

Elections and Civil War in Africa

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We would like to thank participants in presentations at the University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Oslo, University of Pittsburgh, Princeton University, University of Washington in St. Louis, Yale University, Midwest Political Science Association 2012, Eurasian Peace Science 2012, Peace Science Society 2011, European Political Science Association 2011, International Studies Association 2011, and the American Political Science Association 2010. We would also like to thank the following individuals for comments on earlier drafts: Daniela Donno, Scott Morgenstern, and Nicholas Sambanis.

ABSTRACT

The view that multiparty elections in changing authoritarian regimes should be held sooner rather than later has been increasingly under attack. Critics argue that, under the conditions of low institutional development that obtain in most of these regimes, multiparty elections may lead to violence and the eruption of civil war, rather than to the peaceful allocation of authority that everyone desires. This criticism is supported by an increasing amount of scholarly research claiming to document the deleterious effect of democratization on civil war initiation. In this article we examine the relationship between the occurrence of multiparty elections in Africa and the initiation of civil wars. We show that the data provides no support for the view that such elections will increase the probability of a civil war initiation. In fact, we show that for the post-Cold War period, holding multiparty elections is actually associated with a substantial reduction in the probability that a civil war will occur. This is as true for the simple bivariate correlation as it is for several specifications of multivariate models. It is also true once we consider that multiparty elections are more likely to be held when a conflict is deep and already imminent, and consequently, are more likely to be observed when a civil war is likely to occur anyway.

1. Introduction

Academics and policy analysts are currently involved in a debate regarding the appropriate “sequence” of democratization. According to one side of this debate, elections are the fundamental element and the most important event in any democratic regime and should be the immediate goal in any attempt to establish democracy in a country. This is the default position, which, as such, has not been articulated explicitly until it was challenged. It stems from the now classic work on regime transitions and is expressed in the policies of the “international community,” most notably of the United States and its democracy promotion agencies.¹

The other side argues that elections can be held too early in the process of transition away from an authoritarian regime. Prompted by the eruption or intensification of large-scale conflict around national elections in countries such as the Congo, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Rwanda, many observers have come to believe that if held too early elections may hinder rather than foster the process of democratization. This is so, some believe, because elections may provoke war and not the peaceful leadership turnover that they are supposed to engender. Consequently, although necessary for democracy to exist, elections, according to this view, should not necessarily be the immediate or tactical goal in a process of democratization. When elections are held in a context in which existing institutions are weak, they are likely to

¹ O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and Linz and Stepan (1996) are probably the two best-known works on regime transitions. See Carothers (2002) for a criticism of the so-called transition paradigm and for a criticism of the democracy promotion community’s “push for elections” strategy.

be captured by elites whose main goals are to perpetuate their hold in power. Although seemingly compelling, this argument is problematic.

The goal of this paper is to provide an alternative way to view the relationship between elections and civil conflict as authoritarian regimes liberalize. We argue that elections in authoritarian regimes are not held randomly. Non-democratic leaders may choose to hold elections strategically to stave off violence, real or perceived. If this is the case, and elections are held in situations where the threat of violence is imminent, not surprisingly, elections and the onset of civil conflict will correlate positively. We believe this explains much of the current pessimism regarding the consequences of elections for political stability. In order to identify the causal effect of elections on the likelihood of civil conflict, we account for this endogeneity and offer evidence that challenges recent findings that democratization generates civil war.

2. Why Would Multiparty Elections Lead to Civil War?

Although the number of civil wars has not increased in the past decade, some authors claim that the level of violence associated with democratization has increased (e.g. Collier 2009). Prompted by this observation, several analysts have articulated a critical perspective regarding democratization. According to this perspective, under conditions of low institutional capacity political liberalization or pressures for democratization are counter-productive: they generate conflict rather than peaceful democratization.

The bulk of the existing evidence seems to support this view. Snyder (2000) provides a series of case studies that link political liberalization (including elections) to

the eruption of civil wars. Several recent papers have analyzed cross-national datasets and claim to have established the causal impact of democratization on civil war initiation (Hegre et al. 2001, Mansfield and Snyder 2008, Cederman, Hug and Krebs 2010, Flores and Nooruddin 2012, and Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug forthcoming).²

These are important claims, which, in addition to being intrinsically interesting, have far-reaching implications for democracy promotion. They underscore the possibility that pressure by international actors to implement democratic reforms, often revolving around elections, may be counterproductive. According to this view, not all individual steps in the direction of a democratic institutional framework in transitional countries necessarily lead to the desired outcome. The road to democracy, it seems, is littered with traps and dead-ends; it is sinuous and dangerous, with twists that may well send the traveler back to a point further from the desired final outcome. The international community -- the United States and European countries, but also multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Eastern European Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Inter-American Development Bank, among others, should think twice before advocating the widespread holding of competitive elections in developing countries; in particular, it should reconsider the widespread practice of conditioning aid to the holding of elections and other democratic reforms. For, in so doing, the international community may be

² A related line of research obtains mixed results when it investigates the impact of democratization on ethnic conflict. Cf. Saideman (1998), Saideman et al. (2002) and Bertrand (2006).

actually promoting the conditions for the emergence of ethnic conflict, generalized violence and civil war. Instead of pushing current authoritarian leaders to democratize via competitive elections, those who emphasize the importance of a careful sequencing of democratization suggest that the international community should accept authoritarian leaders' hold on power as the lesser of two evils, and should concentrate its efforts on building the institutions that will eventually be able to channel and contain the forces unleashed by competitive elections.³

Theoretically, this view is rooted in Huntington's (1968) argument about the importance of institutionalization and the dangers of praetorianism stemming from political mobilization without strong institutions.⁴ As he argued in reference to the 1950s, "Throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America there was a decline in political order, an undermining of the authority, effectiveness and legitimacy of government. There was a lack of civic morale and public spirit and of political institutions capable of giving meaning and direction to the public interest. Not political development but political decay dominated the scene" [...] "What was responsible for this violence and instability? The primary thesis of this book is that it was in large part the product of rapid social change and the rapid mobilization of new groups into politics coupled with the slow development of political institutions" (Huntington 1968:4).

³ See the series of articles in *Journal of Democracy* for a statement and criticisms of the issue. Berman (2007a, b), Carothers (2007a, b), Fukuyama (2007) and Mansfield and Snyder (2007).

⁴ As Mansfield and Snyder (2008: ft.3) put it, their argument "extends the conceptual framework of Huntington (1968) to the explanation of civil wars."

