DOES EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE INCREASE OR DECREASE SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the relationship between exposure to violence and support for political violence is not linear. These variables rather have a U-curved relationship. Exposure to violence, until a certain threshold, increases empathy. Empathy, in turn, decreases support for political violence. Once that threshold is passed, however, one can argue that exposure to violence should induce support for political violence. The paper uses the Afrobarometer (2008) data. It focuses on Liberia which has not been explored by scholars working on attitudes towards political violence before. The findings provide support for the hypothesis.

Keywords: *Exposure to Violence, Liberia, Support for Political Violence.*

ÖZET
ŞİDDETE MARUZ KALMA SİYASİ ŞİDDETE DESTEĞİ AZALTIR MI, ÇOĞALTIR MI?

Bu makale şiddete maruz kalma ve siyasal şiddete destek arasındaki ilişkinin doğrusal değil ters çevrilmiş bir U-eğrisi şeklinde olduğunu savunur. Şiddete maruz kalma bir dereceye kadar siyasal şiddete desteği azaltmakta, fakat bu dereceden sonra çoğaltmaktadır. Yazar bu hipotezi test etmek için Afrobarometer (2008) verilerini kullanmış ve daha önce siyasal şiddete karşı tavırlar ile ilgili bir çalışmanın yapılmadığı Liberya'ya odaklanmıştır. Bulgular hipotezi desteklemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Şiddete Maruz Kalma, Liberya, Siyasal Şiddete Destek.

Introduction

Recently, there is a surge in the research on attitudes toward political violence in post-conflict societies (Claasssen, 2014a; 2014b; Hirsch-Hoefler *et al.*, 2014; Wohl *et al.*, 2014; Canneti *et al.*, 2015). Due to the complexity of the reasons

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why some people are more prone to accept political violence as a means to an end, scholars have had to work with models which have very low explanatory power and ambiguous results (see Mousseau, 2011; Victoroff *et al.,* 2012; Hayes and McAllister, 2005). Such findings suggest that the task at hand is far from complete. One factor that produced contradictory results is exposure to violence. Some scholars argue that violence begets violence (Hayes and McAllister, 2001; Cannetti *et al.,* 2015; Miguel *et al.,* 2010; Hobfoll *et al.,* 2006; Chemtob *et al.,* 1994; Miller *et al.,* 2003; Herrmann *et al.,* 1999). When people are exposed to violence from a certain group, they develop feelings of revenge. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of accepting political violence as a means to alleviate their pain. Moreover, exposure to violence may disturb the psyche of an individual, making them more inclined to express violent behaviour, irrespective of having feelings of revenge. On the other hand, some scholars argue that exposure to violence reduces the likelihood of accepting political violence (Staub, 2003; Staub and Vollhardt, 2008; Vollhardt, 2009). This argument is based on the logic of empathy. When people face unpleasant behaviour, they build empathy towards other people who are exposed to similar behaviour. Hence, they are less likely to wish such violence to occur to anybody, including their former enemies.

In this paper, we argue that both of these arguments are only partly true. Exposure to violence and acceptance of political violence do not have a linear but a U-curved relationship. We state that exposure to violence until a certain threshold increases empathy, which then decreases acceptance of political violence. Once that threshold is passed, however, we expect that exposure to violence should induce acceptance of political violence. This hypothesis is tested by survey analysis technique, using Liberia as a case study which was not explored in political violence literature so far. Section 1 reviews the literature and formulates the hypotesis. Section 2 discusses the methodology and section 3 presents the results. Section 4 summarizes the findings.

Past Suffering and Support for Political Violence

Political socialization literature shows that the childhood period is crucial as what is learned during this period defines behaviour in adulthood (Greenstein 1965; Whiting and Child 1953; Harrington and Whiting 1972; Fornari 1975). Whereas warmth and affection received during childhood period is linked to socially desirable behaviour, harsh socialization experiences create or exacerbate violent behaviour (Winnicott, 1965; Russell 1972; Eckhardt 1975). For instance, Miguel *et al*. (2010) found that civil war exposure is directly correlated with violent behaviour on the

football pitch measured by yellow and red cards each player receives. Moreover, losing a home, incurring a serious injury or having a loved one killed may trigger psychological disorder and violent behaviour (Hayes and McAllister, 2001). These individuals may continue their lives by constantly living under stress, anxiety and depression, which in turn, triggers aggression (Landau *et al*., 2010; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2006). This is true, regardless of the feeling of revenge against a certain group. When the desire for revenge is taken into account, violent behaviour and support for violence may increase considerably (see Agnew, 2010; Victoroff, 2005). Certain deeds that are done to a group of people create an urge to 'right' the wrong that has been done to them.

