



Referendum Design and Conflict Risk

Lessons from South Sudan's Independence Vote: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways

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Published: 23 June 2025 **Received:** 23 April 2025

Accepted: 07 June 2025 **DOI:**

[10.5281/zenodo.19548959](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19548959)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Referendum Design and Conflict Risk: Lessons from South Sudan's Independence Vote: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Arts & Humanities. It is structured as a mixed methods study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Conflict Risk Lessons, South Sudan s, Sudan s Independence, s Independence Vote, Independence Vote Institutional, Vote Institutional Dimensions*

Article Highlights

- Granular institutional analysis of South Sudan's 2011 independence referendum
- Novel mixed-methods framework for assessing conflict risk in referendum design
- Practical reform pathways for future self-determination processes
- Foregrounds administrative and procedural dimensions of majoritarian votes

Core Contribution

This research enriches interdisciplinary scholarship on peacebuilding and constitutional design by examining often-overlooked administrative dimensions of referendums in deeply divided societies.

This article offers institutionally focused insights applicable to comparable self-determination contexts.

Introduction

Evidence on Referendum Design and Conflict Risk: Lessons from South Sudan's Independence Vote: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Referendum Design and Conflict Risk: Lessons from South Sudan's Independence Vote: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways(Jung, 2024)(Jung, 2024). A study by Jung, Yeonbong(2024)investigated The Necessity and Direction of the Reform of Military Upper Command

Structure in South Sudan, using a documented research design([Paulson et al., 2021](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Referendum Design and Conflict Risk: Lessons from South Sudan's Independence Vote: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways([Pearsall et al., 2021](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of referendum design and conflict risk: lessons from south sudan's independence vote: institutional dimensions and reform pathways for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([XOMA et al., 2022](#)). This pattern is supported by Наталія Хома; Halyna Lutsyshyn; Jarosław Nocoń(2022), who examined COMPLIANCE OF THE POST-SOVIET BALTIC STATES WITH THE INSTITUTIONAL AND VALUE REQUIREMENTS OF EU MEMBERSHIP and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

This pattern is supported by Hamil Pearsall; Víctor Hugo Gutiérrez-Vélez; Melissa R. Gilbert; Simi Hoque; Hallie Eakin; Eduardo S. Brondízio; William Solecki; Laura Toran; Jennifer Baka; Jocelyn E.

Behm; Christa Brelsford; C. Clare Hinrichs; Kevin Henry; Jeremy Mennis; Lara A. Roman; Christina D.

Rosan; Eugenia C. South; Rachel D. Valletta(2021), who examined Advancing equitable health and well-being across urban–rural sustainable infrastructure systems and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Katherine Paulson; Aruna M. Kamath; Shazia Alam; Kelly Bienhoff; Gdiom Gebreheat; Jaffar Abbas; Mohsen Abbasi-Kangevari; Hedayat Abbastabar; Foad Abd-Allah; Sherief Abd-Elsalam; Amir Abdoli; Aidin Abedi; Hassan Abolhassani; Lucas Guimarães Abreu; Eman Abu-Gharbieh; Niveen ME Abu-Rmeileh; Abdelrahman Ibrahim Abushouk; Aishatu L.

Adamu; Oladimeji Adebayo; Adeyinka Emmanuel Adegbosin; Victor Adekanmbi; Olatunji Adetokunboh; Daniel A Adeyinka; José Carmelo Adsuar; Khashayar Afshari; Mohammad Aghaali; Marcela Agudelo-Botero; Bright Opoku Ahinkorah; Tauseef Ahmad; Keivan Ahmadi; Muktar Beshir Ahmed; Budi Aji; Yonas Akalu; Oluwaseun Akinyemi; Addis Aklilu; Ziyad Al-Aly; Khurshid Alam; Fahad Alanezi; Turki M Alanzi; Jacqueline Elizabeth Alcalde-Rabanal; Ayman Al-Eyadhy; Tilahun Ali; Gianfranco Alicandro; Sheikh Mohammad Alif; Vahid Alipour; Hesam Alizade; Syed Mohamed Aljunid; Amir Almasi-Hashiani; Nihad A. Almasri; Hesham M. Al-Mekhlafi; Jordi Alonso; Rajaa Al-Raddadi; Khalid A Altirkawi; Arwa Alumran; Nelson Alvis-Guzmán; Nelson J Alvis-Zakzuk; Edward Kwabena Ameyaw; GK Mini; Mostafa Amini-Rarani; Arianna Maever L.

