



Voting after war: Legacy of conflict and the economy as determinants of electoral support in Croatia[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In spite of a rapidly expanding literature on democratization, elections, and conflict, we lack systematic understanding of what determines electoral results in post-conflict societies. This article offers a novel initiative in revealing electoral patterns in states recuperating from painful experiences of war by analyzing data from more than 500 Croatian municipalities during five post-war electoral cycles. While the findings suggest voters do respond to parties' economic policies, the underlying pattern of electoral support demonstrates that competition is heavily constrained by the legacy of conflict, with the communities more exposed to the violence being more likely to vote for the principal party of the center-right which led the country into independence and throughout the war. This tendency exhibits a remarkable level of stability over time, which suggests conflict dynamics can become firmly embedded in post-conflict democratic electoral competition – even in societies that are not ethnically diverse.

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1. Introduction

What determines electoral results in post-conflict societies? Are elections decided by the voters' experiences and perceptions of the ended conflict? Or are they perhaps decided by the voters' considerations of the political parties' peacetime economic platforms and performance in office? In other words, to which extent are electoral results determined by the war past as opposed to the peacetime present and future?

In the processes of democratization and consolidation that post-

conflict societies usually go through, establishing a functioning system of signaling and accountability between the political elites and the electorate is of critical importance. However, even though the relationship between democratization, elections, and conflict has garnered much attention in the literature over the past two decades, it seems that we are still lacking answers to the previously posed questions. We know, for example, that democratization and elections can lead to armed conflicts (Snyder, 2000; Cederman et al., 2010), just as we know a great deal about a number of aspects of post-conflict electoral processes: from their complex relationship with democratic consolidation to the ambiguous role of the international community in their promotion and implementation (Paris, 2004; Dunning, 2011). Apart from prima facie or merely anecdotal evidence about the lasting power of ethnic appeals in ethnically diverse post-conflict societies, however, we have a limited understanding of what forms the foundations of voters' electoral choices during the times of post-conflict recovery.

This study offers a step in improving that understanding through the analysis of the effects of the legacy of war and economic factors on the pattern of electoral results during more than a decade of post-conflict political competition in the newest EU member state – Croatia. Croatia experienced a difficult post-communist economic transition while fighting for its independence from the former Yugoslavia and later for its full sovereignty

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in a bitter four-year war (1991–1995). Our analysis is based on an original dataset which is comprised of a series of economic and socio-demographic variables, as well as electoral results for Croatia's five post-war elections (2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015) – all collected on the level of more than 500 municipalities. Croatia is a perfect object of study not only because of its recent past or the availability of data uncharacteristic of most post-conflict states, but also because of the stability and the nature of its democratic and electoral institutions during the period under our attention. Its electoral system of proportional representation in relatively large multi-member districts with full control of central party leaderships over nomination procedures is arguably ideal from the standpoint of establishing the incumbent parties' clarity of responsibility (Powell and Whitten, 1993). Our dataset and Croatia's institutional setup, therefore, enable us to trace the evolution of the pattern of electoral support during five electoral cycles, and allow us to draw lessons about the relationship of war legacy, the economy, and electoral results without the interference of institutional volatility often present in post-conflict societies.

In the universe of states recovering from painful experiences of war, the nearly monoethnic post-war Croatia was perhaps uniquely positioned to leave the legacy of violence in the past. Yet the results of our analysis paint a troubling picture of a polity primarily riven by its communities' starkly different experiences of the war rather than by any economic factors. Croatian voters can and do vote the incumbents out of office, which means they do change their preferences from election to election. Moreover – at least judging by the electoral results on the national level – their preferences are likely influenced by the economy. The underlying pattern of electoral support, however, demonstrates that political competition is heavily constrained by the legacy of the war for independence. In fact, our analysis shows the legacy of war to be the single strongest determinant of the pattern of voting. Communities that suffered more in the war disproportionately support the center-right party that took the country into independence and led it throughout the war. Moreover, this tendency exhibits little sign of abating over time – which suggests that the communities' experiences of the war have become embedded into their political choices. In many ways, this deep social and political rift seems to have become a form of a nation-building cleavage in the sense put forward by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and later expanded to post-communist Eastern Europe by Evans and Whitefield (1993). This raises serious concerns about the nature of social recovery in post-conflict polities and the perpetuation of conflict dynamics through democratic competition, even in states as ethnically uniform as Croatia.

