

## **Voting for Militants: Rebel Elections in Civil War**

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Conflict scholarship has increasingly focused on tactics rebel groups use to govern, particularly social service provision. We focus on another aspect of rebel governance: rebel groups conducting popular elections in wartime. We argue that rebel elections are a means through which rebels can strengthen their connections with local populations, display organizational capacity, and create an image of the group as democratically inclined but that there are risks to employing elections (such as logistical failures or publicized disconnect from civilians). We further argue that rebel groups best able to reap the benefits and to assume the risks posed by elections are those that are militarily strong, invest in other legitimacy-building tactics, and face nondemocratic states. Employing new data on elections in which local civilians vote to elect rebel representatives at various levels of organizational hierarchy, we find empirical support for these propositions.

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Armed rebel groups are often defined by the violence they use to fight against incumbent governments, but they also engage in a myriad of other activities, including a political exercise most closely associated with democratic governance: they hold popular elections. During a decades-long armed conflict against the state of Bangladesh, for example, the autonomy-seeking United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (PCJSS) organized village-level elections in which civilians voted directly for representatives of village councils (Gram Panchayat).<sup>1</sup> These elected councils maintained local order, arbitrated disputes, collected revenue, and provided some welfare services. It was through this elected leadership of the Gram Panchayat that the PCJSS ensured its authority reached down to ordinary tribal villagers in the remote Hill Tracts (Ali 1993, p. 185; Barua 2001, p. 107; Bertocci 1989, p. 163).

The PCJSS is not alone in its use of democratic practice. As it fought its way toward a violent takeover of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia organized popular elections for village councils in territories under its control (Kiernan 1985, p. 317). The Polisario, fighting for secession from Morocco, practiced a kind of "direct democracy" through mass assemblies in which people would vote (by show of hands) for delegates to the General People's Congress, the group's legislative body (Hodges 1983, p. 341). Clarke (2006) argues that democratic practice is a key part of Polisario's strategy to gain international favor. Yet many other rebel organizations eschew democratic process. Why do some armed rebel groups organize popular elections in the midst of a civil war?

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<sup>1</sup> The Gram Panchayat was part of a governance system the group established in its "liberated" areas.

Recent scholarship has made important advances in our understanding of rebel governance of civilians during conflict, especially as it pertains to social service provision (Cammett 2014, Heger and Jung 2017, Mampilly 2011, Stewart 2016). However, few works (apart from select case studies) recognize popular elections as an integral part of rebel groups' strategies of rebellion and governance. Although elections are a part of a governance process, they differ in important respects from rebel provision of public goods such as health services, schools, and garbage collection. Unlike these other activities, elections do not help meet civilians' immediate basic needs. Rebel leaders at various levels of an organizational hierarchy – village councils, rebel legislatures, rebel congresses, or rebel executives – could well be appointed rather than elected, and often are.

To our knowledge, this article presents the first systematic documentation and analysis of rebels' use of wartime elections. Whereas much of the rebel governance literature builds on earlier scholarship on state formation and statebuilding (e.g. Tilly 1975, 1985, Olson 1993), in this article we additionally draw on insights from the literature on autocratic institutions to develop an argument more specifically about rebel elections. We argue that rebel elections should be understood not as primarily democratic exercises among armed nonstate actors, but as a strategy of power and legitimacy maintenance and accumulation for rebel groups. By introducing an element of accountability and popular empowerment to their rule, elections can help bolster popular support for the rebel group while serving as a signal of the group's organizational strength, pro-citizen bent, and commitment to pursue a break from the incumbent state's governance (rather than merely preying on the local population). At the same time, organizing popular elections is a risky affair: popular preferences could diverge from those of the rebel elite, attempts at electoral manipulation could backfire, and electoral outcomes can introduce unanticipated mass-led changes to the

rebel movement. Both the ability to manage the risks inherent in wartime elections and the degree of benefit of using elections vary for different groups. Given this tradeoff, we argue that militarily stronger groups and those investing in other legitimacy-building activities will be best placed to manage such uncertainties of wartime elections. Moreover, rebels operating the nondemocratic contexts will see a greater return to such an investment because wartime elections create a stark contrast with existing state institutions.

We examine the determinants of rebel popular elections with a large-n analysis of new data on elections organized by rebel groups, and find clear evidence that strong rebel groups and those that engage in legitimacy-seeking behaviors (such as diplomacy and public good provision) invest in holding elections. Rebels facing nondemocratic states are also more likely to invest in elections. A key implication of these findings is that political initiatives, such as organizing popular elections, are not a necessarily a “weapon of the weak” used to substitute for a lack of military strength in rebel movements. Rather, it is the rebel groups that can manage the risks of wartime elections and benefit most from them that implement political projects aimed at building rebel-society relations.

Understanding the use of rebel popular elections is important for several reasons. During conflict, durable and positive links to the local population can allow rebels to withstand counterinsurgency effort by the state that might otherwise end rebellion (Staniland 2014). Civilian buy-in can also play an invaluable role in determining how war ends, as seen recently with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) peace process. Rebel popular elections may also impact the post-conflict transition. Many rebel groups transform into political parties after a peace deal, but the success of these transitions is varied. Rebels with “democratic” experience, as well as broad-based participatory support, are likely to have an advantage in electoral performance as a political party following conflict (Matanock 2017).

## What are Rebel Elections?

A growing literature examines rebel group transformation into political parties and participation in formal post-conflict electoral politics (Lyons 2016, Manning 2002, Matanock 2017, Soderberg Kovacs 2008). Few works, however, recognize that some rebel groups choose to organize elections *within their own movements* while they are still armed insurgent organizations in the midst of violent conflict. We define rebel popular elections as elections in which ordinary people vote for representatives of a rebel group at some level of a rebel organizational hierarchy during civil war. The direct participation of local people in the voting process distinguishes these elections from rebel elite elections in which a group of rebel delegates, such as a rebel council or rebel “politburo” in communist groups, votes for its leadership. In this article we study rebel popular elections not as discrete *events*, but as political *institutions* introduced by those with power.<sup>2</sup>

Rebel elections can take place at various levels of a rebel movement hierarchy, depending on its organizational structure. Along with the PCJSS in Bangladesh and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia mentioned above, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Uganda, and UNITA of Angola also held village elections for local rebel leaders (Connell 2001, 355; Kasfir 2005; James 2011, 101). Reference to rebel-organized elections serving as the first taste of the democratic franchise for local residents is striking in its recurrence among secondary sources. According to Kasfir (2005, 271), rebel elections enabled people in NRA territory to experience “the first democratic governments ever instituted in Ugandan villages.” Elections for the *poder popular*

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<sup>2</sup> This approach is consistent with a growing comparative literature on competitive authoritarianism (Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig 2017).

