Elections During a Civil War: Problems of Interpretation

by
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In the aftermath of the March 1982 election in El Salvador there was a major debate in the U.S. concerning the significance of this election. The central issue of this debate concerned the turnout. Supporters of the Reagan Administration's Central America policy argued the fact that 1.5 million people voted in this election was a repudiation of the insurgents and a vote of confidence in the government. The opponents of the Administration argued that the turnout figures had been inflated by vote fraud and that, moreover, many people had been coerced into voting by the government.[1]

Interestingly, both sides in this debate assumed that a high turnout in an election during a civil war was in some sense unusual. However, such is not the case. In many civil war elections in the past several decades there has usually been a very high turnout. In the January 1919 election in Weimar Germany, held in the midst of the German Revolution of 1918-1920, turnout was 83%; in contrast, in the three peacetime elections of 1924 (May), 1924 (December) and 1928 turnout was 76%, 78% and 75% respectively.[2] In the 1963 election in Venezuela, held during the height of the conflict between Romulo Betancourt's social democratic government and the radical left, turnout was 90%.[3] In the 1971 election in Uruguay, which took place during the climax of the struggle against the Tupamaro guerrillas, there was an 88% turnout—the highest in the country's history.[4] Finally, in the Portuguese elections of 1975, held in the midst of the confrontation between the alliance of democratic parties headed by Mario Soares and the Portuguese communists, turnout was 92%, while in the peacetime election of 1976 turnout was 83%.[5]

The problems that Americans have in understanding civil war elections stem from two factors. First, in American political culture it is assumed that there is a sharp, radical distinction between peaceful change (elections) and violent change (civil war). Consequently, Americans either tend to dismiss a civil war election as meaningless or to go to the other extreme and see an election in and of itself as the way to end a civil war. Second, Americans tend to misapply their own electoral experiences to civil war elections. For example, in the debates over the 1979 and 1980 elections in Zimbabwe and over the 1982 election in El Salvador many comparisons were made between the turnout in these elections and the turnouts in U.S. elections. What such comparisons overlooked was that in the post-World War II period the United States has had one of the lowest turnout levels of any of the democratic countries; hence, it is hardly surprising that there were higher turnout in Zimbabwe and El Salvador elections than in a typical U.S. election.[6]

If one is to accurately interpret the results of a civil war election it is first necessary to understand the political significance of such an election. In a civil war an election is seldom a meaningless event—but neither is it an exclusive means of resolving the civil war. Instead, in a civil war an election serves as a test of strength between the groups involved in such war. Therefore, like all tests of strength, the results can be inconclusive, though they can also have a crucial impact on the course of the civil war by demoralizing one side and encouraging the other.

Put differently, the real analogy in American politics to a civil war election is not the fall general election but rather the presidential primary. A presidential primary is a test of strength in the context of an ongoing struggle between different factions within the Democratic or Republican parties. In terms of its intrinsic importance (which is the number of delegates won by the various candidates running in the primary) a presidential primary seldom decides the race for the nomination. However, the outcome of a presidential primary can play a major, and occasionally decisive, role in the battle for the party's nomination by dissuading certain candidates and heartening others. For example, John F. Kennedy's victory in the 1960 West Virginia primary was one of the decisive battles in his campaign for the Democratic party's presidential nomination because this victory demonstrated that he could win the support of voters who were Democrats yet had traditionally been suspicious of Roman Catholics.

After a presidential primary an assessment of the results is undertaken by examining a number of key factors such as overall turnout, areas of candidate support and results of the previous primaries. A comparative analysis of a number of civil war elections indicates that there are also several key factors to be taken into account when attempting to assess the results of such an election. The nine civil war elections that were analyzed are as follows:

1. The 1917 Constituent Assembly election in Russia (held in the midst of the Russian Revolution);
2. The 1919 election in Weimar Germany (held during the German revolution of 1918-1920);
3. The 1951 election in the Philippines (held during the Huk insurgency);
4. The 1963 election in Venezuela (held during the civil war between the Betancourt government and the radical left);
5. The 1971 election in Uruguay (held during the Tupamaro insurgency);
6. Two province-wide elections in Northern Ireland in 1973 and 1974;
7. The Portuguese election of 1975 (held in the course of the bitter struggle between the Portuguese democratic parties and the Portuguese communists in 1974-1975);
8. The Zimbabwe elections of 1979 and 1980 (both of which were held with the intent of resolving the civil war that had been un-

derway since the government of Ian Smith declared its independence in 1965);

9. The El Salvador election of 1982 (held in the midst of a major insurgency that had begun in the late 1970s).

This comparative analysis concluded that the key factors to consider are: issues, turnout, breakdown of the vote, other social institutions, honesty of the elections, and leadership. Each factor will be dealt with separately.

