

**ERC Starting Grant 2019
Research proposal [Part B1]**

Elections, Violence, and Parties

EVaP

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Host institution: Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam

Proposal duration: 60 months

Since 1990, deadly violence has occurred in more than 30% of elections held outside of advanced, industrialized democracies. In the 2007 Kenyan elections and the 2010 Côte D'Ivoire elections, violence killed thousands of people in just a few months, undoing years of institution-building and undermining democracy. Much of contemporary politics unfolds in countries holding competitive elections but lacking institutionalized democracy. In these countries, election violence still happens routinely because politicians use violence to influence election outcomes in their favor.

A major political and scholarly problem is that we know a lot about the conditions that make elections more or less violent, but lack insight into the more fundamental issues of how violence plays out on the ground. Departing from the focus on intensity in existing work, I develop a *novel party-centered theory* to explain the nature, organization, and consequences of election violence. Political parties are crucial actors linking politicians and citizens, and I attribute a central role to parties' organizational and social links. The diversity of parties' social support influences whether violence provides electoral benefits, implying that parties supported by a single group benefit more from violence. Party organization at the local level in turn explains whether groups can engage in targeted violence or have to rely on poorly-controlled thugs-for-hire. This theory changes how we think about election violence, explaining (1) *how and why election violence happens* and (2) *the consequences of election violence for citizens*.

EVaP breaks new empirical ground by testing these claims subnationally in India and Nigeria, two of the world's largest emerging democracies. EVaP uses a multi-method approach to examine *within-country variation* in party institutions, social support, and election violence in India and Nigeria, combining fieldwork interviews, quantitative data, survey experiments, and surveys.

Section a: Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal

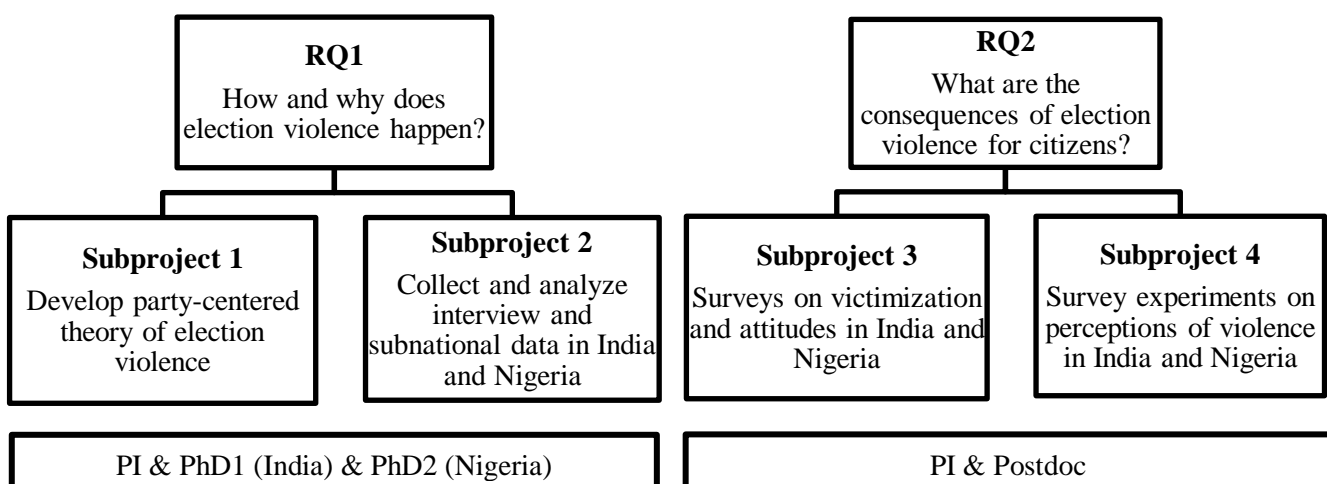
Elections are important because they decide the winners and losers in democratic politics. In stable democracies, election losers accept defeat because they believe that democratic institutions will allow them to pursue their interests in the future (Przeworski 1991). However, much of contemporary politics takes place in countries that hold competitive elections even though their democracy is not thoroughly institutionalized. In these countries, politicians worried about losing can use violence to deter opponents from voting.