*local* (local popular power, or PPLs), established by the FMLN in Chalatenango in El Salvador around 1981, were “an experiment in popular democracy and political participation” (Pearce, quoted in Montgomery 1995, 120). One observer controversially calls the wartime village elections organized by the Khmer Rouge “the first free local elections in Khmer history” (Kiernan 1985, 317). In the ongoing Syrian conflict, opposition members established “a form of representative democracy” in some areas where the government had retreated, with residents voting for local council representatives in “the first free elections in Syria in over four decades” (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016, 69).<sup>3</sup>

While some of these local-level elections may have been fairly unsophisticated events, local representatives were linked to higher levels of power within a rebel organization and hence typically signaled significant organizational capability and planning on the part of the rebel movement. UNITA, for instance, was organized as follows: a Cell consisting of three to four members reported to a Village Committee, whose members were popularly elected. The Village Committee reported to the District Committee, which reported to the Regional Commissars (usually appointed by the top rebel leader), who in turn answered to the Central Committee whose members were selected by Party Congresses which were held

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<sup>3</sup> At times, local council elections were organized by local civilians rather than by the militant opposition. Nevertheless, “The Local Councils are completely connected with the opposition groups whether revolutionary or military” – meaning they are often an integral part of the Syrian armed opposition. See National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces website, <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/syrian-local-councils.html>.

every four years and the head of which was the rebel president and commander-in-chief (namely, Jonas Savimbi) (James 2011, 100-101).

In Zimbabwe, ZANU rebels convened ordinary villagers, “mainly at night,” for village committee elections. These popularly elected committees became the de facto judicial authorities in rebel-controlled territories, essentially displacing the formal district commissioners’ courts (Seidman 1983, 59). Other groups, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), instituted popular elections for the top leadership of the organization, including Dawud Ibsa, Chairman of the OLF, who was first elected to the executive committee in 1988. Still others, such as the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, held popular parliamentary elections soon after declaring independence in 1992, even as violent clashes with Azerbaijani forces continued (Panossian 2001).

Despite some characterizations of rebel elections as rare instances of wartime democratic experimentation by armed groups, it is important to recognize that across cases these elections are better described as involving a combination of voluntary and coerced participation on the part of the local people. The NRA may have granted Ugandans in its territory their first experience with village democracy, but in Nepal “the locals often had to be compelled to vote” in the Maoists’ local-level elections (Adhikari 2014, 121). After all, many of the organizations that instituted elections also ran parallel informal judicial systems in which punishment for noncompliance with rebel dictates could range from fines and being sent to labor camps to execution (Sharma 2004, p. 47; Seidman 1983, p. 59, see “During Conflict Justice” in this issue).

Even within NRA territory in Uganda, where we see frequent reference to elections as an exemplary case of wartime village democracy implemented by a rebel group, Kasfir (2005, p. 285) surmises that “most peasants probably felt an underlying sense of coercion”

since all activity was under rebel surveillance. Such accounts call into question the utility of the “democratic” label often attached to these elections. Elections are “free” when there is minimal fraud or intimidation of voters; they are “fair” when all candidates, be they incumbents or the opposition, enjoy an even playing field (Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 7). In this sense, we should expect variation in the degree of fairness across cases, but given that people are voting for representatives of a militant organization, these elections are likely to be compromised in the degree of freeness. However, even elections that fall short of the standards of “free and fair” can be beneficial political processes to the entity organizing them (Knutson, Nygard, and Wig 2017) .

### **Explaining Rebel Elections**

Why do some rebel groups hold popular wartime elections while others do not? As organizations fighting to seize state power, rebel groups typically need some popular base of support. They must find ways to entice cooperation and compliance while preventing defection (Kalyvas 2006, Kalyvas and Kocher 2007, Mampilly 2011, McLaughlin 2015). While violent coercion can be an effective tool toward this end, coercive methods are risky, they may not always work, or may even create popular backlash (Wood 2003, Arjona 2014, Stanton 2016). Meanwhile, rebel groups can accrue significant political and material benefits by simultaneously assuming the role of a ruler, claiming authority over territory, and meeting some of the basic needs of the community through the provision of public goods such as health services, education, dispute adjudication, local order, and security (Heger and Jung 2017, Mampilly 2011, Huang 2016b, Olson 1993). Rebel organizations such as the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), Hamas, the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM), and a number of others are known to have established fairly sophisticated administrative structures aimed



at civilian governance and to have achieved a rule that combined elements of coercion and consent (ibid).

Rebel civilian administration and service provision – or more broadly, rebel governance – can in turn serve the rebel groups’ broader wartime objectives. Effective rebel governance signals organizational coherence and cohesion, and hence suggests a broader base of popular support than groups that engage in less governance work (Heger and Jung 2017). Moreover, rebel governance can help create an image of the group as an entity worthy of and capable of managing state power by exhibiting concern for civilian welfare and ability to perform state-like functions (Flanigan 2008, Grynkewich 2008, Heger and Jung 2017, Mampilly 2011, Huang 2016b, Stewart 2016). Consequently, successful governance helps enhance rebel groups’ domestic and international credibility and legitimacy. Recent studies show that rebel groups use a number of means in efforts to achieve such legitimacy, from compliance with international humanitarian law (Fazal 2018, Stanton 2016, Jo 2015, Lasley and Thyne 2015) and the conduct of international diplomacy (Coggins 2015, Huang 2016a) to the strategic use of propaganda (Bob 2005). Likewise, rebel governance, while serving practical purposes such as meeting the people’s needs for welfare, order, and protection, can also boost the rebels’ legitimacy among a local population.

Though neglected in existing scholarship, rebel elections are a core component of rebel governance for a number of armed groups. By implementing popular elections, rebel groups can accrue key benefits. Popular wartime elections help signal the group’s organizational cohesion, capacity, political ambition, and respect for nonviolent political processes, as well as increase the rebel group’s local (and possibly international) legitimacy.

Rebel elections, however, are distinct from rebel provision of local order, security, and services in several important respects. Whereas the provision of security and social

services is aimed at meeting civilians' basic physical and material needs in wartime, rebel elections are aimed at addressing the issue of the *form and process* of governance. The degree of civilian inclusiveness in rebel political processes is a decision every rebel group must make in establishing a governance system (see "Explaining Variation in Rebel Political Institutions" in this issue). By choosing to deliver the franchise, no matter how local or rudimentary the process, rebels are granting civilians a political voice and a certain sense of empowerment, in many cases for the participants' first time.

This sense of popular empowerment (and thus the benefit of wartime elections for rebels) may be particularly pronounced in autocratic contexts where rebel elections create a stark contrast to the state's regime type, especially if state elections are nonexistent or highly manipulated. Rebel elections, in this sense, may come as a surprise to those under rebel rule: citizens may expect local rulers to deliver basic necessities such as order and welfare services, but may not anticipate receiving the right to vote in the midst of a war. In rebel-held areas of Syria, resistance groups instituted democratic elections precisely in order to set themselves apart from the Assad regime and demonstrate their commitment to pluralism and democracy (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016, p. 68-69, 73). Popular elections, then, go above and beyond the provision of services in imparting to civilians the idea that the rebel group seeks not merely local control, but also a degree of local consent, and hence can bring greater legitimacy benefits than could be obtained through service and security provision alone.

