

Not All Elections Are Created Equal: Election Quality and Civil Conflict

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Abstract

Research on the dangers of democratization has long warned of the potential for elections to spark civil conflict. Yet, this work has remained surprisingly isolated from the burgeoning body of research on electoral integrity. We open the “black box” of elections to theorize how variation in their quality shapes the opportunities and incentives for military conflict. We argue that electoral integrity matters by influencing perceptions about the legitimacy of political outcomes and about actors’ willingness to play by the rules. While high-quality elections should not exacerbate the risk of civil conflict, low-integrity contests foster grievances and decrease the ability of the government and opposition to make credible commitments to avert violence. We find firm support for our hypothesis: flawed presidential elections increase the risk, especially in countries with a history of civil conflict. These findings are robust to methods to address the endogeneity of elections and electoral quality.

Key words: civil conflict, elections, electoral integrity

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>).

In November 2010, a long-delayed election in Côte d’Ivoire was brazenly falsified by incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, who used his control of state institutions to manipulate the outcome despite initial counts reporting his loss by a wide margin. Deadlock, militarization and violence soon followed, as supporters of the opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara fought to take control of the capital. These dynamics are mirrored in other cases of civil conflict triggered or exacerbated by flawed elections, as in El Salvador (1972), in which electoral fraud prompted an attempted coup and brief military conflict between the government and opposition forces. Yet, in other instances, elections are hailed as promoting conflict resolution, such as in Mozambique (1994) or Sierra Leone (2002) where successful elections were viewed as the linchpin of post-conflict peace processes (Matanock, 2017*a,b*).

The different narratives surrounding such cases point to the lack of consensus as to whether elections exacerbate or inhibit civil conflict. Research on the “dangers of democratization” takes a pessimistic view, pointing to ethno-nationalist mobilization, sore loser effects, and credible commitment problems (Anderson and Mendes, 2005; Collier, 2009; Brancati and Snyder, 2012; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012). On the other hand, analysts and practitioners of international democracy assistance tend to adopt a more optimistic view of elections as defusing social conflict, particularly when accompanied by international scrutiny, aid, or security guarantees (Savun and Tirone, 2011; Donno, 2013; Matanock, 2017*a,b*; von Borzyskowski, 2019). Others point to the importance of the political and societal context in which elections are held: when a country has prior experience with democracy (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016), firm rule of law (Brancati and Snyder, 2012), or relative ethnic homogeneity (Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug, 2012), elections are less likely to incite civil conflict.

However, the study of elections and civil conflict remains surprisingly isolated from the

burgeoning body of research on electoral integrity. Most studies treat elections as a homogeneous phenomenon.¹ Yet, we now have an increasingly rich understanding of electoral integrity violations—why they occur, what forms they take, and what their consequences are (Birch, 2007; Birch and van Ham, 2017; Donno, 2013; Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2014)—and these insights have much to contribute to the debate over whether, and when, elections may trigger conflict.

Here, we build on the basic observation that not all contests are equal. Electoral integrity can vary significantly, influenced by both institutional context—bias in the electoral playing field, the quality of electoral management, or the strength of accountability mechanisms—and by political actors’ choices to play by the rules (or not). Moreover, variation in electoral integrity is present both across and within regime types: two countries may receive identical coding on measures of democracy yet exhibit differences in the the severity or scope of electoral misconduct. We draw from research on the consequences of electoral misconduct to theorize elections as potential conflict triggers.² We argue that electoral integrity matters because it influences beliefs about the legitimacy of political outcomes and about the degree to which political actors can be trusted to keep agreements and play by the rules. All else equal, elections should not be associated with conflict when their integrity is sound. But when electoral malpractice, bias, or institutional weakness creates uncertainty about the outcome’s legitimacy, elections will be associated with an increased risk of civil conflict. We identify two specific mechanisms underpinning this relationship: first, violations of electoral integrity

¹See Krishnarajan et al. (2016) for an initial exploration of the relationship between electoral quality and conflict and Keels (2018) on the relationship between electoral laws and civil conflict recurrence.

²In this sense, our theory is similar to Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug (2012), though their focus on ethnic heterogeneity – a slowly-changing structural factor – differs from our emphasis on electoral integrity as a more proximate factor contributing to conflict.

increase the resonance of the losing party's grievances, spurring mobilization that can lead to political violence; second, because low-integrity elections undermine political legitimacy and trust, they exacerbate commitment problems between government and opposition. We expect these processes to operate more strongly in countries with a history of civil conflict. Past conflicts have negative and enduring legacies for societies, creating conditions in which political entrepreneurs can more easily capitalize on election-related grievances for violent mobilization.

In a time-series cross-sectional analysis covering 134 developing countries from 1950 to 2012, we find clear support for our hypotheses. Focusing on presidential elections, which are high-stakes winner-takes-all contests, we find that elections of low integrity are associated with a significantly higher risk of civil conflict. There is also evidence that this effect is stronger in countries with a history of civil conflict, where low-quality elections are even more dangerous. Notably, elections in general are not associated with conflict onset, underlining the importance of electoral quality as a conditioning factor. Our core finding is robust to the inclusion of additional control variables, different sub-samples, and to methods to address the potential endogeneity of electoral integrity and election timing.

By combining insights from the study of civil war, democratization, and elections, our analysis sheds new light on the conditions under which democratic institutions can instigate civil conflict. Elections are, by nature, conflictual events in which competing parties vie for power. Yet we underscore that they do not inherently contribute to the outbreak of violence; rather, it is contests with severe flaws that exacerbate commitment problems and legitimacy crises that can lead to conflict. While we do not assess the effectiveness of particular remedies here, our conclusions point to the role of international election monitoring and assistance in

helping to shore up peace by fostering more fair and procedurally sound political competition (von Borzyskowski, 2018; Donno, 2013; Birch and Muchlinski, 2017).

