

# Beyond the ballot box: the effect of election violence on electoral participation in Africa

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## Abstract

**Abstract** How does fear of election violence affect electoral participation? We study how fear of election violence affects different forms of political participation important during electoral processes in African democracies. While the literature has focused almost exclusively on the way that election violence impedes voting, we argue that voting is not the only or even the most affected form of participation depressed by fear of violence. Instead, fear of violence is more likely to depress key pre-electoral forms of participation, such as campaign participation and public political deliberation. Empirically, we rely on experimental and observational survey data of almost 3,000 randomly selected respondents in Lusaka, Zambia. We find that respondents report a lower willingness to engage in pre-electoral forms of participation when the hypothetical electoral environment is more violent. When such violence is present, they also assess the physical risk of participating in such activities as higher. Moreover, violence reduces pre-electoral forms of participation more than turnout. We corroborate these survey experimental findings with observational data. Our findings contribute to a fuller appreciation of the way that violence erodes the quality of democracy and exacerbates political inequalities.

**Keywords** election, violence, participation, Africa, Zambia, voting

How does fear of election violence affect electoral participation and, in extension, the quality of African democracy? A functioning democracy requires that citizens can freely engage in the electoral process, not only through the narrow act of casting a ballot, but also as active participants in political discussions and mobilization (Dahl, 1971). A democracy built only on voting is shallow, but a free and vibrant campaign environment allows citizens to seek information from various channels and consider different democratic alternatives. However, election violence threatens the quality of democracy and satisfaction with democracy (Birch et al., 2020; von Borzyskowski, 2019, p. 25–28; von Borzyskowski et al., 2021).

To the extent that the literature on electoral violence has researched the participatory effects of violence, it has focused almost exclusively on turnout. Looking at turnout, existing studies are inconclusive. While some research has found a depressing effect of violence on turnout, others fail to find such effects or have even argued that violence may be used to motivate turnout (e.g.,

Bekoe & Burchard, 2017; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2020; Gutiérrez-Romero & Lebas, 2020; Young, 2019). However, with an exclusive focus on turnout, we still lack a full understanding of the participatory effects of violence and how violence affects other electoral activities besides turnout. Some qualitative case-studies have alluded to the use of violence to “de-campaign” political opponents (e.g., Bob-Milliar, 2014; Makube, 2002; Ndegwa, 1998). However, less research exists that theoretically juxtaposes and causally identifies the effect of violence on different forms of participation.

In this paper, we argue that a narrow focus on turnout as the sole form of political participation severely underestimates the ways in which violence shapes electoral environments. Moreover, in Africa, where electoral campaigns are highly participatory events, it misconstrues the nature of political mobilization and persuasion. Even in cases where actors unsuccessfully deploy violence to depress turnout, democratic participation may suffer. We thus ask how fear of election violence affects *different* forms of electoral participation. Election violence may reduce turnout, as previously acknowledged. However, the secret ballot and high levels of monitoring on election day largely shield voters from individually targeted attacks. Many other important forms of pre-electoral participation in Africa, on the other hand, are often

<sup>1</sup> Election violence is the use (or threat) of physical force before, during, or after elections to purposefully affect the process and outcomes of elections, involving coercive acts against humans, property, and infrastructure (Birch et al., 2020).

less monitored but still incentivize citizens to publicly display their partisan preferences.

It is important to study forms of pre-electoral participation for two reasons. First, they are *intrinsically* important. Active participation in campaigns and public deliberation are key parts of a functioning democracy. This is particularly true in Africa, where campaigns are participatory events built on strong grassroots mobilization. Second, pre-electoral participation is often crucial from an *instrumental* perspective. In non-nationalized electoral systems, electoral mobilization, political identities, and electoral narratives are shaped locally through grassroots campaigns and active citizen involvement (Kramon, 2018; Muñoz, 2019; Paget, 2019; Wahman, 2023). Pre-electoral campaigns can shape turnout and vote choice. If parties/candidates are less able to actively rally supporters in the months before the election, they also have lower chances at the ballot box.

Empirically, we analyze experimental and observational survey data from the capital of Zambia, Lusaka. Zambia is a country that has not experienced extreme levels of election violence by African comparison. Nevertheless, low-scale violence is common, and citizens' fear in relation to elections is high. We surveyed almost 3,000 randomly selected respondents across the city seven months after the 2021 elections. We employ a survey experiment where we randomly vary information about the level of violence in an electoral environment as well as different forms of participation. While we cannot randomly assign fear, we propose fear (physical threat perception) as a mechanism related to violent election environments.

The results from our pre-registered survey experiment show that election violence affects political engagement: citizens report that they are significantly less likely to participate in pre-electoral activities, such as attending rallies, discussing politics in public, and wearing party paraphernalia if a campaign features high levels of violence. Respondents also state that they would be less likely to vote when an election campaign has a lot of violence. However, the size of these effects varies. Two pre-electoral forms of political participation particularly stand out: attending rallies and wearing party regalia. Both activities are significantly more affected by violence than voting. Discussing politics in public—an activity where voters have more control over how their participation is perceived and who registers it—is not significantly more affected than voting.

To further test our experimental findings, we analyze observational survey data. In line with our experimental results, we find that voters in the 2021 Zambian election were not particularly fearful of voting, but highly feared engaging in pre-electoral participation. Opposition supporters were particularly likely to abstain from pre-electoral forms of participation. We also find that voters who feared election violence a lot were significantly less likely to wear party regalia and discuss politics in public. However, fearing violence did not correlate with citizens' (self-reported) turnout.

These findings have important implications for debates on democracy, political participation, electoral manipulation, and election violence in Africa and beyond. The findings suggest that fear shapes how and how much ordinary citizens participate in politics. As such, reducing election violence is not only a matter of ensuring security, but also safeguarding the quality of democracy. This is true even in countries like Zambia, where violence has not been particularly high-scale, and we expect that this also holds across the world where local mobilization happens and fear

of election violence is a relevant feature. Literature on election violence needs to appropriately acknowledge how election violence distorts political competition, including its consequences on local electoral environments. The findings also highlight the need for electoral violence research to understand the effects on political participation broadly and expand such conceptualizations beyond voting.

## Electoral participation and election violence in Africa and beyond

Electoral participation is a subcategory of political participation and refers to forms of political participation directly related to the electoral process. Electoral participation is often conflated with the act of voting, but in fact, citizens participate in elections in many ways beyond (and long before) the act of casting a vote.

