

The Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)

Codebook

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1. Introduction

The Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO) contains information on the worldwide incidence of lethal election violence (4,233 events) from 1989 to 2017.¹ All events are recorded with the highest temporal and geographical precision, information about the actors involved, and a number of attributes pertaining to the election-related dimension. The DECO dataset is coded using the geocoded event database of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP GED), in which each event is assessed separately to identify the particular subset of violent electoral strife. DECO identifies electoral violence across the different forms of violence coded by UCDP GED, including civilian targeting, communal violence, and insurgencies substantially linked to the electoral process. By introducing issue-based identification for each event, but retaining compatibility with UCDP, DECO draws together a subset of violent events that have been previously studied separately. DECO thereby enables analyses of electoral violence in relation to other manifestations of organized violence.

DECO differs from many other cross-national data sources on electoral violence in several respects. Among other features, it focuses on lethal events and contains a different geographical and temporal scope. Table 1 compares the main features of DECO to some of the other most frequently used datasets on electoral violence.

¹ The most updated version of the DECO dataset and the codebook can be downloaded from the UCDP Dataset Download Center at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>. This project has benefitted tremendously from collaboration with the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Mihai Croicu offered invaluable assistance in the automated coding procedure. We are grateful for excellent research assistance from Paulina Cruz Velasquez in the pilot coding phase. The data collection was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, grant P16-0124:1 and the pilot coding by the Norwegian Research Council, grant 217995/V10.

Table 1. Comparison between DECO and other electoral violence datasets

	Deadly Electoral Conflict (DECO)	Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) (Daxecker, Amicarelli and Jung 2019)	Countries at Risk of Electoral Violence (CREV) (Birch and Muchilinski 2017)	National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) (Hyde and Marinov 2012)	Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) (Coppedge et al. 2020)
Geographical scope	Global	Global, except OECD countries	101 countries deemed at risk of electoral violence	Global	Global
Temporal scope	1989–2017	1990–2012	1995–2018	1945–2015	1900–2019
Unit of analysis	Event–location–day	Event–location–day	Event–day	National election round	Country year
Features covered	Actor and targets; event-types	Actor and targets; violent and non-violent; event-types	Threat versus attacks; state, non-state, and international actors	“Government harassment of opposition” “Significant violence involving civilian deaths before during or after”	“Election government intimidation” “Election other electoral violence by non-government actors”
Additional notes on measurement and what is included or not	Only fatal events; coded from event data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program coding back-end	Events occurring 6 months prior and 3 months after date of national election	Coded from event data from the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System	Dichotomous measure	Ordinal scales, converted to interval by the V-dem measurement model

2. Defining Electoral Violence

DECO defines electoral violence as “*violence that is substantially linked to an electoral contest.*” Central to the definition is the direct connection between the violence and the dynamics of the electoral process enacted through political parties, voters, candidates, the polling process, or institutional arrangements surrounding elections. Thus, we assume that electoral violence is distinguished from other forms of violence in that it would not occur or manifest differently in the absence of an electoral contest.

We define an electoral contest as a formal contest to fill political offices where the public is involved in casting the vote.² While most studies of electoral violence focus on national elections for the legislature and executive branches of government, we also include events related to electoral contests for subnational elections to fill regional and local governments. In addition, we include events that are linked to national and subnational referenda on issues relating to constitutional matters, since these also represent situations when the electorate is invited and mobilized to vote on a matter relevant to their governance.³ Admittedly, referenda could be seen as theoretically distinct from elections for political office, and events that pertain to contentions over referenda can easily be separated out for other studies where these would that do not fit the theoretical scope of those on electoral violence.

To ascertain a substantive link between violence and an electoral contest, we assess whether the event is related to a specific election in terms of the perpetrators of violence, targets, and reported purpose and judge whether the event is related to the electoral dynamics.

To identify and compile the events of lethal electoral violence included in DECO we draw on the coding procedures underlying the production of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (Sundberg and Melander 2013). UCDP GED provides spatially and temporally disaggregated event data on political violence from 1989 onwards. In UCDP, an event refers to an individual incident of lethal violence occurring at a given time and place, more specifically “an incident where armed force was used by an organized actor against another organized actor or against civilians, resulting in at least 1 direct death at a specific location and a specific date” (Högbladh 2019, 4). Adopted from the UCDP definition, DECO defines a violent electoral event as *an incident where armed force was used by an armed actor against another armed actor or against civilians, resulting in at least 1 direct death at a*

² In line with definitions from the NELDA dataset, public involvement can be extensive or restricted depending on the extent of suffrage and regime’s definition of the electorate. In contrast to NELDA, however, we include both direct and indirect elections. By indirect elections, we mean voting by a committee or an institution such as electoral college or parliament, which has in turn has been elected with involvement from the public. For details about the elections included in NELDA, see Hyde and Marinov (2019).