Elections and Civil Conflict

Insight into the conflict-inducing potential of elections is found perhaps most prominently in studies on the dangers of democratization (Huntington, 1968; Gleditsch and Ward, 2000; Mann, 2005; Mansfield and Snyder, 2002, 2005; Snyder, 2000; Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug, 2012). Ethnic divisions are central to these accounts. During the early stages of democratization, political elites pit domestic groups against one another, spurring ethno-nationalist mobilization. Coupled with weak institutions, rising exclusionary nationalism during democratization triggers fear of victimization, particularly among the minority groups. These groups may resort to violence against the state, whose commitments are not perceived as credible in an uncertain but high-stakes political environment (Weingast, 1998; Fearon, 1998; Snyder, 2000).³ The commitment problem is highlighted again by Flores and Nooruddin (2012) who argue, specifically in post-conflict settings, that elections create time-inconsistency problems that keep parties from adhering to peace settlements.

Yet, others emphasize the peaceful (or, at least, benign) nature of elections. These accounts tend to rely on high-profile examples of peaceful post-conflict elections, such as El Salvador (1994), Mozambique (1994), and Sierra Leone (2002), to theorize conditions for success. In contrast to claims about the danger of ethnic outbidding, Birnir (2007) argues that elections can stabilize ethnic relations by providing representation for minority

³These problems can be alleviated to some extent by international assistance or other external guarantees (Savun and Tirone, 2011; Pevehouse, 2002; Donno, 2013).

groups. Matanock (2017*a,b*) shows that post-conflict elections with provisions for rebel group participation and high levels of international scrutiny tend to foster peace. Others focus on the endogenous nature of elections, arguing that they do not causally contribute to conflict, but instead tend to be held when there is an already higher risk of civil war (Cheibub and Hays, 2015).

Largely absent from these debates about elections and civil conflict is consideration of the quality of the contests themselves. This is a problematic omission: intuitively, a flawed contest, in which the legitimate outcome of the election is in question, should impact the incentives and calculations of government and rebels in very different ways than a free and fair contest. Indeed, a mounting body of evidence indicates that electoral misconduct is associated with consequences that could potentially contribute to domestic violent conflict, including declining public confidence in the regime (Norris, 2014), less competitive political systems (Simpser, 2013; Gehlbach and Simpser, 2015; Donno and Roussias, 2012; Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski, 2018), and post-election protests (Tucker, 2007; Donno, 2013). Research is beginning to explore how perceptions of electoral integrity influence actors' willingness to engage in protest, riots and lower-level violence (von Borzyskowski, 2019; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015), but to date, no study has considered the link between electoral integrity and outright military conflict between the government and opposition, which is an outcome shaped by different mobilization and commitment problems.

Electoral Integrity and Civil Conflict

Electoral integrity refers to the extent to which a contest is free, fair, and procedurally sound.⁴ Free contests are marked by open competition and unrestricted voter choice. Fair contests are marked by equal access to media and level campaign conditions for all parties. Procedurally sound contests are marked by comprehensive voter registration, ballot security, accurate counting and tabulation, and judicious dispute resolution. Electoral integrity is therefore a multifaceted phenomenon that is shaped by a country’s institutional context and by the conduct of its political actors. It can be undermined in many ways. The tasks associated with administering elections begin months to years in advance of the elections themselves, including the creation and maintenance of voter registration lists, management of candidate registration, and monitoring of campaign practices. The electoral playing field can be biased (usually in the government’s favor) through manipulation of the media environment or the use of state resources to support the incumbent’s campaign. Then come the logistics of managing the casting and counting of ballots, tabulating and announcing results, and, in the post-election period, adjudicating disputes. Schedler (2002, 2006) refers to this as the “menu of manipulation,” emphasizing that a break in any link of the “chain of democratic choice” undermines electoral integrity.

When irregularities, mismanagement, or manipulation at any stage of the electoral cycle cast doubt on the legitimacy of results—or prevent monitors from verifying their accuracy—trust in the political process is undermined: elite and public confidence in the regime, voter turnout, and perceptions of political legitimacy all decrease (Birch, 2010; Rosas, 2010; Mal-

⁴We refer to low-integrity elections interchangeably as “flawed” or “low-quality” elections. We refer to violations of electoral integrity interchangeably as electoral “malpractice,” “misconduct,” or “manipulation.”

donado and Seligson, 2014; Norris, 2014; Kerr, 2014). We emphasize that it is by influencing the *perceived legitimacy of political outcomes* that electoral integrity matters for civil conflict. Thus, our claim is not related to the specific tools or form that misconduct takes, but rather the combined severity of the problems.

Questions as to the legitimacy of the election's outcome feed into political grievances that can be used by the losing party to mobilize against the winner. This is the first path through which low electoral integrity can increase the likelihood of civil conflict. We refer to it as the 'grievance-mobilization' effect. Grievance-based theories of war make clear the importance of rebels' ability to capitalize on popular discontent (Gurr, 1970; Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011; Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014; Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug, 2013), and others have noted that losing an election can trigger a turn to violence (Höglund, Jarstad and Kovacs, 2009; Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug, 2012). Missing from these accounts, however, is consideration of how electoral quality crucially shapes the credibility, and power, of the losing party's complaints. "Sore losers" of a free and fair contest face much greater challenges in garnering domestic and international support than do losers of flawed elections where the legitimacy of the outcome is in doubt. Those who study elections have noted the unique mobilizing potential of "stolen victories," which feed into a narrative of unfair marginalization, increasing the legitimacy of the loser's claims (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010) and serving as a focal point for anti-regime mobilization (Daxecker, 2012; Hyde and Marinov, 2012; Tucker, 2007; Kalandadze and Orenstein, 2009; Howard and Roessler, 2006). Mass protests, in turn, can be a catalyst for violence (Norris, 2014; Anderson and Mendes, 2005). Grievances created by electoral misconduct coupled with a politically mobilized public creates a "tinderbox situation" which makes the onset of rebellion likely (Letsa, 2017).

