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BOOK REVIEW

Violent victors: Why bloodstained parties win postwar elections

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Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

Email: mmelend@g.harvard.edu

In postwar settings, voters often support the very same actors who have inflicted great violence upon them. Consider El Salvador. Between 1979 and 1992, the Salvadoran civil war claimed 70,000 lives and produced more than a million refugees, all in a country of under five million inhabitants. According to the United Nations, the government was responsible for 95 percent of these killings. Yet, when free and fair elections were held in 1994, nearly half of all Salvadoran voters, including thousands of the civil war's victims, chose to support ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, or Nationalist Republican Alliance), the incumbent party whose origins were intertwined with the country's infamous death squads. In addition, a majority of those who chose not to support ARENA voted for the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, or Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), the former guerrilla organization responsible for the balance of the civil war violence. Meanwhile, parties that could credibly claim not to have blood on their hands languished at the polls.

In this penetrating study of founding elections in postwar societies, Sarah Zukerman Daly—an associate professor of political science at Columbia University whose work has greatly advanced our understanding of "political life after war"—shows that the Salvadoran case is far from an outlier. Around the world, bloodstained parties ("the postwar parties representing the ideological and organizational characteristics of ... wartime armed actors" [19]) often succeed in, and even sweep, postwar elections. When offered a choice, why do so many voters, still reeling from episodes of mass violence, support bloodstained parties?

Daly's ingenious answer begins with the premise that, in postwar societies, many voters are especially concerned about avoiding a return to violence. Winning a war (or even forcing a stalemate) puts belligerent parties in a strong position to frame themselves as the most capable guarantors of peace moving forward. After all, not only have victorious (or stalemated) belligerents demonstrated that they are strong enough to defeat other violent actors (or at least keep them at bay), but they have also shown that they are willing to forbear their use of violence for at least long enough to make peace possible. All other things being equal, then, there are good reasons to expect that victorious (or stalemated) belligerents will perform better, on average, than either losing belligerents or nonbelligerents in postwar elections.

But Daly goes a step further. To successfully parlay their wartime achievements into postwar electoral success, victorious (or stalemated) belligerents must convince voters that, moving forward, they will use their military strength to provide security—as opposed to inflicting further

harm or revictimizing the population. How can parties accomplish this? Daly's answer hinges in large part on what voters believe belligerents achieved through their use of wartime violence. If voters blame belligerents for causing or extending armed conflict, they are less likely to view these bloodstained parties as credible guarantors of postwar security. But if voters instead credit belligerents with *ending* the war and reestablishing security, they are more likely to believe that bloodstained parties can continue providing security into the future. Crucially, Daly argues that belligerent parties can (re)shape these beliefs to their advantage through the right combination of campaign tactics. Being victorious in war and then pursuing the right campaign strategy thus provides bloodstained parties with a good chance of succeeding at the polls.

The first two chapters of *Violent Victors* develop this theoretical argument (of which I have provided only the broad contours) in meticulous and compelling detail. Daly then marshals a stunning range of evidence to show the argument in action. A chapter on Colombia tests the voter-level implications of the theory. Individual chapters on a trio of Central American countries that exemplify different war outcomes—El Salvador (stalemate), Guatemala (government victory), and Nicaragua (rebel victory)—test the argument's predictions at the party level. In addition, a final empirical chapter evaluates the extent to which the argument travels beyond these four Latin American cases. Along the way, Daly draws on survey data (including original survey experiments), campaign archives, party documents, declassified diplomatic cables, hundreds of interviews, an original cross-national dataset of civil war successor parties, and more. The result is a masterclass in how to use mixed methods and multiple streams of evidence to test nuanced arguments about big, important questions.

This book is required reading for anyone interested in peacebuilding, justice, democracy, and governance after civil war. For example, in examining the implications of her argument for these all-important questions, Daly identifies a critical tradeoff. On one hand, societies are less likely to descend back into violence when postwar elections reflect the military balance of power between wartime belligerents. On the other hand, if they win postwar elections, belligerents are likely to stifle transitional justice, curtail the rule of law, and limit public goods provision. This compelling insight poses a crucial question that could occupy both scholars and practitioners for years to come: What can be done to ensure that "postwar elections yield not only peace, but also justice, liberalism, and welfare" (252)?

Violent Victors will also be of great interest to at least two other audiences: Central America specialists and scholars of party-building in Latin America. Many Central America specialists will find Daly's arguments provocative. For example, whereas Daly views the immediate postwar electoral success of victorious (or stalemated) belligerents in El Salvador and Nicaragua as puzzling outcomes in need of an explanation, scholars of those two countries are more likely to view those results as a natural consequence of these countries' armed conflicts. After all, these were deeply polarizing episodes that cleaved societies and, in so doing, forged powerful partisan identities, loyalties, and animosities. But in drawing on both theory and evidence to challenge this conventional view about why parties like El Salvador's ARENA and Nicaragua's FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or Sandinistas) performed so well in founding postwar elections, Daly invites scholars of Central America to think more critically about our (often implicit) assumptions regarding the nature, causes, and consequences of voter attitudes during the region's postwar era. We would be wise to heed her call.

Similarly, Daly challenges an emerging view about the relationship between episodes of intense conflict and party-building outcomes in Latin America. In broad terms, recent scholarship suggests that these episodes produced strong, long-lasting parties because of the institutional inheritance they bestowed upon actors who went on to compete in democratic elections. Civil

wars, for example, are said to have endowed belligerents with distinctive brands, strong organizations, and internal cohesion, all of which later helped them win votes, endure electoral setbacks, and avoid internal splits. This view is distinct from, but not incompatible with, the arguments Daly develops in *Violent Victors*. Whereas the institutional inheritance scholarship seems especially well-suited to explain the ideological and organizational characteristics of the parties that competed in Latin America's postconflict elections (what we might refer to as the "supply side" of these elections), *Violent Victors* provides a more convincing account of how voters formed preferences over these parties (the "demand side") and, crucially, how parties attempted to shape those preferences in their favor. To the extent that election outcomes are forged where supply and demand meet, future efforts to integrate these two perspectives would significantly enhance our understanding of Latin America's postwar politics.

ORCID

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6474-3484

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Harvard University, where he is affiliated with the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. His research examines challenges to democracy in Central America and Mexico. He was a 2022–23 USIP-Minerva Peace and Security Scholar at the US Institute of Peace.