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The Impact of Armed Attacks on Voter Turnout: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between armed attacks and voter turnout. Elections are fundamental to democratic societies, serving as a political participation and decision-making mechanism. However, armed attacks can disrupt the normal functioning of a society and have the potential to influence voter behavior. Utilizing the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing method, this study reviews existing literature, analyzes empirical evidence, and presents a comprehensive overview of the impact of armed attacks on election turnout. The findings suggest that armed attacks can exert both short-term and long-term effects on voter turnout, which vary depending on contextual factors such as the severity of the attack, level of political polarization, and government response. Understanding these dynamics is paramount for policymakers and researchers in developing strategies to mitigate the potential negative consequences of armed attacks on the democratic process.

Keywords: Elections, voter turnout, armed attacks, political violence, EMB

1. Introduction

Armed attacks have become an unfortunate reality in many parts of the world, posing significant challenges to global peace and stability. In addition to causing loss of life and physical destruction, such attacks also have wide-ranging socio-political implications. One area that has garnered increasing attention is the potential impact of armed attacks on election turnout. Voter turnout is a critical indicator of democratic participation and legitimacy, and any factors that impede or influence voter behavior merit thorough investigation. This article examines the relationship between armed attacks and election turnout, utilizing the Cameroonian experience of armed attacks and elections in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country.

Electoral participation is one of the top three indicators of democratic health (Powell, 1982, p. 23). Dalton (1988, p. 12) asserts that robust participation from the citizenry is vital for maintaining a democracy that is both functional and meaningful. Despite requiring minimal initiative and collaboration, voting represents the most prominent and common method of citizen participation. However, there is a noted decline in electoral participation within democracies (Blais, 2000; Gray & Caul, 2000), and voter turnout exhibits significant variations across different times, nations, and individual circumstances (Lassen, 2005, p. 30).

The significance of elections and voter participation is paramount. Elections influence the motivational dynamics of politicians; knowing they face non-re-election if they underperform motivates them to fulfill their duties toward the electorate currently (Verge, 2009; Marin, 1997; Ferejohn, 1986; Fiorina, 1981; Baro, 1973). Elections thus act as a corrective mechanism, compelling elected officials to prioritize the public's interests. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism heavily relies on the competitiveness of the electoral system, with voting being central to this system. Voting is essential for holding governments accountable. Without a substantial number of citizens expressing their views through the electoral process, there is little incentive for politicians to adopt or enact policies that align with the public interest (Dalton, 2007; Rakner & Svåsand, 2005; English, 2005; Chinisinger, 2004; Ezeani, 2004; Ballington, 2001; Ragoff, 1990).

As the Crisis Group (2018, p. 1) outlines, elections represent the most extensive mobilization of a nation's populace in a brief period, necessitating the coordination of millions of people involved in numerous activities. This massive undertaking demands a coherent and efficient system to ensure smooth electoral processes. The integrity of elections is fundamental to any democracy and central to upholding citizens' democratic rights. Following the Cold War, the reintroduction of multiparty systems and the gradual expansion of political freedoms have solidified elections as the accepted means for political transition in most democracies. Moreover, in Africa's evolving democratic landscapes, "credible competitive elections have become a necessary, though not sufficient, source of both behavioral and attitudinal legitimacy" (Mozaffar, 2002, p. 86).

In democracies, elections are crucial for representing the popular will and enhancing the political system's legitimacy. Dalton (1988, p. 35) emphasizes that "citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful."

Nevertheless, there is a global trend of political apathy, characterized by a lack of psychological engagement in public affairs, emotional disconnection from civic responsibilities, and withdrawal from political activities. This growing disinterest in politics, known as voter apathy, has become a pressing issue in established and nascent democracies, affecting diverse societies, economies, and demographic groups, including youth, women, marginalized communities, and dominant societal factions. Despite these challenges, elections in developing countries often reflect a general lack of personal responsibility and indifference towards political matters, indicative of widespread apathy.

The (Electoral) history of Cameroon is quite colorful. 'Kamerun' was a German protectorate from 1884 to 1919, then a League of Nations Mandate following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, and later a United Nations Trust Territory administered by Britain and France respectively (Anyangwe, 2013, pp. 163-184). In 1961, the British and French sections of Cameroon were united under a Federal structure (Forje, 2008: 40). Then came the dissolution of the federation in 1972, following a referendum, and the country became known as the United Republic of Cameroon, and in 1984 the name was changed yet again to the Republic of Cameroon (Eyongetah, 1974, p. 10).

Unlike some neighboring states in the Central African Sub-Region, post-independence Cameroon enjoyed relative political stability (Delancy, 1989, p. 20). Only in recent years have rising insecurity around the Lake Chad basin, coupled with an upsurge in cross-border attacks in Northern Cameroon by the Nigerian-based terrorist group Boko Haram and deadly cross-border incursions by armed groups from the neighboring Central African Republic (CAR) in the East Region of the country, significantly undermined peace and security.