Rebel groups, of course, are not the only actors with significant coercive capacity to install elections as part of governance. Recent scholarship on authoritarianism finds that autocratic regimes – which, like rebel organizations, seek to secure their positions of power and obtain compliance and cooperation from the populace – regularly install such staple institutions of democracy as political parties, legislatures, and even popular elections as

instruments of their rule (Gerschewski 2011, Morlino 2009, Schedler 2015).<sup>4</sup> Introducing nominally democratic institutions allows autocrats to cater to popular interests, create the trappings of democracy (with or without its substance), manage potential opposition, gain information about its supporters and opponents, devolve power, signal authority, and extend control over citizens, all without ceding too much power or appearing weak. In short, these institutions help bolster autocrats' rule and increase their survival prospects (Magaloni 2006, Blaydes 2010, Brownlee 2007, Gandhi 2008, Svobik 2012, Miller 2015, Manion 2015). Internationally, adopting elections can be a strategic move by an autocrat aimed at attracting international aid or trade (Hyde, 2011; Levitsky and Way 2010).

These insights serve as a foundation for an understanding of rebel elections as a strategic effort by the rebels to strengthen their hold on power while also boosting their legitimacy. As with autocratic elections, rebel elections help the rebel group to assert its authority and extend control over a population while lending the rebels the appearance of being democratically inclined. Where the incumbent regime is autocratic and citizens have little or no experience with electoral politics, rebel introduction of elections can send a strong message that the rebel group is more democratic, liberal, or progressive than the state.

Furthermore, by granting local citizens a voice in rebel governance, rebel elections may allow the people to feel represented in and connected to the broader rebel movement, hence inspiring a sense of membership and ownership in a cause greater than their more

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<sup>4</sup> According to Miller (2015, p. 1527), about two-thirds of autocracies over the last two decades have allowed multiparty elections. These regimes are considered autocratic to the extent that they manipulate elections to below democratic standards (Miller 2015, p. 1530; see also Schedler 2013).

parochial or quotidian concerns.<sup>5</sup> Relatedly, rebel elections serve the practical benefit of allowing the rebel leadership to devolve power to lower levels of decision-making and hence extend the organization's reach to wider swaths of the local populace. For instance, by having elected representatives at the village level and linking the village delegates to the chain of command reaching to the top echelons, the rebel organization can better manage local affairs and ensure local compliance and support.

The devolution of power to the lower levels can also increase organizational efficiency. As a representative of a Kurdish commune in northern Syria – where “new and sometimes radical alternatives to totalitarianism were being developed” by the Kurdish opposition amidst the conflict – explained, local-level communes “resolve problems quickly and early.... Some jobs can be done in five minutes, but if you send it to the state, it gets caught in a bureaucracy” (quoted in Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016, p. 74).<sup>6</sup> By putting lower-level representatives in charge of local affairs, the top rebel leadership can escape accountability over local-level issues concerning the rebel group and hence ensure security of its rule. The strengthening of civilians' ties to the rebel group, in turn, enables the latter to

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<sup>5</sup> As in autocratic regimes, rebel elections can serve important informational functions: they help rebel leaders gauge degrees of popular support and compliance with their rule, as well as popular interests and potential opposition (Malesky and Schuler 2011). For rulers, elections enhance what James Scott calls the “legibility” of a population (Slater 2008).

<sup>6</sup> On elections in Syria's Kurdish territories, where many Kurds voted for the first time in late 2017, see Rodi Said, “Syrians Vote in Kurdish-led Regions of North,” Reuters, September 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/syrians-vote-in-kurdish-led-regions-of-north-idUSKCN1BX1PY>.

further exert its authority over the former and build up local support that is essential for resisting counter-insurgency and for building stronger governance institutions.

As scholars of autocracy have long asserted, the granting of “democratic” institutions in limited forms ironically has the benefit of strengthening autocrats’ overall power. Seen in this light, rebel elections do not necessarily represent incipient wartime democracy but instead a classic instance of the strategic use of a political institution by actors who seek to strengthen and legitimate their rule.

However, holding popular elections is not without risks. By introducing an element of popular accountability, elections introduce a degree of uncertainty to the ruling regime (Schedler 2013). There is, first, uncertainty over the electoral *process*. Elections could be poorly implemented and fail altogether, hence weakening rather than strengthening the rebel group in the eyes of local and international audiences. Any attempts at electoral manipulation could become exposed to the voters, which can backfire on rebel efforts to shore up popular support.

Second, there is uncertainty over the electoral *outcome*. Election outcomes might misalign with the interests of the rebel leadership. Such electoral outcomes could also disrupt group cohesion. Indeed, there is a tradeoff in which any attempt at electoral manipulation aimed at ensuring electoral success leads to a decrease in the informational benefits of holding elections, a tradeoff which Malesky and Schuler (2011) call the Dictator’s Electoral Dilemma and which is equally applicable to rebel elections. The successful implementation of wartime elections thus requires a strong organization that can both absorb the risks and manage the uncertainties and tradeoffs associated with the electoral process and outcome.

Nevertheless, we should not overstate the danger elections pose to powerholders (Brownlee 2007, p. 8), especially when the latter are armed rebel rulers who can fairly easily

do away with the electoral project altogether (indeed, many rebel groups never hold elections) or manipulate the electoral procedure so as to engineer desired outcomes and enforce those outcomes with coercive power.

Elections can boost regime legitimacy even when they are far from free and fair (Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig 2017, p. 103). Knowing this, rebel groups are likely to take steps to minimize the risks of holding elections while ensuring control over the process up to a point at which people will still view it as acceptable, legitimate, or empowering. Nor should we stretch the analogy between autocratic and rebel elections too far. There are notable differences between elections implemented by a state and a nonstate organization. In a rebel election, for instance, there may not be a real “opposition” as such; all electoral candidates are members of the same organization, and hence any loss of votes will be felt more at the individual, rather than the organizational, level—political parties can lose autocratic elections but rebel groups cannot lose rebel elections.

Moreover, the candidates themselves may be preselected by the rebel group, so that people may vote in a competitive election but there may be few substantive differences between the candidates. “Campaigning” on the part of electoral candidates may be minimal or nonexistent, especially in lower-level elections, so that the extent to which people are informed about their electoral choices may be limited. Finally, if elections are held in an open forum, as in the elections organized by Polisario mentioned above in which people voted by show of hands, this would mark a distinctive difference with autocratic elections in which people vote by secret ballot, and could potentially compromise the freeness of the elections. Despite these caveats, insights about elections in autocracies help illuminate the strategic logic of rebel elections in the ways discussed above. As in autocratic elections, rebel

elections feature both control and uncertainty while popular participation likely evokes both fear and anticipation.

Given this tradeoff between the benefits of holding wartime elections and the risks of doing so, rebel groups must evaluate and weigh the benefits of using them. We center here on a set of characteristics that should impact the ability and willingness of rebels to bear these risks and that impact the likely benefits. First, introducing wartime popular elections both requires and reflects organizational capacity – groups will not hold elections unless they are confident that they could both establish the electoral process and either inspire or coerce popular participation in that process. As such, rebels with greater coercive capacity, material resources, and organizational strength should be more willing and able to weather the risks and uncertainties associated with the introduction of an electoral process. Militarily stronger rebel groups are those that can benefit from a devolution of power to lower levels of the group hierarchy that local-level elections facilitate.