Indeed, in the wake of stolen elections in repressive contexts, it may be that open rebellion is the only way for losers to seek redress (Keels, 2017, 1025). In short, elections that are perceived to be illegitimate create fertile ground for resentment which can be channeled into violent collective action against election winners.⁵

A grievance-mobilization cycle can take hold regardless of whether it is the government or opposition that wins the election. What matters is whether violations of electoral integrity create uncertainty about the legitimacy of political outcomes. While cases of opposition victory in flawed elections are far more rare than government victories,⁶ the cloud of uncertainty in such cases can still be used by the losing (government) side to mobilize its supporters and justify a turn toward violence.

The 2010 election in Côte d’Ivoire demonstrates the danger of electoral malpractice, particularly given a history of conflict. The first Ivoirian civil war ended in 2005 but planned presidential elections were repeatedly delayed. The rebel ‘Forces Nouvelles’ failed to disarm and retained effective control of their territory in the north of the country (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2002). When elections were finally held in November 2010, the contest was between Gbagbo and longstanding adversary Ouattara, whose base of support was in the rebel-held north. Controversy over nationality laws led to confrontations over voter registration lists and a last-minute reconstituting of the Independent Election Commission (CEI). Nonetheless, both parties campaigned vigorously, and

⁵It is important to note that groups that initiate such attacks are not typically formed from scratch during electoral periods, but rather build on existing political, military or civil society groups. As Braithwaite and Cunningham (2019) note, “more than 95 percent of rebel groups active during intrastate conflicts included in the UCDP Armed Conflict Database drew their initial membership from some sort of preexisting named organization or, at the very least, from an identifiable ethnic or refugee community” (1).

⁶Of the presidential elections in our sample, the incumbent lost just 12% of flawed elections (those below the 75th percentile of our measure of electoral integrity).

election day proceeded in a generally acceptable manner albeit with irregularities in voting procedures due to inadequate training of polling station staff (Carter Center, 2011, 53-54). The CEI initially declared Ouattara the victor with 54 percent of the votes, compared to 46 percent for Gbagbo. But the Constitutional Court (allied with Gbagbo) subsequently invalidated the result in several regions and declared Gbagbo the victor. Detailed analysis and a parallel vote tabulation by observers from the United Nations (UN), Carter Center, European Union (EU) and others supported the initial conclusion that Ouattara was the rightful winner (Carter Center, 2011; Cook, 2011). Protests and violence broke out, leading to more than 3,000 deaths over a 5-month period. The government brutally suppressed pro-Ouattara demonstrations, and attacks by ‘death squads’ affiliated with both sides were reported (Cook, 2011). Gbagbo, meanwhile, remained in the capital city of Abidjan as opposition forces, led by the rebel group *Forces Nouvelles*, launched a country-wide offensive in March 2011. Soon after, French and UN forces joined the opposition. Gbagbo was quickly removed from power and transferred to the International Criminal Court. Ouattara assumed the presidency.

In taking stock of events in Côte d’Ivoire, it is useful to consider whether civil conflict would have broken out even in the event of a clean election. If the votes had been tabulated and evaluated fairly (leading to Ouattara’s victory), would the conflict have escalated to the level that it did? This is unlikely. Nor is it likely that conflict would have broken out in the event that Gbagbo had won a legitimate victory. In either case, the potential for mobilization would have been lower. It is clear that the (internationally-validated) narrative of a *stolen election* played an important role in catalyzing protests and in bolstering popular

and international support for the aggrieved party.⁷ In the absence of such a legitimacy crisis, the losing party—regardless of whether it was the government or opposition—would have faced much larger hurdles for mobilizing forces and sustaining support.

A second pathway through which poor electoral integrity increases the risk of conflict is by exacerbating credible commitment problems. The credibility of threats and promises—which influence parties’ ability to strike bargains to avert violence—is a key factor in understanding the risk of civil war (Fearon, 1995; Walter, 1997, 2002). Because elections allocate political power, they create the opportunity for *ex post* abuse of that power. This is the classic “time inconsistency” commitment problem. As Flores and Nooruddin (2012) describe, election winners may renege on campaign promises to abide by norms of peaceful power-sharing. What has been overlooked in this standard account is the importance of *electoral conduct* in shaping actors’ ability to make credible commitments. Elections are seminal events that lead parties to update beliefs about the credibility and trustworthiness of their adversaries. Contests of questionable conduct and legitimacy signal a lack of commitment to playing by the rules, undermining the ability to make credible commitments to avert violent conflict. While this problem can manifest for both government and opposition—both of which have the ability to engage in forms of misconduct such as voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, or vote buying—it is likely to disproportionately affect the incumbent, because it is the government that bears responsibility for administering elections and adjudicating post-election disputes. Thus, low-integrity elections should particularly undermine the opposition’s trust in the government as an interlocutor that is willing and able to abide by a political bargain. The government’s ability to make credible concessions declines.

⁷See also Tucker (2007) on the mobilizing power of stolen elections.

Flawed elections may also exacerbate commitment problems in a second sense. By shutting the opposition out of power and reducing its representation in the legislature and other state institutions, the opposition has limited ability to enforce any political bargain through non-military means. Flores and Nooruddin (2012) note the importance of constraints on election winners as a means of preventing post-election conflicts (561). Governments facing fewer checks on their power are more free to renege on concessions intended to pacify resistance and avert conflict.

Hypothesis 1: *Flawed elections increase the risk of civil conflict.*

The grievance-mobilization and commitment problems highlighted above are a general consequence of flawed elections; we do not expect these processes to be bounded to a subset of cases. Yet, a sizeable body of research focuses on the danger of post-conflict elections (Brancati and Snyder, 2012; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012), raising the possibility that the consequences of electoral malpractice may also be greater in countries with a history of civil conflict. Analyzing post-war elections, Keels (2018) notes the primacy of the “opposition’s concerns that the government will not abide by the results of the election or that the government will attempt to rig the process in their favor” (40), while Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug (2012) argue that election-related conflict is “often linked to former combatants in previous civil war” (393). Lyons (2016*a,b*) notes that in countries governed by former insurgents, elections may be used to “consolidate the authority of the victorious rebel group rather than [as] a mechanism for citizen participation” (Lyons, 2016*a*, 1035). Experts on electoral integrity also argue that in states with a history of civil conflict, elections are characterized by “low-trust but high-stakes,” and “even minor flaws in electoral procedures may prove capable of reigniting violence” (Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2014, 12). For example,

Mozambique’s civil war ended in 1992, but the ensuing decades have seen an uneasy peace punctuated by renewed violence between the ruling Frelimo party and the opposition (former rebel) Renamo party. Elections—in which Frelimo has used ballot fraud, manipulation of the voter registry, and opaque vote tabulation to maintain its advantage—have been seen as a continual irritant to the peace process (Jentzsch, 2019).