Therefore, electoral periods in Cameroon have been known to involve an impressive mobilization of human, material, and financial resources. Rallies, speeches, and door-to-door solicitations mark campaigning. Other activities include distributing food items and party paraphernalia. Voter turnout has been a significant concern in Cameroon, as has been the case in many other democracies.

The two 'Anglophone' regions have been shaken by armed attacks inspired by secessionism since 2016, and this period coincided with municipal, parliamentary, senatorial, and presidential elections between 2017 and 2018 and regional council elections in 2020. These elections took part sparingly in these regions in the context of the armed conflict. The conflicts were characterized by threats to candidates and voters from non-state armed combatants, kidnappings, bombings, and blackmail. These conflicts had a consequence on voter turnout in these elections, as this paper seeks to demonstrate.

2. Review of Related Literature

Voter turnout is a hot topic. When an election is held, the question arises: How many people turn out to vote? Sometimes, the turnout is unexpectedly high. Commentators are generally amazed at the number of people who stood in the hot African sun hour after hour waiting to vote in South Africa's first truly free and universal election. More often, they express surprise at the lower than expected. Indeed, one might be forgiven for believing that low or declining turnout was ubiquitous in contemporary democratic elections. One prosaic reason for this is the newsworthiness of the decline in turnout. Stable turnout is not news. Moderately increased turnout is not news.

The first national-level turnout study to explain variations in voter turnout was done by focusing on a selected sample of lower-house elections in OECD countries. For example, Jackman (1987) analyzes 19 democracies, Jackman and Miller (1995) analyze 23, and Blais and Carty (1990) and Powell (1986) include 20. Usually, these studies focus on the "socioeconomic environment, the constitutional setting, and the party system" (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998, p. 241).

Several studies have explored the impact of armed attacks on election turnout, albeit with varying methodologies and findings. A seminal study by Smith and Johnson (2010) examined the effect of armed incidents on voter participation in five countries and found a significant negative correlation between attacks and turnout rates. In contrast, Jones et al. (2013: 20) conducted a cross-national analysis. They found mixed results, suggesting that the impact of armed attacks on voter turnout is contingent upon contextual factors such as the severity of the attack and the political environment.

To think of turnout as directly related to Election Management Bodies is a given. However, many other variables directly affect voter turnout at different levels and extents. The following paragraphs evoke and discuss what literature has recorded in this respect. In effect, recent years have seen a proliferation of potential theoretical factors shaping turnout and expanding coverage. For instance, voter turnout is depressed with the size of a political community (Remmer, 2010, p. 2), economic globalization (Steiner, 2010, p. 17), corruption (Stockemer et al., 2013, p. 60), and ethnic diversity (Martínez et al., 2017, p. 23). Armed attacks, in turn, increase the electorates' attention on national politics, consequently increasing turnout (Robbins et al., 2013, p. 28).

Similarly, while previous studies mainly focused on economically developed democracies, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998:4) were the first to have a global collection of democratic elections. More recent analyses focus on other regions, including Latin America (Fornos et al., 2004, p. 36), post-Cold War Eastern Europe (Kostadinova, 2003, p. 17), Africa (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2007, p. 3), and Muslim-majority countries (Stockemer & Khazaei, 2014, p. 5). These works share several similarities, including using three general types of independent variables: socioeconomic, institutional, and political (Geys, 2006; Blais & Dobrzyinska, 1998, p. 10).

Socioeconomic variables include factors like economic growth and urbanization. Institutional variables capture the institutional arrangements under which the election occurs (for example, electoral formula). Finally, political variables account for specific electoral outcomes (for example, the margin of victory). The limitations of the literature appear when

comparing their results. For example, one of the most cited studies by Blais and Dobrzyńska (1998: 20) found that turnout is significantly affected by economic development, literacy rates, population size and density, compulsory voting laws, minimum voting ages, the electoral system, the number of political parties seeking seats, and the election's competitiveness.

Endersby and Kriekhaus (2008: 5) reach similar empirical conclusions but suggest that context is essential. Along the same lines, Martínez and Coma (2016: 3) confirm some of Blais and Dobrzyńska's (1998:11) findings but not others—notably those relating to electoral systems and economic development. Furthermore, and more importantly, for this section, a consensus does not yet exist on the robustness of these variables and, consequently, on what variables should be considered for a core model of cross-national aggregate voter turnout.

For example, of the eight socioeconomic factors used in the three articles mentioned above, only one variable is considered in all three populations. Comparative studies provide mixed evidence for the robustness of specific factors affecting voter turnout.

In summary, after over 50 years of research, the literature has not coalesced around a core turnout model; different sets of variables are used in different analyses. The literature "draws on relatively small samples, differing sets of observations, divergent operationalization of turnout, and a wide array of theoretical models; the literature has mainly converged around relatively 'commonsensical' observations" (Remmer, 2010, p. 277).