The first important fact to keep in mind concerning civil war elections is the environment of ongoing violence where various groups involved in the conflict must realize that, if they are defeated, they will be the targets of further violence from the victors. The central issue of the elections, then, tends to be individual and group security rather than social and economic issues. In other words, people will be inclined to cast their ballots on the basis of encouraging those parties that they feel will be most successful in defeating the opposition, even if they normally would not vote for such parties. In the 1917 Constituent Assembly election in Russia many of the very conservative groups in society voted for the moderate Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) rather than for the rightist parties because they felt that the Kadets would be more effective in opposing the Bolsheviks.[7] In the 1975 Portuguese election Mario Soares' Socialist Party received such a high percentage of the total vote (38%) in large part because of the key role the Socialists were playing in opposing the attempt of the Portuguese Communist Party to seize power. (In the peacetime elections of 1976 and 1979 the Socialist Party received 35% and 25% of the vote respectively.)[8] Again, the sizable vote (26%) for Major Roberto D'Aubisson's ARENA Party in the March 1982 election in El Salvador was due, to a considerable extent, to D'Auguisson's image as the sort of tough leader who could prevent the insurgents from winning.[9]

In a country in the throes of a civil war political issues become central to people's everyday existence. Hence, it should not be surprising that election turnout in such highly politicized societies is usually quite high. Because high turnout rates under these conditions will be interpreted by the government as an endorsement of the current political system, the insurgents often try to reduce the percentage through propaganda and/or terrorism. Therefore turnout levels are often a crucial indicator of the strength of the different sides in the civil war, with the side that loses the "turnout battle" being sometimes seriously demoralized. In the 1963 election in Venezuela the radical left attempted to disrupt the election by threatening violence against voters and polling places. The 90% turnout in this election was thus a devastating blow to the morale of the radical left and a great morale boost to the Betancourt government. Consequently, after the election, the radical left ceased to be a serious threat to the Betancourt government.[10] In 1979 an election was held in Zimbabwe after an agreement had been worked out between Ian Smith's government and some

moderate black leaders. In this election turnout was 65% which, at the time, was interpreted by many people in the United States as a solid endorsement of the new government of Bishop Muzorewa. However, in 1980 a second election was organized in Zimbabwe to implement the Lancaster House Settlement negotiated by the British government. Voter participation was 93% and the overwhelming winner was Robert Mugabe. So, in retrospect, the lower percentage in 1979 indicated that, at the time of the internal settlement, much of Zimbabwe's population was unwilling to go along with this internal settlement. Dissatisfaction among the black population grew stronger when it became clear that Muzorewa could not deliver on his promises to get sanctions lifted, to gain international recognition and to end the civil war. This dissatisfaction with the internal settlement culminated in Mugabe's massive victory in the 1980 election.[11]

In analyzing any civil war election it is crucial to look carefully at the breakdown of the electoral returns in terms of their distribution among the parties and groups participating in the election and interms of the geographic distribution of the vote. The 1917 Constituent Assembly election in Russia is a good example of the importance of carefully analyzing the breakdown of the electoral returns. At first glance, this election would appear to have been a stunning setback for the Bolsheviks. They received approximately 25% of the vote, while the various non-Bolshevik parties (the Social Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, the Kadets and the parties representing nationality groups) got 75%.[12] However, a closer examination of the returns reveals that the Bolsheviks had every reason to be encouraged by the outcome. While the Bolsheviks had polled only one-quarter of the vote, the Bolshevik party receiving this vote was a unified and highly disciplined force. In contrast, the largest non-Bolshevik party, the Social Revolutionaries (which received about 50% of the vote), was characterized by serious internal splits and ongoing faction fights. Not only were the Social Revolutionaries divided internally, but in addition they were suspicious and hostile toward the moderate and rightist groups such as the Kadets. Indeed, many Social Revolutionaries regarded the Bolsheviks as preferable to the Kadets. So while the Bolsheviks received only 25% of the vote, their ability to mobilize their supporters was much greater than the opposition's because of the internal strength.[13]