³ Admittedly, referenda could be seen as theoretically distinct from elections for political office, and events that pertain to contentions over referenda can easily be separated out for other studies that do not fit the theoretical scope of those on electoral violence.

specific location and a specific date, substantially linked to an electoral contest. Hence, our definition of violent electoral conflict includes only lethal events with at least one fatality.

For each event, UCDP GED records the parties involved, the number of fatalities, the date, and the geographical location. This information is carried through to DECO, so the dataset provides temporal and geographical references for each event at a high level of resolution. In addition to information about actors, fatalities, and the time and place of the event, DECO codes a range of additional variables including the electoral targets, links to the incumbent side, and whether the event reflects pre- or post-election contention.

3. Coding Rules and Criteria

DECO includes a total of 4,233 events of lethal election violence. In coding electoral violence, we rely upon the database underlying the coding of the publicly released version of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (Sundberg and Melander 2013). UCDP GED does not contain information on whether or not an event is linked to elections. Whether the event is related to an electoral contest is therefore assessed independently of the initial event coding in the UCDP. In compiling DECO, we assessed events from the information provided in the source for the event coding and/or inferred from the context in which the events took place. We elaborate on the procedure below.

We begin with the full list of events coded by the UCDP for inclusion in the UCDP GED. The back-end database of UCDP GED included roughly 231,000 events at the time of extraction (October 2017).⁴ We reviewed these events for inclusion in DECO in several steps. The first step entailed an automated search within the entire database, where events that could be election-related were flagged based on a search string containing a wide range of election-related nouns and noun-verb pairs provided in a dictionary.⁵ This search was applied to the information columns describing the event (often the original source in full or excerpted to describe the event).

In a second step, the retrieved events (6,355 in total) were systematically and qualitatively reviewed by human coders to ascertain whether the event, its perpetrators, targets, and reported purpose were directly related to an election. In our coding, a basic criterion for inclusion is that the event must relate to a specific election, and not just to general demands for democracy.⁶ DECO events also cancelled or postponed elections and contentions arising

⁴ Events for the remainder of 2017 (Nov/Dec) were extracted from the database and reviewed for inclusion when UCDP's annual coding for 2017 was complete.

⁵ We use WordNet dictionary for this task (<https://wordnet.princeton.edu>). Examples of words in this dictionary are election, electoral process, political parties, political candidates, voting, or referendum. The full list is available upon request.

⁶ Events related to more general protests for democracy were not included in the final version of DECO. Other events picked up by the search string but excluded were those in which elections were mentioned as a contextual variable, but with no direct connection to the reported violent event.

from the polling results. For instance, if government forces cracked down on a protest demanding the overturn of the election result, the event would fall within DECO's definition. However, similar protest events in which protesters demand elections that are not held do not fall within DECO's definition of electoral violence. The assessment of each event's relationship to an electoral contest is based on several markers that individually or in combination establish a substantive link to electoral dynamics. Specifically, we code events as election-related based on the following information:

Perpetrator affiliation: To establish a link to elections, we determine whether the perpetrator has explicit ties to a political party or if the participants in the violence are identified and referred to by their party affiliation.

Nature of the target: Events may also be coded as election related based on the nature of the target, such as voters at a polling station, political candidates, election observers, or security forces deployed at elections. Similar to the perpetrator's affiliation, the victims of electoral violence often have affiliations to a particular party, candidate, or side in an electoral contest, from which we can draw inferences regarding whether or not the violence seems related to an electoral incompatibility. The target may be different from the actual victims of the attack. For example, a government official targeted in an attack may escape while civilian bystanders are killed. Note that the intended target may also be a material object tied to the electoral process, such as a polling station.

Reported purpose: Events may be election related if the reported purpose of the violence is to influence an electoral process or outcome. The purpose is primarily inferred from statements issued by perpetrators of violence. For instance, if an armed actor issues a statement claiming that the purpose of the violence is to destabilize (or even halt) elections, we code this as election-related violence, even if the target or the perpetrators are the same as those in a more general civil war context. Electoral violence may, for instance, be aimed to displace particular electoral constituencies, influence the process of voter registration, protest boundary setting directly in relation to an election, or shape who may cast their votes on election day. When no statements are issued, the context of the event and information about the alleged intention of the violence as reported by case experts may be used to assess the purpose of the violence. For example, if government forces target civilians in popular protests following cancelled or postponed elections or the announcement of electoral results, it is coded as election-related.