In Africa and many other parts of the developing world, the active participation of citizens is crucial for electoral processes. While some accounts of African elections have understood African elections as predictable ethnic headcounts, others have emphasized the importance of grassroots campaigns for mobilizing voters and molding partisan identities (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023; Brierley & Kramon, 2020; Cheeseman et al., 2020; Jöst et al., 2024; Krönke et al., 2022; Lynch, 2023; Paget et al., 2023; Wahman, 2023; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). Indeed, Paget (2019) describes how African campaigns are built predominantly on locally organized ground campaigns. This differs from predominantly national modes of communication and makes African elections highly participatory events on the local level, with voters actively engaging in the campaigning period. For instance, using Afrobarometer data, Krönke et al. (2022) show that more than a third of African citizens participated in at least one campaign meeting during their country's last national election.

For voters, electoral participation offers personal benefits and enhances their sense of political efficacy. Political participation is associated with a sense of civic virtue. African voters attach great moral significance to active participation (Cheeseman et al., 2020) and demand accountability and social recognition from politicians (Klaus et al., 2023). Election campaigns are also associated with clientelism, and have become prime sites to extract direct material benefits from politicians (Kramon, 2018; Wantchekon, 2003).

For political parties, grassroots participation injects energy, a sense of viability, and visibility into political campaigns. Parties in Africa often lack strong and distinctive party platforms. Parties forge strong links to local communities through broad, inclusive campaigns. In decentralized campaigns, parties can tailor messages to appeal to local issues, and citizen participation strengthens political identities and create a sense of collective purpose (Krönke et al., 2022; Paget et al., 2023).

The highly participatory and localized mode of political mobilization described above is a scope condition of the central argument described in this paper. If parties do not invest heavily in mobilizing voters and voters see little use in participating beyond casting a vote, parties have less incentive to use violence to discourage pre-electoral participation. While these highly participatory election campaigns are quintessentially African, they are not uniquely so. Indeed, research on countries such as Colombia (Duque-Salazar, 2025), Turkey (Toros & Birch, 2021), and Jamaica

(Charles, 2004) suggests similar forms of political mobilization and the use of violence to curb pre-electoral participation. Thus logics and findings are likely applicable to countries outside the African context.

## How electoral violence shapes electoral participation

Election violence has been understood as a form of electoral manipulation aimed at reducing political participation (Birch, 2020; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018; Norris, 2013). If we understand the decision to participate in politics as a cost/benefit calculation, violence is supposed to increase the perceived costs of participation and make certain voters less likely to participate. However, most studies have examined participation from a narrow perspective, focusing exclusively on turnout. Parties are assumed to target core constituencies of rival parties to discourage them from voting (e.g., Collier & Vicente, 2012; Rauschenbach & Paula, 2019). Studies on turnout and voting are inconclusive. Many studies argue and find that election violence deters turnout (Gutiérrez-Romero & Lebas, 2020; Trelles & Carreras, 2012), particularly among non-co-partisan voters. Nevertheless, some studies on aggregate-level turnout and violence show no correlation between the two (Bekoe & Burchard, 2017). Furthermore, some studies find that violence can increase turnout (Burchard, 2020; Lebas, 2006).

The narrow focus on political participation as turnout is problematic because it tends to underappreciate the extent to which violence undermines other forms of participation and the outcomes of elections. A few studies have focused on the relationship between violence and a broader repertoire of participation, such as opposition partisan participation and protest in Zimbabwe (Lebas & Young, 2024; Young, 2020), and youth participation in Nigeria (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). However, none of them explicitly theorize and juxtapose different forms of participation and relate to election violence.

In the repertoire of electoral participation, there are reasons to believe that turnout would be the least affected by violence and that other forms of pre-electoral participation may be more acutely affected. First, temporally, much electoral violence happens not on election day but during the campaigning period. Figure 1 shows the distribution of election violence events in the 3 months before election day versus on election day.<sup>2</sup> Most events happen in the run-up to election day, not on election day itself—in Zambia, Africa, and the world. With high attention from the media and observers on election day, voters know from experience that election day is not the time of the electoral cycle most affected by violence and feel relatively safe to come out and cast a ballot. Second, on election day, voters are protected by the secrecy of the ballot. Given the secret ballot, brokers could observe whether a citizen voted, but they cannot tell with certainty who an individual voted for.

Voters are likely to associate the important forms of pre-electoral participation with more physical risk than voting. Violence perpetrators have been known to target campaigns to shape

electoral environments. In the pre-electoral phase, violence perpetrators (such as party activists or state security personnel) may accurately target citizens who openly support the campaign of the opposing party. Such targeted violence can suppress or even disable the campaign of opposing parties. In rural areas, locally dominant parties have often successfully created so-called “no-go zones” where violence has been used to prevent any form of electoral campaigning from minority parties (Wahman, 2023). Although harder to dominate, violence can also be used to curb pre-electoral forms of political participation in urban areas (e.g., Elfversson & Höglund, 2019). For instance, party foot soldiers have been known to operate in public spaces to harass those wearing opposition t-shirts or disrupt campaign events (Bob-Milliar, 2014).

While some voters may feel discouraged from voting when campaign environments are violent, we are likely to see even larger effects on some of the prominent pre-electoral forms of participation. Voters may decide to adopt a “silent protest” approach to politics when encountering high levels of violence; they may rationally respond by participating in voting but shunning other forms of pre-electoral participation more likely to lead to targeted repression (Siachiwena, 2021). In this scenario, we would anticipate small reduction in election day turnout and larger reduction in pre-electoral activities. We believe that the larger effect of violence on pre-electoral participation runs through the mechanism of physical risk evaluation. That is, compared to voting, voters are more likely to perceive a high physical risk of participating in pre-electoral activities. We formulate the following pre-registered hypotheses:

**H1:** Election violence should reduce citizens' willingness to engage in pre-electoral forms of electoral participation (i.e., attending a rally or campaign meeting, wearing party regalia on the street or discussing politics publicly on the street).