This view is widespread. Collier (2009: 49), for instance, states: “Democracy [electoral competition], at least in the form it has usually taken to date in the societies of the bottom billion, does not seem to enhance the prospects of internal peace. On the contrary, it seems to increase proneness to political violence.” Chua (2003:16), in turn, argues that “in the numerous countries around the world that have pervasive poverty and a market-dominant minority, democracy and markets – at least in the form in which they are currently being promoted – can proceed only in deep tension with each other. In such conditions, the combined pursuit of free markets and democratization has repeatedly catalyzed ethnic conflict in highly predictable ways, with catastrophic consequences, including genocidal violence and the subversion of markets and democracy themselves.” In spite of the nuances and specificities of each of these arguments, the basic proposition is that democratization – specifically competitive elections – will have a detrimental effect on civil peace.

The theory behind these arguments is not very well developed. One strand is associated with the notion of “anocracy” or “partial democracy.”⁵ These regimes are considered to be incoherent, in the sense that they are neither full blown dictatorships, regimes that would be presumably willing and capable of employing coercion to resolve existing conflicts, nor full democracies, regimes in which conflicts would be processed

⁵ The literature on “partial democracies,” “hybrid regimes,” or “competitive authoritarianism” is now vast. The theoretical underpinnings of these categories are weak as they are normally “defined” by the fact that they are located in the middle range of a regime measure (Epstein et al. 2006), or as regimes that use formal democratic institutions, but at the same time violate them so often and deeply that they do not meet the minimum criteria for democracy (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52, 2010: 3-7). See also Shedler (2002) and Diamond (2002).

through institutionalized channels, such as political parties, legislatures and courts. Civil war in this view is the product of being in a state in which repression “cannot” be fully applied, but conflicts “cannot” be fully processed through democratic institutions. As Hegre et al. (2001:33) stated, intermediate regimes possess “inherent contradictions as a result of being neither democratic nor autocratic. Semidemocracies are partly open yet somewhat repressive, a combination that invites protest, rebellion, and other forms of civil violence. Repression leads to grievances that induce groups to take action, and openness allows for them to organize and engage in activities against the regime. Such institutional contradictions imply a level of incoherence, which is linked to civil conflict.”

Snyder (2000: 39), in turn, proposes that the outcome of a process of liberalization of an authoritarian regime depends on two factors: the adaptability of the authoritarian elites to a post-liberalization environment and the strength of a country’s political institutions. In countries where the elites are adaptable and political institutions are strong, the result of liberalization is the establishment of a regime based on strong representative institutions (such as in 19th century Britain); in countries where political institutions are strong, but elites are rigid and fear their fate under a liberalized polity based on competitive elections, the outcome will be a conservative, “counter-revolutionary,” polity, dominated by strong administrative institutions (such as in Germany under Bismarck). In countries where elites are adaptable to a post-transition order but political institutions are weak, the result will be a revolution (such as in France). Finally, countries with rigid elites and weak political institutions will experience ethnic and other conflicts in the process of political liberalization. Note that, in this

argument, what really matters for civil conflict is the level of institutionalization: whether elites are adaptable or rigid, countries with weak political institutions that undergo a process of political transformation will experience some kind of civil war.

Insightful as these arguments may be, they adopt a partial view of the relationship between elections and conflict. The fact that we observe instances in which conflict erupts or intensifies after an electoral contest is not in itself sufficient to establish that one causes the other. Consider that elections -- along with force and lineage -- represent one of the mechanisms that have been widely employed by different societies to address the fundamental issue of who rules.⁶ Part of the problem with arguments that emphasize sequencing in the process of democratization is that they fail to see that the resolution of this fundamental issue in any society will not wait for the creation of the institutions they deem necessary for elections to be held. Given the urgency of the decision about “who rules” and given that lineage is no longer a viable mechanism of leadership selection (but see Brownlee 2007), it is safe to anticipate that, if not by elections, the decision about who rules will be made in one way or another by force.

Moreover, non-democratic leaders always face the threat of removal by force; this threat is more likely to become a reality when these leaders are weak (international pressures, weak economy, etc.) and/or social conflicts are more intense. Knowing that

⁶ Lot is an additional mechanism but it has not been employed in modern societies (see Manin 1997). As a mechanism of collective choice, elections have been employed in a variety of contexts and for different purposes (see Katz 1997 for a review of models of elections).

they face a higher threat of removal by force, these leaders may call multi-party elections as a way to defuse that possibility. Thus, it may be the case that multiparty elections in democratizing, non-institutionalized authoritarian regimes are observed precisely when the leader already faces a significant threat of being removed by force: they are held when a civil war is already a real possibility and elections are nothing but an attempt to avoid war. In this case the election did not cause the underlying conflict that led to it being called in the first place. For these reasons, elections should be seen as instruments for the peaceful resolution of conflict, real or potential. They serve as the best alternative to the use of force in arriving at the crucial decision about who will rule a society. Elections and civil war are, thus, substitutes (Dunning 2011).

This view is consistent with several strands of recent work, all of which point to the role elections play in defusing conflict. Recent work has suggested the importance of this perspective about the role of elections. According to Wantchekon and Neeman (2002), elections allow contenders in a civil conflict to lay down their weapons and fight peacefully for the power that they were not able to obtain in the battlefields. Other work has emphasized the relationship between the emergence of democracy (often understood as competitive elections and all that they entail) and the threat of violence.

According to one such analysis, contestants in a competitive election will accept the results – choose not to pursue by force the outcome not obtained by vote – when the costs of fighting are so high that they exceed the costs of waiting for the next opportunity to win power peacefully, that is, of waiting for the next election (Przeworski 1991, 2006, 2009). Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) suggest that democracy emerges

when the threat of a revolution by the poor is sufficiently real to compel the rich to create institutions – democracy – under which a certain amount of income redistribution will be guaranteed. Londregan and Vindigni (2006) argue that elections are a cheap and credible way to reveal information about the balance of forces in the battlefield. Their reasoning is that participation in elections is costly for individuals. Elections, thus, reveal the number of people who are willing to incur some costs to gain a trivial advantage for their side – “provide a signal about the relative number of combatants each side could draw on in case of civil war.” For this reason, election returns facilitate bargaining among factions because the information about their strength is available. Cox (2009), in turn, argues that authoritarian leaders agree to hold multi-party elections, in which they face some risk of losing power, in order to gain information that reduces the risk of their violent removal from office (via a coup or a revolution). Perhaps the closest to the intuition that motivated this article – that the decision to hold elections is endogenous to the probability of conflict – is the work of Little (2011). He develops a model that allows for the assessment of the proper counterfactual in thinking about the causal impact of elections in the eruption of civil wars: the level of violence that would have occurred had elections not been held. He shows that, although elections may promote conflict under some conditions, on average they deter conflict.