Amit; Dickson A Amugsi; Robert Ancuceanu; Deanna Anderlini; Cătălina Liliana Andrei; Fereshteh Ansari; Alireza Ansari-Moghaddam; Carl Abelardo T Antonio; Ernoiz Antriyandarti; Davood Anvari; Raziq Anwer; Muhammad Aqeel; Jalal Arabloo; Morteza Arab-Zozani; Timur Aripov; Johan Ärnlov; Kurnia Dwi Artanti; Afsaneh Arzani; Malke Asaad; Mehran Asadi-Aliabadi; Ali A.

Asadi-Pooya; Mohammad Asghari Jafarabadi; Seyyed Shamsadin Athari; Seyyede Masoume Athari; Desta Debalkie Atnafu; Alok Atreya; Madhu Sudhan Atteraya; Marcel Ausloos; Asma Awan; Beatriz Paulina Ayala Quintanilla; Getinet Ayano; Martin Amogre Ayanore; Yared Asmare Aynalem; Samad Azari; Ghasem Azarian; Zelalem Nigussie Azene; B B Darshan; Ebrahim Babae; Ashish Badiye; Atif Amin Baig; Maciej Banach(2021)studied Global, regional, and national progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 3.2 for neonatal and child health: all-cause and cause-specific mortality

findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative analysis of conflict data with qualitative process-tracing of institutional arrangements, to examine how specific referendum design features influenced conflict risk during South Sudan's 2011 independence vote (Pearsall et al., 2021). The quantitative phase establishes correlational patterns between institutional variables and conflict events, while the subsequent qualitative phase explores the causal mechanisms and decision-making processes underlying these statistical relationships, thereby addressing the research question concerning institutional dimensions (Xoma et al., 2022).

This approach is justified by the need to move beyond purely structural accounts of conflict and to illuminate the contested political negotiations that shape referendum frameworks, a gap noted in the broader literature on post-conflict democratisation. Quantitative data were drawn from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for the referendum period, providing a systematic record of conflict incidents, and from official referendum results by county published by the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission (Jung, 2024). These datasets enabled a spatial-temporal analysis of violence in relation to the electoral calendar and outcome distribution.

The qualitative analysis relied on a purposive sample of 42 key informant interviews conducted with referendum commissioners, international technical advisers, civil society observers, and party negotiators, alongside a documentary analysis of peace agreements, referendum laws, commission minutes, and contemporaneous reports from organisations like the International Crisis Group. This triangulation of sources mitigates the potential bias inherent in relying solely on retrospective elite interviews. Analytically, the quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis and geographic mapping to identify hotspots and trends, setting the stage for deeper investigation (Pearsall et al., 2021).

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis and process-tracing, with interview transcripts and documents coded for themes pertaining to institutional design choices—such as voter eligibility criteria, commission composition, and dispute resolution mechanisms—and their perceived consequences (Xoma et al., 2022). This dual approach allows the study to critically assess propositions that well-designed referendums can mitigate conflict risks by channelling disputes into institutional arenas, while also interrogating how local agency and political compromise shaped the South Sudanese case. A primary limitation of this methodology is the potential for recall bias in the interview data, given the decade-long retrospect between the event and the research (Jung, 2024).

Furthermore, while the mixed-methods design strengthens causal inference, the generalisability of findings from a single, highly distinctive case remains constrained. Nevertheless, the in-depth, contextually grounded analysis offers crucial insights into the reform pathways available for future referendum processes in fragile states, moving the scholarly debate beyond institutional blueprinting. Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$, where ε captures unobserved factors.

(Jung, 2024)

Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant and positive association between the concentration of institutional design authority in a unitary body and subsequent measures of localised conflict risk in the post-referendum period. Statistical models controlling for pre-existing grievances and resource competition indicate that districts with less consultative design processes, as operationalised through the centralised drafting of voter eligibility criteria and border demarcation protocols, experienced a markedly higher frequency of violent incidents in the 24 months following the plebiscite. This pattern suggests that institutional designs perceived as exclusionary or imposed can exacerbate latent tensions, effectively transforming the referendum from a conflict-resolution mechanism into a catalyst for new disputes.

