



Elections as a conflict processing mechanism[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 November 2014

Received in revised form 29 May 2015

Accepted 30 May 2015

Available online 7 June 2015

JEL classification:

D72

D74

D79

N40

Keywords:

Conflicts

Elections

Violence

Polarization

ABSTRACT

We examine the conditions under which societal conflicts are peacefully processed by competitive elections when the contending parties can revert to force as an alternative. We show that the viability of the electoral mechanism depends on the balance of military force, the sharpness of divisions within a society, and institutions that moderate policies implemented by winners of elections. For elections to be held and their outcomes to be respected, the probabilities that they would be won by incumbents must bear an inverse relation to the magnitude of policy changes resulting from elections. Elections are competitive when their outcomes make some but not too much difference. Constraining the scope of policy divergence increases the range of the balance of force under which elections are competitive in divided, but not in homogeneous, societies. Hence, competitiveness of elections and constitutional constraints on policies – the norms being promoted as essential for democracies – do not always go together.

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1. Introduction

Elections are a way of processing conflicts. Yet they are just one way, historically rare and recent. During the past two-hundred years, political power changed hands more frequently by the use of force than through elections. From 1788 when the first election took place in the United States until 2009 governments around the world changed as a result of 577 coups and 544 elections.¹ To understand why competitive elections are held in some but not in other societies, it is necessary to ascertain what would have occurred if peaceful order broke down. The possibility that force may be used casts a shadow over elections.² The type of political regime that can be maintained depends on counterfactual outcomes of violent confrontations.

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the conditions under which conflicts are peacefully processed by competitive elections when the contending parties can revert to force as an alternative, the viability of the electoral mechanism under the shadow of force.

[☆] This version reflects comments by participants in seminars at the Paris School of Economics, Yale University, Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales in Madrid, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales in Madrid, the meeting on “Determinants of Social Conflict,” Fundación Areces, Madrid, Workshop on “Elections and Political Order,” The Carter Center Atlanta, as well as by Sandeep Baliga, Neal Beck, Jess Benhabib, Mario Chacón, José Antonio Cheibub, Avinash Dixit, Pepe Fernández-Albertos, Jim Fearon, Jen Gandhi, Casiano Hacker-Gordon, Fernando Limongi, Andrew Little, Beatriz Magaloni, Thomas Piketty, Rubén Ruiz-Runo, Pacho Sánchez-Cuenca, Milan Slovik, Guangzhen Sun, and James Vreeland. Earlier versions of this paper circulated under the title “Elections under the Shadow of Force.”

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¹ All the numbers and descriptive figures presented below are based on the PIPE data set (Przeworski, 2014) that covers about 3000 thousand elections, political institutions, and some political events in the world from 1788 through 2008.

² The general idea of peaceful equilibria induced by the shadow of violence is due to Powell (1999).

Assume that two political forces are in a repeated conflict over some policy: the tax rate, the size of military budget, the laws regulating abortion, and the political rights of minorities. At each time they can process the conflict by an election or by fighting, which is inefficient. Winners of elections pursue policies less favorable to them than winners of violent conflicts. Fighting is inefficient because it is costly. The probability that the current incumbent would win the next election need not be the same as the probability that the incumbent would prevail in a violent conflict. Hence, political actors face two lotteries, with different stakes and different probabilities.

Elections, however, are a special kind of a lottery because conflicting parties attempt to influence their probability of winning by undertaking some actions. In standard models of elections these actions are policy platforms proposed to the electorate. Depending on the assumptions about the objectives of the parties, uncertainty about voters' preferences, and the role of social and partisan identities, these models generate different conclusions concerning the extent to which party platforms converge in electoral equilibria. We deviate from this approach, taking the distance between policies implemented by winners and those that would have been pursued by losers as given. In turn, we allow the incumbents to manipulate elections by other instruments, such as adopting advantageous electoral rules, controlling the media, extending patronage, or when this is not sufficient, reverting to fraud. The extent of manipulation is constrained only by the possibility that the opposition would refuse to participate or would not acquiesce to the incumbent's victory. Hence, ours is a model of political, not electoral, competition.

