatively new and must be kept together under difficult circumstances. The authors contend that nationalist messages can be the glue that holds these coalitions together, but in post-civil war contexts, such messages may refer instead to ethnic solidarity or grievances from the previous conflict. When mobilization is high, it can be increasingly difficult to control these mass allies, and thus the momentum created during the electoral contest may snowball into renewed calls for hostilities in a post-election environment.

This pathway may better explain cases of recidivism that come months or years after the first election. Diverse coalitions may remain content in the afterglow of the election, but as time passes and politicians cannot deliver on campaign promises, or find growing fissures amongst different groups of supporters, messages of collective grievance may become a more attractive or feasible means for keeping supporters under control. When citizens are highly mobilized, it may be necessary for political leaders to rely on dangerous messages of ethnic nationalism or secession to keep them aligned.

Finally, voter turnout may lead to recidivism simply because it is physically easier to identify and arm supporters when they are already mobilized. This may be especially salient when the election comes many years after the formal conclusion of hostilities. If a great deal of time passes between the end of the civil war and the first election, it may be difficult for warring factions to assess their level of support amongst civilians. When previously warring factions now represent electoral factions, voter turnout allows these different sides to (quite literally) count their supporters. If it is difficult to get your supporters out to the polls to vote for you, it will likely seem doubly difficult to get them to pick up arms for you. In contrast, if supporters are easily mobilized for elections, they may be signalling their commitment to the cause – whether through peaceful or violent channels.

Unfortunately this article cannot arbitrate between these different logics of participation. It is possible that all of them work together to produce a higher risk of war in post-conflict first elections with high levels of voter turnout. Alternatively, one of these mechanisms may be much more powerful than the others. Or further, one logic may work most powerfully under certain post-conflict environments, while others work under different circumstances. Overall, however, the central theory presented here proposes that high levels of electoral participation may contribute to the
conditions that make civil war more feasible. Thus, in post-conflict first elections high levels of voter turnout may actually be a signal of danger, not peace.

**Alternative explanations**

The null hypothesis of this study, informally proposed by commentators of post-conflict elections, suggests that high levels of voter turnout signify a commitment to peace, and therefore a decreased likelihood for conflict recidivism. In direct opposition, I propose an inverse relationship. The first hypothesis is the core contribution of this article; that elections featuring high levels of electoral mobilization will be potentially dangerous for peace in fragile societies.

**Hypothesis 0:** In post-conflict first elections, voter turnout is negatively related to conflict recidivism.

**Hypothesis 1:** In post-conflict first elections, voter turnout is positively related to conflict recidivism.

However, given the observational nature of civil war data, there are several confounding factors that may cause both high levels of electoral mobilization as well as conflict recurrence. Alternative theories would contend that electoral contentiousness or opportunities for conflict are the true causes of electoral participation, and that turnout acts as a proxy for these theoretically prior causes of recidivism.

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between voter turnout and recidivism is spurious to the overall contentiousness of the election.

**Hypothesis 3:** The relationship between voter turnout and recidivism is spurious to pre-existing structural opportunities for conflict.

However, in the following section, I show through survival modelling that such theories do not fully account for the relationship between voter turnout and conflict recurrence.

**Electoral contentiousness leads to high levels of voter turnout**

The contentiousness of an election has a clear impact on whether a post-conflict environment is more or less likely to erupt in violence. Where political parties represent previously warring factions and the campaign is hard-fought, it is clear that the outcome of the election is more likely to result in electoral losers willing to pick up arms. In particular, it has been shown that the closeness of the election, the type of electoral system, number of effective political parties, type and timing of the election, previous experience with democracy, and fraudulence of the election have an effect on its contentiousness. Nonetheless, I argue that no matter how hard-fought a campaign, if everyday people are disconnected from the political process, electoral losers may be unable to return to war.