Election violence is indeed a frequent and recurring problem in many countries, as violence accompanying elections in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe has shown. Since 1990, 34% of elections held in the developing world have experienced deadly violence (Daxecker and Amicarelli 2018). We also know that violence can be an effective means for reducing turnout, explaining why elites would use it (Bratton 2008). Election violence refers to the threat or use of violence to influence the electoral process and is thus widely understood as strategic (Höglund 2009; Wilkinson 2004). Yet even in countries prone to experiencing election violence, violence does not happen everywhere, nor does it target or affect all citizens equally. How can we explain *subnational* differences in how violence plays out?

EVaP develops a *novel, party-centered theory* that changes how we think about election violence. Existing work has focused on conditions that make elections more or less violent, not on the more fundamental issues of whether, where and in what ways election violence happens. Departing from this focus on “body counts,” my argument explains not just the intensity of violence, but also its nature, organization, and consequences. I focus on parties as crucial actors linking elites with citizens, which explains two unanswered puzzles in the study of election violence. First, the theory explains *how and why election violence happens*. My argument attributes a central role to organizational and social links provided by parties. The diversity or narrowness of parties’ social support explains whether politicians benefit from election violence. In turn, parties with local organizations can rely on trusted local affiliates to engage in targeted violence, while those without a local presence outsource violence to less-committed and poorly controlled thugs and militants. Party organization thus helps us understand the intensity of violence, whether it is targeted or not, and why a lot of election violence is carried out by nonstate actors (Daxecker and Jung 2018). Second, the theory explains *the consequences of election violence for citizens*. Does election violence actually “work,” meaning that it keeps opponents from voting? I argue that voter responses differ depending on their partisan commitments and the nature of violence, helping clarify why some victims of violence withdraw from politics while others become radicalized. This improved understanding is crucial for scholarship and practitioners involved in democracy promotion (Bermeo 2016).

EVaP’s breaks empirical ground by systematically exploring these arguments in India and Nigeria, two of the world’s largest developing democracies. Both countries capture large variation geographically and temporally in local party institutionalization, social support bases, and election violence. The main variation of interest is *within-country*, requiring extensive collection of subnational qualitative and quantitative data on party institutions, social bases, and violence. EVaP uses a multi-method approach, combining fieldwork interviews, subnational quantitative data collection and analysis, surveys using techniques for sensitive questions, and survey experiments. Figure 1 summarizes EVaP’s research questions and subprojects.

Figure 1: EVaP Research Questions and Subprojects



Innovation Beyond the State of the Art

- EVaP develops a **novel, party-centered theory of election violence** that highlights parties as meso-level actors linking macro-level actions of politicians with micro-level dynamics involving citizens.
- EVaP can explain **unanswered questions** about the **nature and organization of election violence**, including whether violence is targeted or indiscriminate, whether violence is delegated to nonstate agents, and how perpetrators identify targets.
- The project explores **within-country variation** in parties and violence in **Nigeria** and **India** with a multi-method approach, combining fieldwork interviews and original, subnational datasets.
- EVaP develops and tests theories on the **consequences of election violence**, examining how partisanship conditions the effect of violence on victims and influences perceptions of violence.
- EVaP uses innovative methods rarely used in the study of election violence, including **survey experiments** and **surveys with list experiments**.

RQ1: How and Why Does Election Violence Happen?

Subproject 1 develops a party-centered theory that explains the nature and organization of election violence. Subproject 2 tests these mechanisms empirically in India and Nigeria using a multi-method approach.

Subproject 1: A Party-Centered Theory of Election Violence

My theory argues that political parties play a crucial role in structuring the nature of election violence. Surprisingly, while parties play an important role in elections across the world, they do not figure prominently in existing theory on election violence. Government and opposition elites are seen as prominent actors using violence as a tool to influence outcomes, but scant attention is given to parties as crucial meso-level actors who organize and execute this violence (Balcells and Justino 2014). In countries where democracy is not consolidated, political parties may be poorly institutionalized and function primarily as vehicles for ethnic groups or for advancing personalistic interests. Yet governments across the world are elected through parties with politicians running on party labels. To win elections –with or without violence – politicians must therefore organize a party (Cox 1997; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Sartori 2005). I argue that parties provide two types of linkages between elites and citizens that affect election violence: (1) local party presence and (2) diversity of party support base.