There are other arguments about why elections are held under authoritarian regimes and the conflict-avoiding effects they may have. Matanock (2012), for instance, argues that in post-conflict settings, elections serve as a commitment device in the

difficult interaction between incumbent and combatants as they allow relatively easy monitoring and sanctioning of deviations from peace agreements by international organizations. Others see elections (and other seemingly democratic institutions) as a safety valve for releasing pressure against the authoritarian regime, which stems either from society (Gandhi 2010) or from the regime coalition (Svolik *forthcoming*). Finally, Magaloni (2008) argues that elections in authoritarian systems serve to bolster the regime's strength and deter opponents. Although through different mechanisms, these arguments too imply that elections may serve as a way to defuse an existing and simmering conflict.

Thus, whereas it may be true that the dynamics of democratization could lead to the emergence or eruption of conflict, it is also true that elections may serve as an alternative to conflict. Elections are a way to resolve peacefully fundamental issues, such as who will rule, that otherwise are decided in the battlefields. In this sense, rather than being the cause of violence, elections may be the consequence of people's attempt to avoid violence, real or perceived. The decision to hold competitive elections may well reflect a dictator's attempt to peacefully resolve a conflict that has the potential of becoming violent, to stave off the violence that is imminent and that would certainly occur if he tried to hold on to power by other means. Consequently, rather than causing violence, competitive elections may actually prevent it by offering a mechanism to decide who rules and which takes into consideration existing asymmetries of real power without requiring contenders to demonstrate this power in the battlefield. For this reason, the findings that suggest the existence of a causal effect of democratization (but

particularly competitive elections) on civil war and conflict may be the product of the conditions under which democratization occurs and not of democratization per se.

All this amounts to saying that the relationship between democratization (elections) and civil war eruption is complex. While elections may unleash violence, violence may also be the reason why elections are held in the first place. While elections may provide the opportunity and the incentive for incendiary appeals that can degenerate into violence (Snyder 2000), they may also be invoked in situations where violence is imminent. If this is true, then cases of civil war eruption following an election may well be the manifestation of a conflict that would have involved force, even if elections had not been held. Before we attribute to competitive elections a causal power that they may not have, or make policy on the basis of this attribution, we need to counter-factually evaluate what could have occurred had elections not been held. It is this that this paper seeks to accomplish.

The discussion above suggests a weak and a strong version of a hypothesis about the relationship between elections and civil conflict. The weak version states that, given a sample of countries matched on strength of their government and the propensity for conflict, we will find that there is no relationship between the holding of elections and the eruption of a civil war. The strong version of this hypothesis, in turn, states that, under similar circumstances, the relationship between elections and conflict will actually be negative: the probability of conflict declines when elections are held. This expectation comes from the fact that, as explained above, authoritarian governments call elections in order to deflect a conflict that is almost certain to erupt if they are not

called. In some cases, these governments are successful and manage to remain in power after the election. In other cases, they are not as successful and must yield power to a successor who may or may not have been an opponent. Elections with these outcomes are not notable and fail to incite much concern from observers. Yet, there are some cases in which elections that were called by an authoritarian leader to stave off an imminent conflict are unable to do so. These are the cases that make the headlines and convey the illusion of a negative causal relationship between the elections and the conflict that follows it. Yet, if we are able to compare countries that are identical in terms of the strength of their government and the propensity for conflict, we might find that the probability of conflict is actually smaller in those countries that held elections than in those that did not.

3. Empirical Strategy

Our goal in this paper is to identify whether democratization has, in fact, an effect on the probability that a civil war will occur, taking into consideration that the process of democratization often happens under conditions that are already conducive to the eruption of a civil war.

We start from the premise that our observations of post-election civil conflict are not sufficient to establish convincingly that elections lead to conflict. In order to evaluate the causal impact of elections on conflict we need to find a way to study cases – countries – that are matched in terms of the strength of their government and the underlying propensity for conflict. This is the only way to assess whether countries that

hold elections are more likely to experience conflict than those that do not. In addition to the fact that no existing study considers the endogeneity between elections and conflict, there are two additional reasons our analysis is distinct from what has been done so far.

3.1. Why Africa?

Empirically, our analysis is restricted to Africa. Although data on elections and civil wars are available beginning in 1946, in practical terms our study focuses on the 1960-2005 period since most control variables are not available for the years prior to 1960. Restricting the analysis to Africa is substantively important because it holds constant (or at least considerably restricts the variation in) one factor that seems to be crucial in the theoretical arguments about the positive effects of democratization on civil war: the degree of institutionalization or the country's institutional capacity. According to these arguments, institutionalization is crucial since it is its low levels that are supposed to make the process of democratization dangerous from the point of view of civil peace (Snyder 2000). When institutions are weak, the forces unleashed in the process of democratization cannot be funneled into institutional channels and find their expression in “raw” politics – rhetorical escalation, mobilization of co-ethnics against perceived enemies, mass demonstrations and, ultimately, civil war.

In every existing empirical analysis of the relationship between democratization and civil war, however, institutionalization goes either unmeasured or measured by the same instrument that measures democratization. For example, Mansfield and Snyder (2008) define three regime types on the basis of the Polity score: autocracies (Polity < -

6), anocracies ($-6 \leq \text{Polity} < 6$), and democracies ($\text{Polity} \geq 6$). They define democratization as a change over a 5-year period from autocracy to anocracy, from autocracy to democracy, or from anocracy to democracy. At the same time they define an incomplete process of democratization as a change from autocracy to anocracy and a complete process of democratization as a change from autocracy or from anocracy to democracy. Although they do not use the term, what distinguishes an incomplete from a complete process of democratization is the degree of institutionalization. In the former, they argue, “old elites threatened by the transition often continue to be powerful and the institutions needed to regulate mass political participation are generally underdeveloped;” in the latter, “there is open political competition and complete governmental accountability to the populace. [...] As the transition is completed, however, advocates of democracy have greater institutional capacity...” (Mansfield and Snyder 2008: 8). Thus, democratization and institutionalization cannot be observed separately; by definition one type of democratization (from autocracy to anocracy) will *always* be incomplete; that is, it will always occur under conditions for low institutionalization.

Our solution to deal with the measurement of institutionalization – to limit the analysis to Africa – is far from perfect. But it represents an improvement over existing studies. It is generally accepted that most African political systems are characterized by relatively low levels of institutional capacity (Heberst 1990). In particular, they lack strong political institutions such as political parties, news media, and a judicial system,

that is, precisely the institutions that are considered to be necessary prior to the holding of competitive elections.⁷

Our decision to restrict our analysis to Africa on the grounds that most countries in this region would be placed at the lower values in any measure of institutionalization is validated by Figure 1. In this figure we use the time spent under leaders who completed their term in office according to previously specified rules as a measure of institutionalization. We see that African countries have almost consistently since 1946 been below the world average. There is no measure of political institutionalization that generates anything remotely close to a consensus among political scientists, and we do not claim that this one should.⁸ Moreover, there are data issues in the construction of this measure that limit its direct use in our empirical analysis. We should say, however, that we did run all the analyses reported below using this measure and the inferences we would have made did not change in any substantive way.⁹

⁷ See Ndulo (2007), Kuenzi and Lambright (2001), and Bratton and van de Walle (1997) among many others whose analyses support this statement. We fully recognize that institutionalization, in Africa as elsewhere, is not static; Posner and Young (2007), for example, argue that institutionalization in Africa, although historically low, has been increasing since the 1990s.