It has long been argued in consolidated democracies that the closeness of an election has a positive effect on the level of voter turnout. When an election is expected to be close, more people choose to turn out on election day. It has also been argued that the contentiousness of an election can be affected by particular electoral configurations. First, the type of electoral system, presidential versus parliamentary, has important potential effects on voter turnout. Presidential democracies are less stable than parliamentary systems because of their rigidity and propensity to create zero-sum, winner-
take-all outcomes that fail to foster consociationalism. If parliamentary systems decrease the likelihood of instability (and thus recidivism) while decreasing the rate of voter turnout, the relationship between turnout and recidivism may be endogenous to the type of electoral system.

Similar to the type of electoral system, the type of election (whether for the head of state or for the national legislative body), as well as the number of parties in government, may also affect the likelihood of recidivism. While legislative elections can produce compromise and power-sharing outcomes, elections for the executive are much more divisive. Elections for the chief executive may also produce higher levels of turnout than elections for legislatures. Similarly, two-party systems may produce more competition (and therefore more participation and more opportunities for conflict) than multi-party systems or hegemonic party systems. In addition, the timing of the election has also been shown to have an impact on the chances of recidivism. Tensions may not run as high where important political actors have more time between the ending of hostilities and the holding of electoral contests. Contentiousness may also be affected by previous experience with elections and democracy. In countries with a long democratic history and experience with many elections, the electoral moment may be less destabilizing.

Finally, the contentiousness of an election could also be mediated by the freeness and fairness of the contest. In fraudulent elections, turnout figures can be artificially inflated or deflated in order to aid the victory of the incumbent candidate. In addition, fraudulent elections may also affect the likelihood of recidivism because elites and everyday citizens may have more motivation to return to conflict when they feel the system is rigged against them. Overall, the contentiousness of the election raises some concerns about a spurious relationship between voter turnout and likelihood of recidivism.

**Opportunities for conflict lead to high levels of voter turnout**

In addition to the contentiousness of the election, a second literature proposes that civil war is most likely when structural opportunities for conflict are available. Many different factors can contribute to structural opportunities for conflict. For example, Collier and Hoeffler argue that low levels of secondary schooling within the male population increase the opportunities for conflict by providing a large recruiting base for rebels. It has long been shown in consolidated democracies that more educated citizens are more likely to vote in elections. When a large proportion of men are educated, voter turnout tends to be high, and the potential for recidivism remains low.

Relatedly, level of economic development has also been shown to affect the likelihood of war. While low levels of development create fertile conditions for insurgency, they may also affect voter turnout. However, Blais and Dobrzynska find that voter turnout tends to be lower in the most economically underdeveloped countries, therefore we might expect a negative relationship between turnout and recidivism if economic development is driving this relationship.

In post-conflict countries, the nature of the previous civil war also creates a separate set of structural opportunities for recidivism that may also affect levels of voter turnout. If the previous conflict is especially destructive (measured by its duration and the number of deaths), if its ceasefire is monitored by peacekeepers, and the war ends in a victory (or a settlement that resolves the fundamental political issues), then the conflict is especially unlikely to result in recidivism. If these factors simultaneously
decrease the level of turnout while decreasing the likelihood of recidivism, then the relationship between these factors may be driven by opportunities for conflict more than electoral behaviour itself. In addition, ethnicity and identity cleavages have a structural impact on recidivism, and potentially voter turnout. Countries emerging from identity-based conflicts may be more vulnerable to renewed conflict when compared to countries with a history of ideologically based conflict. Further, where previous conflicts were identity-based, emergent religious or ethnic political parties may be better equipped to mobilize voters.

Empirical specifications and results

This section tests the theory that high levels of voter turnout can increase the chance of conflict recurrence with an empirical analysis. The general relationship of voter turnout on civil war recurrence is estimated through survival modelling. Both of the alternative arguments are tested, and controlling for a number of relevant factors, the data indicate that high levels of voter turnout have an independent, positive, and significant correlation with civil war recurrence. The data show that this relationship is not driven by either the contentiousness of the election or the underlying opportunities for conflict.