In sum, research points to the long-term effects of conflict on social cleavages and on groups’ fighting and mobilization capacity, which may create conditions that make it easier for political entrepreneurs to capitalize on election-related grievances. It is therefore important to examine whether the consequences of electoral integrity violations are worse in countries with a history of civil conflict.

Hypothesis 2: *The risk of civil conflict is higher following flawed elections in countries with a history of conflict than countries without a history of conflict.*

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we construct a time-series cross-sectional dataset of all non-OECD countries between 1950 and 2012. By limiting our analysis to developing countries, we delimit a sample in which civil conflict onset is far more likely and in which electoral integrity varies more substantially.⁸ Our dependent variable is *Civil Conflict Onset* from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD), version 4. UCDP/PRIO defines a civil conflict as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at

⁸Because developed countries have higher-quality elections *and* a lower baseline risk of civil conflict, their inclusion would, if anything, bias our results toward finding a relationship between election quality and onset.

least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year” (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Melander, Pettersson and Themnér, 2016). A conflict is coded as starting in the year that the conflict reached the 25 battle deaths threshold, to meet ACD’s definition of civil conflict.⁹

To identify election years, we consult the the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). Here, we focus our analysis on *Presidential Elections*, which include both stand-alone presidential contests as well as general elections in which presidential and legislative elections are held simultaneously. In presidential and semi-presidential systems, which make up the large majority of our sample, these are the most important elections that determine who holds executive power.¹⁰ They are high-stakes, winner-take-all contests, in which the consequences of misconduct for political outcomes are severe.¹¹ We therefore expect presidential elections to be the relevant cases for our theory. In parliamentary systems where seats are allocated based on proportional representation, the stakes for losing parties are lower, and we should not expect electoral malpractice to have the same potential to spark conflict.¹² We nevertheless control for legislative elections in our models.

⁹We link conflict onsets to elections in the following way: for each presidential election, we compare the date of the election (first round) with the date of the nearest conflict onset (if any). We code onset as occurring in the year of that election if it occurred within a window of 3 months prior and 1 year after the election. This is informed by common practice among election monitors in defining the start of the electoral cycle (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005), as well as the subsequent time period for an event-related onset (a one-year period is standard in the civil conflict literature). In countries with multiple conflicts, onset is the initiation of a new conflict or the rekindling of a past conflict that has been inactive for at least one year (Themnér, 2016).

¹⁰71% of observations in our sample are in countries with presidential or semi-presidential systems. Of the remaining countries, 13 have parliamentary systems and 15 do not have an elected chief executive (e.g., monarchies).

¹¹Classic work on the “perils of presidentialism” highlight the conflictual, zero-sum nature of these contests (Linz, 1990; Mainwaring, 1993). Birch (2007) discusses how electoral malfeasance has a greater effect on election outcomes in winner-take-all systems.

¹²See Salehyan and Linebarger (2015) for a similar reasoning and approach. When we investigate this issue, we indeed find that legislative elections are not associated with an increased risk of conflict regardless of their quality.

We emphasize that our dependent variable, *Civil Conflict Onset*, is different from election violence, which refers to violent acts perpetrated with the purpose of influencing elections. Whereas civil conflict entails armed conflict between two militarily-organized parties (one of which is the government), election violence may be one-sided¹³. It is itself a tool of electoral manipulation, rather than purely a response (Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski, 2013). The ‘threshold’ for civil conflict violence is also higher. While UCDP conflict requires 25 battle deaths per year, data on election violence typically do not require any death threshold and may even consider threats to be instances of violence (Daxecker, Amicarelli and Jung, 2019; Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski, 2018; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015). Having identified these conceptual distinctions, it is still important to note that election violence and civil conflict are empirically correlated. Countries susceptible to one form of political violence are often susceptible to others (Bodea, Elbadawi and Houle, 2017).

Our theory centers on how violations of electoral integrity can create uncertainty about the legitimacy of political outcomes. We therefore need a measure of election quality that captures not the particular tools of misconduct, but rather the overall severity of problems and the extent to which the outcome may have been affected. We rely on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) summary evaluation of whether an election was free and fair (Coppedge et al., 2018) to measure *Electoral Integrity*.¹⁴ This question asked experts: “Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?” Respondents then rate the election on a 5-point scale, with each category representing different degrees to which irregularities

¹³Straus and Taylor (2012) report that incumbents are the main perpetrators of election violence in three-quarters of cases in Sub-Saharan Africa. Well-known cases that the UCDP codes as one-sided violence include Kenya (2007) and Zimbabwe (2008).

¹⁴This is the V-Dem variable *v2elfrfair*, which is different from the summary index *v2xelfrfair*.

were present, were intentional, and affected the outcome of the election. For example, the lowest category represents cases where “the official results had little if anything to do with the will of the people;” the middle category where “it is hard to determine whether irregularities affected the outcome or not;” and the highest category where some human error was “without significant consequences.”¹⁵ Subsequently, V-Dem uses a Bayesian item response theory (IRT) measurement model to generate a continuous measure, where higher values indicate that elections were more free and fair. (Pemstein et al., 2018). We recenter this measure so that the minimum value is zero. There is wide variation in the quality of elections in our sample, which approximates a normal distribution.¹⁶ Some examples of countries with low-quality elections (below the 25th percentile) are Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Tunisia, and Djibouti, while countries with high-quality elections (above the 75th percentile) are Costa Rica, Brazil, and Uruguay.