2. Post-conflict elections and post-communist economic voting

Wars leave lasting imprints on the affected societies. The cessation of hostilities often only marks the beginning of a lengthy and difficult healing process characterized by scarcely better quality of life and lingering danger of reversal back into violence. Time, however, does heal wounds. People and their societies do move on. Their concerns increasingly turn toward matters related to the peacetime present and future, rather than to wartime past. For Tony Judt (2007: 236), one sign that post-1945 European publics left World War II in the past was “the way in which economics displaced politics as the goal and language of collective action.” Indeed, there is something fundamentally different in the political lives of post-conflict societies that have left their wars in the past, as opposed to those that have not. Like Judt, we believe economics is at the heart of that difference. Political competition in societies that have successfully transitioned into peacetime is usually centered on the economy. This is the reason why the analysis presented in this

study focusses on the relationship of war legacy, the economy, and electoral competition. Literatures on post-conflict elections and (peacetime) economic voting have developed without much contact. Nevertheless, they are essential in helping us understand electoral dynamics in a post-conflict polity like Croatia.

2.1. Post-conflict elections: beyond democratization and ethnicity

At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that research on conflict and elections generally comes in two forms: that which examines the impact of democratization and elections on the onset of violence, and that which examines the role of elections in post-conflict recovery. Both of these research strands have been strongly dominated by considerations of inter-ethnic relations, which is not surprising given the nature of conflicts that have captured the world's attention over the past two decades. The question of ethnic divisions has, therefore, crucially informed most research efforts dealing with the relationship between conflict and voting – from the impact of democratization on ethnically complex societies (Mann, 2005) to the role of different types of electoral systems in bridging inter-ethnic divisions (Lijphart, 1977; Reilly, 2001). When it comes to actual voter choices in post-conflict societies, however, research results have been largely case-specific and ultimately inconclusive (Lyons, 2002), possibly due to the fact that most studies have offered merely descriptive accounts of single elections and their national level results. Thus, for example, we have the Cambodian voters opting for moderates in the Constituent Assembly elections of 1993, but we also have the voters in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first post-war elections of 1996 electing the ethnically-based parties which had precipitated the war (Manning, 2004).

Far more significant progress has been made in the study of the effects of exposure to conflict violence – in the form of combat casualties – on the level of support for war and for incumbents responsible for the conduct of war in the US context. Studies with counties or congressional districts as units of analysis have shown that combat casualties can have a significant impact on the incumbents' electoral fortunes – from the Civil War (Carson et al., 2001) through the Vietnam War (Gartner et al., 1997) to the Second Iraq War (Karol and Miguel, 2007). The principal line of contention in this literature concerns the question of the relationship between casualty tolerance and war outcome, i.e. voters rewarding or punishing incumbents based on whether they are winning or losing the war (Klarevas et al., 2006). Generally speaking, however, incumbents seem to fare worse electorally in communities which have experienced higher levels of war casualties. The question that hovers over this line of research in US politics, however, is to which extent these effects are lasting, with some evidence suggesting they are very short-lived (Althaus et al., 2012). When it comes to individual-level studies in this literature, what stands out are the findings that voters respond strongly to the geographic and the socioeconomic distribution of casualties, i.e. they assign greater value to local, as opposed to national, casualties and they show aversion to the socioeconomic inequality among combat fatalities (Kriner and Shen, 2012, 2014). In other words, voters' political preference formation when it comes to the conduct of war is heavily dependent on social context.

As insightful as this literature on war and voter choice in the US setting is, however, its utility for our understanding of political competition in post-war societies which have experienced the full fury of war destruction first-hand is limited. Wars in Vietnam or Iraq have of course had a dramatic impact on American society, but the United States has not experienced war on its own soil for a century and a half. One line of inquiry in the body of research on the impact of full social exposure to war violence does offer promise in

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