In the final step, DECO assessed events considered to fall within "spells" or extended periods of electoral violence. This step entailed moving away from the events identified in the initial search string to consider all events included in the back-end of UCDP GED. Some identified instances of lethal electoral violence are followed by more violent incidents and reprisals among the same or closely affiliated actors, in the same or related locations, which extend beyond the initial events. If such events are identified with high certainty as election-related, we code events that are part of the same spell of violence as electoral violence, although we assign the coding decision a higher degree of uncertainty. The cutoff point for the end of a

spell decided mainly by a notable change in dynamics, which is ultimately assessed by the coder based on a more comprehensive reading of the case.⁷ Also, if there is a clear temporal break in the violence, new events of violence are not classified as part of the initial spell of electoral violence.

DECO includes violent events occurring at any point in the electoral cycle, from early voter registration to events that happen months after polling. In contrast to other datasets on electoral violence we do not code events solely based on a temporal criterion such as a range of dates around a specific election (e.g., three months before and after election day). While elections come with a clear date, elections for different tiers of government (parliament, president, and local institutions) and referenda are sometimes, but not always, held in close temporal proximity, and sometimes on the same day, as the main election. Regardless of whether or not elections are held on the same day, temporal proximity will be challenged by overlapping election cycles. Moreover, the electoral cycles' early phases, such as voter registration and internal party nominations, which often occur months ahead of the actual polling, have been seen to spark conflicts in some countries because they are considered decisive for the main electoral outcome. Election-related riots in response to an incumbent's attempt to extend term limits or protests against the outcome of a court ruling on an electoral outcome are also events that may occur months before polling day.

To improve inter-coder reliability, the DECO team held regular coding meetings with the whole group. These meetings served the purpose of a joint review discussing challenging coding decisions and ambiguous cases (down to the event level), coding rules, and their specific application. Based on this regular review, coding instructions were updated when necessary.

⁷ Such a change in dynamics could, for example, constitute a move from more unorganized violence to conventional warfare, a change in the reported intentionality of the violence, or a change in the actors involved.

4. Variables

In this section we provide more information about the variables included in DECO data.

UCDP GED variables

The following variables and descriptions are taken from the original UCDP GED coding of the event and accompanying codebook (Högbladh, 2019).

Variable name	Content	DECO comment
id	Unique identifier for each event	Can be used to identify UCDP GED events that are coded as election related by DECO
type_of_violence	Type of UCDP conflict: 1: state-based conflict 2: non-state conflict 3: one-sided violence 4: violence in civilian protests and miscellaneous incidents	This variable has been updated from UCPD GED public release 19.1 to cover events found exclusively in DECO. We also denote a fourth category: “violence in civilian protests and miscellaneous,” for events in which unorganized, but armed, civilians engage in protests that escalate to lethal violence.
conflict_new_id	A unique conflict identification code for each individual conflict in the dataset	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
conflict_name	Name of the UCDP conflict to which the event belongs. For non-state conflicts and one-sided violence this is the same as the dyad name	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
dyad_new_id	A unique conflict identification code for each individual dyad in the dataset	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
side_a_new_id	Unique ID of Side A	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1

side_a	Name of Side A in the dyad	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
side_b_new_id	Unique ID of Side B	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
side_b	Name of Side B in the dyad	Note: not systematically coded for events not included in UCPD GED public release 19.1
country_id	The Gleditsch and Ward country ID number for the country where the event takes place.	
country	Name of the country in which the event takes place	
region		
source_article	References to names, dates, and titles of the source material from which information on the event is gathered	
year		
date_start	Earliest possible date the event occurred	
date_end	Last possible date the event occurred	
deaths_a	Best estimate of deaths sustained by Side A	
deaths_b	Best estimate of deaths sustained by Side B	
civilians_deaths	Best estimate of civilian deaths in the event	
Unknown	Best estimate of deaths of persons of unknown status	
best	Best (most likely) estimate of total fatalities resulting from an event	
high	Highest estimate of total fatalities resulting from an event	
low	Lowest estimate of total fatalities resulting from an event	
latitude	Latitude	
longitude	Longitude	

All additional UCDP GED variables can be added to the events that are part of the published version of UCDP GED, based on merging on the “releid” variable.

