

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Wahman. *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 272pp. \$90. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198872825.

How does election violence influence campaigns and the local electoral environment in geographically polarized electoral systems? Relatedly, how does the logic of political competition in these electoral systems shape subnational variation in election violence? In *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence*, Michael Wahman advances an eloquent theory and offers rich original data that takes territory seriously. He argues that where national competition is high but subnational competition is low, or geographically polarized electoral systems, political parties must mobilize supporters in regional strongholds and stifle competition locally in order to be competitive in national elections. In these contexts, political parties resort to violence both to control and contest territory. In their local strongholds, ruling and opposition parties alike engage in and encourage violence to reinforce and project dominance, deter their opponents from making in-roads, and shrink the democratic space by intimidating their opponents' supporters and restricting their access to other candidates and platforms. Beyond their strongholds, parties also engage in violence to contest territory and break their opponents' dominance, but those with centralized repressive capacity—often ruling parties—are more likely to engage in this kind of violence. Wahman draws on original qualitative and quantitative data from Malawi and Zambia to demonstrate how political parties strategically engage in violence and with what effects on the electoral environment and political participation.

This richly detailed and insightful book makes valuable contributions to scholarship on election violence, subnational authoritarianism, and democratization in Africa and beyond. For one, Wahman makes a compelling case to theorize and study election violence not only as a tool to influence turnout and vote choice, but more broadly—and perhaps more importantly—as a means to shape and control territory and the local electoral environment. Parties engage in and encourage violence not only, or primarily, to scare voters away from the polls or sway their decision in the voting booth but, rather, to signal their dominance, convey their opponents' weakness by denying them access to their stronghold, and influence voters' participation in campaign activities and discussions. This theoretical move is a welcome departure from earlier work that has studied violence more narrowly for its impact on voting behavior, and future studies would benefit from broadening their view of how and why political parties and other actors engage in violence during elections.

Relatedly, Wahman's book bridges the election violence, subnational authoritarianism, and democratization literatures by showing how campaign violence is often about more than shaping voting behavior. Instead, it is a tool to both control and contest territory as well as advance other goals. Casting election violence in this light is essential for broadening our understanding of not just how violence influences election results, but democratic institutions, norms, and civic engagement more broadly. Wahman shows that there is much to be gained theoretically and empirically from studying election violence not only as a strategy to manipulate election outcomes, but also as a tactic political parties and other actors rely on to thwart democratic deepening as elections become increasingly competitive. This book nicely puts the election violence and democratization literatures in dialogue with one another.


The book's focus on moderate and low-level cases of election violence is a third important contribution. Prior work on election violence has focused on high-violence cases, such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, where thousands have been killed in election-related violence. Yet the preoccupation with these high-violence cases limits the generalizability of existing theories and our understanding of election violence. Wahman's in-depth analysis of Malawi and Zambia is thus highly welcomed as these more representative cases serve to advance our knowledge and refine extant theories about the dynamics and consequences of election violence.

The book's argument and findings point to important questions for future research. One, how might the strength of political parties, in terms of their internal cohesion, ties with voters, or organizational capacity, shape their incentives to engage in or encourage violence to control or contest territory? Are stronger parties less likely to turn to violence because they are more confident about their ability to mobilize voters and maintain support or, perhaps more likely, knowing that they can tolerate the costs of violence while also having the capacity to organize violence in a targeted manner? Wahman makes a compelling argument about how and why parties engage in violence but does not directly grapple with party strength as an explanatory variable; future work might consider how and why stronger or weaker parties engage in violence and its different forms.

Second, what constraints might political parties and other actors run up against that might dissuade them from perpetrating violence? Wahman marshals an impressive array of evidence to illustrate how political parties use violence and with what ends in mind. A question that emerges from his analysis is what factors might alter parties' calculations to resort to or promote election violence, such as institutional design, other actors such as civil society organizations or election management bodies, or alternative political narratives. Studying and theorizing these constraints will be an important next step in advancing scholarship about when and why political parties and other actors refrain from or resort to election violence.

Finally, Wahman's book makes a convincing case that scholars of election-related violence need to revisit assumptions about the costs and benefits of violence. Much prior work assumes that election violence is a high-cost strategy of last resort on the menu of electoral manipulation. Wahman's analysis of

Zambia and Malawi, however, forces us to question these assumptions when it comes to moderate and low-level violence, and to unpack different forms of violence as well. Whereas high-scale lethal violence may carry serious material and reputational costs, the atmosphere of intimidation and low-scale violence that political parties cultivate in contexts like Zambia and Malawi entail fewer costs and perhaps greater benefits. Disentangling different types and scales of violence and their accompanying costs and benefits will be an important task for future work if we are to accurately theorize about the causes, consequences, and dynamics of election violence.

Megan Turnbull 
University of Georgia, Athens, GA
Megan.Turnbull@uga.edu
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