Elections occur in specific social contexts that differ greatly in the intensity of conflicts. Some societies are highly homogeneous, while others are deeply split by economic, religious, ethnic, or regional cleavages. Hence, the extent of what we call "political polarization" – the distance between the ideal policies of the parties – varies across societies. Elections in Luxembourg are not elections in Iraq. Yet the entire spectrum of conflicting interests need not be at stake in elections. Parties may moderate their stances when competing in elections, while super-majoritarian institutions, such as bicameralism or executive veto, or anti-majoritarian institutions, such as constitutional courts or independent central banks, may disable some extreme policies. Hence, while the stakes in elections – the utility difference associated with their outcomes – depend on the intensity of conflicts, they may be moderated by the political institutions.

Viewing elections as a method of processing conflicts when parties can revert to force leads to the following conclusions³:

- (1) As one would expect, no elections are held when one party has an overwhelming military advantage. We do not assume that parties act as armies. The military force of contending parties depends on the partisan postures of organized bodies that bear arms: the armed forces, various kinds of police, secret services, frontier guards, and sometimes paramilitary militias. These bodies may be highly partisan or purely non-partisan, unwilling to intervene on behalf of either party. The glaring weakness of our model, and the general approach it implements, is that the partisan postures of the military are taken as a given feature of the environment.⁴
- (2) When elections are held, incumbents manipulate them to the point at which the opposition is indifferent between participating and fighting. Hence, probabilities of winning elections reflect relations of force: elections are rarely, if ever, "fair." The opposition consents to incumbents' manipulation of elections because defeat in a fight would be costly. In any electoral equilibrium, the chances of the losing party to win the next election must be greater if the current defeat inflicted on it a larger loss of utility. To maintain peace, winners of elections must give their opponents a chance to recuperate their losses in the future, sometimes to the point of allowing them to enjoy electoral advantage. Hence, parties should alternate in office more frequently when more is at stake in the outcomes of particular elections.
- (3) Elections are competitive, in the minimal sense that neither party is certain to win, if their outcomes make some but not too much difference. Given that in our model parties care only about the policy outcomes (following Wittman (1973), not Downs (1957)), elections are not competitive if their outcome would make no difference whatsoever, as in the median voter model. When outcomes of elections make little difference, either party can declare the policy that would have resulted from competition and the other party consents. At the other extreme, if elections were to make too much difference, parties would rather fight than face the possibility of defeat.

The electoral mechanism is most robust when the stakes in elections assume a specific value, the present value of the cost of being dominated by force. This is true whether a society is little polarized and elections process a large segment of the divisions that are or it is more polarized but elections process only a small part of the underlying conflict. Societal conflicts and political institutions interact in a subtle way. In less polarized societies, some policy divergence is necessary to induce parties to compete and outcomes of elections are acceptable whoever wins, because their distance from ideal policies is small for both parties. In more polarized societies, even outcomes of elections that make little difference would be unacceptable to both parties.

The paper is structured as follows. Because our assumptions concerning the manipulability of elections and the fixed distance between electoral policies are unorthodox, we devote a separate section to justify them, both theoretically, summarizing some of the relevant literature, and empirically, showing some facts concerning the history of elections. The subsequent section introduces the model and it is followed by a presentation of the main results and their implications with some empirical tests using original data. The model is then applied to conflicts over distribution of income. The final section concludes.

³ For models of conflict management in a dynamic environment see Besley and Persson (2011), Dixit et al. (2000), Ellman and Wantchekon (2000), Grossman (2004), Hirschleifer (1995), and Powell (1999).

⁴ While several recent models (Acemoglu et al., 2010; Besley and Robinson, 2010; Svobik, 2012) treat civilian–military relations as a principal–agent problem, in which civilians pay the military to engage in repression and the military revolt when the civilians do not satisfy their participation constraint, the military intervene in politics not only on behalf or behest of civilians but also for its own reasons. Rivero (2012) counts that more than one-half of military coups after 1945 were directed against military governments, while one-half of coups were led by officers of lower rank: evidence that coups have something to do with the relations within the military institutions, not only with military–civilian relations. All we can say is that partisan postures of different repressive apparatuses and the relations among them are still largely unexplored (but see Davis and Pereira, 2003).

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