Structure of the data

The following statistical analysis uses data on civil war recurrence based on Doyle and Sambanis, with some cases expanded on by Fortna, and the inclusion of particular civil wars with ceasefires between the ending of their datasets (2004) and 2014. Appendix A includes all coding notes as well as cases updated through to 2014. A civil war is defined as a conflict that caused more than 1000 battle deaths, represented a challenge to the sovereignty of an internationally recognized state, occurred within the boundaries of that state, involved the state as one of the principal combatants, and where the rebels were able to mount an organized military opposition to the state that inflicted significant casualties on state forces. Using Fortna’s coding, it includes all ceasefires that lasted for at least one month between 1945 and mid-2014, and was modified to include only cases that held an election after the ceasefire date and before the recurrence of conflict, if conflict recurred. The resulting data set contains 70 ceasefire observations. Observations include the date of the ceasefire, election, and date of “failure” in cases of recidivism. The duration of peace was recorded through 15 July 2014.

Thus, cases of civil war must pass two hurdles to enter the data set. First, there must be a cessation of hostilities that endures for at least one month, and second, there must be an election held after this ceasefire (and before the recurrence of conflict, if renewed hostilities occur). The first barrier is critical to the analysis in order to measure the dependent variable: time until recidivism. If elections held in the midst of civil wars were included, they would be recorded as instant failures, which is not truly a measure of conflict recidivism. While it is possible that high turnout elections held during civil wars might fuel conflict, they do not provide empirical purchase on the question of civil war recidivism. The second barrier, the holding of elections after a ceasefire, is critical to measuring the independent variable: voter turnout. Because this analysis is interested in explaining the role of voter turnout in relationship to the likelihood of recidivism, it does not consider ceasefires where elections are not held.
Consequently, the findings apply only to countries that hold elections in the wake of civil war ceasefires.

The dependent variable in this study is time until the resumption of conflict after the holding of a first election. As defined by Fortna, recidivism is coded as the failure of peace if a new war occurs within the same country that involved the same or similar parties. If peace endured through 15 July 2014, the observation is censored at that point. In the survival analysis presented below, time is modelled as days until the recurrence of war after the holding of a first election. For the 14 cases of recidivism in the sample, the range of time between election date and the return to war varies considerably. Several cases occurred directly after the first election (Congo-Brazzaville, March 2002; Angola, October 1992; Uganda, January 1981). Several others were outliers over 10 years after the election (Mali, 1997–2012; Myanmar/Burma, 1956–1991). The median time to recidivism is 4.7 years. Both the total number of cases as well as the failure rate of the data set is lower than Doyle and Sambanis’ (121 cases with a failure rate of 43%) because this data set only includes cases where an election was held after the ceasefire. This excludes many of the short-term cessations in violence that broke down into conflict before elections could be established. The implication for this coding rule is that the findings on voter turnout cannot be applied to all cases of ceasefire, but only to post-conflict cases that hold an election in the aftermath of conflict.

Data for the independent variable voter turnout are taken from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance’s (IDEA) turnout database. Voter turnout is measured as a percentage of the voting-age population (VAP) in each country who voted in the relevant election. Thus, the numerator is measured as the number of people who cast a ballot in the election, and the denominator measures all citizens who are old enough to vote. In contrast to voter turnout figures based on voter registration, VAP turnout better captures levels of mobilization amongst the entire population (not just registered voters). Figure 1 presents an image of how voter turnout is distributed within the sample. The bulk of the cases in the sample have voter turnout between 60% and 90% of the VAP. However, the sample features a distinctive

![Figure 1. Levels of voter turnout in the sample.](image-url)
left-hand tail with about 39% of the cases falling between 24% and 59% turnout. The average value in the sample is 62.40% voter turnout.

