

## BOOK REVIEW

Michael Wahman. *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 272 pp. \$90. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198872825.


Why do political parties engage in violence during election campaigns? Much of the existing literature has argued or assumed that such violence is intended to deter citizens from voting for opposing parties. However, as Michael Wahman convincingly shows in the context of Zambia and Malawi, the large majority of electoral violence actually occurs in party strongholds, or “no-go zones,” by the same parties who dominate in these constituencies. Why would political parties perpetrate violence in their own strongholds? *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters* cleverly elucidates the critical role that political geography plays in explaining this outcome: parties don’t use violence primarily to deter voters. Instead, they predominantly use it to defend their strongholds from outsiders or—under a specific set of circumstances—to attempt to breach the territory of their rivals.

This theory is premised on a novel conceptualization of electoral systems. Wahman proposes that multiparty elections can vary on two distinct axes: first, whether or not they are nationally competitive, and, second, whether or not they are *locally* competitive. This framework is one of the most astute contributions of the book. Although we tend to assume that nationally competitive elections are competitive everywhere while nationally uncompetitive elections are uncompetitive everywhere, Wahman delivers the shrewd insight that many—if not most—competitive elections in Africa are marked by remarkably uncompetitive conditions at the local level. The political geography of many African democracies is marked by a patchwork of party strongholds, where most constituencies are not particularly competitive, but instead won in a landslide. Though the insight is conceptually simple, it fundamentally changes our expectations about political behavior both across electoral system types as well as within countries. A citizen in a competitive district may face a completely different set of political choices than their compatriot living in a party stronghold.

Wahman uses this insight primarily to explain the outcome of electoral violence, which he does thoroughly and convincingly. Parties defend their territory (with violence or the threat of violence) in order to deter other parties from even competing in these constituencies, producing a localized “air of invincibility” for ordinary voters. But one of the more profound implications of Wahman’s conceptualization is the constrained nature of political choice itself in such *nationally* competitive democracies. By policing the boundaries of their strongholds, parties effectively restrict the ability of ordinary voters to even

hear from—let alone vote for—opposing parties. Citizens are robbed of democratic rights not because they fear violence, but because they are deprived of political choice during elections.

This framework opens up a host of questions for future work. Most obviously, perhaps, the reader wants to know how dynamics of territoriality and electoral violence might apply to other types of electoral systems proposed in the book, particularly in locally competitive ones. If party strongholds are the exception rather than the rule, do we see different dynamics of political violence? Relatedly, the reader is left wondering about the potentially endogenous nature of the construction of electoral strongholds. On the one hand, the logic of the argument points clearly towards the idea that political geography produces certain kinds of violence. On the other hand, violence also constructs this same political geography. How then, do locally uncompetitive systems “break out” of these patterns to become more locally competitive? And if they cannot, then is there a structural cause of this geography (such as local levels of development or ethnic diversity) that makes both strongholds and violence more likely? In other words, are less violent political systems more prone to locally competitive geographies? Through these questions, *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters* unlocks an entirely new area of research for scholars to explore the unique dynamics of African electoral geography. Thus, the book is a must read not just for scholars of electoral violence, but for anyone interested in political behavior or electoral campaigns in Africa.

Natalie Wenzell Letsa   
University of Oklahoma, USA  
[nwletsa@ou.edu](mailto:nwletsa@ou.edu)  
[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.27](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.27)