Our main variable of interest is the interaction between *Electoral Integrity* and *Presidential Election*, or *Electoral Integrity in Presidential Elections*. We include a control for *Legislative Election* in all models. Though (presidential) election years may not be destabilizing *in general*, we expect that elections that are not free and fair are more likely to incite conflict onset.

To test our second hypothesis, we created a dummy variable, *Conflict History* that is coded as 1 if a country has experienced civil conflict in the past. We choose to focus on

¹⁵Note that this measure does not explicitly ask coders to consider the presence of election-related violence in their summary evaluation. Still, it is possible that respondents consider violence as an implicit feature of an election’s quality, which may mean that this variable is correlated with our outcome (civil conflict onset) in ways unrelated to our theory. To mitigate this, we include a measure of *Election Violence* as a control in all models.

¹⁶See Table A1 for the distribution of the rescaled variable *v2elfrfair*. The average value of the index is around 3.5 and countries scoring above 5.5 fall in the 90th percentile of values of free and fair.

countries with any prior history of conflict, in order to avoid setting an arbitrary time limit for when the danger of conflict recurrence ends. The organizational and societal legacy of civil conflict endures for many years, well beyond the 5-10 year period of immediate post-conflict reconstruction. Recent fears of an election-related conflict in Mozambique illustrate this point, as the civil war ended 27 years ago, but still shapes the political arena today (Jentzsch, 2019). Our assessment of Hypothesis 2 is based on the interaction between conflict history and electoral integrity. Here we are interested in whether low electoral integrity has a stronger effect on conflict onset in countries with a history of civil conflict. In addition to evaluating this interactive relationship, we control for conflict history in all our models, given that countries with a history of conflict may be more likely to experience recurrence of violence (Collier et al., 2003).

We also control for the presence of *Election Violence* in all models. This sets up a conservative test of our theory, because election violence is a tool of electoral misconduct that is correlated with our dependent variable. Any remaining association in our model between election integrity and civil conflict onset is therefore net of election violence. We use NELDA question 33, which codes whether there was significant violence involving civilian deaths immediately before, during, or after the election (Hyde and Marinov, 2012).¹⁷

It is also important to assess whether it matters who wins the election. In theory, we expect grievances, mobilization and credible commitment problems to result from flawed elections regardless of whether it is the incumbent or opposition that wins. Yet, research on post-election protests and “electoral revolutions” focuses on incumbent victories as the focal

¹⁷The coding criteria also specify that the violence should be “at least plausibly related to the election” and that “deaths related to civil war that are not intended to influence the election, and are not caused by the election, should not be counted.”

point for opposition mobilization.¹⁸ We therefore employ the NELDA variable *Incumbent Lost* to control for the identity of the election victor.¹⁹

In addition to *Election Violence*, *Legislative Election*, and *Incumbent Lost*, we control for each country's regime type using *Polity*,²⁰ the size of the *Excluded Population*, *ln GDP per Capita*, *log Population*, *ln Democracy Aid*, as well as *Peace Years* to account for temporal dynamics. The rationale and operationalization of these variables is explained in the Appendix Section 1. Table A1 shows descriptive statistics for all variables in our analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

In our primary set of analyses, we use a sample of all non-OECD country-years (Table 2, Models 1-3), which allows us to assess the effect of elections (at varying levels of integrity) on civil conflict onset.²¹ In alternative models (Table 2, Models 4-6), we use a sample of presidential election years, again in non-OECD countries. These models compare elections of varying integrity only to each other. Model 7 then assesses our second hypothesis, interacting electoral integrity with conflict history, using the country-year sample. Beginning with a simple cross-tabulation, Table 1 provides initial support for Hypothesis 1. We see that conflict onset is more likely when elections are not free and fair (7.28% of cases) compared

¹⁸See for example (Kuntz and Thompson, 2009).

¹⁹NELDA question 24 (Hyde and Marinov, 2015). In the Appendix, we investigate the independent influence of incumbent loss on civil conflict onset in Table A4. We find that incumbent loss has no significant effect on the likelihood of conflict and that there is no conditioning effect of incumbent loss when it is interacted with electoral integrity: Figure A2 shows that there is no significant effect of incumbent loss on the probability of civil conflict for any value of free/fair.

²⁰Our sample includes both dictatorships and democracies, as long as the country held national elections. Variation in regime type correlates with electoral quality, but not perfectly so. Within regimes, there remains substantial variation in the severity of electoral misconduct.

²¹This establishes the baseline association between elections and conflict, similar to Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug (2012).

to when they are free and fair (3.17%) and this difference is statistically significant.

Table 1 here

Moving beyond these suggestive results, Table 2 presents the main findings. Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we employ a logistic estimator and cluster standard errors by country.²² We begin with a basic model to establish the effect of elections on the probability of civil conflict. Model 1 shows that – without controlling for election quality – holding presidential elections does not affect the risk of civil conflict.²³ Our next model of interest uses the Firth logistic regression to account for the rarity of our outcome variable, civil conflict, which occurs in about 5% of all cases in the pooled sample (Firth, 1993; King and Zeng, 2001*a,b*).²⁴ These results yield strong support for our expectations: elections have a heterogeneous effect on the risk of civil conflict depending on their quality, and this conditional relationship holds when controlling for possible confounding variables.²⁵ Graphing the marginal effects, Figure 1 shows that low quality elections carry a substantially higher risk of sparking conflict. An election with a low electoral integrity value of 1 (on the 7 point scale) is around six times more likely to spark conflict than an election with a high value of 6.5. Among the control variables, consistent with prior research on civil wars, we find that countries with a history of civil conflict, election violence, a large discriminated population, low GDP per capita, a large population, less democracy aid receipts, and lower

²²The firth method does not allow clustering of standard errors, which are Models 2 and 7 in Table 2.

²³This is in line with Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug (2012)’s null finding.

²⁴It should be noted that the use of a logit model for this analysis, rather than the rare events logit model, will produce results that are less robust. This might be due to the fact that “computing probabilities of events in logit analysis is suboptimal in finite samples of rare events data,” leading to biased coefficients (King and Zeng, 2001*b*, 138).