H1: Militarily stronger rebel groups are more likely to hold wartime popular elections.

Second, rebel groups may also be investing in other strategies for maintaining legitimacy, which can inure them to the risks inherent in wartime elections. This legitimacy can be with the local population (Mampilly 2011), or with the broader international community (Coggins 2015). Groups that have engaged in other forms of legitimacy-seeking behavior should also be more willing to hold elections as part of their overall strategy.

H2: Rebel groups that engage in legitimacy-seeking behavior are more likely to hold wartime popular elections.

Finally, the potential benefits of investing in electoral institutions will vary across conflicts. We center here on the degree to which such institutions allow rebels to draw a contrast with the existing state institutions. While the use of wartime elections will make groups seem democratically inclined in any context, the power of such identification is not equal in all situations. Specifically, rebels that face democratic states may have little to gain by appearing pro-democracy. In contrast, such identification may play a powerful role in gaining international and local support for rebels that face nondemocratic states. Rebel groups in more autocratic contexts should have greater incentives to use elections than groups in less autocratic contexts.

H3: Rebel groups are more likely to hold elections in autocratic contexts than in democratic contexts.

### **Empirical Analyses: Which Rebels Hold Elections?**

We examine the determinants of rebel popular elections empirically with a new dataset of election use by rebels during conflict. This dataset builds on original rebel election data from the Rebel Governance Dataset (Huang 2016b), data on rebel leadership (Cunningham and Sawyer 2017), and the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) dataset of



internal conflicts that reach a yearly 25 battle-death threshold.<sup>7</sup> The dataset covers UCDP rebel groups in conflicts active between 1989 and 2011. We include dyad years prior to 1989 if the war was still ongoing as of 1989. The unit of analysis is the rebel-group dyad year.

### *Measuring Rebel Elections*

Wartime rebel elections are an institution of popular accountability in the rebel group during civil conflict. This includes popular elections of the top rebel leader, other central leadership positions, and seats in rebel “legislatures” as well as popular elections for rebel representatives at lower levels of a rebel organization such as regional, town, and village councils. Data on the election of rebel group leaders and other forms of rebel elections was coded leveraging multiple secondary academic and news sources. In order to be coded as a rebel group that employs elections, there had to be indications of one or more rebel-organized elections for a rebel representative *and* the involvement of ordinary people in that process (see Huang 2016b, p. 57).

For example, the head of the All Bodo Student Union, Upendra Nath Brahma, was elected to lead the group’s continued conflict against the Indian government in 1986 (Sinha 2007). The SPLM-N instituted elections for both the group’s “Chairperson” and for the National Liberation Council (NLC), which functions as the group’s governing body.<sup>8</sup> Rebel groups such as UNITA and the Khmer Rouge organized elections for village-level

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<sup>7</sup> We repeated all analyses below restricting the sample to only disputes that generated 1,000 battle-deaths total, and the findings on the effect on elections are similar to the presented models.

<sup>8</sup> The Constitution of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, p. 12.

representatives of the rebel group. The details of these elections, as well as the depth of information available about them, varies. In some instances, we found information about the percentage of votes received by rebel leaders, such as Eduard Kokoity's election to lead the breakaway South Ossetia territory in 2001 where he won with 53% of the popular vote (Illarianov 2009). The largest civilian selectorate we had clear information on was approximately 700,000 people, voting for Meles Zenawi in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in 1989.

For cases in which multiple rebel groups fought against the state, elections were coded for the main rebel group in that conflict. Rebel groups that held one (or more) elections at some point during the conflict period were coded as one; rebel groups that did not hold elections during the conflict period were coded as zero.<sup>9</sup> See Appendix Section B for additional coding information on rebel groups that held elections during civil conflict. There are 20 conflicts in the dataset in which rebels held elections, which comprise approximately 15% of the disputes in the sample. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of these conflicts with elections.

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Figure 1 here

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<sup>9</sup> As information on larger, more powerful rebel groups is more likely to be recorded and published than for smaller rebel groups, we do not include a count of the number of elections groups held during their conflict tenure. Doing so would likely bias the results in favor of our main hypothesis concerning rebel strength (H1).

Wartime elections occurred in most regions of the world except North America. Table 1 shows the regional distribution of observations that include a rebel group that held elections.

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Table 1 here

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Figure 2 shows over time variation in active conflict where the rebels employ elections. The highest number of conflicts that feature rebel wartime elections occurred just after the end of the Cold War.

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Figure 2 here

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Rebel groups that invest in electoral processes have similar average duration – about 9 years for groups with no rebel elections, about 11 years for those with rebel wartime elections.

#### *Which Rebels Use Elections?*

H1 suggests that rebel elections are most likely to be organized by militarily strong rebel groups that can engage in the risk-return tradeoff involved in the electoral process. To measure the military strength of the rebels, we use data on the number of rebel troops (log

transformed) coded from the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.<sup>10</sup> The mean number of rebel troops in our data is approximately 8,809, with 10 being the minimum number of reported rebel troops in a dyad-year and 194,000, the maximum number of reported rebel troops in our dataset.

In H2, we hypothesize that rebels who pursue other legitimacy-seeking practices to signal their authority and legitimacy may be inured to the risks of election and thus are more likely to hold wartime elections. We include a dichotomous measure of rebel diplomacy, coded as one if the rebel group established offices overseas, sent emissaries abroad, or established a foreign affairs wing within its organization. International diplomacy is a political tactic of rebellion employed by rebel groups that seek domestic and international legitimacy which, if attained, can help transform the armed group into a political body that is seen to be capable of assuming state power (Huang 2016a). Rebel groups engaged in international diplomacy in about 39 percent of conflicts.

Our third hypothesis suggests that the contrast between democratic practice and the incumbent state's institutions will, in part, determine how useful wartime elections will be for rebels. Rebels should be more likely to hold elections in autocratic states rather than democratic states because the benefits of elections are greater in the former, allowing rebels to proffer themselves as an alternative to the state. We measure democracy as a score of seven or greater on the Polity2 score from the Polity IV data (Gleditsch 2013). In approximately 28 percent of all dyad-years, rebels fight against a democratic state.

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<sup>10</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Date of retrieval: 09/01/01 - 14/11/07) UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia: [www.ucdp.uu.se/database](http://www.ucdp.uu.se/database), Uppsala University. Using the ratio of rebel to state troop forces does not change the results of the models. See Appendix Table 3.

In addition to the factors included to evaluate H1 – H3, we include a set of covariates likely to impact both the decision to hold elections and our main independent variables: rebel strength, diplomacy, and state regime type. First, we include several variables capturing characteristics of rebel groups. We anticipate that the political objective of the rebel group – whether the rebels are fighting specifically for greater self-determination or not – may impact the likelihood of the rebels holding elections. Groups seeking self-determination (or independence) may be inclined to use elections to demonstrate that they would become a democratic country if they achieve independence. We capture this with a dichotomous measure of autonomy-seeking or secessionist conflict (from Fortna and Huang 2012), coded as 1 if the conflict was characterized as a fight for territorial autonomy or secession. Rebels are fighting for greater self-determination in approximately 35 percent of all conflicts in our data.