⁸ Measures of institutional capacity are more feasible and more likely to be accepted by a larger proportion of scholars if they focus on more specific institutions, such as party systems (Huntington 1968, Mainwaring and Scully 1995) or central banks (Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini 1991, Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti 1992, and Alesina and Summers 1993). Although in the latter case concern is more with their independence than with their institutional capacity, a case could be made that independence is one dimension of institutionalization. Measures of broad institutional capacity (cf. Kaufman, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2008) are, to say the least, problematic. Their reliability, internal and external validity are questionable (see Kurtz and Schrank 2007).

⁹ We present these results in the web appendix.

*** Figure 1 about here ***

3.2. Elections versus “Democratization”

Our main independent variable is the occurrence of a multiparty election. Most existing studies focus on the impact of “democratization” on civil war, with democratization invariably measured as changes of a pre-specified magnitude in the Polity measure. The argument for this is that what may cause civil conflict is not simply the occurrence of an election, but the occurrence of an election in a broader context of liberalization under weak institutions. Apart from the measurement problem that this raises, as we indicated above, the occurrence of a multiparty election is *the* event that catalyzes conflict in all existing arguments: it is because parties and leaders need to mobilize voters to support them in multiparty elections that they start to make appeals for example along ethnic lines to increase the stakes and polarize politics. Thus, holding multiparty elections is the main event of interest and should be what brings about civil war.¹⁰ All the other things – the more general liberalization of politics such as the

¹⁰ Among those who examine the impact of election on civil war initiation, the exception is Cederman et al. (2010). Studies of the role of multiparty elections in post-conflict settings normally use the election event as their main independent variable (Snyder and Brancati 2012, Flores and Nooruddin 2012). These studies are obviously related to our question, but we bracket them here for two main reasons: first, the scope of their argument is narrower than the one we are considering here (elections may cause the resumption of conflict, but not necessarily a new conflict); second, our analysis empirically subsumes these analyses since we control for the existence of previous conflicts and, in the robustness section, for the presence of peace-keeping missions at the time of the election. It should be noted that none of these studies takes endogeneity into consideration, although the case for it is even stronger than the one we are making here.

emergence of a relatively independent media corps and the organization of political parties – can be assumed to go with the holding of multiparty elections.

Following Vreeland (2008), we also believe that the use of Polity is particularly problematic in studying civil war initiation and/or duration. Vreeland has shown that at least one of the components of this measure uses information about the occurrence of a civil war in order to place countries in one of its categories, which means, of course, that the relationship between the Polity and civil war is tautological. He replicates the studies conducted by Hegre et al (2001) and Fearon and Laitin (2003) where they find a positive effect of “anocracies” on civil war initiation. He shows that, once the contaminated Polity component is removed from the overall measure, the effect of anocracy on civil war completely disappears. So, at the same time that changes in Polity might be measuring the broader process of democratization, as opposed to the mere occurrence of multiparty elections, it is also contaminating the data in a way that will necessarily find an effect on civil war. Cederman et al (2010) employ a modified version of Polity, stripped of the component identified as problematic by Vreeland and still find a positive effect of democratization on civil war initiation. While this represents an improvement over previous analyses, it is still subject to the criticisms identified above.

4. Do Multiparty Elections in Authoritarian Regimes Cause Civil War?

We start by examining whether there is a correlation between our two main variables – multiparty elections under dictatorship and civil war initiation – for African countries. To our surprise and contrary to the existing empirical literature, such a

correlation does not exist *in the observed data*. To put it in the simplest terms, we find that the occurrence of multiparty elections is not associated with an increase in the probability of civil war onset in Africa. This is true for the whole period (1946 – 2007), although there seems to be a break in the data with the end of the Cold War. Prior to 1990, we find that the effect of multiparty elections on civil war initiation was positive, although the coefficient is not statistically significant. One possible way to interpret this is that, during the Cold War period, holding multiparty elections signified an alignment with “the West” and provoked a reaction from those who opposed such an alliance. Another possibility is that elections held during the Cold War period provided less information about the strength of the political threat to the incumbent autocratic regimes, information that may have facilitated the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The prospect of superpower intervention makes the domestic political base of support for opposition groups far less important in determining their ability to topple governments by force. We discuss both these possibilities in more detail below. In the post- Cold War period, however, multiparty elections are clearly associated with a *reduction* in the probability that a civil war occurs. This is precisely the opposite from what has been found previously.

Our data set is composed of all African countries since 1946 (the number of independent countries in Africa increased from 4 in 1946 to 53 in 2008). Between 1946 and 2008, there were 558 electoral contests in Africa: 214 presidential, 331 for legislative lower houses, and 13 for legislative upper houses. Of these, 351 were

multiparty elections: 118 were presidential, 220 for the lower house and 13 for the upper house.¹¹ Table 1 summarizes this information.

*** Table 1 about here ***

As is widely known, multiparty elections in Africa have become more frequent over the years. After a decline in the proportion of multiparty elections during the 1980s (a decade of democratization in Latin America and Asia), virtually all elections held in Africa since 1990 were multiparty. Figure 2 presents the evolution of multiparty elections over the years, weighted by the number of independent countries in each year. At the beginning of the period, about a quarter of African countries held a multiparty election in any given year, most of them legislative. As more countries became independent in the 1960s, the proportion of those holding multiparty elections declined. A clear upward trend started just prior to 1990. Today, in any given electoral year, one-third of African countries hold multiparty elections.

*** Figure 2 about here ***

The civil war trend is less marked than the one observed for multiparty elections. We use Sambanis' coding of civil war initiation, which covers the 1946 – 2005 period.¹²

¹¹ The data come from the Elections Project coordinated by Cheibub at the Cline Center for Democracy at the University of Illinois. There is no non-arbitrary way to classify elections as multiparty. In this work we adopt two definitions of multiparty. The *strict* definition considers as multiparty any election in which no party or candidate obtained more than 90% of the vote. The *less strict* definition considers as multiparty any election in which at least two parties or candidates obtained votes. We only consider the first round of presidential elections. This has no consequence for our analysis since in the vast majority of cases, the first and the second rounds happened in the same year.

