

Confronting the Myth of the Rational Insurgent: Toward a New Conventional Wisdom

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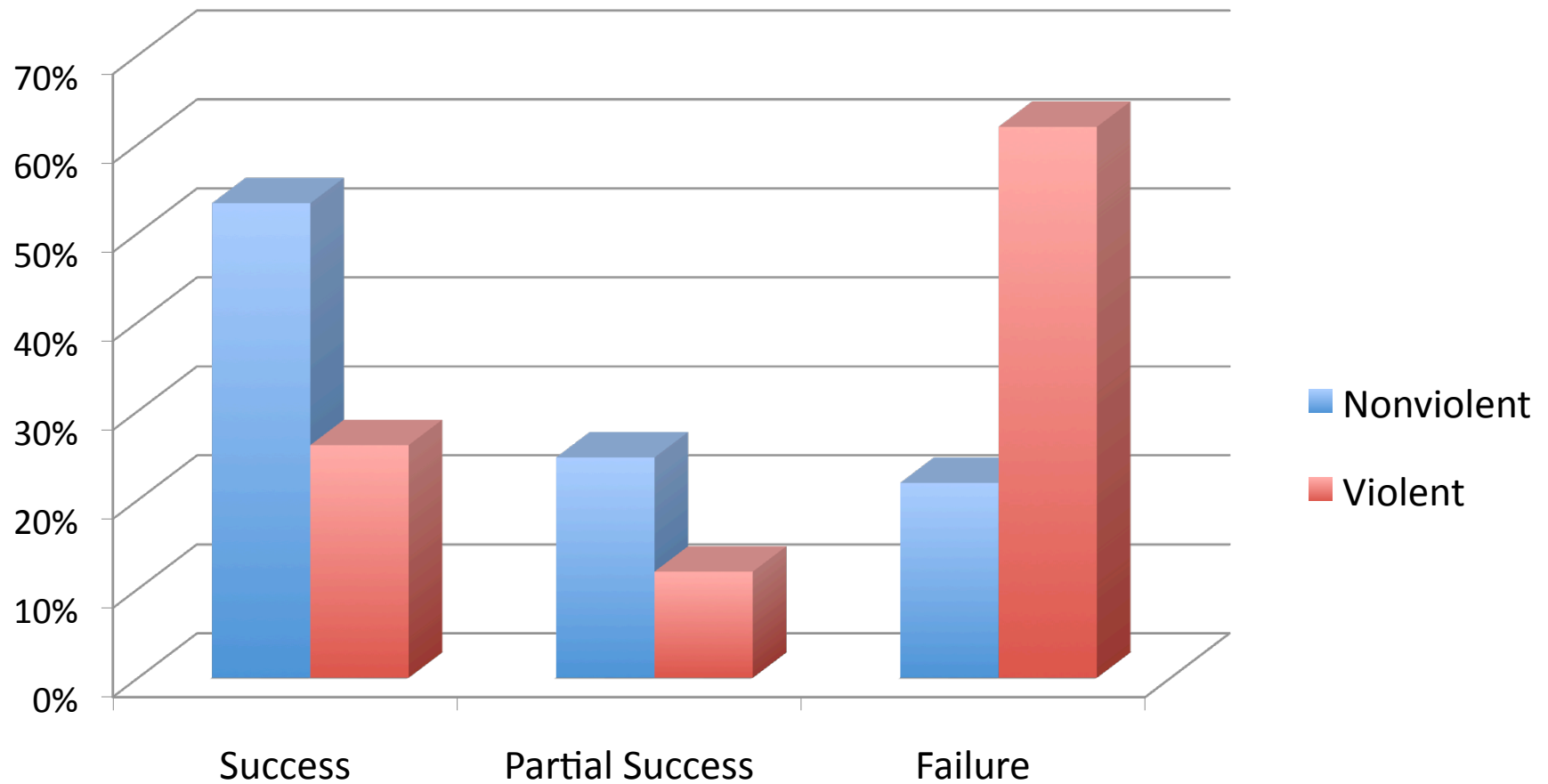
Six Conventional Wisdoms

- Violent insurgency is effective.
- Insurgents use violence because they must.
- All insurgencies begin nonviolently, and adopt violence when nonviolent resistance fails.
- Resistance movements have to adopt violence to take on brutal regimes.
- Societies need quick and decisive victories to be stable enough for democracy to thrive.
- All insurgents can be persuaded to substitute nonviolent for violent resistance.