²⁵Note that we do not include a constituent term for election quality (‘electoral integrity’) because this variable is only coded in election years. This assumes (plausibly) that any changes in election quality during off years will influence outcomes via the election itself.

levels of democracy tend to be at higher risk of civil conflict.

Table 2 here

Figure 1 here

While these initial results are in line with our expectations, one important concern relates to selection issues common in studies using observational data. Neither the decision to hold an election nor the quality of elections is assigned randomly and could therefore be correlated with a country’s propensity for civil conflict. While we do not establish a single, ideal causal identification strategy, we use a multi-pronged approach to alleviate these concerns. As a first step, we estimate a panel fixed effects model to address the possibility of selection on time-invariant unobservable characteristics of countries. This addresses one important source of endogeneity—that the countries with higher electoral integrity are not directly comparable to those with low quality elections—by allowing for country-specific baseline risk heterogeneity. We also include year fixed effects to control for global trends or shocks.

Model 3 in Table 2 presents the results of this more conservative estimation strategy. The coefficient for *Electoral Integrity* remains negative but falls short of achieving conventional levels of statistical significance, with a p-value of 0.12. This result is not surprising given the implications of using within-country variation only (Cook, Hays and Franzese, 2020). Electoral integrity is a relatively slow moving variable, creating challenges for estimation on temporal variation only. Moreover, of the 134 developing countries included in our original sample, 45 of these dropped from the fixed effects analysis since they never experienced civil conflict. In further evaluating this sample, we find that countries that these countries were statistically more likely to hold higher quality presidential elections.²⁶ As such, the fixed

²⁶Results available on request.

effects analysis excludes many countries that provide support for our theory: those with high quality elections and peace. In light of these issues, we consider the still marginally significant result in this model to lend support to the robustness of our finding.²⁷

We adopt several other strategies to account for potential endogeneity concerns. One source of bias that may confound our results is that elections are known to be held strategically at certain times, perhaps in an attempt to forestall an impending civil conflict. Further, the decision to strategically hold elections at certain times may be correlated with the decision to engage in electoral misconduct (Cheibub and Hays, 2015). If election-years are associated with a higher baseline risk of conflict (due possibly to unobserved factors), our inclusion of both election- and non-election years may be leading us to compare apples to oranges, possibly biasing our estimates in favor of finding a relationship between (low-integrity) elections and conflict onset. In Model 4 we limit our sample to presidential election years, and we still find a negative and significant relationship between the quality of elections and the likelihood of conflict onset. We then test our hypothesis on an even smaller sub-sample of presidential elections held according to a pre-determined constitutional schedule (e.g., every four years), for which we should not be concerned about endogenous timing. The variable *Scheduled Elections* is taken from NELDA questions 1 and 2, which code whether regular elections had previously been suspended and whether these were the first multiparty elections (Hyde and Marinov, 2014). Model 5 shows that in this sub-sample, election quality retains its negative and significant effect.

As an additional step to address the concern that a common (observable) factor is pre-

²⁷These issues are not limited to our own variable of interest. We note that in the fixed effects analysis, variables known to increase the risk of civil conflict, such as conflict history, group exclusion, GDP per capita, and population size, also do not have a statistically significant relationship with conflict onset.

dicting both electoral malpractice and civil conflict onset, we undertake a matching analysis. We use coarsened exact matching to improve balance across a treatment group (with high violations of electoral integrity) and a control group (low violations) (Iacus, King and Porro, 2012). By reducing imbalance between treatment and control groups, matching also reduces the influence of extreme observations that do not have a counterfactual in the data (King and Zeng, 2006). We confirm that balance on each of our covariates is improved after matching, and our key result showing a negative, significant association between electoral integrity and civil conflict holds. These results are described in Appendix 6.

We next consider the potential endogeneity of election *quality*, employing an endogenous treatment probit model using a system of recursive equations (Maddala, 1983; Greene, 2008). Recursive probit models allow the treatment (electoral integrity) to be endogenous and account for unobservable determinants of election quality that might also affect the likelihood of civil conflict. In determining model specification, we first draw from prior research about the determinants of electoral integrity. In terms of political factors—such as the relative strength of the incumbent—there are few clear associations; electoral malpractice occurs in competitive and uncompetitive contests alike, even when it is not needed for victory (Simpser, 2013). Rather, a more consistent finding is that countries with stronger traditions of political accountability, oversight (media, civil society), and rule of law exhibit higher electoral integrity (Birch and van Ham, 2017; Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2014). We therefore rely on Birch and van Ham (2017) to estimate a model of election quality as a function of institutional and societal accountability mechanisms. Thus, in addition to the controls from our civil conflict model, predictors of electoral integrity include: *Media Independence*, *Strength of Civil Society Organizations*, *Judicial Independence*, *Domestic*

Monitors, and *International Monitors*.²⁸

These non-overlapping variables in our model of election quality are considered instruments.²⁹ In Table A5 in the Appendix, we show the first-stage results for our recursive probit model. These results reveal that four out of five instruments are statistically significant predictors of election quality in the expected directions.³⁰ To further assess the strength of the instruments, we estimate a system of linear probability models using 2SLS. The first-stage F statistic is about 26 and the adjusted R^2 is 0.73, both of which are well above the minimum values to be considered relevant and strong instruments when there is a single endogenous regressor (Shea, 1997; Staiger and Stock, 1997). Next, we conduct the Sargan test and fail to reject the null hypothesis that these instruments have no direct predictive power on conflict onset, in support of the exclusion restriction. Model 6 of Table 2 shows that elections with greater integrity continue to have a negative and statistically significant effect on the likelihood of civil conflict even after addressing the non-random assignment of electoral integrity. Together, the results from Models 1-6 provide strong support for our first hypothesis.

We now turn to evaluating our second hypothesis that the risk of civil conflict will be higher following flawed elections in countries with a history of civil conflict compared to those without. We create an interaction term between conflict history and electoral integrity.³¹ Model 7 shows that the interaction term is insignificant, meaning that there is no statistically

²⁸See the Appendix for the operationalization of these variables.

²⁹To our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence that any of these factors directly predict civil conflict onset.