¹² The original data covers the 1946-2002 period. The update to 2005 was graciously shared by Nicholas Sambanis. A disproportionate number of civil wars have erupted in Africa, when

As Figure 3 suggests, the rate of civil war eruption declined considerably in 2000 and has remained more or less constant ever since. Thus, it is not really the case that the occurrence of multiparty elections and the eruption of civil wars in Africa have evolved in tandem over the years. As a matter of fact, it seems that precisely around 1990, when the proportion of countries holding multiparty elections increases dramatically, the number of countries experiencing the eruption of a civil war declines significantly. This can be clearly seen in Figure 4.

*** Figures 3 and 4 about here ***

Table 2 presents the probability of a civil war outbreak, conditional on the occurrence of a multi-party election within the past three years for the 1946-2005, for the Cold War (1946-1989), and for the post-Cold War (1990-2005) periods. Note that the probability that a civil war would erupt in any year in Africa was 0.0268; it was 0.0239 if a multiparty election had been held in the past three years and 0.0282 if it had not.

*** Table 2 about here ***

As seen above, 1990 is the year after which the number of multiparty elections increased significantly. As many observers have argued, it is at this time that African dictators felt pressed by both international and domestic actors to liberalize their

compared with other regions of the world. There were 152 civil war outbreaks in the world between 1946 and 2005, 59 of which in Africa. This represents 39% of all civil wars in the world. African countries, however, existed in 26% of the years during the same period.

regimes,¹³ a move that many now see as premature in light of what they believe was the consequence: an increase in the likelihood of civil wars. Yet, Table 2 does not support this view at all. Prior to 1990, multiparty elections had at best a small positive effect on civil war initiation. Although we observe a higher proportion of civil wars initiating after multiparty elections (0.0342 vs. 0.018), the difference is not very large and is barely statistically significant.

After 1990, however, multiparty elections actually reduced the likelihood that a civil war would be initiated. While we expect to see a civil war breaking in one out of every 18 countries that do not hold multiparty elections (0.058), civil war is expected to break out in only one out of every 60 countries when they hold multiparty elections (0.0167). Thus, countries that do not hold multiparty elections are more than 3 times as likely to experience a civil war than those that allow multiple parties to compete in executive and legislative elections. This is a significant difference, both substantively and statistically.

We obtain similar results when we estimate multivariate models of civil war initiation. Our dependent variable, civil war onset, comes from Sambanis (2004), who defines civil war as an armed conflict between the government and an organized insurgent group that results in at least 500 deaths, with 100 deaths inflicted on the stronger party. To ensure that our results are robust across different measurements of the dependent variable, we estimate additional models with minor civil conflicts (25

¹³ See Bratton and van de Walle (1997) for a thorough examination of the early post-Cold War experiences of regime change in Africa.

battle deaths) identified by the UCDP/PRIO armed conflict dataset (Gleditsch et a. 2002). Both variables are dichotomous indicators of the onset of civil wars, coded as 1 the year the conflict starts and zero otherwise.

Following Sambanis (2004), we include per capita income, growth of per capita income, oil export, ethnic heterogeneity, population size, the proportion of mountainous terrain, the percent of Muslims in the population and whether there was a war in the previous year as control variables in our models. For reasons discussed above, we exclude anocracy and political instability, which are measured on the basis of Polity.

Table 3 presents the average marginal effect of multiparty elections on civil conflict initiation for the post-1945, Cold War and post-Cold War periods, for all of Africa and the subsample of African non-democracies. It also presents results for the strict and less strict definitions of multiparty elections.¹⁴ We see that multiparty elections are associated with reductions in the probability of civil war initiation in the post-1990 period ranging from -3.2% to -4.4%.¹⁵ Thus, if anything, at least for the post-cold war period, elections are associated with a reduction in the probability that a civil conflict will erupt.

*** Table 3 about here ***

¹⁴ We estimate our models using both the full African sample and the non-democratic subsample because, while it is true that several African regimes qualify as democracies according to Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland (2010), many would argue that they are not consolidated and thus vulnerable to election-induced political violence (e.g., Kenya post-2002).

¹⁵ Our regressions include the full set of control variables. We present the complete results in the online appendix.

Finally, we estimate a model in which, along the lines of our discussion above, multiparty elections are endogenous. Here we adopt Gandhi and Przeworski's (2007) model of the number of parties in a dictatorship, which represents a dilemma for the dictator akin to the one about the decision to hold multiparty elections. According to Gandhi and Przeworski, a dictator will allow for the existence of multiple parties (and, by extension, for the holding of multiparty elections) when the need for cooperation is great and the threats originating from the opposition (i.e. the chances of a successful rebellion) are high. This is operationalized with variables indicating the type of dictatorship (military, royal or civilian, which, unlike the first two, lacks a ready-made institution the dictator can rely upon for support), the extent of mineral exports (which provide resources for repression), the number of legislative parties in existence in the last year of the previous ruler, the number of accumulated rulers since 1946, and the proportion of other democracies in the world.

Our strategy is to first estimate a probit model of multiparty elections, calculate the inverse Mills ratio (IMR) from this model, and then include the IMR in a second stage civil conflict regression. The IMR is our best (composite) estimate of the underlying set of unobservable factors determining whether a country will hold multiparty elections. If multiparty elections are endogenous to conflict, these same unobservable influences will determine the probability of conflict onset. More specifically, if elections are held when violence is more likely, the IMR should be positively and statistically significantly associated with conflict onset.

*** Table 4 about here ***

Table 4 presents the average marginal effect estimates for both multiparty elections and the IMR on civil conflict initiation, using the same combinations of samples and operationalizations presented in Table 3. The results tell a clear and consistent story. For the full African sample, the effect of multiparty elections in the post-Cold War period is to reduce the likelihood of civil conflict by about 5%., ranging from 5.3 to 5.4%.

The results for the post-Cold War non-democracy subsample are particularly noteworthy. Keep in mind that these are precisely the countries that, according to the new conventional wisdom on the dangers of “rushing” to democracy, are the most vulnerable to election-induced violence. First, multiparty elections in transitioning regimes are clearly endogenous to the likelihood of major civil violence. Our estimates for the average marginal effects of the IMR variable on the likelihood of civil war onset are 36% and 32% respectively, using the strict and less strict definitions of multiparty elections. Second, the pacifying effects of multiparty elections, once we control for this endogeneity, are very large. The average marginal effects across this sample of non-democracies are -12.6% (strict definition) and -11.5% (less strict). To interpret this, note that the frequency of major civil conflict in this particular sample of country-years is about 6.2%. If we counterfactually eliminated the multiparty elections in this sample, we would expect the number of major civil conflicts to more than double.