Effectiveness and Necessity

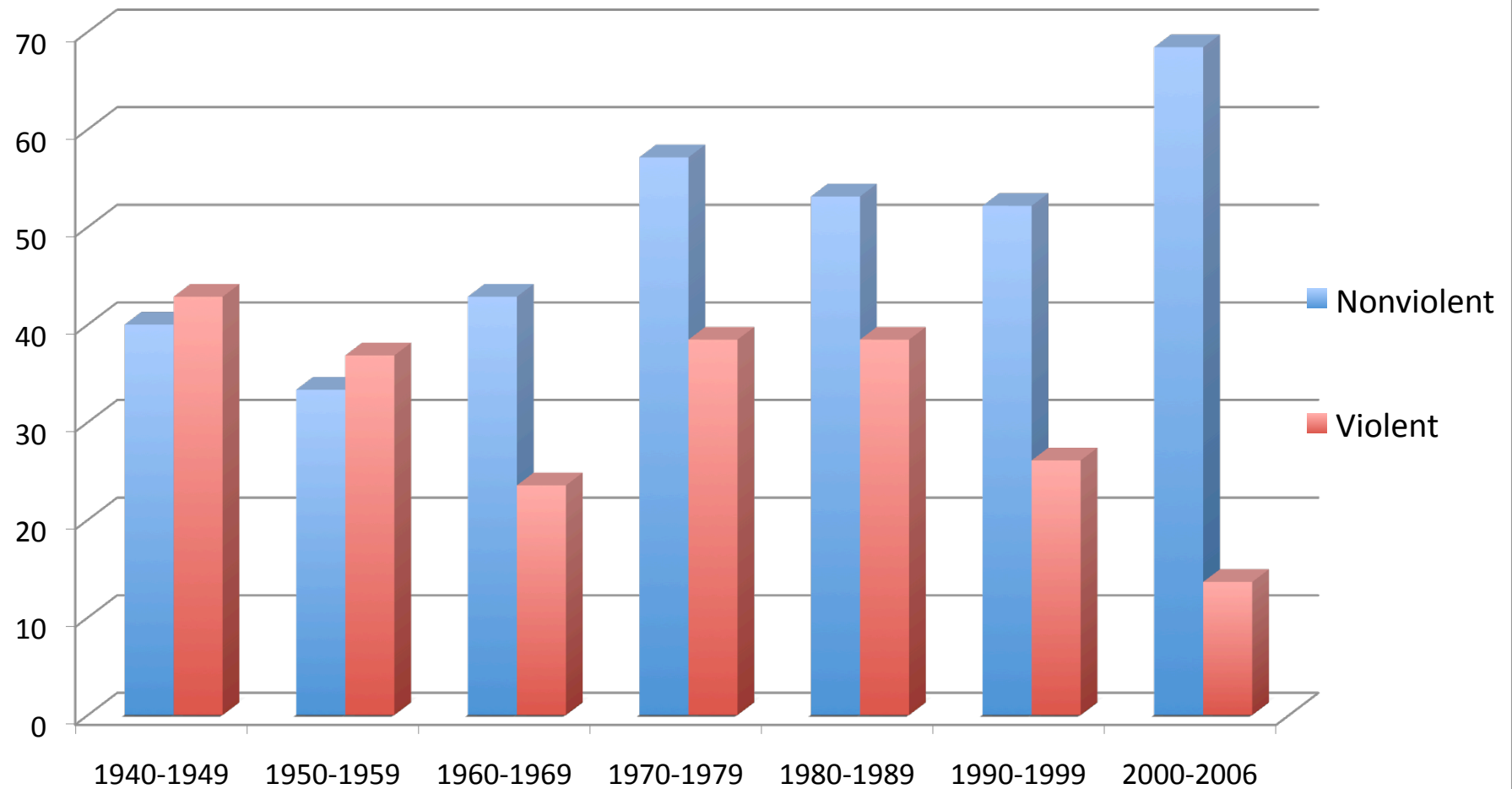
- Conventional Wisdom 1
 - Violent insurgency occurs because it succeeds.
- Conventional Wisdom 2
 - Insurgents use violence because they must.
- Empirical Record
 - NAVCO 1.0
 - 323 NV & V campaigns from 1900-2006

Figure 1. Success Rates of Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns, 1900-2006



$p=.000$

Figure 2. Success Rates by Decade, 1940-2006



$p=.000$

Conventional Wisdom 3: Last Resort

- All insurgents use nonviolent resistance first, and abandon it when it does not work.
- Empirical Record
 - Many insurgents use violence reflexively
 - Among those who do not, they abandon nonviolent resistance too soon

On the Last Resort

“It is not so easy to reach the last resort. To get there, one must indeed try everything (which is a lot of things)—and not just once, as if a political party or movement might organize a single demonstration, fail to win immediate victory, and claim that it is now justified in moving on to murder....It is by no means clear when they run out of options....What exactly did they try when they were trying everything?”

