

Two Sword Lengths Apart: Credible Commitment Problems and Physical Violence in Multi-party Elected National Legislatures

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Abstract

Multi-party elected national legislatures should be venues for peacefully resolving conflicts between opposing groups. However, they can become scenes of physical violence. Such violence is an indication that a country's legislative institutions are functioning far from perfectly as legislative actors are deciding to disregard the rules of the game. In some cases, such as recently in Ukraine, violence can indicate and possibly fuel deeper political divisions. In this first global study of legislative violence, I show that brawls are more likely when legislators find it difficult to credibly commit to follow peaceful bargains. Credible commitment problems are more acute in countries with disproportionate electoral outcomes and in new democracies. I find robust evidence for this argument using a case study of legislative violence in the antebellum United States Senate and a new global data set.

Keywords: legislatures, violence, credible commitment problems, electoral proportionality, institutional design, majority and minority governments

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