- (1) **Local Party Presence and Violence:** Political elites with access to a party apparatus that is institutionalized all the way down to the local level have major advantages in the organization of violence. Scholarship on parties has often focused on the institutionalization of party systems at the country level (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Mainwaring and Torcal 2005). Yet recent research has shown that party institutionalization can vary substantially within countries and affect outcomes like the extent of electoral competition or electoral success (Chhibber et al. 2014; Tavits 2012; Poguntke et al. 2016). Importantly, though, party institutions can also assist in the implementation of *illicit* electoral strategies through local party brokers (Mares and Young 2016; Rundlett and Svulik 2016). Local party organization has major implications for the adoption of coercive strategies. A local presence means that elites can rely on local party workers or their trusted allies to intimidate opponents. Further, local party workers know the locations of opponents, solving information problems inherent in the organization of violence. Parties with local organizations thus have the “know how” and “know whom” to organize violence (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Costalli and Ruggeri 2018). All else equal, I expect that politicians with locally institutionalized parties have greater capacity to execute violence targeting opponents. In contrast, elites with parties that have only a weak or no local-level presence have no choice but to outsource violence to allies or other third parties such as gangs, militias, or armed groups. These third parties are likely less committed and less knowledgeable about the targets of violence. When local party institutions are weak or absent, election violence should therefore be more indiscriminate.
- (2) **Diversity of Party Support and Violence:** In developing countries, linkages between elites and citizens are often thought to take the form of patron-client relationships in which party brokers promise favors in exchange for votes. The introduction of competitive elections, however, has forced the scaling-up of personalistic networks to regional or national levels (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007: 4). The landscape of political parties in the developing world thus consists of parties representing ethnic or ideological groups more akin to traditional patron-client relationships, but also more broadly-based parties that span multiple ethnic, religious, or ideological cleavages. Faced with competitive elections, I expect that parties representing the interests of a single ethnic, religious, or ideological group have greater incentives to use violence than do those representing multiple cleavages. The literature on ethnic conflict amply demonstrates that violence polarizes citizens by antagonizing them against an out-group, a benefit of

violence not available to multi-cleavage parties. The benefits of violence should thus be greater for parties with single ethnic, religious, or ideological group as support base, yet lower for parties with a more diverse support base.

Subproject 2: Empirical Implications and Tests in India and Nigeria

My theory highlights two dimensions of partisanship – local institutions and social support bases - that structure the capacity and incentives for violence. Note that the primary *variation of interest occurs within rather than between countries*. Parties' institutionalization at the local level can vary substantially across regions within the same country. Similarly, the same party could rely on different social support bases in different areas. Such subnational variation is crucial for a theory that wants to account for the nature of election violence, which can involve many different agents, flare up in some areas but not others, or be more or less targeted. Table 1 describes the tentative empirical implications with provisional examples from India.

Table 1: Empirical Implications for Election Violence, with Provisional Examples from India

	Local party presence	
Party support base	Weak presence	Strong presence
Low diversity	<i>Indiscriminate violence by local agents of violence</i> E.g. Congress and BJP in Bihar	<i>Targeted violence authorized by parties</i> E.g. BJP in Gujarat & Uttar Pradesh
High diversity	<i>Potentially counterproductive violence by allies</i> E.g.: Congress in Punjab	<i>Discourage violence</i> E.g. Congress in South India

For parties with *a strong local presence and a narrow social base* (top-right cell), violence can be an attractive tool to target and demobilize opponents while simultaneously strengthening support from the in-group. The tacit and active support of local politicians and party workers for agents of violence will be crucial for executing such violence. In contrast, when parties have *a strong local presence and a diverse social base* (bottom-right cell), elites are discouraged from using violence even if facing contested elections. While a strong local presence would allow for organizing and executing targeted violence, their diverse social base inspires restraint. For parties with *a weak local presence and a diverse social base* (bottom-left cell), violence is not appealing because it risks alienating an ethnically or ideologically diverse group of supporters. However, the weak institutional presence of such parties may lead them to enter political alliances with regional or local parties that do not face these same constraints. Coalitions with local political entrepreneurs may thus provoke violence, even though this violence could backfire for the party. Finally, parties with *a weak local presence and a narrow social base* (top-left cell) can benefit from violence that radicalizes its supporters, but lack the institutional means to engage in it. Parties in this situation outsource the use of force to nonstate specialists of violence, but can neither control this violence nor ensure that it targets opponents accurately.