*** Table 5 about here ***

In Table 5, we subject our findings to a battery of robustness tests. First, we check whether the pacifying effects of elections in post-cold war period hold when we use a lower threshold of violence for the dependent variable, i.e., 25 battle deaths

instead of 500. The results indicate that this is indeed the case. Elections held in Africa during the post-cold war period reduce the risk of minor civil conflicts by around 2 %. However, this effect ceases to be statistically significant for the non-democracy sample.¹⁶

Second, we differentiated elections that are held immediately after civil wars from elections that are held in other times. Recent work on the timing of elections suggests that elections held immediately after civil wars are particularly prone to further violence (cite). We evaluate this assertion in Table 5 by estimating the main models from Table 4 using an indicator for post-conflict elections, i.e., elections that are held up to 5 years after the termination of a major civil war. In the sample (post-Cold War Africa), there are no instances of civil war recurrence during elections years. Given this fact, not surprisingly, the results show that post-conflict elections are not conflict-generating. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that elections held after civil wars in the post-cold war period significantly reduce the risk of civil war recurrence, ranging from -19% to -28%.¹⁷

Third, we consider the possibility that electoral effects on civil war can precede as well as follow the actual holding of elections in time. If strategic actors choose to

¹⁶ In the UCDP/PRIO dataset, there are only a few post-Cold War civil war onsets in Africa that passes the 1,000 battle death threshold. For this reason—i.e., insufficient variation in the outcome of interest—we are unable to estimate statistical models using this as the dependent variable.

¹⁷ With the probit model, the issue of perfect separation arises—we never observe a civil war in an election year—and therefore cannot estimate the probability of recurrence in these years. The Table 5 results for post-conflict elections are from a linear probability model.

fight in anticipation of electoral outcomes, we will observe conflict in the run up to elections (e.g., 2012 coup in Mali). We explore this using a five-year election window indicator that is coded 1 during the two years prior and subsequent to elections (and 0 other times). Again, the results suggest that elections have a pacifying effect. Civil war onset is about 10% less likely during these election windows.

Finally, we control for potential pacifying effects of the presence of multidimensional peacekeeping forces during elections. The extant literature shows that peacekeeping forces, particularly those missions with election monitoring, increase the durability of peace (Fortna 2008). We find the same effect for peacekeeping in Table 5. Including the presence of peacekeeping forces in our model dampens the pacifying effects of elections, however, the main results still remain statistically and politically significant: multiparty elections reduce the likelihood of civil war by 5-6%.

5. Conclusion

Given the relatively large and growing body of evidence supporting the notion that democratization is associated with civil conflict, we started our analysis expecting to find a similar correlation between the occurrence of multi-party elections and civil war initiation. We believed that such a correlation could not be taken at face value given the possibility that authoritarian regimes do not randomly choose to hold multi-party elections. Given this endogeneity, we argued that elections could, in fact, reduce the probability of civil war initiation; at the very least it should have no effect on whether it starts or not once endogeneity was taken into consideration.

To our surprise, we found that, once we use a variable that is more theoretically appropriate – the occurrence of a multiparty election and not “democratization” as measure by Polity – the observed data do not display the kind of correlation between elections and civil war initiation that one would expect on the basis of existing studies. To the contrary, the data suggest that in the post-cold war period, the chances that a civil war would be initiated in an African country was reduced in the two years following multiparty elections. This result was the same whether we included controls that are normally employed in civil war models and whether we used a model of endogenous multiparty elections. We are confident, therefore, that elections do not systematically cause the eruption of civil wars, even in countries with low levels of institutional capacity. The evidence suggests that they may, in fact, reduce the probability that a civil war will erupt in their aftermath.

Our analysis has a clear practical implication; it presents a clear option for those who like to think of themselves as operating in the international arena and influencing different countries’ domestic trajectory: multiparty elections should be *always* supported, even in countries with low levels of institutionalization, since there are no grounds for believing that they increase the probability of a civil war.

The view that multiparty elections can be dangerous is both morally problematic and presumptuous. It implies that in many circumstances the so-called international community should neither push for countries to hold elections nor assist in organizing them when they are held anyway. This view is presumptuous because it sees countries located at the bottom of the income distribution, like many in Africa, as enormously

sensitive to the directives and commands emanating from the “international community.”¹⁸ It is morally problematic because, to the extent that the “international community” has any leverage over African (and other developing) countries, it suggests that dealing with the incumbent dictators while they presumably dig their graves by building strong political institutions is acceptable and even efficient.

But supporting the holding of multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes also poses a moral dilemma. Note that in no moment have we talked about a transition to democracy. All that we have established is that the holding of a multiparty election in an authoritarian regime may reduce the probability of a civil war. Given that in the vast majority of cases the incumbent dictator (or some of his associates) run in these elections and win, these elections may actually be providing the dictator with a life line – they increase his chances of surviving in office. Thus, should we promote a policy that effectively extends the tenure of authoritarian rulers?

Our answer is an unambiguous yes. For one, if the alternative is a civil war – the material and human costs of which are invariably high – it seems that additional years under a dictatorship that finds the need to somehow accommodate its opposition is not a terrible outcome. Additionally, whereas multiparty elections may increase the survival of a *dictator* in office – this seems to be the gist of the recent literature on authoritarian elections and institutions – it is not clear whether it increases the life of the *dictatorship* in office. As a matter of fact, some authors have claimed that elections under

¹⁸ There are many who emphasize the impact of international factors on the decision to hold elections in non-democratic regimes (e.g., Levitsky and Way 2010, Hyde 2011), although it is not clear the extent to which they suffer from the same presumption.

authoritarianism may increase the probability of a transition to democracy (e.g., Schedler 2002, Howard and Roessler 2006, Lindberg 2009, Donno 2011). Thus, there is nothing requiring that one infer the longevity of an authoritarian regime on the basis of evidence about the longevity of an authoritarian leader. In this sense, until further studies are conducted, it seems that the reasons in favor of unrestricted support for multiparty elections trump those that favor avoiding them.