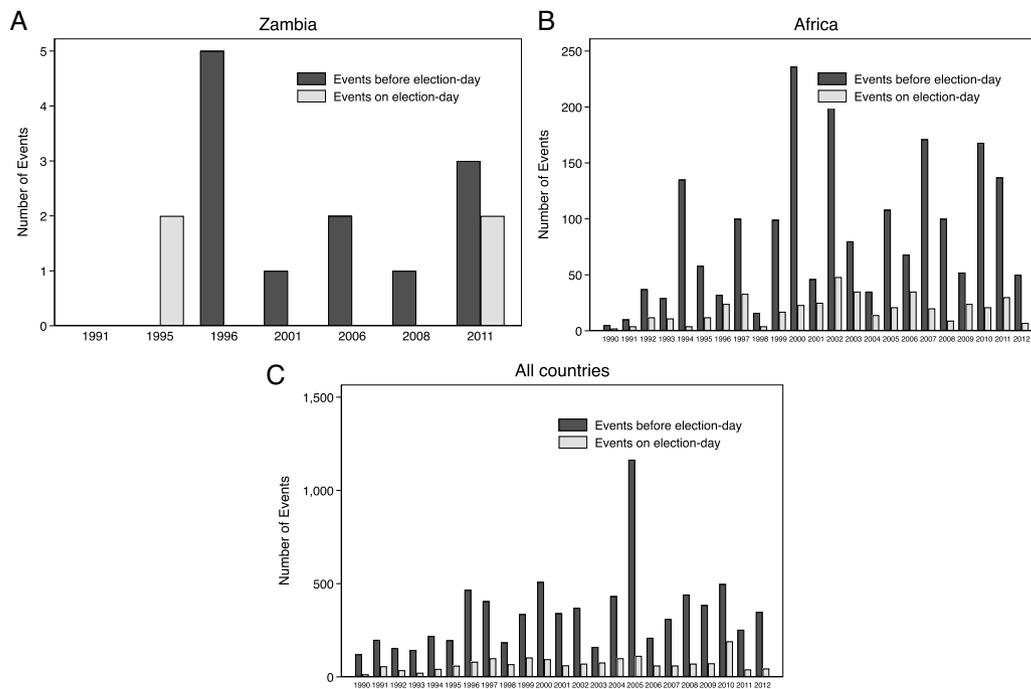
**H2:** Election violence should reduce citizens' willingness to engage in pre-electoral forms of democratic participation more than voting itself.

In our pre-registered hypotheses, we do not hypothesize differentiated effects of violence on different forms of pre-electoral participation. However, it is possible to conceive of such differences, especially since some forms of pre-electoral participation are more explicitly partisan than other forms. For instance, it is easier to conceal your partisan preference when discussing politics in public than when visiting the campaign rally of a political candidate. In the empirical section, we disaggregate the category of “pre-electoral participation” to study variations between different forms of electoral participation in this broader category.

## The case of Lusaka, Zambia

Our study concentrates on the case of Lusaka, Zambia. Most research on election violence has focused on cases with extreme levels of fatal election violence, like Kenya, Zimbabwe, India, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire (e.g., Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vicente, 2012; Lebas, 2006; Turnbull, 2020; Wilkinson, 2004). While such cases are critical from the perspective of conflict studies, they are not very typical of the average case where election violence is a factor in electoral competition. The relatively low frequency of fatal election violence in Zambia, however, is similar to about a dozen other African countries (see Online Appendix Figure A1). Lusaka

<sup>2</sup> The analysis in Figure 1 most likely overestimates the amount of election-day violence compared to pre-election violence. von Borzyskowski and Wahman (2021) show that under-reporting in media-based election violence data is higher for events occurring long before election day.



**Figure 1** Election violence before versus on the election day. *Note:* Data obtained from Daxecker et al. (2019).

has experienced fatal election violence: in 2016, police killed an opposition supporter in a protest (Wahman, 2023), and in 2021 two ruling party supporters were murdered by alleged members of the opposition (LAZ 2021) and other violence occurred around opposition party campaign events (CCMG 2021). Nevertheless, low-scale violence and intimidation had a greater impact than rare instances of high-scale violence (Wahman, 2024). Accounts from Malawi, Ghana, Tanzania, and Sierra Leone also show that violence does not have to be high-scale to shape electoral environments and possibly alter political behavior (Bangura & Söderberg Kovacs, 2018; Bob-Milliar, 2014; McLellan, 2020; Wahman, 2023).

Despite lower levels of fatal violence, fear of election violence is high in Zambia. Counter-intuitive as it might sound, this is not uncommon among African cases with low frequency fatal election violence (see Online Appendix Figure A1). Zambia illustrates the absence of a simple one-to-one relationship between manifested violence and fear of violence.

In terms of participation levels, Zambia is also fairly representative of other African countries, and political competition is significant. Zambia is an average African country regarding levels of participation in rallies and voting (see Online Appendix Figure A2). While Zambia has clear regional divisions in vote choice, Lusaka was relatively competitive in 2021, and electoral majorities varied within the city (Siachiwena & Wahman, 2024).

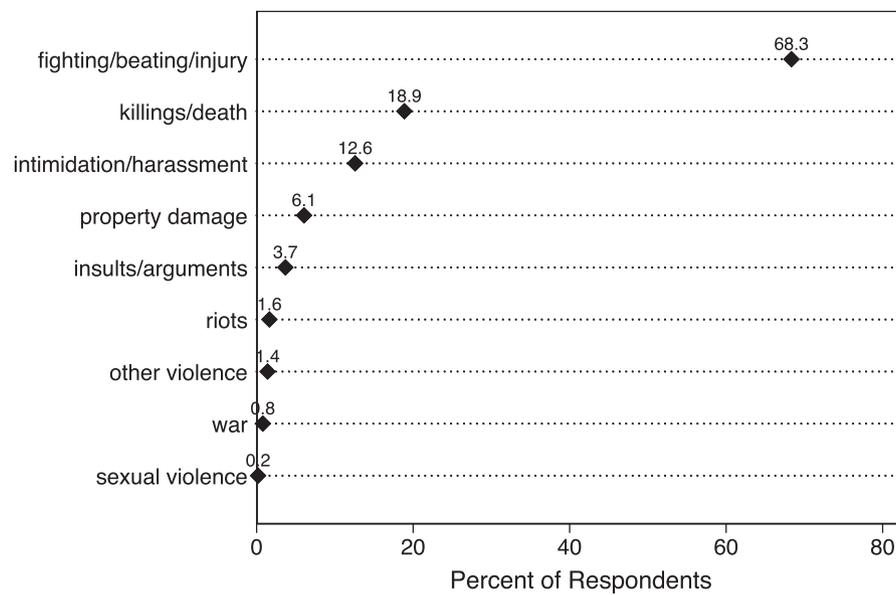
Our focus is on Lusaka, Zambia's largest city and the capital. Urban areas are renowned for their high levels of competition and ethnic heterogeneity (Elfverson, 2025; Nathan, 2019; Paller, 2019). Urban Zambia, particularly Lusaka, has also been a hotbed for electoral violence and intimidation. Consequently, urban Zambians are fearful of electoral violence. Online Appendix Figure A3 shows that 46% of urban Zambians feared election violence “a lot” compared to 23% of their rural compatriots. In rural areas, similar dynamics of fear and participation likely apply but—because

of their greater homogeneity—tend to affect a smaller share of the population.