**Model specification**

Survival modelling is used to estimate the effect of turnout on time until recidivism. As opposed to logit models, survival models have the advantage of modelling time as well as avoiding the assumption (that exists in the logistic framework) that cases that did not fail by 15 July 2014 will never fail. By modelling time within the survival framework, the risk of conflict becomes continuous, providing more data about the “riskiness” of renewed war. A peace that lasts two months is more fragile than one that lasts 10 years. The results from the survival models are presented in hazard ratios, which are interpreted in terms of estimated risk of conflict recurrence. Standard errors are clustered by country in each model.

All models are estimated using a Cox estimator. The Cox proportional hazard function takes the exponential form:

\[
h(t, X) = h_0(t) \exp \left( \sum_{i=1}^{p} \beta_i X_i \right)
\]

The Cox estimator makes no assumptions about the underlying hazard function of conflict recidivism. The Cox estimator is a conservative estimator in that we do not know the “true” hazard function of recidivism. However, it is not entirely unrealistic to assume that the risk of conflict after a ceasefire changes monotonically with time. The Weibull estimator assumes just this – the hazard function either increases or decreases at all times. While the Weibull estimator is preferable with small samples, this assumption is potentially restrictive. A Schoenfeld residuals test indicates that the proportional hazard assumption is not violated for the primary independent variable (voter turnout).

**Control variables**

Due to the nature of this observational data, it is impossible to establish a conclusive causal relationship between voter turnout and civil war recidivism. There are potential unobserved factors that could affect both voter turnout and conflict recidivism that have not yet been explored by scholars. Nonetheless, the following analysis presents multiple models that attempt to control for any potential spuriousness between the two variables. Model 1, testing Hypothesis 2, takes into account a number of factors related to electoral contentiousness, while Model 2, testing Hypothesis 3, controls for opportunities for conflict. Model 3 combines these two in order to account for both factors, effectively testing Hypothesis 1 (against the null hypothesis) in a parsimonious model.

The first model tests Hypothesis 2, concerning the relationship between voter turnout, the contentiousness of the election, and the likelihood of recidivism. Descriptive statistics for all control variables for Model 1 are included in Table 1. The first control for electoral contentiousness is closeness of the election. This is measured by the difference in vote total percentages of the top two parties or candidates competing in the election. Second, I include a dummy variable for the type of electoral system. This indicator takes the value of “1” for parliamentary systems where the chief executive is
indirectly elected by the national legislature. The base category is composed of presidential systems, semi-presidential systems, and unelected executives.

Relatedly, a second dummy variable is included to capture the voting rules for each country. This indicator takes a value of “1” when the system is majoritarian or plurality-based. A majoritarian electoral system is one in which the candidates or parties that receive the most votes win. I also capture the contentiousness of the election by controlling for the type of election being held. Presidential and concurrent presidential and legislative elections are coded as “1” while legislative elections are the base category. I also include a measure of the number of effective parties contesting the election. For parliamentary elections, this variable counts the total number of parties or party coalitions that took seats in the parliament in the aftermath of the election. For presidential elections, the count measures the number of candidates running who received at least 10% of the national vote in first round elections (where applicable). For concurrent parliamentary and presidential elections, I follow the coding rule for presidential elections, which is likely the more contentious contest.

Another important factor related to contentiousness is a country’s previous experience with democracy. I include several variables to capture democratic experience. First, I constructed a dummy variable based on combined Polity IV country scores, such that countries are coded as “1” if the country ever scored higher than a “7” on the Polity combined indicator at any point within 25 years before the ceasefire. I also include raw Polity IV combined scores for the year before each conflict began and the year after each ceasefire was reached. In addition, a variable is included to capture the number of days between the beginning of a ceasefire and the holding of first elections. Finally, I include a dummy variable for whether or not voting is mandatory in each country. A final aspect of electoral contentiousness is the fraudulence of the election. I use an indicator from the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data set, which measures whether or not there were meaningful concerns before the elections about if they would be free and fair.