Table 1
Elections in Africa by Decade

Period	Presidential		Lower House		Upper House	
	All	Multiparty	All	Multiparty	All	Multiparty
1946-1959	3	0	11	5	2	2
1960-1969	31	3	58	24	2	2
1970-1979	28	4	48	48	0	0
1980-1989	34	6	58	15	2	2
1990-1999	58	45	78	61	2	2
2000-2008	60	60	78	67	5	5
1946-2008	214	118	331	220	13	13

Table2. Multiparty Elections and Civil War Onset in Africa

		Civil war outbreak?		
		No	Yes	Total
Multiparty election within the past two years? (1946-2005)	No	1,445	42	1,487
		97.18%	2.82%	100%
		67.55%	71.19%	67.65%
	Yes	694	17	711
		97.61%	2.39%	100%
		32.45%	28.81%	32.35%
Total	2,139	59	2,198	
	97.32%	2.68%	100%	
	100%	100%	100%	
$\chi^2=0.346$, p-value=0.556				
Multiparty election within the past two years? (1946-1989)	No	1,073	20	1,093
		98.17%	1.83%	100%
		79.19%	66.67%	78.92%
	Yes	282	10	292
		96.58%	3.42%	100%
		20.81%	33.33%	21.08%
Total	1,355	30	1,385	
	97.83%	2.17%	100%	
	100%	100%	100%	
$\chi^2=2.766$, p-value=0.096				
Multiparty election within the past two years? (1990-2005)	No	372	22	394
		94.42%	5.58%	100%
		47.45%	75.86%	48.46%
	Yes	412	7	419
		98.33%	1.67%	100%
		52.55%	24.14%	51.54%
Total	784	29	813	
	96.43%	3.57%	100%	
	100%	100%	100%	
$\chi^2=9.039$, p-value=0.003				

Notes: The first entry in each cell of the table is the count; the second entry is the row percentage; and the third entry is the column percentage. The χ^2 statistic tests the null hypothesis that the timing of multiparty elections and civil war onset are independent.

Table 3. Multiparty Elections and Civil War Initiation (With Controls)

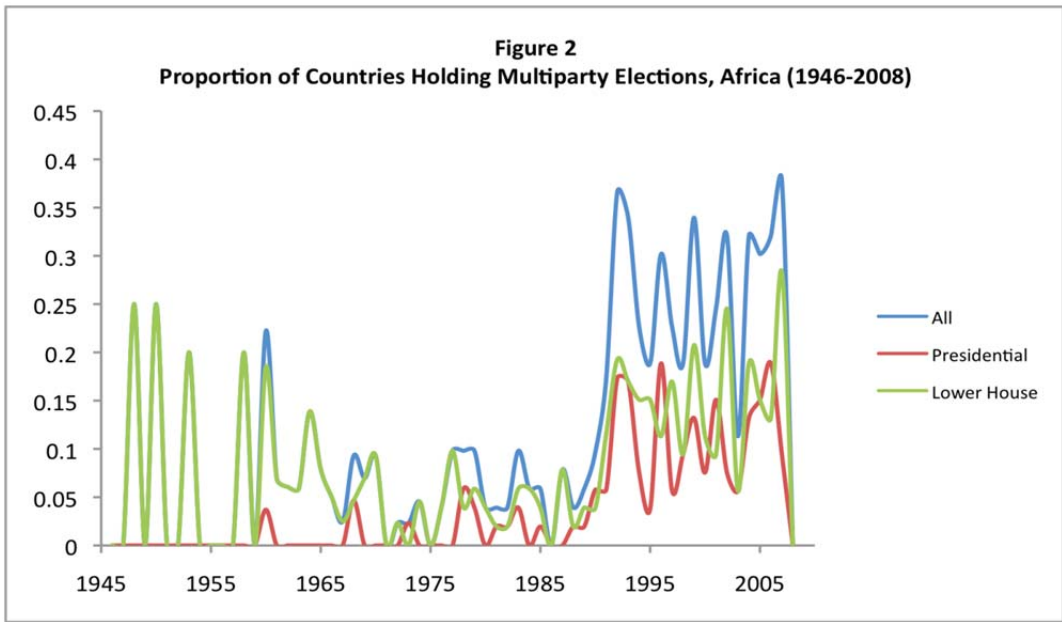
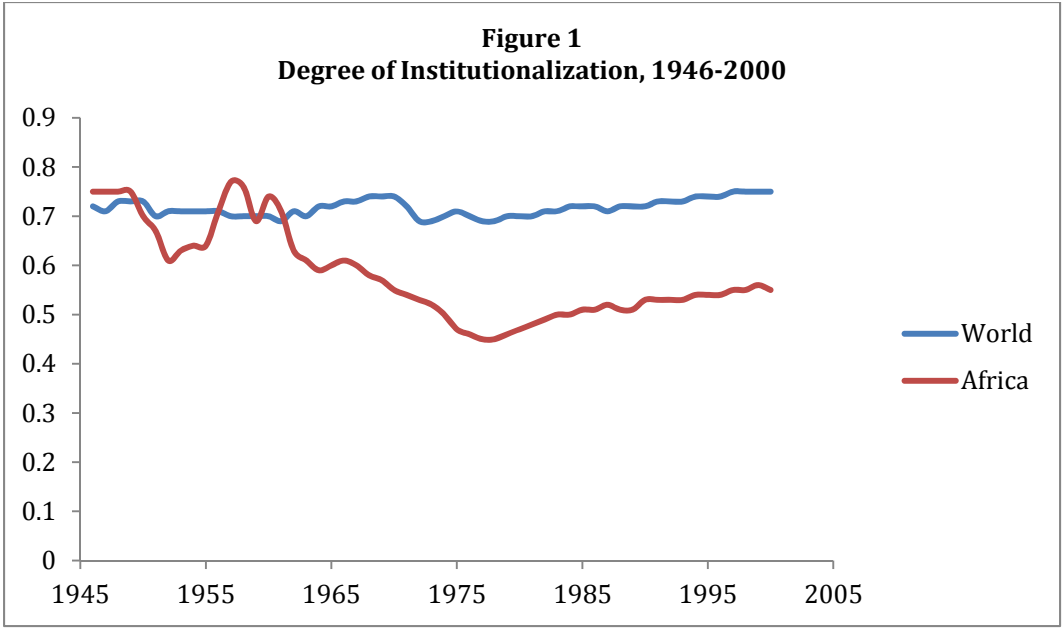
	All of Africa		African Non-Democracies	
	Marginal Effect	p-value	Marginal Effect	p-value
ELE: Strict				
Post-1945	-0.013	0.170	-0.015	0.162
Cold War	-0.002	0.908	0.003	0.892
Post-Cold War	-0.032	0.013	-0.042	0.003
ELE: Less Strict				
Post-1945	-0.010	0.286	-0.011	0.304
Cold War	0.011	0.583	0.018	0.457
Post-Cold War	-0.034	0.005	-0.044	0.001