Groups that have sustained local territorial control may be more likely to hold elections as they have demonstrated some degree of autonomy from the state already; conversely, if elections are a legitimacy-seeking signal, groups that have achieved local territorial autonomy may not perceive elections as a necessary means for garnering local buy-in. We include a dichotomous measure of territorial control is coded from the Nonstate Actor Dataset v3.4 (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013). Rebels hold territorial control in approximately 26 percent of all conflict years in our data.

Others have suggested that rebel provision of public services can play a role in creating local legitimacy (Heger and Jung 2017). Such groups may also be more likely to see a benefit to hold elections for the reasons we have proposed here. As argued above, holding elections confers similar benefits to rebel groups as providing other social services such as education and medical care, but elections go beyond such services in signaling the group's

intent to rule with popular consent and legitimacy. It is possible, then, that groups that provide other social services are also more likely to organize elections. We include a variable capturing rebel provision of either education (through the creation of rebel schools) or health services (through the creation of rebel health service facilities), or humanitarian aid (from Huang 2016b).

Recent studies show that rebel ideology is often an important determinant of rebel behavior (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, Wood and Thomas 2017). Following Wood and Thomas (2017) and using their data, we control for rebel groups espousing a leftist (Marxist-, Leninist-, or Maoist-inspired) ideology. On the one hand, leftists often proclaim a “popular” revolutionary struggle and seek civilian involvement in rebel administration and governance. On the other hand, many leftists also adhere to the Leninist principle of “democratic centralism” that is less “democratic” and more “centrist,” involving top-down administration of rebel orders.

Studies also suggest rebel groups with access to abundant profits from natural resources have fewer incentives to establish strong ties with civilians through governance work (e.g. Weinstein 2007). We thus control for rebel dependence on profits from natural resources (from Huang 2016b).

We expect that international intervention in the conflict could also impact whether or not the group holds elections. Interventions could affect rebel incentives regarding their links to civilian populations, or shape rebels’ military calculus in a way that would affect their wartime political strategies (e.g. Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012). We include a measure of direct military intervention in the civil conflict (Cunningham 2010) as well as other types of foreign intervention in the form of external support to the rebels or the state coded from the

UCDP External Support Dataset.<sup>11</sup> External support is provided to the state in approximately 48 percent of all conflict years and is provided to the rebels in approximately 43 percent of all conflict years.

Finally, we run a model with a set of covariates measuring state characteristics: the size of the state's army (yearly count of troops log transformed),<sup>12</sup> a measure of ethnic fractionalization,<sup>13</sup> state dependence on natural resource rents,<sup>14</sup> the size of the state's population (natural log transformed),<sup>15</sup> and the country's GDP per capita (natural log transformed).<sup>16</sup> We include a measure of state troops (log transformed) to account for the relative strength of the rebel opposition. Ethnically fractionalized countries may be more likely to have rebels fighting along ethnic lines, making popular elections across these divides more risky and less likely to be pursued by weaker rebels. Conversely, richer, more populous states may provide rebels with a greater potential support base and wealth, potentially making these rebels stronger than those in other countries, and thus, more able to take on the risk of holding elections. See Appendix Table 2 for descriptive statistics.

Table 2 reports the results of a logistic model of wartime rebel elections.

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<sup>11</sup> This measure includes the types: financial, troops, weapons, material/logistic, military/intelligence, material, training/expertise, and/or access to territory.

<sup>12</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Date of retrieval: 09/01/01 - 14/11/07) UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia: [www.ucdp.uu.se/database](http://www.ucdp.uu.se/database), Uppsala University.

<sup>13</sup> Data from Fearon 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Data from Huang 2016b.

<sup>15</sup> Data from World Bank. World Development Indicators.

<sup>16</sup> Data from World Bank. World Development Indicators.

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Table 2 here

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These analyses demonstrate consistent support for our hypothesis (H1) that stronger rebels are more likely to hold popular elections: the coefficient on rebel troop strength is positive and statistically significant across all models while controlling for alternative rebel group, conflict, state, and international factors that might impact why groups would hold elections. Substantively, increasing the log of rebel troops from the first to the third quartile<sup>17</sup> on average increases the probability of rebel elections from approximately 13.62 percent to over 22.49 percent ( $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>18</sup> Figure 3 displays the predicted probability of rebel elections by changes in the log of rebel troops (from the approximate minimum to the approximate maximum value).

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Figure 3 here

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<sup>17</sup> This is a change from approximately 6.91 to 9.21 in the log of rebel troops.

<sup>18</sup> We calculate predicted probabilities using the observed values approach (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013) and regressing rebel elections on the list of covariates reported in Table 1 Model 4.



Moreover, rebels that face militarily stronger states are less likely to hold elections. An increase in state troops (logged) from the first to the third quartile<sup>19</sup> decreases the mean predicted probability of rebel elections from approximately 22 and a half percent to 16 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Consistent with H2 we find evidence that groups engaging in other legitimacy seeking behaviors (e.g., rebel diplomacy) are significantly more likely to hold rebel elections during conflict. On average, rebels with diplomatic operations overseas are approximately 25 percentage points more likely to also hold elections: an increase from approximately 10.99 percent to 35.94 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ). It may be the case that rebel organizations differ according to type; elections are one part of a broader package of legitimacy-seeking behaviors that are instituted by groups seeking to establish themselves as an alternative political authority to the state. Similarly, groups that engage in public goods or social service provision in the form of education, health care, or humanitarian assistance are significantly more likely to hold elections. Engaging in public goods or social service provision increases the mean predicted probability of elections from approximately 10 percent to over 40 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In Model 4, which includes state-level characteristics, we find support for H3 – rebels operating in nondemocratic context are more likely to use elections. In democracies, the narrative of rebel legitimacy may be less compelling as rebels fight a state whose authority rests on popular support. On average, rebels fighting in a democratic state are approximately 12 percentage points less likely to hold elections, a decrease from approximately 24 percent in nondemocracies to 12 percent in democracies ( $p < 0.05$ ).

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<sup>19</sup> This is a change from approximately 10.60 to 12.50.

The control variables also show several robust findings. Rebels are also less likely to hold elections when fighting a state that receives external support: the mean predicted probability of elections decreases by approximately 21 percentage points, from approximately 34 percent to 13 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, rebels are less likely to hold elections when states are dependent on natural resources. The mean predicted probability of elections decreases from approximately 35 percent to approximately 11 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ). One interpretation is that states that receive external support have arguably achieved some degree of international legitimacy in their fight against the rebels, as demonstrated by the foreign support on their behalf in the conflict. Alternatively, these findings may reflect state-level opportunism. When states receive an influx of money from either an external patron or natural resources, rebels may have greater incentive to engage in predatory behavior and seize control of state wealth and fewer incentives to engage in rebel governance.