DECO coded variables

Variable name	Content	DECO comment
electoral_vio_uncertainty	<p>Variable denoting the level of uncertainty for the coding of the event as electoral violence (and included in DECO)</p> <p>0 = low uncertainty 1 = some uncertainty 2 = high uncertainty</p>	<p>Uncertainty level 2 is assigned to events where the coding of electoral violence is primarily based on contextual information. Typically, these events are part of a spell of violence, where actors, location, and timing jointly suggest that this event is election-related, but where the link cannot be ascertained.</p>
electoral_vio_source	Sources underlying the coding of electoral_vio	This information is only provided if these are other sources than those listed in the UCDP variable source_article.
electoral_purpose	Variable stating the reported purpose of electoral violence	The reported purpose is coded based on statements by the perpetrators or the reported context of the event. If multiple purposes are denoted, these are separated with “,”
electoral_side_a	<p>Variable denoting the type of actor involved in the event on side a. Where there is more than one actor, see also electoral_side_a_2.</p> <p>We record the following categories: Civilians; External actors; Militia; Political supporters; Politicians; Public officials; Rebel group; Security forces; Unclear; Other</p>	
electoral_side_a_2	Variable denoting the type of actor involved in the event on side a if there is more than one actor.	

electoral_side_a_inc	<p>Variable denoting whether electoral_side_a has identifiable ties to the incumbent side:</p> <p>1 = identifiable ties to the incumbent 0 = identifiable ties to the opposition or against the incumbent -99= ties are unknown</p>	<p>The assessment of ties is based on formal authority, as well as allegiance to or support of the incumbent. State forces, such as police or the military, are therefore coded as having ties to the incumbent, as are supporters of the incumbent party or president.</p>
electoral_side_b	<p>Variable denoting the type of actor involved in the event on side b. Where there is more than one actor, see also electoral_side_b_2. We record the following categories: Civilians; External actors; Militia; Political supporters; Politicians; Public officials; Rebel group; Security forces; Unclear; Other</p>	
electoral_side_b_2	<p>Variable denoting the type of actor involved in the event on side b if there is more than one actor.</p>	
electoral_side_b_inc	<p>Variable denoting whether electoral_side_b has identifiable ties to the incumbent side:</p> <p>1 = identifiable ties to the incumbent 0 = identifiable ties to the opposition or against the incumbent -99 = ties are unknown</p>	<p>The assessment of ties is based on formal authority, as well as allegiance to or support of the incumbent. State forces, such as police or the military, are therefore coded as having ties to the incumbent, as are supporters of the incumbent party or president.</p>
electoral_perpetrator	<p>Variable denoting who initiates the violence or is the main perpetrator, provided that this information can be ascertained from the event:</p> <p>1 = side a 2 = side b 3 = symmetric, for example, in clashes</p>	

	<p>between groups of supporters 4 = unclear</p>	
electoral_targets	<p>Variable denoting the targets of the violence, provided that this information can be ascertained from the event description:</p> <p>1 = targeting of political candidate/politician 2 = targeting of election workers/personnel 3 = targeting of voters or party supporters 4 = targeting of election-related activists (e.g., NGO workers) 5 = targeting of election-related protesters (context-specific, not necessarily organized) 6 = targeting of members of security forces (police, military) 7 = targeting of insurgents/rebel soldiers 8 = other 9 = targeting of non-designated civilians 10 = targeting of electoral material 11 = targeting of journalists -99 = targets are unknown</p>	<p>If an event has multiple targets, these are separated with “;”</p>
electoral_type	<p>Variable denoting the type of election the violence is associated with:</p> <p>1 = Parliamentary (national) 2 = Presidential (national) 3 = Subnational elections 4 = Other or unclear 5 = Referendum (national or subnational)</p>	<p>When it is not clear to which election the violence relates, or when there are concurrent elections, election types are separated with “;”. “Other or unclear” is used to code, for example, by-elections, primary elections, and other elections when it is not clear to which election the event relates.</p>
electoral_timing	<p>Variable denoting whether the event is pre-election, on election day or post-election:</p> <p>1 = pre-election. Events occurring before election day such as during voter registration, political rallies, political primaries, or party nominations. 2 = election day. Events occurring on the day of polling. 3 = post-election. Events occurring after</p>	<p>The classification is primarily based on assessing the timing of the event in relation to the most proximate election, but in case of multiple elections in close proximity, a more qualitative assessment may also be used to</p>

	election day such as during tallying or in the wake of the announcement of results. 4 = unclear timing	determine the timing.
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