We fielded the survey after the local, parliamentary, and presidential elections of August 2021. The 2021 elections featured two viable parties: the incumbent Patriotic Front (PF, in power since 2011) and the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND). These parties dominated both the presidential election and the parliamentary elections in almost all constituencies. Both parties had their traditional geographic strongholds, but economic mismanagement by the government had seriously damaged the standing of the PF (Beardsworth et al., 2022; Hern, 2024). Lusaka had previously been a major stronghold for the ruling party (Larmer & Fraser, 2007; Resnick, 2014) but in 2021 Lusaka (as well as the other major urban region, the Copperbelt) swung to the opposition (Siachiwena, 2021). In no small part due to the PF's loss of the urban vote, the party lost national power to the UPND. The turnover in 2021 was Zambia's third turnover since the introduction of multipartyism. Similar to the previous 2016 election, the 2021 election campaign was active and tense, with both the PF and UPND campaigning throughout the country (Beardsworth, 2020; Siachiwena, 2021).

To gauge the understanding of the concept of election violence in Zambia, we included an open-ended question at the end of our survey (detailed below) where we asked respondents to provide one or two examples of violence and intimidation that happen during elections. We coded these responses inductively. The results are in Figure 2 and show that most respondents associate election violence with low-scale, non-lethal, violence. Nevertheless, a sizable minority (18.9%) provided examples of lethal violence. Our respondents' understanding of election violence thus aligns with our conceptualization and the broader literature on this issue.

As in other countries, urban areas in Zambia have been the organizational center for political parties. Under-employed young men



**Figure 2** Examples of election violence mentioned in Lusaka.

in Lusaka's poorer neighborhoods, like Munali and Matero, have been employed by political parties to work in campaigns, often tasked with providing "security" and coercive capacity during the election period. These so-called "party cadres" have become a visible element of urban campaigns. Styled in military-style paraphernalia, they patrolled markets and townships and established permanent depots in high-density areas.

PF cadres had been known to target visible members of the opposition or diffuse opposition campaign meetings in 2016 and 2021 (Mukuntu, 2019). Cadres/supporters of the UPND were the main targets of election violence with a ratio of 2:1 over PF cadres/supporters (CCMG 2021, p. 5). The victimization of opposition supporters even resulted in the opposition itself cautioning against visible forms of political participation. Using the famous "watermelon strategy," the UPND asked its supporters to wear the PF's green paraphernalia on top of the UPND red regalia to avoid UPND supporters being exposed to violence (Wahman, 2023). Fearing PF cadres made citizens afraid to criticize the government in public and to engage in political discussions (Siachiwena, 2021).

## Data and research design

To assess our hypotheses about the effect of election violence on electoral participation, we collected individual-level survey data. We describe the experimental and observational data below, followed by the estimation strategy. The pre-registration and survey instrument are in the Online Appendix.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative to the survey experiment design used here would be a purely observational approach with aggregate-level data (e.g., correlating violence event data with participation reported in a survey in a geographic area). However, reporting biases in election violence event data are well known, and such data are unreliable in measuring local variations in violence at a low level

of spatial aggregation (von Borzyskowski & Wahman, 2021). More importantly, violence is not randomly distributed. Political agents spatially direct violence with participatory effects in mind. A correlational approach would, in other words, risk underestimating the negative effect of violence on political participation.

## Survey data

We conducted a survey with an embedded, pre-registered survey experiment using a representative sample of Lusaka, Zambia. The survey included 2,964 respondents and was fielded in March-April 2022, which was 7 months after the Zambia 2021 election. Fielding the survey outside the election period reduced security concerns for interviewers and respondents. Fielding the survey still within close temporal proximity to the election enhances respondents' ability to more accurately recall their electoral behavior.

The survey was implemented using a multi-stage sampling strategy. Within urban Lusaka, we randomly selected 25 of the 33 wards from the most recent (2010) census. These wards are located in 7 constituencies (Chawama, Kabwata, Kanyama, Lusaka Central, Mandevu, Matero, and Munali). We set the number of respondents per ward by dividing the sample size by the ward's share of the total population of all sampled wards. After sample allocation, we randomly selected 1–4 starting points per ward (depending on ward size) from which we identified households using a random walk strategy. At the household level, we randomly selected respondents using a gender quota system to ensure roughly equal numbers of men and women. Online Appendix Table A3 shows that our Lusaka sample is similar demographically to the Lusaka respondents of the nationally representative Afrobarometer surveys from 2017 and 2020. The survey was carried out in face-to-face interviews by trained enumerators employed by a local firm (Ubuntu Research). Interviews were conducted in English or Nyanja (according to the respondent's preference).

The survey had three parts: respondent demographics, a survey experiment about respondents' participation preferences, and

<sup>3</sup> See Online Appendix pages 31 and 34. The pre-registration is also available at [https://aspredicted.org/6QQ\\_KNM](https://aspredicted.org/6QQ_KNM)

then observational questions on respondents' actual participation in the 2021 election. The first part featured questions on respondents' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, partisanship, education, employment, poverty, etc.<sup>4</sup> We also measured respondents' past political behavior such as whether they voted in the most recent (August 2021) election.

The second survey part was the experiment, which allowed us to test how multiple factors causally impact individual-level attitudes about likely participation in several hypothetical election activities. Our study differs from many other conjoint designs in that our outcome question is not a forced choice (say, a choice between two candidates) but questions about likely participation and risk (Bansak et al., 2021). A forced choice would introduce unrealistic assumptions to this particular study: in real life, citizens do not choose between participating in different activities but may decide to participate in no activities or multiple activities.

We test our hypotheses by varying three attributes in a hypothetical scenario of an election event (a vignette). First, to test whether information about election violence changes individuals' willingness to engage in democratic participation, we varied the hypothetical risk of election violence. Specifically, the experiment randomizes violence as a campaign characteristic. The two levels here included "a campaign environment with no violence" (coded 0) and "a campaign environment with a lot of violence" (coded 1). We decided against anchoring the concept of "a lot of violence" with any particular example of violence (e.g., describing an incident of lethal violence). Respondents are likely to understand the term "a lot" based on their own experiences of violence in elections. Respondents with little exposure to violence are likely to have a lower threshold for "a lot" than someone with more exposure. The more open wording of the treatment allows respondents to imagine the scenario within their own social context and experience. We use the term "campaign environment," which is intentionally vague. We do not want to use a term that makes respondents associate prior violence in the scenario with any specific type of activity.