The converse is not necessarily true of rebels; we find some evidence (Model 4) that all else equal, rebels that have access to natural resource wealth are more likely to hold elections. Rebels with natural resource wealth are approximately 14 percentage points more likely to hold elections, an increase from approximately 16 percent to over 30 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ). This mirrors our main result concerning rebel strength (H1): rebels with greater resources, all else equal, are then able to engage in governance activities including holding elections.

Rebel ideology also seems to play some role in the likelihood of holding elections. All else equal, we find some evidence (Model 4) that leftist rebels are less likely to hold elections than other rebels, by approximately 18 percentage points, a decrease in the mean predicted probability of elections from approximately 28 percent to approximately 10 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ); although, this effect is not consistent across model specifications. In fact,

the sign on the effect reverses from positive (Models 1-3) to negative (Model 4) when we include state-level covariates such as democracy.

The models also suggest that ethnic tensions within a state may be negatively associated with the likelihood of rebel elections. Ethnically fractionalized countries are significantly less likely to have rebels that hold elections. As the level of ethnic fractionalization in a state increases from the first to the third quartile,<sup>20</sup> the mean predicted probability of rebel elections decreases by approximately 21 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ), from approximately 31 percent to 10 percent. The risk of fractionalization that elections incur may be greater in societies that are divided along ethnic lines. Richer states, conversely, are more likely to have rebels that hold elections: an increase in the (natural log) of the country's GDP per capita from the first to the third quartile<sup>21</sup> increases the mean predicted probability of rebel elections from approximately 16 percent to 24 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Table 3 provides a comparison of the percent change in the predicted probability of rebel elections based on Model 4 of Table 2.

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Table 3 here

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<sup>20</sup> This is a change on the ethnic fractionalization scale from approximately 0.43 to 0.77.

<sup>21</sup> This is a change from approximately 6.72 to 8.10.

### ***Endogeneity Concerns***

The results of our statistical analysis provide consistent and robust empirical evidence for the logic of our argument that stronger rebels seeking to sustain popular legitimacy and support are more likely to hold elections. Yet, a factor like military strength (which typically does not exhibit much temporal variation) may be endogenously related to wartime elections, such that elections lead to strength (reverse causality) or an external factors leads to both (omitted variable bias). As noted in the scholarship on the use of democratic institutions by autocracies, the selective use of democratic processes such as elections can legitimize the group in power and engender support for the regime (Gerschewski 2011; Morlino 2009; Schedler 2015). However, rebel groups that are stronger likely also vary in significant ways beyond what we can account for with our covariates. We address these issues using a nonparametric matching procedure, specifically Coarsened Exact Matching, designed to balance the distribution of the covariates across rebel groups, reducing the statistical bias of the estimates that occurs as a result of omitted variable bias and potential endogeneity (Iacus, King, and Porro 2011).<sup>22</sup> The results of hypotheses one remain unchanged after statistically addressing these issues: stronger rebel groups are significantly more likely to hold rebel elections than relatively weak rebels. We describe the procedure and the results more fully below.

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<sup>22</sup> See Miller (2013) for a discussion on the problematic use of matching procedures.

Although estimation of the coefficients should be less biased using matching procedures than without, there is the potential for estimation bias due to imbalance on the unobservables an inherent issue to observational data that matching procedures cannot correct (Sekhon 2009). For this reason, we employ several statistical modeling approaches.

### *Coarsened Exact Matching Models*

We employ a Coarsened Exact Matching algorithm developed by Blackwell, Iacus, King and Porro (2009), and further enumerated by Iacus, King and Porro (2011), which improves the estimation of causal effects by statistically reducing imbalance between rebel groups to more closely resemble “true” experimental conditions. Coarsened Exact Matching is a monotonic imbalance reduction method for matching in which the difference between treatment and nontreatment groups is reduced ex-ante to reduce estimation bias. As such, the Coarsened Exact Matching procedure is likely more robust to measurement error (Iacus, King, and Porro 2011); after correcting for this imbalance with the Coarsened Exact Matching algorithm, the empirical distributions of the covariates in stronger and weaker rebel groups, for example, are more analogous, and we can then estimate our coefficients using the same statistical modeling procedure as before.<sup>23</sup>

The estimation of overall imbalance, or the  $\mathcal{L}_1$  statistic defined by Iacus, King, and Porro (2008) as a measure of global imbalance, indicates that pre-matching, stronger rebel groups differ from weaker rebel groups, as expected.<sup>24</sup> Larger values on the  $\mathcal{L}_1$  statistic

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<sup>23</sup> After coarsening, differences in means tests would be sufficient (Iacus, King, and Porro 2008); however, it may be interesting to estimate the effects of the covariates after correcting for treatment imbalance, as in this case.

<sup>24</sup> Where stronger rebels are those defined by the balance of rebel to state troops as being greater than or equal to one and weaker rebels are those where the balance of rebel to state troops are less than one. Using other causal inference models produce similar results including causal inference modeling using an inverse probability weighting (IPW) estimator,

indicate greater imbalance between stronger and weaker rebel groups. We employed the characteristics of the rebel groups reported in Table 2 above to apply the coarsening exact matching algorithm, which then determines matches based on these characteristics in the data and passes uncoarsened data from observations in order to correct for bias. In particular, employing this coarsened exact matching procedure decreases the estimate of overall imbalance between these two groups - relatively stronger and relatively weaker rebels - from approximately 0.122 to less than 0.00001, indicating that the coarsening procedure reduced sample imbalance. We report the coefficients of the logistic model after employing the coarsened exact matching procedure in Table 4 below.

In Model 1 of Table 4, we report the effect of rebel strength modeled without the covariates used in the CEM algorithm, namely rebel group characteristics which we find to vary between strong and weak rebels; in Model 2 of Table 4 we report these, as well, in order to examine our additional hypotheses (H2-H3). Consistent across modeling specifications, stronger rebels are significantly more likely to hold rebel elections.

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Table 4 here

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the IPW with regression adjustment estimator, and the augmented IPW (AIPW) estimator, all of which are designed to account for estimation bias in observational data. Across these models, relatively strong rebels are significantly more likely to hold wartime elections.

Moreover, we see similar effects across the covariates as found in the logistic model of rebel elections reported in Table 1. Rebel diplomacy and public goods/service provision are positively associated as is rebel access to natural resources. Controlling for differences in rebel group, state and international factors, leftist rebel groups are less likely to hold elections. Several state level variables are again negatively associated with rebel elections. All else equal, democratic states, resource dependent states, states that receive external support, and states that are fractionalized along ethnic lines are less likely to have rebels that hold elections; in addition, these results now suggest that states that are wealthier are less likely to hold elections, the opposite of what we found using logistic analysis alone (Table 2 Model 4). This series of analyses, however, provides consistent evidence that militarily stronger rebels are more likely to engage in rebel governance, particularly by holding elections. Moreover, these rebels are also likely to engage in other governance activities at home and abroad, including public goods/social service provision as well as overseas diplomatic operations.

