

REVIEW

Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Violent Victors: Why Bloodstained Parties Win Postwar Elections*

Princeton University Press, 2022, pp. vii + 383

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(Received 27 March 2024; accepted 23 April 2024)

Among the most vexing phenomena in post-conflict Latin America is the rise of wartime perpetrators via the ballot box. As countries seek a break with their violent pasts, the staying power of political figures directly linked to atrocities appears to defy the logic of democratic accountability. Even where transitional justice initiatives like truth commissions expose conflict-era abuses, civil war protagonists – both state and insurgent actors – manage to overcome their bloodstained histories. In areas hardest hit by violence, victimised communities cast ballots for their victimisers. How do we explain these unnerving dynamics?

In *Violent Victors: Why Bloodstained Parties Win Postwar Elections*, Sarah Zukerman Daly tackles this puzzle by examining how parties linked to wartime perpetrators and their rivals navigate the electoral dilemmas they face following conflict, as well as the calculations that drive voter behaviour. Daly's core argument is that war outcomes, specifically the ability of belligerents to leverage success on the battlefield, shape postwar parties' fortunes. Actors who achieve military victory can spin their triumphs as illustrative of their superior capacity to secure peace and stability. In other words, military victory (or even military stalemate) lends the belligerent party credibility on the valence issue of security. Maximising this advantage, however, depends on the war victor selling itself as a 'Restrained Leviathan' by claiming credit for the de-escalation of conflict, moderating its positions and selecting high-valence candidates (pp. 28–40).

For war losers, the electoral strategies to maximise vote-share differ because these parties often shoulder the blame for war's consequences. They should, therefore, behave as 'Tactical Immoderates' – emphasising non-security issues and distinguishing themselves from their belligerent rivals (pp. 40–5). Meanwhile, parties without links to past abuses can credibly inhabit the role of the 'Rule Abiders', emphasising their human-rights-respecting credentials in contrast to their belligerent competitors (pp. 27–8).

Ultimately, Daly argues that where the victorious belligerent parties play their cards correctly, they enjoy the greatest electoral appeal because they can project greater competence on current and future security – a priority in war-ravaged societies and one likely to swing uncommitted voters. However, war winners can also

squander this favourable post-conflict inheritance by straying too far from their security advantage and remaking their image (pp. 46–8).

Overall, *Violent Victors* is an ambitious study that delivers both theoretically and empirically. A core contribution of the book is Daly's holistic treatment of the postwar electoral landscape. Research on political violence and its legacies has largely advanced in a bifurcated manner, with scholars focusing on either state military actors *or* rebel organisations (full disclosure: the author of this review is guilty of this tendency as well). Yet recognising that we cannot understand the platforms, strategies and actions of one side in isolation, Daly theorises the dynamic interactions between postwar parties in a comprehensive and compelling way. Likewise, it is not hard to envision a book that focuses on either the supply (party) or demand (voter) side of the postwar electoral equation; however, *Violent Victors* provides a thorough treatment of both.

Daly also assesses how the electoral success of victorious belligerents shapes longer-term outcomes like peace, justice and governance. In so doing, the book highlights a central dilemma of postwar environments. Because of the electoral advantages enjoyed by triumphant bloodstained parties, they do not perceive a need to go back to war, allowing peace and stability to hold. But at the same time, belligerents' continued political dominance allows them to block accountability for previous human-rights abuses, forgo democratic deepening, and divert resources away from social development and toward hardline security policies. These dynamics foster an enduring but shallow peace.

Violent Victors utilises a variety of methodological techniques and marshals impressive quantitative and qualitative data. To assess individual voter behaviour, Daly fielded an original survey of over 1,500 Colombians, using both survey experiments and observational data to evaluate how identities and framing affect voter perceptions of belligerent and non-belligerent candidates (Chapter 4). The author draws on rich archival and interview data to analyse postwar party strategies in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, which represent cases of stalemate, military victory and rebel victory, respectively (Chapters 5–7). Drawing on the novel Civil War Successor Party (CWSP) dataset, *Violent Victors* then evaluates several of the party-level hypotheses (Chapter 8) and implications for post-conflict peace, justice and rule of law (Chapter 9) within a broader cross-national framework.

Daly's study not only provides a careful and comprehensive treatment of the dilemmas and dynamics of postwar elections, but also effectively refutes several alternative explanations for victorious belligerents' electoral success. These include their use of coercion, their underlying popularity, and the notion that it is only the beneficiaries of wartime military actions that vote for belligerent successors. However, *Violent Victors* left me with two lingering questions, which would be fruitful avenues for future research.

The first has to do with how the origins and ideological orientations of belligerent parties shape their strategies and voter responses. This issue surfaced in my reading of the Nicaraguan case (Chapter 7), where Daly claims that the revolutionary Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN), which came to power in 1979, used their security credentials to win the 1984 election. Daly recognises the limited explanatory power of the

Nicaraguan case because of several idiosyncratic factors, among them the fact that the country was enmeshed in another violent conflict (the 1980s Contra War), the out-sized and adversarial role of the United States within that ongoing war and electoral politics, and mixed views on whether the 1984 contest was, in fact, free and fair (see pp. 197–8, 207–9).

However, as a social revolutionary party, FSLN governance was about much more than the security valence; it sought to implement transformative social, political and economic programmes that disproportionately affected the lives and livelihoods of rural peasant sectors in areas that became vulnerable to Contra defection in the early and mid-1980s. In fact, internal government polling data published in the 1985 report ‘Campesinado y Reforma Agraria: Impacto Político de la Reforma Agraria’ reveal that, unlike in Guatemala and El Salvador and contrary to Daly’s theory, those rural areas hardest hit by the Contra conflict exhibited the highest levels of opposition to the FSLN. For example, in the conflict-ravaged provinces of Region V (Zelaya Central, Boaco and Chontales), municipal-level opposition averaged 67.7 per cent (p. 57). Likewise, in the other main theatre of war, Region VI (Matagalpa and Jinotega), the average municipal opposition was 70.1 per cent (p. 58). Not only were these the zones most affected by violence, but they were also those in which orthodox collectivisation policies, price controls and other economic restrictions engendered the greatest upheaval and resentment. Therefore, even if the FSLN was able to own the security valence in war-torn areas, its other revolutionary policies may have dampened this advantage – prompting backlash and opposition that varied by class and geography. This case thus begs the broader question of whether wartime belligerents from social revolutionary regimes (and voter responses to them) operate according to the theoretical propositions that *Violent Victors* puts forward, or whether they warrant a more nuanced approach.

Second, Daly is very clear that her theory and its implications only apply to the first postwar election, as any number of intervening factors may alter party and voter strategies subsequently. But *Violent Victors* also illuminates an array of new questions related to the longer-term effects of bloodstained party brands. For example, Daly briefly mentions the electoral success of former general Otto Pérez Molina, who won the 2011 Guatemalan elections while running on a hardline security platform and burnishing his credentials as the ‘general of peace’ – the leading military official who helped broker the 1996 peace settlement. Pérez Molina triumphed after having lost the 2007 election to leftist politician Álvaro Colom, illustrating how a party’s belligerent identity can be ‘resurrected’ well after conflict’s end (p. 191). Building on *Violent Victors*’ invaluable contributions to better understand when bloodstained party brands are invoked and how they can serve as a winning electoral formula beyond the first postwar election can unlock new and important insights into the longer-term legacies of armed conflict.