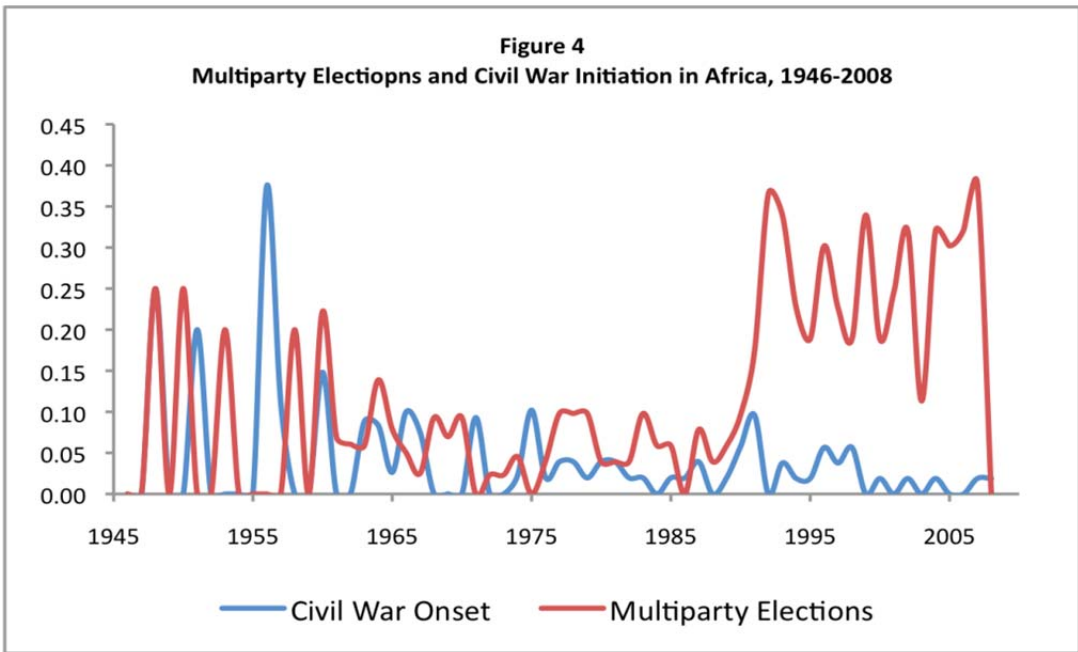
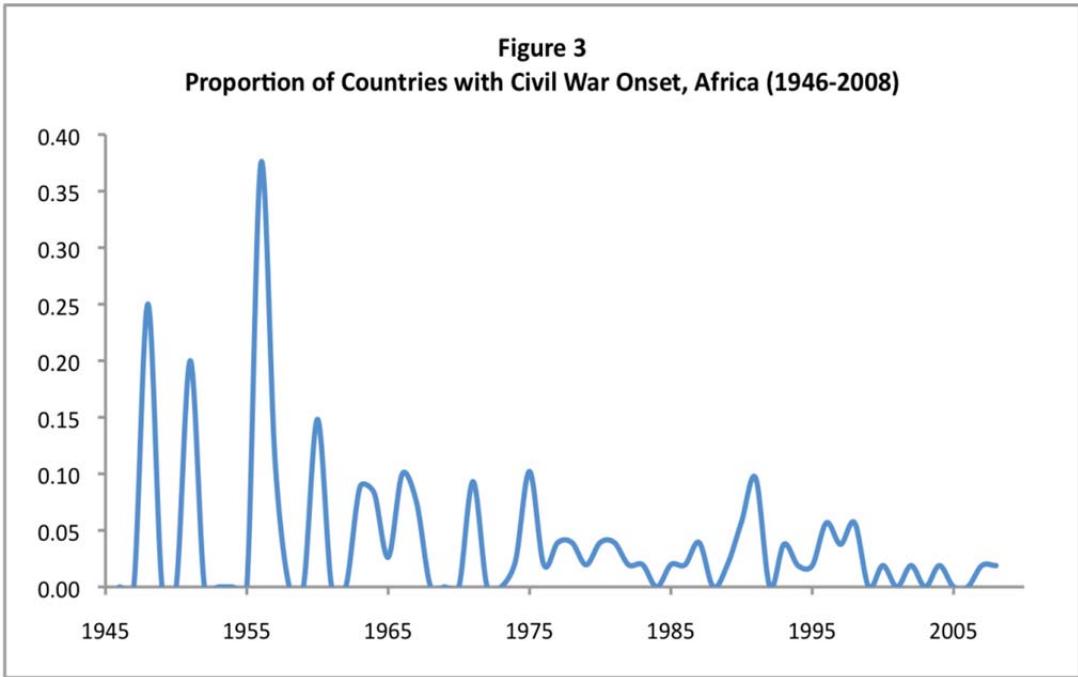
Table 4. Endogenous Multiparty Elections and Civil War Initiation (with Controls)

	All of Africa		African Non-Democracies	
	Marginal Effect	p-value	Marginal Effect	p-value
ELE: Strict				
Post-1945				
ELE	-0.028	0.006	-0.041	0.000
IMR	0.027	0.116	0.054	0.041
Cold War				
ELE	-0.015	0.252	-0.018	0.194
IMR	0.012	0.476	0.018	0.424
Post-Cold War				
ELE	-0.054	0.002	-0.126	0.000
IMR	0.067	0.064	0.360	0.051
ELE: Less Strict				
Post-1945				
ELE	-0.026	0.010	-0.035	0.001
IMR	0.027	0.055	0.042	0.028
Cold War				
ELE	-0.010	0.620	-0.010	0.665
IMR	-0.015	0.344	0.017	0.364
Post-Cold War				
ELE	-0.053	0.002	-0.115	0.000
IMR	0.070	0.082	0.322	0.046

Table 5. Endogenous Elections and Civil War: Robustness Tests for Post-Cold War Period

	All of Africa		African Non-Democracies	
	Marginal Effect	p-value	Marginal Effect	p-value
CW:PRIO_25				
ELE: Strict				
ELE	-0.018	0.077	-0.011	0.427
IMR	0.013	0.339	0.010	0.416
ELE: Less Strict				
ELE	-0.019	0.091	-0.012	0.362
IMR	0.036	0.165	0.033	0.219
ELE: Post-Conflict				
ELE: Strict				
ELE	-0.193	0.004	-0.268	0.003
IMR	0.081	0.018	0.111	0.004
ELE: Less Strict				
ELE	-0.200	0.003	-0.282	0.002
IMR	0.084	0.013	0.118	0.002
ELE: 5-Year Window				
ELE: Strict				
ELE	-0.119	0.006	-0.108	0.006
IMR	0.074	0.007	0.072	0.005
ELE: Less Strict				
ELE	-0.102	0.016	-0.081	0.024
IMR	0.052	0.042	0.043	0.065
Peacekeeping				
ELE: Strict				
PK	-0.051	0.019	-0.061	0.018
ELE	-0.049	0.001	-0.066	0.000
IMR	0.035	0.042	0.042	0.031
ELE: Less Strict				
PK	-0.051	0.022	-0.061	0.020
ELE	-0.044	0.001	-0.058	0.000
IMR	0.029	0.086	0.035	0.074





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