The geographic distribution of the vote was also highly favorable to the Bolsheviks. Their electoral strength was concentrated in the industrial areas around Petrograd and Moscow. The opposition's support, in contrast, was badly distributed. The Social Revolutionaries drew their support mainly from the peasantry and, thus, their supporters were scattered all over Russia. The Kadets got their greatest strength from the middle classes in Petrograd and Moscow. These groups were substantial but were still a minority of the population of these cities. The Bolsheviks, then, were able to crush these groups early on in the civil war because they were located in the areas where

the Bolsheviks were the dominant force.[14] In other words, the geographic distribution of the opposition enabled the Bolsheviks to carry out the military strategy of defeating the enemy "in detail." Early in the civil war they were able to destroy their middle class opponents in Petrograd and Moscow (these being the groups most firmly opposed to the Bolsheviks), and then were able to move against their divided, vacillating opposition in the rural regions of Russia.

Finally, in the 1917 Russian election there were separate returns for the army and navy. The Bolsheviks received about half of the vote of the military. Most of the rest went to the Social Revolutionaries. Those moderate and rightist forces most unequivocally opposed to the Bolsheviks got only about 1% of the votes of the military. Moreover, the Bolshevik's military support was concentrated in the same general regions as was their electoral support. Those elements of the military with which the Bolsheviks did not do well were located in distant regions of the country such as Roumanian front and the Caucasus.[15]

In sum, a breakdown of the vote in the 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly election shows that the Bolsheviks started the civil war in a very strong position. They were a unified, disciplined and geographically concentrated minority fighting against a majority that was badly divided both politically and geographically.

Since a civil war election is one stage in an ongoing struggle, it is essential in analyzing the results of such an election to be cognizant of other potential sources of power in a civil war besides the levels of popular support achieved by the various sides. The military is obviously a source of power in a civil war and, it follows, the political loyalties of the military will be a critical factor in determining the outcome of the civil war. For example, the Portuguese election of 1975 was a major setback to the Portuguese communists for a number of reasons. The communists and their radical left allies did poorly (17%) as compared to the alliance of the Portuguese socialists, liberals and conservatives (72%). The three non-communist parties won overwhelmingly in the northern two-thirds of the country. In those regions in the south of Portugal where the communists did well, they still remained a minority of the overall population of southern Portugal. In the language of military geography the communists "lacked a secure rear area" and were in a bad strategic position in the event of a civil war. Reinforcing these election results was another key factor: unlike Russia in 1917, these groups in Portugal in 1975 who were determined to prevent a communist seizure of power had the support of much of the Portuguese military.[16]

Labor unions provide another important source of strength in a civil war. In December 1973 the British worked out a compromise in Northern Ireland whereby a government of moderate Catholics and Protestants was established in the province. The Protestant hardliners were strongly opposed to this new provincial government but, because they had received only 35% of the vote, they were reluctant to confront

it. However, in the February 1974 British parliamentary election the Protestant hardliners got 51% of the vote and won 11 out of the 12 Ulster seats in the British parliament. Encouraged by this electoral victory, the Protestant hardliners decided to use their control of the labor movement in Ulster to bring down the new government. After a 14 day general strike in the spring of 1974, organized by the Protestant-controlled Ulster Worker's Council, the provincial government resigned and the British were forced to return to ruling Ulster directly from London.[17]

As has been recognized by a number of major twentieth century revolutionaries, it is difficult to mobilize popular opposition to a government that has come to power through free and honest elections. It is precisely for this reason that revolutionaries struggling against a government often attempt (as in the case of Venezuela in 1963) to disrupt an election by acts of terrorism. The 1951 election in the Philippines was a key turning point in the struggle against the Huk guerrillas. In this election Ramon Magsaysay had the Philippine military supervise the election to guarantee an honest outcome. An incident in this election provides a dramatic illustration of how an honest election can be a major setback for a revolutionary movement. An old Philippine peasant had been providing assistance to the Huk guerrillas for a number of years. He had nothing but scorn for the electoral process in the Philippines. It was obvious to him that in his region the elections were rigged. After the results of the 1951 election were reported the old peasant was shocked; the candidates he had supported had won. When the Huks came to him a few days later to ask for assistance he refused, saying that the government now represented the wishes of the population. When he refused to be moved by persuasion or threats, the Huks beat him severely and left him for dead. (He did die a few days later in a hospital, but, before dying, he told his story to an American military officer.)[18]