## **Conclusion**

Rebel groups often maintain complex relationships with civilians in their milieu. This article provides a novel look at the role of rebels' wartime political projects in civil wars. We argue that rebels use popular elections for a number of reasons—they can bolster popular support and legitimacy, signal the group's strength, and show a commitment to govern better than the incumbent state—but that the decision to use elections is a risk-return tradeoff. Elections can provide these benefits, but they also create risk: elections can introduce uncertainty, reveal misalignment of interests between civilians and the rebel leadership, and weaken the group's legitimacy through electoral failure. Given this tradeoff, we argue that strong rebels and those that are investing in legitimacy in other ways will be

best able to undertake the risks associated with holding popular elections. Moreover, taking the risk to hold wartime elections will be more worthwhile for rebels in nondemocratic states where elections can serve to highlight differences between rebel actors in nondemocratic states. We find substantial empirical support for these propositions.

Our findings suggest rebel groups' political strategies, such as the holding of popular elections, are tightly connected to their capacity and other governance behaviors. Future research should further explore the interplay between the military and political aspects of violent rebellion, as well as how different facets of rebel governance operate together or in isolation. Studies should examine other ways through which the military and governance dynamics of conflict affect rebel groups' political strategies, as well as how rebels' political choices may affect battlefield outcomes.



## Tables and Figures

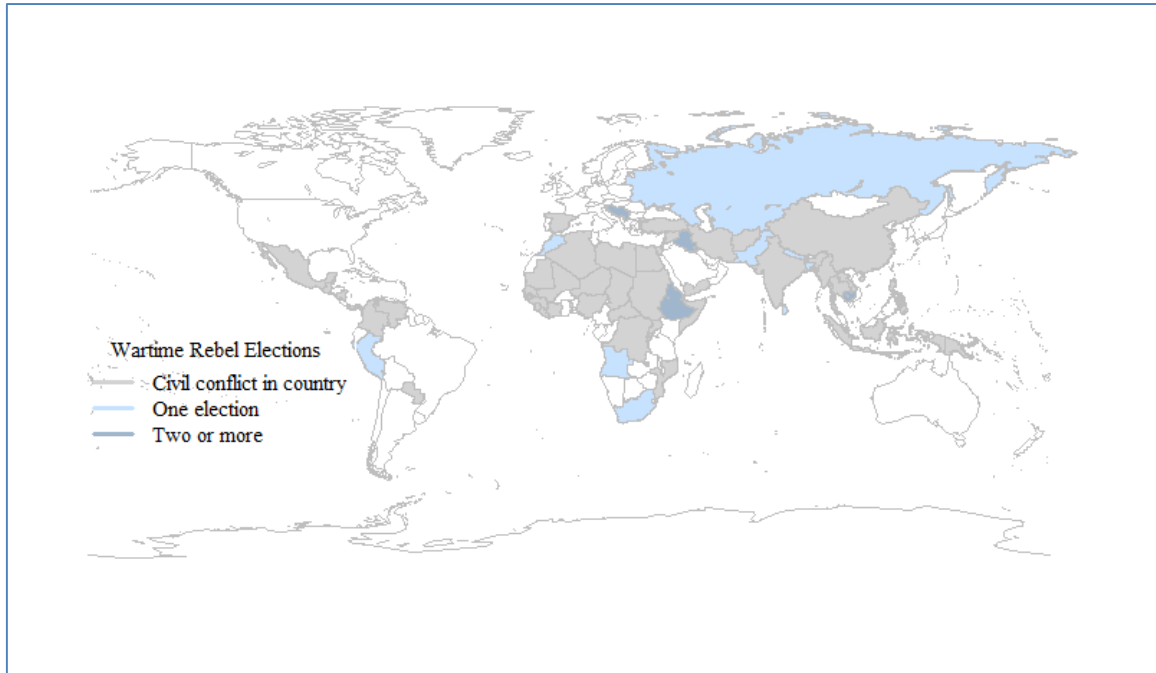


Figure 1. Wartime Rebel Elections by Country

Table 1. Regional distribution of observations

Region	Election user-year observations
Africa	22 (6%)
Americas	22 (27%)
Asia	41 (10%)
Europe	24 (36%)
Middle East	12 (9%)

