

Is War Good for a Country's Political Institutions?

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Recent research suggests that experiencing war violence might make people more likely to turn out during elections. Using data from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, we show, however, that people who were injured or had close friends or relatives killed or injured were less likely to turn out at the 2014 parliamentary elections. We also show that the impact of violence on turn out and political views depends on the type of violence one experienced.

Note: this column draws heavily on a paper, co-authored by Maksym Obrizan and Tom Coupe, which is forthcoming in a special issue on Ukraine of the Journal of Comparative Economics – the article can be found [here](#).

A number of recent papers suggest that, even though war violence is bad for human and physical capital, some aspects of social capital can improve as a consequence of wars.

For example, Bellows and Miguel (2009) show that households who directly experienced violence in the 1991–2002 Sierra Leone are more likely to answer that they vote, attend community meetings, or join local political and community groups. Similarly, Grosjean (2014) shows that victims of recent civil wars in Eastern Europe are more likely to answer that they actively participate in groups or in collective actions, and that they are members of a political party. At the same time, they are less likely to say they trust other people or institutions. Finally, Voors et al. (2012) provide experimental evidence that, in Burundi, people who have experienced violence related to the civil conflict display more altruistic behaviour.

In a recent paper, Maksym Obrizan and myself contribute to this literature by investigating whether personally experiencing the consequences of violence affects political participation, views and knowledge of respondents in Ukraine.

In 2014, Ukraine witnessed a lot of violence, ranging from protestors being killed in the centre of Kyiv during protests against the regime of Victor Yanukovich, to soldiers and civilians being killed by heavy weaponry and indiscriminate shelling in the East of Ukraine during armed confrontations between Ukrainian military forces and heavily armed pro-Russian militia members.

In our paper, we focus on Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, two mid-sized cities situated about 100 kilometres West of the regional capital Donetsk which were heavily affected by the war between April and July 2014. While reliable statistics on the impact of war are hard to find, estimates suggest that more than half of these cities' population fled their homes, that hundreds of facilities were damaged, and that tens of people were killed.

Our findings, based on a survey in November 2014, shortly after the 2014 parliamentary elections, suggest that context matters and that the results of studies for one country do not necessarily extrapolate easily to other countries. For example, while Miguel and Bellows' (2009) results for Sierra Leone suggest that experiencing violence makes people more likely to turn out, and Di Luca and Verpoorten's (2015) results for Uganda suggest there is no relationship between violence and turnout, we find a substantial negative relation between experiencing some consequences of violence and turnout in the East of Ukraine. More specifically, those who were injured or had close friends or relatives who were killed or injured were less likely to turn out for the 2014 October parliamentary elections.

We also find that the impact of violence depends on the type of victimization: while physical suffering affected voter turnout negatively, we find no impact on voter turnout of suffering property damage or of suffering other kinds of inconveniences like losing one's job or temporarily losing access to food, water or electricity. We further report that property damage is associated with greater support for pro-Western parties, with lower support for compromising with Russia or for keeping Donbas part of Ukraine.

In summary, both researchers and policymakers should be careful in interpreting the message of the recent wave of literature on the positive effect of war on social attitudes and norms. Our study suggests that extrapolating across conflicts and/or across kinds of violence is problematic and that war does not necessarily improve the political or social institutions of a country. Expecting improved social institutions to help a country recover from war thus can be overly optimistic.

References

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