³⁰While the coefficient for *Judicial Independence* is in the expected direction, it falls short of conventional levels of significance. Our results hold if we remove this variable from the model. We believe *International Monitors* has a negative effect on free and fair elections given that international monitors tend to deploy to the cases with elections most likely to be flawed.

³¹Since our measure of electoral integrity only takes a value greater than zero in the presence of a presidential election, this is in a sense a three-way interaction. In Appendix Table A8, we present a model including a constituent term for presidential election * conflict history. Because it is not significant, we do not report this term in Table 2, in order to increase efficiency and ease of interpretation.

significant *difference* in the effect of electoral integrity between countries with and without a history of conflict. We further confirm that electoral integrity reduces the risk of conflict in both groups: in countries with no history of conflict (the constituent term for electoral integrity, at $p=0.043$) and in countries with a history of conflict (a test of the sum of electoral integrity and the interaction term, at $p=0.038$).

But are *flawed* elections especially risky in countries with a history of conflict? Looking across all models, it is clear that conflict history is a strong and consistent predictor of onset. To assess our second hypothesis, we plot the predicted probability of conflict onset for various combinations of electoral integrity and conflict history (Table 2, Model 7) in Figure 2. The upper panel shows results for observations with low electoral integrity (elections at the 10th percentile) while the bottom panel shows results for observations with high electoral integrity (at the 90th percentile). This yields some support for our second hypothesis: at a 90% level of confidence, we find that for elections of low integrity, the probability of civil conflict is significantly higher among countries with conflict history compared to those without conflict history. Moreover, the conflict-reducing effect of increasing electoral integrity is substantial.³² When electoral integrity is high, there is only a small divergence in the risk of conflict between countries with and without conflict history. This suggests that efforts to ensure quality, procedurally-sound elections in post-conflict cases—whether through institutional reform, capacity-building, or monitoring—can mitigate the particular risks associated with a history of civil conflict. Conversely, just as past research finds that elections can incite conflict recurrence in some post-conflict countries (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016), our results

³²Note that the lower bound for the confidence interval for the probability of conflict in countries with low electoral integrity and a history of conflict is .0988, while the upper bound of the confidence interval for countries with high electoral integrity and a history of conflict is .0918.

suggest that flawed elections are especially dangerous in these settings.

Robustness and Additional Tests

We conduct a variety of additional tests to analyze the robustness of our main results linking electoral integrity to conflict onset. First, we assess the robustness of our results when including alternative combinations of control variables, including a dummy for whether there was a *Downgraded Group* from a particular ethnic group, whether there was *Powersharing* between ethnic groups in the executive branch, levels of *Positive Horizontal Inequality* and *Negative Horizontal Inequality*, and whether there were *Peacekeepers* in the country in a given year.³³ We also run our models in the sub-sample of democratizing countries, where prior work has argued elections are particularly dangerous (Collier, 2009; Cook and Savun, 2016; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012; Huntington, 1968). Table A2 in the Appendix demonstrates the robustness of our main findings in these alternative model specifications.

Next, we probe the empirical plausibility of our two causal mechanisms. While a direct test would require knowledge of the perceptions and intentions of political elites, we identify two observable implications that are straightforward to assess. First, if violations of electoral integrity spur a “grievance-mobilization” effect, they should be associated with a higher occurrence of election-related *Protests*.³⁴ Second, if violations of electoral integrity decrease trust and exacerbate commitment problems, they should be associated with a higher occurrence of election *Boycotts*, which are a manifestation of severe lack of confidence in the fairness and probity of the electoral process (Beaulieu, 2014). We find support for both of

³³See Appendix 1 for a description and justification of these variables.

³⁴Research on electoral revolutions has noted the relationship between electoral fraud and mass protest (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Tucker, 2007).

these conjectures in Table A3 in the Appendix: the quality of elections has a significant negative association with both boycotts and post-election protests. While this is not a definitive test of causal pathways, we take this as evidence consistent with our theory.

Conclusion

A central debate about democracy promotion concerns the potential for a peace-democracy trade-off. Opening up the political space to competitive elections—particularly in a winner-take-all system—can create zero-sum dynamics that unleash the forces of nationalism, ethnic outbidding, and violent collective action. But not all elections are equal. Here, we show that process matters: a key factor for avoiding election-related civil conflict is to ensure electoral integrity. Contests that are free, fair and procedurally sound are much less likely to incite grievances, facilitate mobilization and exacerbate commitment problems among political elites. While this may seem in some ways an obvious point, it is one that has been overlooked in prior work, which has primarily considered the question of election timing—i.e., how long to wait after conflict before holding elections—as well as the specific risks of holding elections in ethnically polarized societies. These factors are surely important, but our findings indicate that electoral quality is an essential dimension that may “layer” over these others, mitigating or exacerbating the risks associated with them. Moreover, unlike structural, historical, or societal factors that are difficult to change, electoral integrity is amenable to improvement via focused technical assistance, political reforms, and high-quality election monitoring.

In exploring this link between electoral integrity and civil conflict, we integrate theories of civil conflict onset with research on the consequences of electoral manipulation. We explain

how grievances and commitment problems—two of the most fundamental causes of civil conflict—are exacerbated by flawed elections in particular ways that move beyond standard accounts related to diffuse grievances and time-inconsistency commitment problems. And though we are not the first to point out the mobilizing power of fraudulent elections, our analysis extends beyond protests and lower-scale violence to consider their effect on deadly, two-sided conflict between the government and a militarily-organized opposition.

On a positive closing note, our findings imply that free and fair elections—in which the legitimacy of outcomes is widely accepted—may bolster peace by subduing the grievances and mobilization capacity of election losers, and increasing beliefs that political elites will respect the institutional rules of the game. That our finding about the importance of electoral integrity is particularly pronounced in states with a history of conflict provides grounds for optimism that concerted efforts toward electoral assistance by the international community can have an important payoff during periods of political transition.