Finally, there is the question of the leadership of the different groups participating in a civil war election. Whether in a civil war election or in a peacetime election, an electoral mandate, no matter how large, is not self-implementing. Implementation can only be the result of skillful leadership. In looking at the Philippine election of 1951, the Venezuelan election of 1963 and the Portuguese election of 1951, it is striking that in all of these cases the elections were an ultimately fatal setback for the insurgents, in large measure because these countries had leaders (Ramon Magsaysay, Romulo Betancourt and Mario Soares) capable of effectively using the legitimacy conferred upon their governments by these elections. In addition to all of its other difficulties, the opposition to the Bolsheviks was severely handicapped by the fact that it did not have a leader with the effectiveness and skill of a Magsaysay, a Betancourt or a Soares.

Being able to assess a civil war election as accurately as possible is often a crucial task for American officials responsible for protecting the national security of the United States. For example, in the 1974-

75 crisis in Portugal the United States was in the difficult position of trying to influence internal politics of a country in which, because of U.S. support for the former regime, there was considerable hostility toward the United States. In such a situation, a wrong move by the United States could greatly benefit those groups hostile to it. Fortunately, in this crisis, U.S. officials on the scent quickly grasped the importance of the 1975 election and, thus, were able to help the democratic forces in Portugal use the legitimacy conferred by this election to defeat the attempt of Portuguese communists to seize power.[19] In light of the need to assess accurately civil war elections such as those which have taken place in recent years in Portugal, Zimbabwe and El Salvador, it is essential that U.S. policy-makers look at such elections not in the context of peacetime American elections but, rather, in the context of the generalizations discussed which can be drawn from comparative analyses of such civil war elections.

Footnotes

1. For contrasting views of the March 1982 El Salvador election see "El Salvador: Beyond Elections," *NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America) Report on the Americas*, vol. XVI, no. 2 (March-April 1982) and Michael Novak, "El Salvador: Rule by Ballot," *Orbis*, 26 (Summer 1982), pp. 317-322.
2. Stein Rokkan and Jean Meyriat, eds., *International Guide to Electoral Statistics* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), pp. 157-159.
3. Richard Gott, *Guerilla Movements in Latin America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971), p. 172.
4. Martin Weinstein, *Uruguay: The Politics of Failure* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 127.
5. Kenneth Maxwell, *The Transition in Portugal* (Washington, D.C.: The Wilson Center's Latin American Program, 1981), p. 29; *New York Times*, May 8, 1976.
6. In a recent study of turnout rates in elections in twenty-eight democratic countries in the post-World War II period the United States ranked 27th; the only country with lower turnout rates was Colombia. Howard Penniman, (ed.), *Democracy at the Polls* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), pp. 234-237.
7. Oliver Henry Radkey, *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 34-35.
8. Maxwell, *The Transition in Portugal*, p. 42.
9. "El Salvador: Beyond Elections," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, pp. 15-17; Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 185-189.
10. Gott, *Guerilla Movements in Latin America*, p. 172.
11. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey: 1979* (London: IISS, 1980), pp. 84-90; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey: 1980-1981* (London: IISS, 1981), pp. 85-89.
12. Radkey, *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917*, pp. 16-17.
13. Ibid., pp. 6-11; 71-73.
14. Ibid., pp. 38-39.
15. Ibid., pp. 35-37.
16. Maxwell, *The Transition in Portugal*, pp. 29-35.
17. Richard Rose, *Northern Ireland: Time of Choice* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1976), pp. 29-31.

18. Charles W. Thayer, *Guerrilla* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 27-29. The American officer was Edward Lansdale, a well-known student of guerrilla warfare.
19. In the words of U.S. Ambassador to Portugal Frank Carlucci: "I think it was the election that turned the situation around." Maxwell, *The Transition in Portugal*, pp. 30, 37.