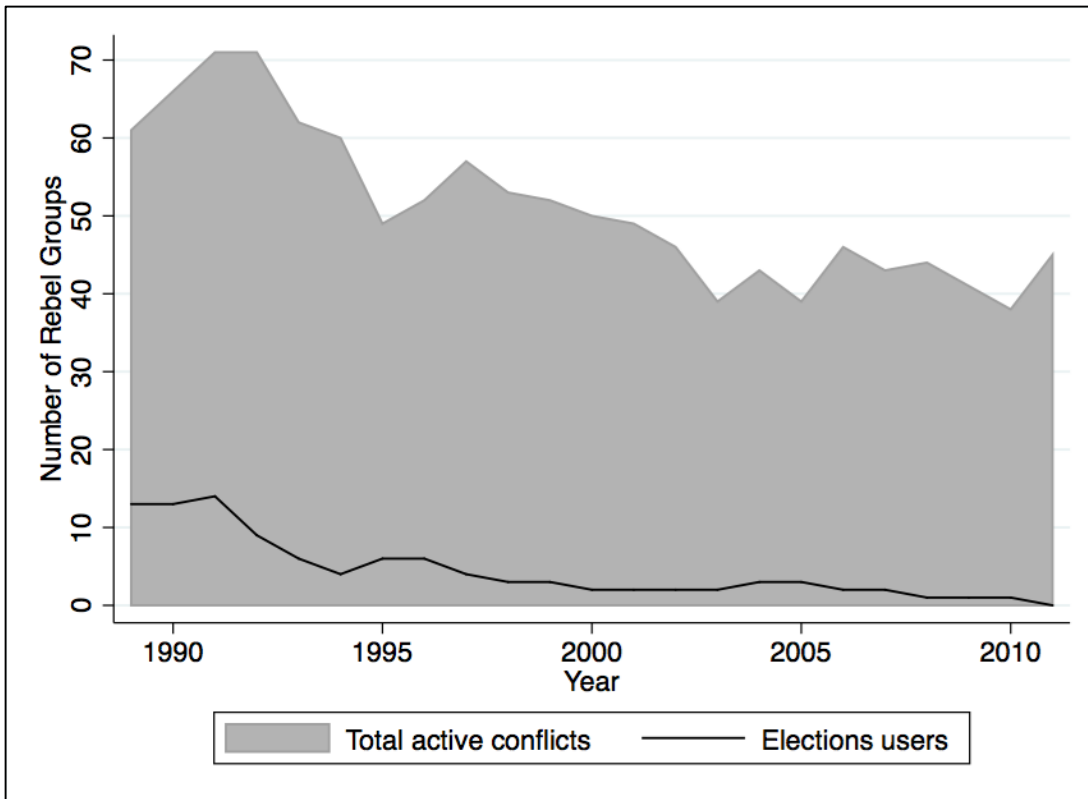


Figure 2. Active Conflicts with Rebels that Employ Elections

Table 2. Logistic Model of Wartime Rebel Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Elections	Elections	Elections	Elections
Log(Troop size – Rebels)	0.391*** (0.0719)	0.395*** (0.0727)	0.588*** (0.0972)	0.449*** (0.121)
Log(Troop size – State)	0.0903 (0.0859)	0.0761 (0.0872)	-0.0331 (0.0916)	-0.421** (0.170)
Diplomacy	1.221*** (0.238)	1.216*** (0.238)	1.383*** (0.254)	2.794*** (0.686)
Public goods/service provision	-0.0647 (0.216)	-0.0516 (0.217)	-0.233 (0.241)	1.718*** (0.617)
Natural resource dependence	0.647** (0.273)	0.683** (0.277)	0.711*** (0.254)	3.181*** (0.751)
Territory	-0.287 (0.227)	-0.294 (0.227)	-0.381 (0.263)	0.540 (0.382)
Leftist	0.993*** (0.196)	1.020*** (0.197)	1.268*** (0.231)	-2.944** (1.229)
Secessionist		1.278 (0.880)	1.189 (1.150)	0.397 (0.770)
Intervention			-0.310 (0.396)	-0.785** (0.388)
External support - State			-1.656*** (0.232)	-2.227*** (0.388)
External support - Rebels			-0.225 (0.253)	-0.336 (0.383)
Democracy				-2.845*** (0.649)
Natural resource dependence - State				-1.409** (0.554)
Ethnic fractionalization				-7.006*** (2.101)
Ln(Population)				0.227* (0.127)
Ln(GDPpc)				0.663** (0.282)
Constant	-6.906*** (1.113)	-6.842*** (1.121)	-6.273*** (1.159)	-4.610 (2.982)
Observations	681	681	681	520

Reporting logistic coefficients and robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

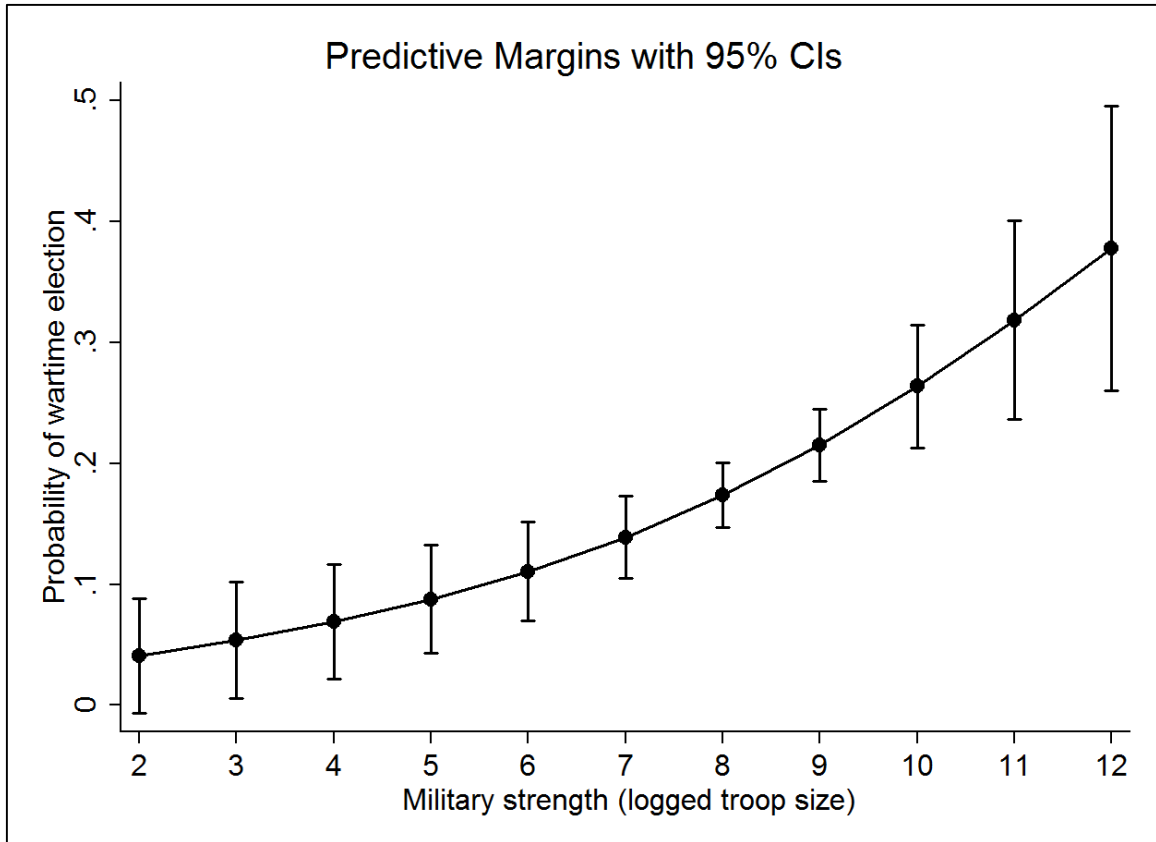


Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Rebel Elections by log of Rebel Troops

Table 3. Percent Change in Predicted Probability of Rebel Elections<sup>25</sup>

Variables	Value change	Percent change
log(Troop size – Rebels) (H1)	1st to 3rd quartile	65%
Diplomacy (H2)	no to yes	227%
Democracy (H3)	no to yes	-50%
log(Troop size – State)	1st to 3rd quartile	-30%
Public goods/service provision	no to yes	319%
Natural resources – Rebels	no to yes	92%
Leftist	no to yes	-65%
Intervention	no to yes	-29%
External support to state	no to yes	-62%
Natural resources – State	no to yes	-68%
Ethnic fractionalization	no to yes	-67%
ln(GDPpc)	1st to 3rd quartile	51%

<sup>25</sup> Calculated by regressing rebel elections on the list of covariates in Table 2 Model 4

holding all other variables to their expected values.

Table 4. Coarsened Exact Matching – Rebel Wartime Elections

	(1) Elections	(2) Elections
Log(Troop size – Rebels)	0.535*** (0.0904)	0.493*** (0.132)
Log(Troop size – State)		-0.326* (0.189)
Diplomacy		3.328*** (0.701)
Public goods/service provision		1.761*** (0.568)
Natural resource dependence		3.331*** (0.774)
Territory		0.177 (0.403)
Leftist		-3.271*** (1.118)
Secessionist	-0.0785 (0.938)	0.705 (0.919)
Intervention	0.947*** (0.325)	-1.101** (0.438)
External support – State	-1.205*** (0.289)	-2.130*** (0.418)
External support – Rebels	0.562* (0.290)	-0.212 (0.392)
Democracy	-2.616*** (0.691)	-1.824*** (0.666)
Natural resource dependence – State	-1.726*** (0.598)	-6.223*** (1.888)
Ethnic fractionalization	0.227 (0.140)	0.213 (0.139)
Ln(Population)	0.636*** (0.214)	0.498 (0.316)
Ln(GDPpc)	-1.298*** (0.307)	-4.143*** (0.765)
Constant	-10.73*** (2.533)	-4.663 (3.220)
Observations	601	520

Coarsened exact matching. Reporting logistic coefficients and robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

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