—Michael Walzer

Conventional Wisdom 4: Brutality

- Nonviolent resistance movements must adopt violence to take on brutal regimes.
- Empirical Record
 - Nonviolent campaigns facing repression are over 46% likely to succeed
 - Backfire
 - Unsustainable repression
 - Abandoning nonviolent discipline can undermine backfire

Figure 3. The Effects of Campaign Membership on the Probability of Success

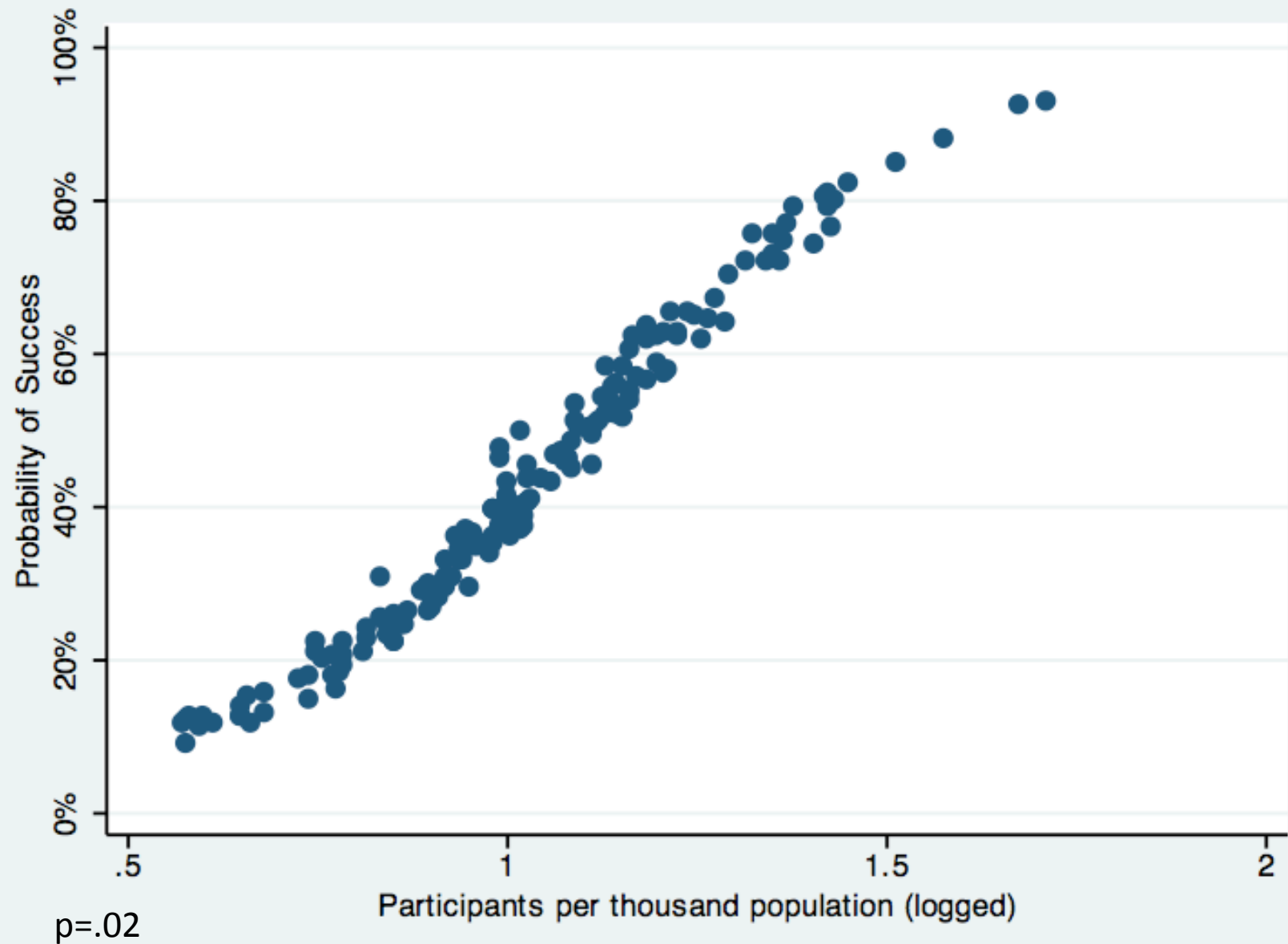
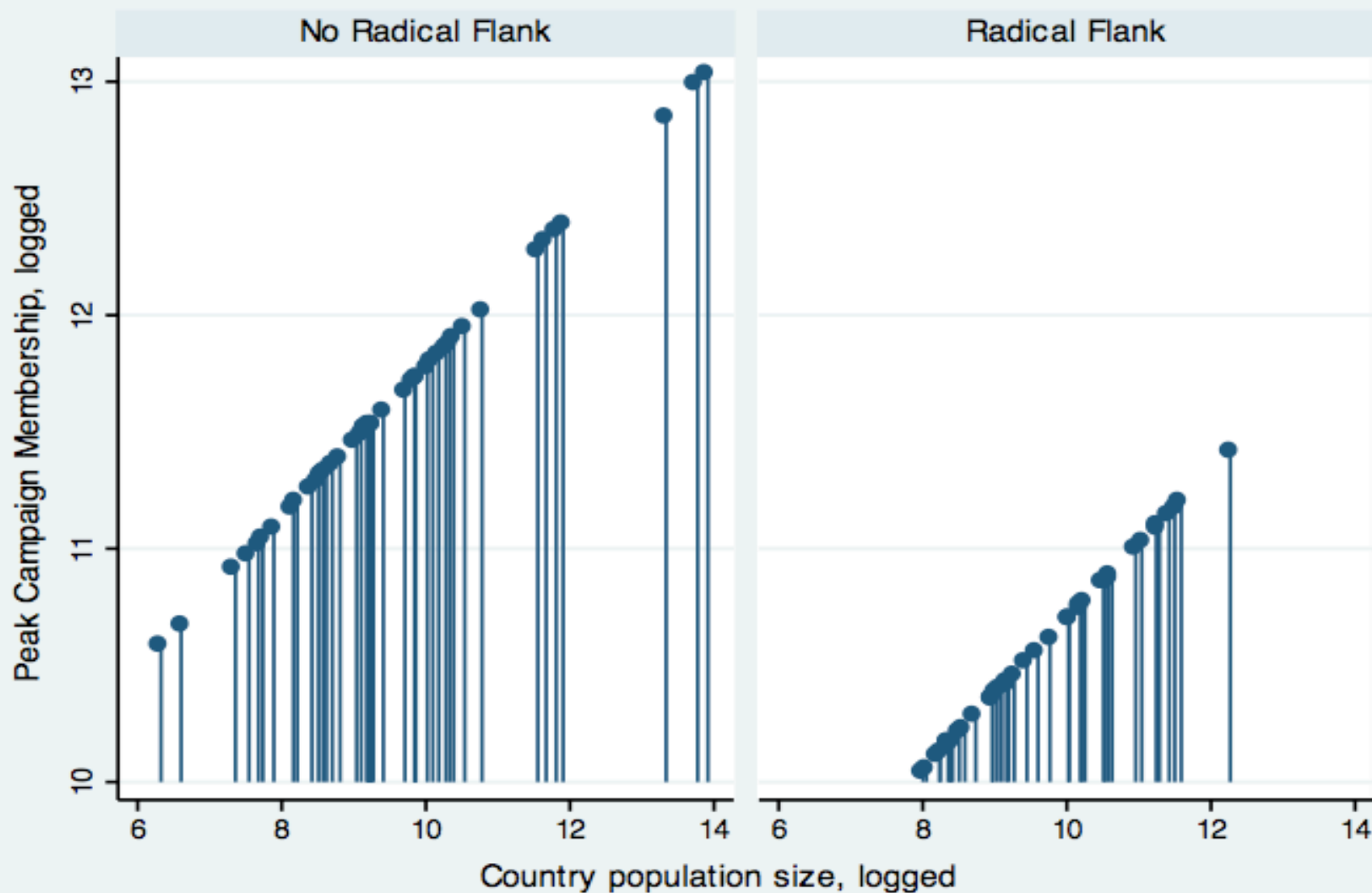


Figure 4. The Effects of Radical Flank on Campaign Participation



$p=.05$

Some Options for Responding to Brutality



Shift Nonviolent
Methods

Maintain Status
Quo

Retreat

Respond with
Violence

Methods of
Concentration

Methods of
Dispersion

Conventional Wisdom 5: Decisive Victory

- Societies need quick and decisive victories to be stable enough for democracy to thrive.
- Empirical Record
 - Regardless of duration, violent campaigns lead to “structural violence”
 - Nonviolent resistance enhances post-conflict governance and stability

Post-Conflict Regime Type

	Violent Campaigns	Nonviolent Campaigns
Probability of Being a Democracy Five Years after the Conflict Has Ended	4%	41%

P=.000

Post-Conflict Civil War Onset

	Violent Campaigns	Nonviolent Campaigns
Probability of Experiencing a Civil War within Ten Years of the End of the Conflict	43%	28%

P=.07

Conventional Wisdom 6: The Impressionable Insurgent

- All insurgents can be persuaded to substitute nonviolent for violent resistance.
- Empirical Record
 - Need for further research
 - Variation across groups?