The second model tests the validity of Hypothesis 3: whether the relationship between voter turnout and conflict recurrence is spurious to pre-existing structural opportunities for conflict. Descriptive statistics for all control variables of Model 2 are presented in Table 2. First, percentage of male secondary schooling measures the total number of new male entrants in the last grade of primary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total male population of the theoretical entrance
age to the last grade of primary school. Data are taken for the year after the start of the ceasefire. Where data are unavailable for that year, the next available entry is recorded if it falls within ten years of the ceasefire. There is a significant amount of missing data for this important control variable (17 missing observations in total), and so I model the “missingness” by coding missing observations as zero values, and including a dummy variable for all missing values of male secondary schooling. Logged gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is also included for the year after the onset of a ceasefire.

The model also attempts to capture opportunities for recidivism created by the conditions of the original civil war. The destructiveness of the previous conflict is measured by the duration, in months, of the original civil war, as well as the number of fatalities from that conflict. A dummy variable is included which indicates whether or not a peacekeeping operation was present in the aftermath of the conflict. An additional variable measures whether or not the original conflict ended in (1) a victory for the government, (2) a victory for the rebels, (3) an interim agreement, such as a ceasefire, preliminary agreement on a peace process, or the gradual dissolving of violence, or (4) a negotiated settlement that resolves fundamental political issues. Finally, I measure whether or not the original conflict was an identity conflict (based on religion or ethnicity), as opposed to an ideological or revolutionary conflict.

**Model 1: electoral contentiousness**

The results of Model 1, which tests Hypothesis 2 (the relationship between voter turnout, electoral contentiousness, and civil war recidivism), are shown in Table 3. The majority of variables related to the contentiousness of the election do not have a significant effect (p-value less than 0.05) on the likelihood of recidivism. However, the data do show that electoral design can have a significant effect on the likelihood of recidivism. As predicted, electoral systems that feature majoritarian or plurality voting rules are much more likely to return to conflict than those with proportional representation or mixed systems. In addition, the more time that passes between the beginning of a ceasefire and the holding of an election, the less likely a country is to return to conflict following the election.

Overall, despite controlling for many different aspects of the contentiousness of each election, voter turnout has a positive and significant relationship with civil war recurrence. All else being equal, a one-point increase in VAP voter turnout increases the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Descriptive statistics of controls in Model 2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent male secondary schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita after the war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the previous conflict (months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of fatalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a government victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a rebel victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a truce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
likelihood of recidivism by 5.5%. A country with 92.42% turnout in first elections (the highest value in the sample) is more than three and a half times more likely to return to war than a country with 24.71% turnout (the lowest value in the sample). When rebels are able to mount a serious challenge to the state and participation is sufficiently high, the peace will be fragile regardless of the nature of the election. While these electoral characteristics may impact the likelihood of recidivism, they do not fully explain the relationship between high voter turnout and the resumption of conflict.

**Model 2: opportunities for conflict**

Table 4 reports the results of Model 2, which tests Hypothesis 3 that the relationship between voter turnout and recidivism is spurious to structural opportunities for conflict. Again, at a p-value of less than 0.05, most of the structural control variables are not significantly correlated with the likelihood of recidivism. Importantly, the measure of “missingness” for male secondary schooling is not statistically significant, suggesting that missing data on this variable is not correlated with recidivism. Although most of these control variables are not significantly related to recidivism, the presence of a peacekeeping mission appears to have a strong relationship. All else being equal, the presence of a peacekeeping mission nearly eliminates the likelihood of recidivism.