While the theory applies more broadly to developing countries, my team will empirically examine the above theory's observable implications in India and Nigeria. I selected India and Nigeria for three reasons. First, these countries offer ample within-country variation on the institutionalization of parties, their social bases of support, and election violence across space and time. Election violence committed by state and nonstate actors has routinely occurred in both countries, but varies geographically with some regions seeing little if any violence (e.g. Kerala in India) while others often see a lot (e.g. Bihar in India). Both countries also have large national parties with subnationally varying institutionalization and composition of social bases (Chhibber et al. 2014; Kendhammer 2010; Thachil 2014). The People's Democratic Party in Nigeria, for example, is seen as multi-ethnic in most areas, but as Muslim Hausa party in Zamfara state and a Christian party in Plateau State (Kendhammer 2010). Recent national and state elections have also seen markedly lower levels of violence (more so in India than Nigeria). There have been major shifts in party strength, providing important temporal variation to explore (Jha 2017, Kendhammer 2010). Second, the countries are important in their own right because they are among the largest democracies in the developing world. India is the most populous country in the world holding elections, while Nigeria is the largest African country. Their trajectory is crucial for the future of democratic politics. Third, the PI has established preliminary connections through visits to both countries. The PI plans to recruit two PhD candidates from these countries since extensive fieldwork is necessary for the project. In both countries, elite interviews can be conducted in English.

EVaP's empirical approach for subproject 2 is multi-method, combining analysis of quantitative subnational data with analysis of qualitative fieldwork and interview data. The PI and two PhD students will conduct

fieldwork interviews in India and Nigeria. The goal of interviews is to examine, revise, and refine the theoretical mechanisms and to collect data on local party presence. Field research will include interviews with party officials and politicians at national, regional, and local levels, but also partisan brokers and citizens at the local level. More systematically, EVaP will collect quantitative data on independent variables of interest in India and Nigeria. This includes collecting and coding subnational data on local party presence and party social bases. The unit of analysis will be national and state election districts. To measure local party institutions, the project will collect information on local party offices, party events, party financial support for local candidates, and party defections. This information will come from interviews, party publications, and electoral commissions. To measure parties' social bases, the project will use data from public opinion surveys to identify the diversity of supporters by caste (India), ethnicity (in Nigeria), and religion (India and Nigeria). These data are available from the National Election Survey in India and Afrobarometer for Nigeria. Disaggregated data for election violence come from the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) project (Daxecker and Amicarelli 2018), and will be validated with survey measures for violence. The PI's work on ECAV testifies to her capacity to manage collection of large, disaggregated datasets. All datasets on local party institutionalization and social support will be publicly available upon completion of the project.

RQ2: What are the Consequences of Election Violence for Citizens?

In subproject 3, the team conducts surveys to examine how violence and partisanship affect attitudes. Subproject 4 uses survey experiments to explore citizens' perceptions of election violence.

Subproject 3: Surveys on Election Violence and Political Attitudes in India and Nigeria

There is limited scholarship on how exposure to election violence affects individual-level attitudes. Research on political participation finds that experiences with election violence reduce turnout at the individual level (Bratton 2008; Collier and Vicente 2012; Trelles and Carreras 2012). Exposure to election violence has been linked to reduced trust in state institutions, lower interethnic trust, reduced social capital, and lower political knowledge (Dercon and Gutiérrez-Romero 2012; Gutiérrez-Romero 2014, Söderström 2017). Surprisingly, the literature on consequences has not considered the role of partisanship.

EVaP hypothesizes that violence may “work” in the sense of demobilizing opponents, but that the *nature of violence* and the *partisanship* of the victims have heterogenous effects on political attitudes. My party-centered theory suggests that parties (1) with local organizations and (2) reliant on the support of a single ethnic, religious, or ideological group are capable of organizing targeted violence against opponents. In contrast, weakly organized parties with narrow social support have to hire thugs or militants to execute less discriminate violence. If my theory is correct, targeted violence should be aimed at citizens supporting opponent parties, while indiscriminate violence targets both citizens supporting opponent parties but also those weak or no partisan commitments. I expect that the effect of violence on attitudes is conditional on partisanship. Table 2 summarizes these expectations. First, partisans exposed to violence become more radicalized in response to violence (bottom cells), possibly leading to greater polarization and conflict in the long run. Second, weak or non-partisans exposed to violence withdraw from the political process when exposed to violence (top-left cell). Violence thus has divergent but pernicious effects, radicalizing strong partisans while alienating weak or non-partisans from the political process.