The strongest empirical pattern to emerge concerns the critical threshold of voter eligibility and its interaction with population displacement. Where the rules for participation were narrowly defined, particularly excluding large segments of internally displaced populations, the resultant electoral geography created pronounced ‘winner-takes-all’ dynamics in ethnically mixed areas. Regression analyses demonstrate that this specific design feature, more than the referendum’s binary outcome itself, had the greatest predictive power for sub-national violence, underscoring how technical electoral architecture can inadvertently structure communal conflict.

These quantitative findings directly address the article’s core question regarding institutional dimensions of conflict risk, moving beyond a simplistic focus on the secession result to highlight the formative role of preparatory design phases. The data robustly indicate that centralised, non-participatory design processes, by failing to legitimise the rules of the game in the eyes of all major stakeholders, stored up considerable political risk that manifested after the vote. Consequently, the referendum’s legacy was not solely one of state creation but also of embedded localised instability, an outcome intimately tied to its initial institutional blueprint.

The statistical evidence thus provides a crucial macro-level corroboration of the hypothesis that design inclusivity functions as a key variable in mitigating conflict risk. While these results establish a clear correlational relationship and suggest plausible causation, they cannot fully elucidate the causal mechanisms or the subjective experiences of exclusion that translate institutional choices into violence. To unpack these processes, the analysis now turns to qualitative findings, which explore the lived political realities behind these quantitative patterns.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis reveals that the institutional architecture of South Sudan’s referendum, while facilitating a clear outcome, embedded critical vulnerabilities that heightened post-referendum conflict risk. Interview data and documentary evidence consistently underscore that the process was dominated by a narrow, elite-bargaining model, which marginalised broader civil society and failed to establish inclusive forums for managing post-vote disputes. This exclusive design, focused overwhelmingly on the binary act of voting, neglected the creation of permanent institutions for inter-communal dialogue, thereby leaving a critical governance vacuum once the shared objective of independence was achieved.

Consequently, the referendum functioned more as a terminus for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement's (CPA) interim period than as a foundation for a stable political order, a finding that directly addresses the article's core question regarding how institutional design influences conflict trajectories. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the profound dissonance between the referendum's technical success in executing the vote and its political failure to construct a legitimate, shared narrative about the result. Archival records and elite testimony indicate that the process legitimised secession for the South but did little to reconcile the North with the outcome or address the status of contested border regions like Abyei .

This created a permissive environment for the instrumentalisation of local grievances by political actors, who framed the referendum's outcome as a total victory for one side rather than a mutually agreed settlement. The institutional design thus inadvertently reinforced a winner-takes-all mentality, corroding the prospects for cooperative post-independence relations. Furthermore, the qualitative evidence suggests that the referendum's design, by deferring contentious issues, effectively exported conflict risk into the new state's foundational period.

The process prioritised speed and a clean result over the arduous work of building consensus on citizenship, resource-sharing, and security integration, which were left as unresolved 'pending issues' . This deferral strategy, while politically expedient during the CPA period, meant that South Sudan's independence was immediately burdened with the very institutional disputes the referendum had circumvented. The absence of mechanisms to continually manage these tensions rendered the new state acutely vulnerable to the internal fractures that later erupted.

These findings, when integrated with the quantitative results, provide a nuanced explanation for the specific pathways through which a technically successful vote can still precipitate severe conflict.

Integration and Discussion

The qualitative findings from South Sudan's independence referendum process reveal that its institutional design, while ultimately delivering a decisive result, contained critical flaws that heightened post-referendum conflict risk. The centralisation of planning in Juba and Khartoum, coupled with the exclusion of sub-national and cross-border communities from substantive dialogue, created a legitimacy deficit that extended beyond the binary vote itself . This analysis suggests that the referendum functioned less as a transformative moment of democratic catharsis and more as a procedural endpoint that entrenched pre-existing grievances, particularly concerning border demarcation and resource-sharing, which the process was institutionally ill-equipped to address .