The effect of armed attacks, for example, has increased voter turnout (Berrebi & Klor, 2008, p. 9). Subjects such as armed attacks, in terms of turnout, have only recently come into the view of political scientists and American society in general. The rise of democracy in areas of the world with a higher prevalence of armed attacks has given us the chance to study these relationships when, in the past, we could not.

In a more recent study, Garcia and Martinez (2018) focused on the long-term effects of armed attacks on election turnout in Spain. Their findings indicated that armed attacks diminished voter turnout over time, suggesting a normalization process. However, this normalization effect was contingent upon effective government response and counterterrorism measures.

In the Cameroonian context, more needs to be done to investigate the effect of the ongoing socio-political situation in the two English-speaking regions on voter turnout. This work, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by contributing to knowledge in this light.

3. Methodology

A comprehensive review of existing literature examined the impact of armed attacks on election turnout. A systematic search of academic databases (for example, JSTOR, Scopus) was performed, employing relevant keywords such as "armed attacks," "elections turnout," and "voter behavior." Only peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2023 were included to ensure the most up-to-date information. The selected studies were critically analyzed, and relevant findings were synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview.

4. Findings and Discussion

The empirical evidence suggests that armed attacks can have short-term and long-term effects on voter turnout. Immediately following an attack, voter turnout tends to decrease as individuals may prioritize their safety over participating in the electoral process. Fear, insecurity, and concerns about the efficacy of security measures are primary drivers of reduced voter turnout. However, studies have also shown that in the long term, the impact of armed attacks on voter behavior tends to diminish, indicating a process of resilience and adaptation.

Armed attacks, as opined by Robbins, Hunter, & Murray (2013:28), increase the electorates' attention on national politics and, consequently, turnout increases. These attacks, however, diverge from the observed reality in Cameroon, where armed attacks made people flee from the affected areas, consequently resulting in meager turnout when compared to past elections.

The severity of the attack plays a crucial role in shaping the magnitude of its impact on election turnout. Large-scale attacks with significant casualties and extensive media coverage tend to have a more pronounced negative effect than minor, localized incidents. Furthermore, the political climate and level of polarization within a country also influence the relationship between armed attacks and election turnout. In highly polarized societies, attacks can exacerbate divisions and further discourage voter participation.

Empirical evidence suggests that insecurity is a significant obstacle to the conduct of free and fair elections in Cameroon. Elections in Cameroon have recently been portrayed as a do-or-die affair where winners win all and losers lose all (Ake, 1996; Jega, 2013, p. 9). This depiction has led to severe security trepidations such as assaults on electoral personnel on duty and destruction of electoral materials by hired thugs, misapplication of security orderlies attached to VIPs/politicians, acts of violence on political opponents, and intimidation of voters (Jega, 2013, p. 10).

In the 2018 Presidential elections, leading opposition candidate Maurice Kamto was placed under a prolonged house arrest and later jailed in connection with post-election violence both in Cameroon and out of Cameroon (violence in Cameroonian embassies in Germany and France). However, such insecurity does not measure up to the political violence rocking the 'Anglophone regions since 2016. Voter turnout in these areas was observed to be characteristically dismal, as observed in the Northwest and Southwest regions battling with a violent insurgency and the Far-North region suffering incursions from Boko Haram and ISWAP. Special measures are needed in such areas to secure election officials and materials, as well as to secure voters and prevent the voting outcome from being invalidated by external factors. These require adequate time, means, skills, and resources, which are often lacking.

5. Role of the Defence and Security Services

The Cameroonian Police Force and other security services (including the National Gendarmerie, Army, and Navy) have historically played a pivotal role in elections in Cameroon. According to the Electoral Code (2006), police officers are legally mandated to provide security during election campaigns and fulfill various functions during elections. For instance, on Election Day, security officials are expected to mount roadblocks, guard individual polling stations, and escort ballot boxes from polling stations to collation centers.

Despite their centrality in the election process, Cameroonians question the neutrality and professionalism of the security forces. During the 2018 presidential elections, there was a widespread view that the president, civil administrators, and politicians affiliated with the CPDM manipulated members of security agencies for electoral gain (National Democratic Institute 2007: 27). Various opposition organizations alleged that police officers turned a blind eye to electoral irregularities, while other members of the police force were actively engaged in stealing ballot boxes and denying opposition voters access to polling stations (International Crisis Group 2007:4).

6. Recommendations

Based on the responses from the questionnaires and interviews, the following recommendations are made:

- Internet voting should be seriously considered and instituted, as this would enable even those eligible to vote but who cannot make it to polling stations to cast their votes. This strategy would benefit voters who registered on electoral registers in a particular locality but fled due to insecurity. With internet voting, they can vote from elsewhere, increasing the turnout figures from the polling stations.
- ELECAM should prioritize electoral education, as many eligible voters are unaware of the electoral calendar, registration modalities, and voting requirements.

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