Table 2: Empirical Implications for Political Attitudes

	Nature of violence	
Partisan commitments	Indiscriminate	Targeted
Weak or nonpartisan	<i>Withdraw from politics</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Strong partisan	<i>Radicalize</i>	<i>Radicalize</i>

The PI and postdoc will examine these expectations in nationally representative public opinion surveys in India and Nigeria. Since the theoretical framework is still exploratory, the PI will use fieldwork periods to further develop these expectations. The PI also aims for surveys that are ethnographically informed, ensuring that questions capture the relevant dimensions in an adequate and sensitive manner. The focus of surveys is on exposure to election violence, which is why they will be conducted in the run-up to the 2023 elections in Nigeria, and the 2024 elections in India. An important methodological contribution is to embed a *list experiment* in the surveys to measure exposure to violence. This technique asks respondents to indicate how often they experienced events in a list. The list given to the treatment group contains a sensitive item (experience with violence), while the list provided to the control group does not include it. Social desirability bias is a major concern for survey responses to questions such as exposure to violence, and work on vote

buying has shown that list experiments are an effective technique to address these biases (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012). These techniques have not been used to study election violence. The PI has solicited quotes from reputable survey firms in India and Nigeria. The PI and postdoc will be on location for interviewer training and survey deployment. The postdoc will play a major role in the development and execution of the surveys.

Subproject 4: Survey Experiments on Perceptions of Election Violence in India and Nigeria

Subproject 4 examines how citizens form perceptions of violence. Analysing perceptions is important for interpreting the effects of violence on attitudes, particularly if such perceptions are shaped not just by objective information about violence but also by biases or misinformation. The literature on political violence generally assumes that citizens update their perceptions of events in objective and unbiased ways, implying that perceptions are factual interpretations of events (Gerber and Green 1999). However, recent research demonstrates that citizens' beliefs about what happens in conflict often diverge wildly from "facts on the ground" and are subject to partisan biases (Silverman 2018). Building on work on motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013), I argue that individuals systematically disregard information that is inconsistent with pre-existing partisan orientations. My team will use an experimental design embedded in surveys to empirically test these expectations in India and Nigeria. Theories of opinion updating have rarely been tested outside industrialized, advanced democracies. The experiment will be embedded in the surveys described in subproject 3, i.e. in surveys conducted in the run-up to the 2023 Nigerian elections and the 2024 Indian elections. The experiment will present a fictional yet realistic account of a violent event taking place during the campaign. The event description will be drawn from actual newspaper reporting a violent event, but randomly vary the identity of the alleged perpetrator. The dependent variable in this experiment is citizens' beliefs in the account of violence, while the randomized treatment - the independent variable - is the partisan identity of the perpetrators. I expect that partisanship structures how individuals interpret violent events, with citizens disregarding information that contradicts their beliefs, while accepting information confirming them.

Table 3: EVaP Work Plan

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	
PI	Develop theory	Fieldwork & article w/ PhD1&2	Fieldwork & article w/ PhD1&2	2 articles w/ postdoc	Article & academic book	
PhD 1 (India)		Coursework & proposal	Fieldwork & dissertation	Fieldwork & dissertation	Finish dissertation	
PhD 2 (Nigeria)		Coursework & proposal	Fieldwork & dissertation	Fieldwork & dissertation	Finish dissertation	
Postdoc			Survey questionnaire & pre-test	Survey Nigeria & 2 articles w/ PI	Survey India & solo article	

Feasibility and Challenges

In terms of *access*, the PI has conducted some preliminary fieldwork and can draw on those contacts. The PI also has experience supervising large data collection projects. The PI has submitted an *ethical issues annex* discussing anticipated benefits and harm for participants, minimizing risk for vulnerable individuals, obtaining informed consent, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and considerations specific for research in developing countries. EVaP will seek approval from the University of Amsterdam's ethics advisory board.

Impact and Dissemination

EVaP will result in 6-7 articles written by the PI and team members, which will be submitted to top political science journals. The PI will also write an academic book. The project will host 3-4 smaller workshops at universities in India and Nigeria and one large workshop at the University of Amsterdam. EVaP will produce blog posts and policy briefs and participate in expert panels to reach a broader audience, drawing on the PI's connections with the European Center for Electoral Support (ECES) and the European Parliament. The spread and promotion of democracy lies at the heart of the EU's external relations, making it crucial to understand whether, where, and how elites in developing democracies adopt violent strategies.

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