Second, we varied the types of activities; the four activities here included "voting at a polling station" (which we use as a baseline), "wearing party regalia on the street," "attending a rally or campaign meeting," and "discussing politics publicly on the street."

Third, as emphasized in the theory section, voters derive benefits from participation. To account for some of this, we vary levels of clientelism and specifically handouts (often including t-shirts, food, cash; see Kramon, 2018; Muñoz, 2019). Varying the potential benefits of participation helps mitigate confounding. Levels were "political parties have only rarely distributed handouts in this campaign" (0) and "political parties have often distributed handouts in this campaign" (1).

We randomized all attributes independently, which allows us to estimate how much weight (if any) respondents attach to each attribute.<sup>5</sup> We presented the information in text form for easier comprehension when interviewers read it out loud. The vignette prompt with randomized text [in brackets] was: "Imagine a campaign environment that had [no/a lot of] violence or intimidation. Also, political parties have [often/rarely] distributed handouts in

this campaign. And the activity you may participate in is [wearing party regalia on the street/voting at a polling station/attending a rally or campaign meeting/discussing politics publicly on the street] in your ward..." The full survey instrument is in the Online Appendix. We presented 8 vignette prompts to each of our 2,946 respondents, yielding 23,566 preference measures for participation.<sup>6</sup>

We measured the outcomes of interest right after the conjoint experiment, asking about likely participation (the ultimate outcome) and the perceived physical risk (the mechanism). Specifically, we asked "How likely would you be to participate in campaign activity [insert number], [insert activity type from treatment]?" We recorded answers on a 4-point scale: from no I would not participate (0), probably no (1), probably yes (2), to yes I would participate (3). As Zambia shows, there is no one-to-one relationship between actual violence and fear. Theoretically, we assume that it is not violence in itself that causes voters to shift their willingness to participate in political activities, but the fear that such violence generates. We cannot randomly assign fear, but we assume that in a controlled setting (such as a survey experiment) information about violence will trigger higher threat perception (fear). We therefore also include a test of the fear mechanism (perceived risk of participating in the election activity). We asked "How risky is activity [insert number]?" Possible answers were again on a 4-point scale: from not risky at all (0), a little bit risky (1), quite risky (2), to very risky (3).

We also measured respondents' attention with two manipulation checks after vignettes of activity 1 and activity 7. Each check consisted of two questions: "Before we continue, I want to make sure you understood the information correctly. Did the election campaign in this example involve intimidation?" And "did the activity involve [randomly chosen activity type]?" Both questions had answer options yes and no. We coded attentiveness on a 5-point scale (0–4), counting the number of attention checks passed. As pre-specified, we use this measure as a control variable; because this may introduce bias (Montgomery et al., 2018), we omit this control in a robustness check, with substantive results unchanged (see below).

The third part of the survey consisted of observational questions about respondents' fear and actual participation during the 2021 election. While the experiment measures willingness to participate, the observational data allow us to correlate fear of violence with self-reported actual participation. We asked "During the 2021 election, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?" This captures general fear of election violence and proxies for risk perceptions of violence. We also asked about fear of participating in specific activities: "In the 2021 election, how much did you fear being subject to election violence or intimidation if you did the following: ...?" The battery included voting, discussing politics on the street, attending a campaign rally, and wearing party regalia. Answer options to both questions were measured on a 4-point scale.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Of the 2,946 respondents, one did not respond to the participation question for activity 2, and one did not respond to the participation question for activity 4. Thus, attrition was very low, and potential fearfulness did not affect attrition. Eight tasks are on the conservative side to mitigate potential respondent fatigue, while common guidance suggests more tasks would have been possible (Bansak et al., 2021, 27).

<sup>7</sup> Not at all (0), a little bit (1), somewhat (2), a lot (3).

<sup>4</sup> Variable codings are in Online Appendix Table A1.

<sup>5</sup> Prompts are also randomized across respondents, mitigating order effects.

Lastly, we asked respondents if fearing violence made them change their behavior in the 2021 election, which types of democratic participation they engaged in,<sup>8</sup> and the participation of their social network (family and friends). This is because citizens may still engage in activities even if they are fearful of participation. For example, some people may fear intimidation on voting day but voting also means having a say in who governs, so the benefits may outweigh the risks. Descriptive statistics are in Online Appendix Table A2.

## Estimation

To examine Hypothesis 1 that election violence should reduce citizens' willingness to engage in pre-electoral forms of democratic participation, we subset the sample to the three non-voting activities (i.e., attending a rally or campaign meeting, wearing party regalia on the street or discussing politics publicly on the street). We then estimate the effect of each attribute (handouts, violence) on respondents' participation preferences and risk perception using Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) (Bansak et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2014). Using linear regression, each attribute is dummied out with the baseline value set as the omitted category. We cluster standard errors by respondent to account for non-independence of answers from the same respondent. The AMCE represents the extent to which a given level of an event attribute (e.g., violence) increases or decreases a respondent's participation preferences (or risk perception) relative to that attribute's baseline level (e.g., no violence), averaging across all other event profile attributes and all respondents. This allows us to observe whether changes in preferences for democratic participation are caused by changes in event attributes (violence, handouts). We expect that the coefficient on violence should be negative for predicting participation preferences and positive for predicting risk perceptions.

To assess Hypothesis 2 about the comparison between voting and pre-electoral forms of participation, we compare the AMCE of election violence on voting to the AMCE of election violence on the three non-voting activities (i.e., wearing party regalia, attending a campaign rally, and discussing politics on the street). We expect that the effect of election violence on the three non-voting activities is larger than the effect of election violence on voting.

As pre-specified, we control for attention level. Attentiveness does not change responses and follows common patterns (see Online Appendix Tables A4 and A5); when we drop the control in robustness checks, results are unaffected (Online Appendix Tables A11A, B). We had also pre-specified to control for any un-balanced covariates. However, balance checks in Online Appendix Table A6 show that the data are well balanced. None of the three treatment attributes are significantly correlated with relevant respondent or geographic characteristics. We thus do not control for covariates in the main analyses but introduce some in the robustness checks.

<sup>8</sup> We asked whether (1/0) they voted, discussed politics publicly, wore regalia in the street or attended a rally. For the latter two, we also asked which parties this activity related to (e.g., PF or UPND or other rally).

## Results

The empirical analyses support the argument that election violence reduces willingness to participate in election activities, and that pre-electoral forms of participation, like wearing regalia and attending rallies, are even more affected than voting. We also find support for the theorized mechanism that information about violence increases risk perception (and thus fear) of participation. We begin by discussing the experimental results and then turn to the observational data for validation.