**Table 3. The estimated effect of voter turnout on conflict recurrence, Model 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hazard ratio (Standard errors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter turnout</td>
<td>1.055*** (0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness of election</td>
<td>0.989 (0.019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary democracy</td>
<td>0.331 (0.282)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majoritarian system</td>
<td>5.546** (3.671)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential election</td>
<td>1.360 (1.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of political parties</td>
<td>0.985 (0.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral fraud</td>
<td>2.409 (1.890)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with democracy</td>
<td>1.475 (0.973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of democracy before the conflict</td>
<td>0.907* (0.051)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of democracy after the conflict</td>
<td>1.143 (0.110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time between ceasefire and election</td>
<td>0.999** (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory voting</td>
<td>0.980 (1.061)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statistical significance is reported at *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

**Table 4. The estimated effect of voter turnout on conflict recurrence, Model 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The estimated effect of turnout, Model 2</th>
<th>Model 2: Opportunities for conflict Hazard ratio (Standard errors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter turnout</td>
<td>1.055*** (0.019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent male secondary schooling</td>
<td>0.973 (0.019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing male secondary schooling</td>
<td>0.213 (0.443)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita after the war (logged)</td>
<td>1.177 (0.465)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the previous conflict</td>
<td>0.990* (0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of fatalities (logged)</td>
<td>0.909 (0.256)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping mission</td>
<td>0.154*** (0.095)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a rebel victory</td>
<td>0.941 (1.702)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a truce</td>
<td>1.721 (1.954)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict ended in a settlement</td>
<td>2.232 (2.344)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity conflict</td>
<td>0.528 (0.437)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statistical significance is reported at *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
Nonetheless, even while controlling for different structural opportunities for conflict, voter turnout has an independent and significant relationship with the likelihood of recidivism. As turnout increases, so does the likelihood of renewed conflict. Just as in Model 1, the hazard ratio in Model 2 indicates that a one-point increase in voter turnout produces a 5.5% increase in the likelihood of recidivism. The stability and robustness of the relationship between voter turnout and conflict recidivism strongly suggests that the relationship is not mediated by related factors, such as the contentiousness of the election, or the structural opportunities for renewed conflict. Thus, the data reveal that while structural opportunities for conflict, such as the presence of a peacekeeping mission, can have an effect on the likelihood of recidivism in post-conflict countries that hold elections, these structural opportunities do not explain the relationship between high levels of voter turnout and the return to conflict.

**Model 3: parsimonious full model**

Due to the limited number of observations in the data set (at its largest, only 70 cases), estimating a full model with all 22 control variables is impossible. In order to estimate a full model of the effect of voter turnout on conflict recurrence, the parsimonious model in Table 5 includes all control variables that reached significance at a $p$-value of at least 0.10 in one of the models above.\textsuperscript{52} Taken together with Model 1 and Model 2, this final parsimonious model tests Hypothesis 1: the central proposition that high levels of voter turnout should have a positive relationship with conflict recidivism.

Not all of the control variables remain significant ($p$-value < 0.05) in the combined model. While peacekeeping maintains a very small hazard ratio, its statistical significance is reduced, and the level of democracy before the conflict ceases to accurately predict recidivism. However, majoritarian systems continue to have a strong, positive relationship with renewed conflict. Majoritarian systems are almost six times as likely to return to conflict as plurality or proportional systems. Additionally, the time between the ceasefire and the election continues to have a negative and significant impact on the likelihood of recidivism. For each day that accrues between the start of the ceasefire and the holding of elections, the likelihood of recidivism decreases by 0.1 percentage points. All else being equal, a country that waits six years to hold elections is about half as likely to return to civil war as a country that holds an election in the immediate aftermath of a ceasefire.

Likewise, the duration of the previous conflict also has a negative and significant impact on the likelihood of recidivism. The average duration of the previous conflict in the model is 109 months (about nine years), while the minimum value is one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The estimated effect of turnout, Model 3</th>
<th>Model 3: Full model Hazard ratio (Standard errors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter turnout</td>
<td>1.056** (0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majoritarian system</td>
<td>5.701** (4.429)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of democracy before the conflict</td>
<td>0.941 (0.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time between ceasefire and election</td>
<td>0.999*** (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the previous conflict</td>
<td>0.990** (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping mission</td>
<td>0.366* (0.199)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statistical significance is reported at *$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$. 