Typology of Insurgent Impressionability

	Rational Insurgent	Semi-Rational Insurgent	Non-Rational Insurgent
Goals	Limited	Limited	Maximalist
Notion of success	Goal achievement	Organizational survival	Goal achievement
Purpose of violence	Instrumental	Demonstrative	Exterminatory
Probability of NV substitution	High	Contingent on competition	Low

A New Conventional Wisdom?

- Violent resistance is ineffective relative to nonviolent alternatives, and usually is unnecessary
- Nonviolent resistance is often effective against brutal regimes, and armed wings don't help
- Nonviolent resistance produces superior social and political outcomes—even when it fails
- Some insurgents may substitute nonviolent resistance for violent insurgency, but others must be isolated rather than persuaded

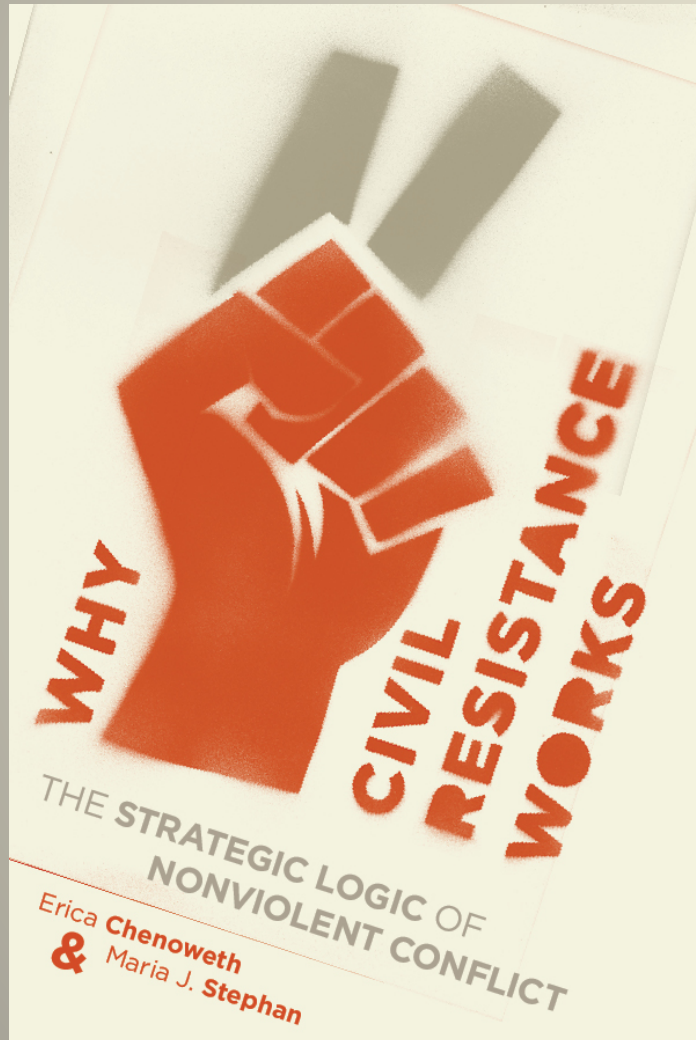
Barriers to Changing the Discourse

- Misconceptions of nonviolent resistance as “weak” or “passive”
- Need to make sense of violence
- Attribution errors
- Emphasis on “structural conditions” as predictors of violence
- Endurance of perceived benefits of violence
 - Outbidding, spoiling, social cohesion, “manhood,” personal liberation, various cultural referents
- Sunk costs and high barriers to exit within violent movements

Toward a New Conventional Wisdom

- **Reject** the “old” conventional wisdom
- **Publicize** the canon on nonviolent resistance
- **Challenge** popular perceptions and depictions
- **Demand** accurate and comprehensive media coverage
- **Dramatize** the short- and long-term costs of violence
- **Persuade** impressionable insurgents
- **Express** solidarity with civil resistance
- **Teach** nonviolent methods
- **Support** further research

Questions?



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