### Experiment results: election violence reduces participation in non-voting activities more than voting itself

The full conjoint estimates are in Online Appendix Figure A4, which shows that election violence significantly reduces participation (pooling over all participation forms), and that respondents are less willing to participate in pre-electoral activities than voting. Experimental results also support the proposed mechanism that election violence increases the perceived physical risk of participating in election activities. This suggests that violence as a campaign feature strongly increases fear in citizens, making them afraid of engaging in political life and thus more likely to abstain from election activities.

Figure 3 shows tests for Hypothesis 1.<sup>9</sup> As pre-registered, we subset the sample by the three non-voting activities: attending a rally, discussing politics publicly, and wearing party regalia on the street. Figure 3 shows the coefficient estimate and 95% confidence intervals of *election violence* on the two outcomes, i.e., (a) *likely participation* and (b) *risk perception*. Each of the sample subsets is shown on the left. The dashed line indicates 0. Given the large sample size, confidence intervals are small.

The results in Figure 3A support Hypothesis 1, showing that election violence reduces citizens' willingness to engage in pre-electoral forms of electoral participation. The coefficient for *election violence* is negative and statistically significant in all four activity types. Figure 4 shows the substantive effect sizes in terms of predicted probability to participate as violence changes. Election violence—changing from “no violence” to “a lot”—reduces the willingness to attend rallies or wear party regalia by 1.7 points on a 4-point scale. For comparison, the mean reported likelihood of engaging in pre-electoral activities among respondents who were not informed about election violence is 2.18 on this scale, or just above “probably yes” (probably participating). The effect of election violence means respondents' likelihood reduces to about 0.5 on this scale, meaning definitely not” or “probably not” attending rallies or wearing party regalia. This is a meaningful change in participation. The election violence effect on discussing politics publicly or voting is somewhat lower, about 1.48 points on the same 4-point scale. One reason for the smaller effect on public discussion could be that it is less overtly linked to a particular candidate/party and perhaps more neutral or at least easier to qualify behavior than wearing party apparel or being at a rally.

Figure 3B shows the expected mirror image for risk perception, our hypothesized mechanism. For each activity type, election violence increases the perceived physical risk of participation.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed coefficient estimates are in Online Appendix Table A7.

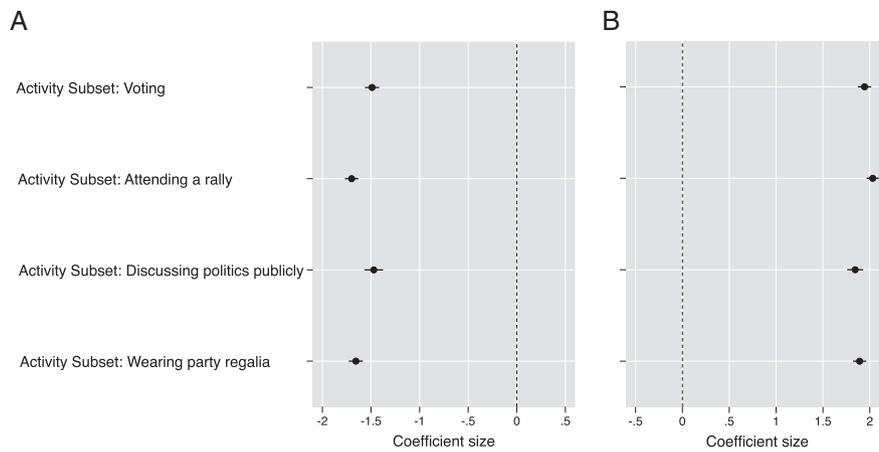


Figure 3 Effect of election violence on A) participation and B) risk, subset by activity type (Hypothesis 1).

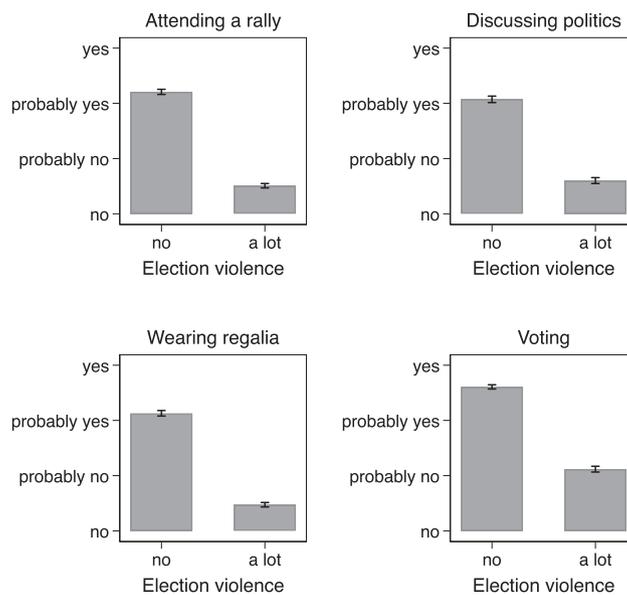


Figure 4 Substantive effect of election violence on participation.

Substantively, the effect estimates are about 1.9 points on the 4-point scale. This is again a statistically significant and meaningful change. It supports our argument that election violence heightens fear and thus reduces willingness to engage in the democratic process. This is strong support for Hypothesis 1.

To formally test Hypotheses 2, we subset the sample by voting versus pre-electoral activities and compare the effect of election violence. The result is shown in Table 1. The coefficient on election violence is negative and statistically significant for voting (model 1) and non-voting activities (model 2). As predicted, the effect estimate is significantly larger for pre-electoral activities. The formal test of the difference in coefficients returns a *p*-value of 0.0005 (reported at the bottom of Table 1). This supports Hypothesis 2. Substantively, the difference in effect sizes is 1.48 versus 1.62 on a 4-point scale; in terms of the outcome’s standard deviation, violence generates 10% more change in non-voting activities than in voting.

Figure 3 suggests that the stronger deterrent effect of election violence on pre-electoral activities (compared to voting) is mainly due to the stronger effect for wearing party regalia and attending

campaign rallies, less so for political discussions. To see these differences more explicitly, Table 2 shows the interactions between election violence and activities, where the excluded reference category is voting. Table 2 model 1 shows estimates for the dependent variable *participation*, while model 2 reports estimates for the dependent variable of *perceived risk*. Turning to the interaction effects, we see that compared to voting, election violence reduces likely participation in rallies and wearing regalia but not political discussions (two of three non-voting activities). Overall, though, the formal hypothesis testing in Table 1 supports Hypothesis 2 that as a group, pre-electoral activities are more affected by violence than voting.

