

**Authors**

Christopher Blattman  
The University of Chicago

From Violence to Voting:  
War and political participation in Uganda\*

Christopher Blattman  
Yale University<sup>†</sup>

March 2009

\* **Acknowledgements:** I want to thank Justin Armit, my co-Investigator on the Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY). For comments I also thank Robert Bates, Christopher Coffin, Malcolm Humphreys, David Laitin, Dyan Maranan, Edward Miguel, Betty Levy Polack, Gérard Roland, David Roodman, Cyrus Samii, Chris Udry, and Jeremy Weinstein, several anonymous referees, and seminar participants at Yale University, Columbia University, ICARES, and CGD. For data collection I thank Roger Horon, Olex Gottfay, the SWAY field research assistants, AVSI Uganda, and UNICEF Uganda. Military access during data collection was provided by the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF). The survey was funded by grants from UNICEF (via AVSI Uganda), the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (via the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center), the Russell Sage Foundation, the International Peace Research Association Foundation, the UC Berkeley Center for African Studies, and the UC Berkeley Institute for Enterprise and Business Research.

<sup>†</sup> Contact: Yale University, Department of Political Science, 77 Prospect Street, P.O. Box 208208, New Haven, CT 06520-8209; t (203) 432-3347; cblattman@yale.edu.

## From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda

What is the political legacy of violent conflict? I present evidence for a link from past violence to increased political engagement among ex-combatants. The evidence comes from northern Uganda, where rebel recruitment generated quasi-experimental variation in who was conscripted by abduction. Survey data suggest that abduction leads to substantial increases in voting and community leadership, largely due to elevated levels of violence witnessed. Meanwhile, abduction and violence do not appear to affect non-political participation. These patterns are not easily explained by conventional theories of participation, including mobilization by elites, differential costs, and altruistic preferences. Qualitative interviews suggest that violence may lead to personal growth and political activation, a possibility supported by psychological research on the positive effects of traumatic events. While the generalizability of these results requires more evidence to judge, the findings challenge our

understanding of political behavior and point to important new avenues of research.

March 01, 2009