Table 5. The estimated effect of voter turnout on conflict recurrence, Model 3.
month. A one-month increase in the length of the original conflict decreases the risk of recidivism by 1%. Therefore, a country that faced one month of war is about 8% more likely to return to conflict after holding elections than a country that faced nine years of conflict. Overall, we can see that although not all of the controls are statistically significant, most of them have the expected effect on recidivism.

Importantly, controlling for both the contentiousness of the election and the opportunities for conflict, voter turnout continues to have a positive and significant relationship with the likelihood of recidivism. A one-point increase in voter turnout increases the likelihood of recidivism by 5.6%. Figure 2 reveals how this risk varies over time by level of voter turnout (Appendix B presents similar figures for Model 1 and Model 2). At very low levels of turnout, the likelihood of recidivism remains nearly 0%; the peace holds for nearly ten years after the election. Even at the average level of turnout in the sample, 63%, this likelihood of recidivism remains less than 10%. However, at the highest levels of turnout (92% of VAP), the likelihood of survival (remaining at peace) drops precipitously with time.

Around two years after the holding of first elections, a country that has very high levels of turnout faces the same survival rate as an average country after 20 years. After four years, a country with high levels of turnout has a 20% chance of returning to war, and ten years after a first election, the likelihood of recidivism for a country with high levels of turnout rises to 40%. To put this in perspective, of the entire sample of 70 countries, exactly 20% of cases failed over this time period. Of the countries with less than 63% turnout, 12% returned to war. Of the counties with more than the average level of turnout, more than twice that rate (27%) faced renewed conflict.

There are many causes of recidivism in post-conflict countries. Elections themselves cause electoral conflict that can escalate into renewed hostilities. In addition, there are different characteristics of elections, such as their closeness, the rules that govern them, and the outcomes they produce, that can make civil war more likely. Opportunities for recidivism can also arise out of structural aspects of a country’s environment, such as its
level of development, the intensity of its original conflict, and the attention it receives from the international community. But it is clear that voter turnout also has a role to play in the riskiness of recidivism. Where people are engaged in the political contest and willing to put aside their day-to-day lives to participate in elections, people are likely more invested in the outcome of the election than in countries where people are disconnected from such processes.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, elections have become a regular feature of post-conflict state building. Although this trend has been critiqued in a number of different accounts, analysts have largely praised post-conflict elections that feature high levels of voter turnout. These observers cite the population’s commitment to democratization and the peace process as evidence of a lasting peace. However, it is clear that more caution is needed in the analysis of voter turnout in post-conflict first elections.

While it is entirely conceivable that high turnout reveals hopefulness and commitment on behalf of citizens, strong rates of participation can become dangerous in the months and years after an election. Tensions surrounding the outcome of the election can become electric, and a return to conflict can be particularly enticing when mass participation is high because elites may be physically more capable of identifying and arming followers. Further, turnout may have long-term effects on the likelihood of recidivism if elites find it difficult to control their followers in the months and years after an election. If delivering on campaign promises proves difficult, elites may rely instead on messages of ethnic separatism or past grievance.

The analysis presented here reveals that high levels of voter turnout have a positive relationship with the likelihood of recidivism regardless of many different features of an election. The traditional ways scholars and practitioners have suggested to ameliorate the negative effects of elections in post-conflict environments may not apply to the insidious effects of turnout. While mechanisms such as proportional electoral rules, parliamentary systems and elections, increased time between ceasefires and elections, and the presence of peacekeepers can decrease the likelihood of renewed conflict, they do not appear to dampen the dangerous relationship between voter turnout and recidivism.

