

# Two Sword Lengths Apart: Credible Commitment Problems and Physical Violence in Democratic National Legislatures

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## Abstract

Ideally, national legislatures in democracies should be venues for peacefully resolving conflicts between opposing groups. However, they can become places of physical violence. Such violence can be an indication that countries' legislative institutions are functioning far from the democratic ideal of being venues for peaceful conflict reconciliation. In some cases, such as Ukraine prior to the 2014 outbreak of armed conflicts in the country's east and south, 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 new democracies and disproportionate electoral outcomes—i.e. when electoral votes for parties do not closely correspond to the legislative seats they are given. I find robust support for this argument using a case study of legislative violence in the antebellum United States Senate and a new global data set. In addition, I find strong evidence that violence is more likely in legislatures with small minority governments.

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

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