To test the robustness of results for Hypotheses 1 and 2, we change the model specification in three ways. First, we change the clustering of standard errors from respondents to wards (Online Appendix Tables A9A, B). Second, we change the model estimation from OLS to ordered logit for Figure 3 (Online Appendix Table A10A). Third, we change control variables in two ways. We replicate results without the control for attention level (Online

**Table 1** Election violence reduces likely participation in pre-electoral activities more than in voting (Hypothesis 2).

	<b>Model 1 Participation Voting</b>	<b>Model 2 Participation Non-voting activities</b>
<b>Handouts</b>	0.130*** (0.036)	0.088** (0.027)
<b>Election violence</b>	-1.489*** (0.037)	-1.621*** (0.028)
<b>Attention checks passed</b>	0.016 (0.013)	0.004 (0.010)
<b>Constant</b>	2.496*** (0.050)	2.085*** (0.040)
<b>Observations</b>	5,873	17,621
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.37	0.41

Note. OLS regressions with standard errors clustered on respondents in parentheses. Coefficient on *Election Violence* (model 1 = model 2): Probability >  $\chi^2 = 0.0005$ . † $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2** Election violence reduces likely participation and risk, with activity interactions.

	<b>All activities pooled</b>	
	<b>Model 1 Participation</b>	<b>Model 2 Risk</b>
<b>Activity—rally</b>	-0.414*** (0.022)	0.270*** (0.019)
<b>Activity—discussion</b>	-0.533*** (0.024)	0.380*** (0.022)
<b>Activity—regalia</b>	-0.493*** (0.024)	0.331*** (0.021)
<b>Handouts</b>	0.104*** (0.025)	-0.132*** (0.024)
<b>Election violence</b>	-1.507*** (0.032)	1.943*** (0.030)
<b>Activity—rally x election violence</b>	-1.80*** (0.031)	0.050† (0.028)
<b>Activity—discussion x election violence</b>	0.015 (0.033)	-0.089** (0.030)
<b>Activity—regalia x election violence</b>	-0.136*** (0.033)	-0.026 (0.030)
<b>Attention checks passed</b>	0.008 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.008)
<b>Constant</b>	2.542*** (0.036)	0.410*** (0.034)
<b>Observations</b>	23,494	23,495
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.42	0.55

Note. OLS regressions with standard errors clustered on respondents in parentheses. The excluded reference category is activity—voting. † $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Appendix Tables A11A, B), and we add control variables for *gender*, *ethnicity*, and *activity number* (Online Appendix Tables A12A, B). It is possible that there is a contamination effect between scenarios, whereby respondents start comparing the scenarios to each other after a few iterations, which makes it important to account for sequencing of activities in the survey. None of these changes affect the substantive results; respondents tend to perceive later activities as less risky. We also replicate analyses on

just the first vignette; results are quite similar (Online Appendix Table A13).

Another substantive concern is that varying experiences of violence during the election may lead respondents to associate the term “violence” with varying levels of severity. That is, when learning about an electoral environment affected by violence, some may envision an election with lethal violence while others may think about non-lethal forms of violence (beatings, harassment,

or intimidation), which could influence how they respond to the treatments. To test whether this changes results, we use an open-text question at the end of the survey which asked respondents “when you think of intimidation and violence that happens during elections, can you tell me one or two examples that you think about?”<sup>10</sup> From this open-text field, we use text analysis to code a variable capturing whether examples given included fatal violence. Controlling for this does not influence the main results; the interaction term is also not significant (Online Appendix Table A14).

Lastly, our main models have treated vote-buying (handouts) as a control variable, but an interactive effect between vote-buying and violence is also conceivable. Rather than thinking about vote-buying and violence as complements, Birch (2020) has argued that violence is used to underpin the use of vote-buying. While we have not pre-registered an interactive effect between handouts and violence, we explore this relationship in Online Appendix Table A15 and Figure A5. We find that the demobilizing effect of violence is much stronger than the mobilizing effect of handouts. However, we also find that while there is no statistically significant effect of handouts for rally attendance and wearing regalia without violence, respondents are significantly more likely to engage in such activities in a violent environment when handouts are present. These results suggest that parties may use handouts to partially counteract the demobilizing effect of violence. In other words, it is indeed possible that clientelism and violence, as suggested by Birch (2020), will contribute to unvirtuous cycles of manipulation. Further examining the countervailing strategies of violence and handouts is a promising avenue for future work.

In sum, data from the survey experiment support our argument that election violence reduces citizens’ willingness to participate in the democratic process—above and beyond voting itself. While violence depresses voting, it reduces other common and pre-electoral activities even more severely. We show that violence reduces citizens’ willingness to wear party regalia or attend campaign rallies even more than it reduces voting. To check that these estimates are not just an artifact of the constraints of the survey design, we validate the main dynamics with observational data, to which we turn to next.

## Observational data results: fear reduces democratic participation beyond voting

One issue with the experimental results is that while the treatment (violence) is randomized, it uses theoretical scenarios and not real-world exposure to violence and actual behavior. To complement the experimental results, we thus also collect and analyze observational data from the end of the same survey. We begin the observational analysis with descriptive statistics on fear of election violence and participation in different election activities,

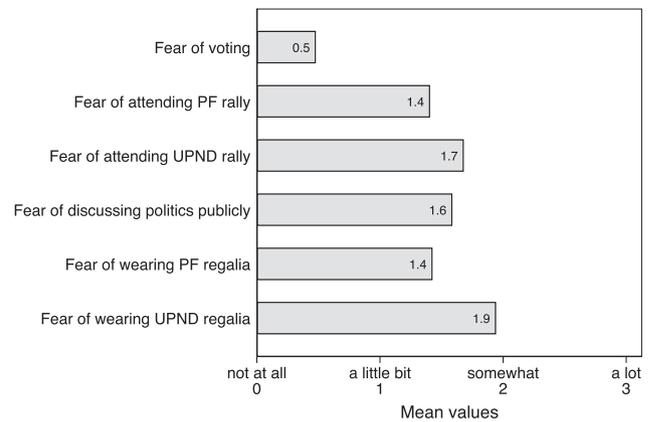


Figure 5 Fearing election activities (observational data).

as well as actual participation, before moving to the multivariate regression analysis. Statistics show that fear of violence was a major element of elections in Lusaka in 2021: more than half (51.2%) of respondents said that they feared such violence “a lot.” Only 29% did not fear election violence victimization at all, while about 10% feared violence a “little bit” or “somewhat.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this general fear of victimization, we also asked about victimization specific to election activities to find out if fear is limited to voting or also extends to other campaign activities. Figure 5 shows the mean values of these measures. In line with our argument, we find that respondents fear voting but pre-electoral activities even more. All three non-voting activities—wearing regalia, attending rallies, discussing politics publicly—are significantly more fear inducing than voting. Within the non-voting activities, respondents are more fearful of showing partisan alignment with the opposition party than the governing party. This is in line with common arguments about incumbent parties commanding more repressive capacity and sometimes using that to their advantage in elections (Taylor et al., 2017). The relative level of fear between the 4 activities in the observational data is also in line with the findings in the experimental data. That is, wearing regalia is most affected, followed by attending rallies, discussions, and then voting.