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Tables

Table 1: Civil Conflict Onset and Electoral Integrity

Conflict Onset	Electoral Integrity		Total
	Not Free/Fair	Free/Fair	
No Onset	446	183	629
	92.72%	96.83%	93.88%
Conflict Onset	35	6	41
	7.28%	3.17%	6.12%
Total	481	189	670
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Notes: Chi-square is 3.974 ($p = .046$). Free/Fair is from V-Dem, where “Free/Fair” indicates a value above the 75th percentile of the V-Dem variable *v2elrfair* (“Election Free and Fair”). Civil conflict is from UCDP/PRIO (battle deaths > 25). Percentages are for columns and the sample is presidential election years.

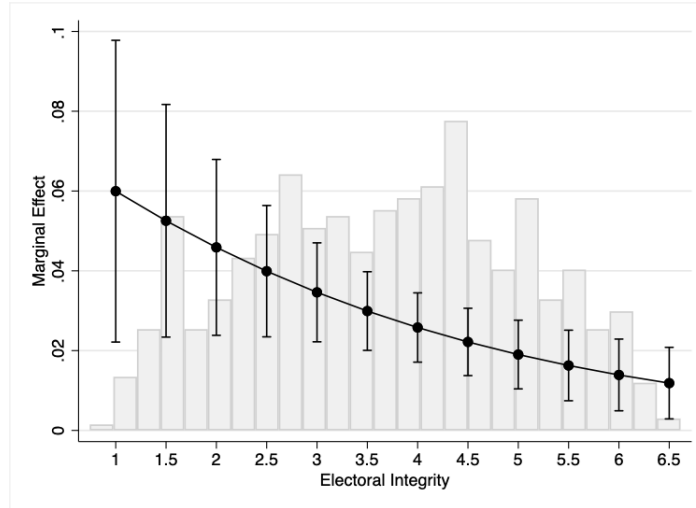
Table 2: Election Quality and Civil Conflict Onset

	(1) Without Free/Fair	(2) Rare Events	(3) Fixed Effects	(4) Presidential Election Years	(5) Excluding Unscheduled Elections	(6) Recursive Probit	(7) Conflict History Interaction
Presidential Election	0.17 (0.33)	1.34** (0.55)	1.32* (0.76)				1.34** (0.55)
Electoral Integrity, in Presidential Elections		-0.34** (0.15)	-0.31 (0.20)	-0.43* (0.23)	-0.54** (0.27)	-0.73*** (0.20)	-0.37** (0.18)
Conflict History	1.12*** (0.39)	1.13*** (0.17)	-0.51 (0.56)	0.99** (0.41)	1.22** (0.50)	0.39* (0.21)	1.11*** (0.18)
Electoral Integrity * Conflict History							0.04 (0.12)
Election Violence	1.01*** (0.30)	0.95*** (0.25)	1.12*** (0.34)	0.97** (0.41)	0.56 (0.57)	0.39* (0.20)	0.94*** (0.25)
Incumbent Lost	-0.14 (0.33)	0.07 (0.33)	0.30 (0.45)	-0.49 (0.63)	-0.20 (0.77)	-0.08 (0.28)	0.07 (0.33)
Leg. Election	0.04 (0.26)	0.03 (0.23)	-0.18 (0.27)				0.03 (0.23)
Excluded Population	1.28** (0.50)	1.28*** (0.32)	0.76 (1.01)	-0.39 (1.31)	-0.02 (1.51)	-0.67 (0.64)	1.28*** (0.32)
ln GDP per Capita	-0.43*** (0.16)	-0.42*** (0.08)	-0.39 (0.55)	0.36 (0.26)	0.30 (0.28)	0.19 (0.13)	-0.42*** (0.08)
log Population	0.33*** (0.10)	0.33*** (0.04)	1.62 (1.76)	0.14 (0.23)	0.07 (0.28)	0.11 (0.12)	0.33*** (0.04)
ln Democracy Aid	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)
Polity	0.03 (0.02)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.06** (0.03)	0.06 (0.06)	0.05 (0.07)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.03*** (0.01)
Peace Years	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.10)	-0.29** (0.11)	-0.13*** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.03)
Peace Years ²	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01** (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)	0.01** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Peace Years ³	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Observations	4728	4723	3044	512	398	496	4723

Notes: Dependent variable is civil conflict onset. Standard errors clustered by country in Models 1 and 3-7. Sample is non-OECD countries in Models 1-3 and 7 and presidential elections in non-OECD countries in Models 4-6. ***, **, * significant at .01, .05, .10, respectively.

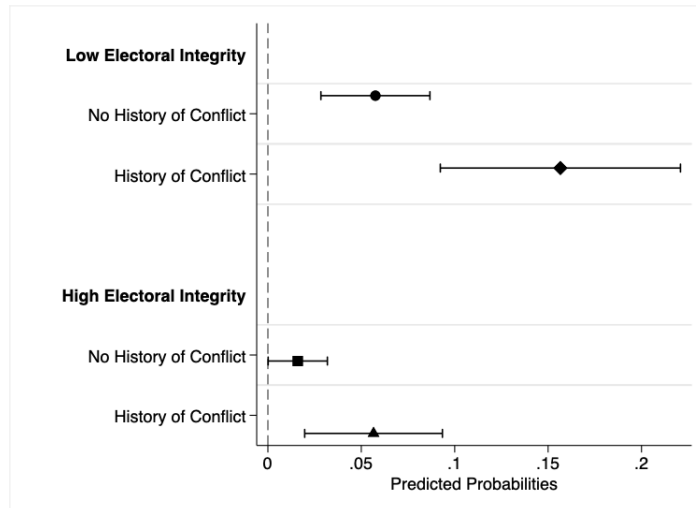
Figures

Figure 1: Marginal Effects of Presidential Election on Civil Conflict Onset from Table 2, Model 2



Notes: The histograms display the fraction of cases with each value of electoral integrity. 90% confidence intervals reported.

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Civil Conflict Onset from Table 2, Model 7



Notes: Elections of low electoral integrity are those ranking at the 10th percentile for V-Dem's *v2elrfair* measure, while elections of high electoral integrity fall at the 90th percentile for the same measure. 90% confidence intervals reported.