Attempting to openly suppress voter turnout is not just unethical – citizens should continue to have the fundamental right to participate in the selection of their leaders, regardless of their environment – it is extremely difficult. Interfering in a candidate’s ability to mobilize their potential electoral base is risky for international actors and likely to have negative consequences outside of the effect of turnout on recidivism. Nonetheless, it may be beneficial for international actors to downplay the importance of turnout relative to other important priorities during the organization of first elections. Instead of pouring resources into voter registration campaigns, local and international organizations may consider instead redirecting such precious resources to voter education campaigns or local actors that are engaged in peace and reconciliation efforts. Instead of trying to actively decrease turnout, practitioners may simply de-emphasize the importance of turnout and instead focus their energies on other important aspects of democratization and peacekeeping.

In order to understand the role of citizens in the onset of conflict, more mass-level analysis is needed in the study of civil wars. Not only do bottom-up processes inform the feasibility literature by affecting the ability of elites to incite violence, mass-level
factors can also speak to the literature that finds that different institutional arrangements lead to conflict. While previous work has shown that unconsolidated regimes are the most likely to face civil war, the mechanisms behind these relationships are less well understood. Analysing how institutions interact with and mobilize citizens may reveal the ways in which they lead to conflict.

Notes

3. While this argument is prevalent in studies of democratic elections, it is questioned in the literature on authoritarian elections: Gandhi and Lust-Okar, “Elections Under Authoritarianism.” In Soviet elections, turnout was mandatory and thus not a true measure of popular participation: Karklins, “Soviet Elections Revisited.” Similarly, where elections are rigged, turnout may be artificially inflated by the regime: Cox and Kousser, “Turnout and Rural Corruption.”
4. Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*.
8. Ibid., 80.
20. Blais, Young, and Lapp, “The Calculus of Voting”; Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*?
25. Collier and Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War.”


34. Fortna notes that “In many cases the exact date of a cease-fire agreement or the date of resumed fighting is unknown. In others there may be no exact date, the fighting stopped or escalated over a period of days or weeks (or even months), so that coding stop and start dates is arbitrary … For example if research indicates a cease-fire in May, I use May 15th; at the end of May, May 31st, etc.” (*Does Peacekeeping Work?*). For cases added to the data set I follow the same coding rule.

35. Pintor and Gratschew, *Voter Turnout Since 1945*.

36. Additionally, it is unlikely that the registration process is uniform across cases. Because it is a highly political process, registration may be correlated to a number of factors related to both voter turnout and recidivism. For example, more authoritarian regimes may be better adept at suppressing registration (particularly in hostile regions) than more democratic regimes. Likewise, time between the ceasefire and the first election may affect the ability of the regime to register voters in a timely fashion. In sum, it is implausible that registration rates are randomly distributed across the sample, creating bias in the coefficients. I therefore use percentage of VAP as a measure of turnout.

37. However, all estimates are robust to the use of the Weibull estimator. All hazard ratios in all models remain in the same direction regardless of the estimator used. Yet, some control variables lose statistical significance when estimated with the Weibull estimator. Nonetheless, the $p$-values of voter turnout remain unaffected.

38. For Model 3, turnout has a rho-value of $-0.193$ ($p = 0.232$).


41. Flores and Nooruddin, “The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction.”

42. Marshall and Jaggers, “Polity IV Project.”

43. Hyde and Marinov, “Which Elections Can Be Lost?”

44. World Bank, “Word Development Indicators.”


47. Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?*

48. Ibid.


50. A test for multicollinearity in Model 1 reveals variance inflation factor (VIF) values between 1.15 and 2.33; the mean VIF value is 1.65.

51. A test for multicollinearity in Model 2 reveals VIF values between 1.09 and 1.56; the mean VIF value is 1.42.

52. A test for multicollinearity in Model 3 reveals VIF values between 1.02 and 1.16; the mean VIF value is 1.09.


**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Note on contributor**

*Natalie Wenzell Letsa* is a PhD candidate in the Government Department at Cornell University. She conducts research on public opinion and political behaviour in autocratic regimes, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa.
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