To assess if fear of election violence was sufficient to make people abstain from participation (versus a risk worth taking), we also asked two direct questions on behavior. First, we asked “Did fearing election violence make you change your behavior—did you avoid some activities or lower your participation in the 2021 election campaign because of the risk of election violence?” Answer options were yes/no, and respondents who reported changing their behavior also received a follow-up, open question on “Can you tell me how election violence changed your participation?” Half of the respondents reported that fear changed their behavior, stating that they avoided some activities or lowered their participation in the 2021 election campaign because of the risk

<sup>10</sup> We did not ask respondents about their *personal* exposure to violence to protect respondents and interviewers. This decision was made based on two ethical considerations. First, we wanted to avoid causing post-traumatic stress for respondents and the possibility of revealing individual perpetrators, which could have carried risks for both respondents and interviewers (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). Second, asking respondents to report actual incidents of violence could put respondents at risk of harm. We pre-tested the survey with enumerators during training and with local test respondents in a pilot. Survey attrition was very low and fearfulness did not affect attrition (see footnote 8).

<sup>11</sup> These high rates are in line with Afrobarometer post-election surveys of Zambia: shortly after the 2016 election, 50.5% of respondents in Lusaka reported that they feared election violence “a lot” (Afrobarometer Round 7, fielded April 2017). The mean of our variable (1.83) is also in line with Afrobarometer data on Lusaka (mean 1.95) and a pre-election survey of Lusaka residents (mean 1.53, fielded June 2021, Lust et al., 2021). This suggests that the observational measures are not distorted by the experiment in the first part of the survey.



**Table 3** Election activities done by partisanship (observational data).

Partisan group	Wore one's own party regalia	Attended one's own party rally	Discussed politics publicly	Voted
<b>Opposition: UPND supporters</b>	0.29 (UPND regalia)	0.34 (UPND rally)	0.45	0.82
<b>Core/incumbent: PF supporters</b>	0.59 (PF regalia)	0.41 (PF rally)	0.51	0.80
<b>Swing: supporters of other or no parties</b>	0.41 (any party regalia)	0.26 (PF or UPND rally)	0.31	0.80

Overall, the observational data substantiate the findings from the experimental data and strengthen our confidence in the external (real-world) validity of experimental results. The results are not identical in the experimental and observational analyses. The experimental analysis showed a negative effect of violence on voting, and this effect is not present in the observational analysis. Likewise, contrary to the experimental analysis, the coefficients for discussing politics in public fall just below conventional thresholds for statistical significance. Observational analysis can be shaped by confounders and omitted variable bias. However, the main argument in this paper is not that every form of pre-electoral participation will be negatively affected by violence. Nor is it that voting is negatively affected. Instead, we argue that pre-electoral participation (in varying form) is negatively affected and that effects of violence on pre-electoral participation are larger than on voting. These two arguments are supported in both the experimental and observational analyses.

## Conclusion

This paper shows how election violence distorts electoral competition and undermines democratic citizenship. When violence is present, citizens reduce their participation in vital parts of the electoral process which impedes meaningful democratic campaigns. While earlier work has mostly focused on the possible direct effect of violence on the act of voting, we have argued that we cannot fully understand the role of election violence in political competition without studying the effect of violence on a broader set of electoral activities. This is especially important in Africa, where campaigns are built on active citizenry mobilization (Paget et al., 2023).

Using a survey experiment fielded in Lusaka, Zambia, we show that election violence reduces respondents' willingness to participate in electoral activities and that transparently partisan activities are more severely affected than voting itself. The findings from our survey experiment are corroborated with observational data on self-reported behavior. Citizens who expressed a higher fear of election violence were significantly less willing to participate in transparently partisan forms of participation in the 2021 Zambian election.

This study focused particularly on elections in urban Zambia. However, there are reasons to believe that many of the findings from this study can be generalized beyond urban areas and beyond the Zambian context. Violence is an important feature of election campaigns around the world, even in more consolidated democratic contexts. Compared to many other countries such as India, Mexico, or Nigeria (Bratton, 2008; Trelles & Carreras, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004), Zambia has had relatively low levels of fatal violence in elections. It is likely that persistently high levels of violence in some of the world's largest democracies severely

restricts political participation for ordinary citizens. Even in older, established democracies, such as the United States, violence continues to be a concern in electoral competition and may restrict participation, particularly for certain minority groups in particular locations (Epperly et al., 2020). Moreover, while we found negative consequences of violence in urban Zambia, we also anticipate such effects in rural areas, particularly among minorities. Such areas are characterized by stronger social control and local political dominance and minorities may be particularly unlikely to participate in elections when they fear violence (Lust, 2022).

The findings of this paper have important implications for our understanding of election violence and, in extension, the quality of democracy. First, some recent literature has questioned the extent to which violence affects electoral participation (Burchard, 2020) or whether election violence may even be counter-productive for those perpetrating it (Rosenzweig, 2021). Our findings, however, suggest that violence profoundly shapes the nature of local electoral environments. Future research may also study the extent to which violence may shift modes of political participation, particularly from forms of participation that are perceived as physically risky (such as physical campaigning) to forms associated with less risk (such as online activism).

Secondly, election violence has negative consequences on the quality of elections. Citizens engage in the electoral environment locally. When fear restricts participation, it undermines citizens' *de facto* freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Moreover, the negative participatory effects of violence may not be equal across citizens. Those living in more impoverished parts of the city could be more severely affected. Violence can perpetuate political inequalities and further disempower those already marginalized.

Lastly, on a more practical note, the findings emphasize that violence is not only an issue of security but also democratic quality. Even in cases such as Zambia where few people die because of election violence, fear of violence has severe implications for democracy. Democracy promoters should focus not only on reducing acts of violence but also on reducing intimidation and threats of violence to create a secure environment where citizens are comfortable fully participating in democracy.

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