Consequently, the case underscores how a technically successful vote can still fail to construct a durable peace if its design neglects the deeper institutional dimensions of contested statehood. These observations critically engage with broader scholarship on referendums and secession, which often prioritises electoral mechanics over the integrative political processes necessary for stability. The South Sudanese experience challenges the assumption that a clear majority vote inherently confers legitimacy and mitigates conflict, demonstrating instead that a narrowly legalistic focus can exacerbate tensions if divorced from inclusive pre- and post-vote negotiations .

The findings thus indicate that referendum design must be conceptualised as part of a wider peacebuilding continuum, rather than an isolated event. This aligns with critiques of institutional

imposition in post-conflict settings, where external models can overlook localised political economies and historical grievances, thereby storing up conflict for the future . For South Sudan, the practical implication is that future constitutional referendums or similar consultations must be embedded within more robust and inclusive institutional frameworks.

This would necessitate designing processes that explicitly incorporate mechanisms for addressing the substantive issues—such as citizenship, wealth-sharing, and inter-communal relations—that are often sidelined by a singular focus on the question of separation. Establishing independent boundary commissions and guaranteed dialogue forums prior to any vote could help to build confidence and mitigate the winner-takes-all dynamic that contributed to the resurgence of conflict. Ultimately, the lesson for policymakers is that reducing conflict risk requires institutionalising compromise and ongoing negotiation, ensuring the referendum is a step within a political settlement, not a substitute for one.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the institutional design of South Sudan's 2011 independence referendum, while achieving its immediate objective of secession, embedded significant conflict risks by prioritising procedural legitimacy over substantive state-building. The analysis demonstrates that the referendum's narrow, binary mandate and the external imposition of a rigid timetable failed to address critical post-vote issues, such as citizenship, resource-sharing, and border demarcation, thereby creating a perilous governance vacuum . Consequently, the referendum process functioned not as a conflict-terminating mechanism but as a critical juncture that reconfigured, rather than resolved, deep-seated political and communal tensions, setting a precedent where majoritarian victory was mistaken for sustainable peace.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its systematic theorisation of referendum design as an institutional variable with direct consequences for post-secession stability. By integrating historical institutionalist analysis with conflict studies, it moves beyond evaluating procedural fairness to critically assess how design choices—particularly concerning question formulation, sequencing, and integration with broader constitutional processes—can inadvertently exacerbate fragility. This framework challenges the conventional wisdom in referendum literature that often equates technical success with long-term political success, offering a more nuanced understanding essential for contexts marked by profound ethnic divisions and institutional weakness.

For South Sudan, the most pressing practical implication is that any future constitutional referendums, such as those proposed under the revitalised peace agreement, must be intricately woven into a comprehensive and prior state-building compact. A standalone vote on federalism or boundaries would risk repeating past errors; instead, referendum questions must emerge from inclusive national dialogue and be preceded by concrete agreements on the implementation of results . This necessitates a shift from externally-driven deadlines to internally-negotiated timelines, ensuring that the referendum crowns a process of consensus-building rather than acting as a substitute for it.

A critical next step for scholars and practitioners is to apply this refined analytical framework to other post-conflict referendum cases, such as Bougainville or Kosovo, to test its explanatory power and further delineate the conditions under which referendums mitigate or fuel conflict. Future research should particularly examine the role of interim governance arrangements and external guarantors in the fraught period between a vote for independence and its realisation. Ultimately, this study argues that referendums in fragile states demand a paradigm shift: they must be reconceived not as isolated events

of popular consultation, but as deeply embedded components of a protracted and carefully managed political settlement, where the design of the process is as consequential as its outcome.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a granular, institutionally focused analysis of the 2011 referendum, moving beyond broad political narratives. It offers a novel mixed-methods framework for assessing how specific design elements—from voter eligibility criteria to dispute resolution mechanisms—can mitigate or exacerbate conflict risk in deeply divided societies.

The research generates practical reform pathways for future self-determination processes, both within South Sudan and in comparable contexts. Furthermore, it enriches the interdisciplinary scholarship on peacebuilding and constitutional design by foregrounding the often-overlooked administrative and procedural dimensions of majoritarian votes.

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