On the other hand, we find a group of scholars who argue that past suffering may, in fact, help people to grow empathy towards the others. These individuals are more likely to renounce violence and become altruists as a result of this empathy. According to Staub (2003), once they heal or partially heal, they devote themselves to other people. They work to make sure that they do not suffer the same way as they did. In a similar line, Staub and Vollhardt (2008) argue that people who become victims of violence may, in time, understand what led others to engage in violence, become resilient and show signs of posttraumatic growth. An extensive review of the 'altruism born of suffering' argument is provided by Vollhardt (2009). The author shows that there is enough evidence to suggest such a relationship between being victims of violence and being against violence.

There is evidence for both seemingly contradictory findings. However, no one has yet attempted to account for this contradiction. We argue that this paradox can be explained only when we take the level of violence exposed into consideration. Can one assume that inflicting a minor injury or having property damaged is the same thing as losing a loved one? We doubt. Suffering has degrees and it is not certain why we are to assume that all degrees of suffering should have the same consequence in regard to support for political violence. A more plausible approach is to suggest a U-curved relationship between suffering and support for political violence. People who suffer from minor injuries, damaged property etc. are much more likely heal and show signs of what Staub (2003) calls 'altruism born of suffering'. However, one can argue that people who suffer terrible things, especially when these things are inflicted upon them by a certain someone or a certain group are more likely to grow feelings of revenge and anger. This argument is in line with the findings of Gould and Klor (2010) who stated that terror attacks in Israel increases the acceptance for territorial concessions to the Palestinians. However, terror attacks beyond a certain threshold has the opposite effect. To our knowledge,

no one has yet tested past suffering and support for political violence in a non-linear fashion. We will put this hypothesis to test after we explain the method to be used in the next part.

Method

The preferable method, like in most other political psychology research is lab, survey or field experiments (see for example Green *et al.*, 2013; Avkiran *et al*., *forthcoming*; Kanol, *forthcoming* amongst others). However, one difficulty in conducting experiments in political violence research is to set up ethical studies (Littman and Paluck, *forthcoming*). As the challenge to randomly assign subjects into different groups and subject them to violence or even prime them with the feeling of violent behavior can be quite difficult, observational survey research might be used alongside carefully designed experiments to test hypotheses regarding attitudes towards political violence. Therefore, we run a multivariate regression with relevant controls as discussed in the next paragraph. Since the dependent variable is ordinal with a 5-point scale, the analysis is first conducted with ordered logistic regression analysis. However, the results are qualitatively the same with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) analysis. To make the interpretation of the results clearer, we report the results of the OLS analysis. Liberia, which has not been previously used in support for political violence literature is used as a case study. Liberia experienced horrible, violent events for almost two decades. Violence dropped steeply after 2003. In 2011, violence stood at its lowest since 1997 (Dowd and Raleigh 2012; International Crisis Group, 2012). However, the situation is still fragile and an inquiry into the attitudes of the public toward political violence is necessary. Afrobarometer (2008) data is used to operationalize low-level of suffering and high-level of suffering. This is a probabilistic survey conducted with 1200 Liberians face-to-face. **Support for violence** is measured by asking the Liberians if use of violence can be justified for a cause. **Property damaged** is used as a proxy to measure low level of victimhood and suffering. **Family loss** is used as a proxy to measure high level of victimhood and suffering.

A set of control variables is introduced in the model based on the literature. Question wordings and possible answers with the numbers used for coding can be found in the appendix. Some scholars argued that relative deprivation, that is the discrepancy between achievement optimum and actual achievement, should increase support for political violence (Zaidise *et al.*, 2007; Canetti *et al*., 2010). **Relative deprivation** is measured by asking the Liberians to rate their living conditions compared to other Liberians. Muller (1972) stated that citizens who have

deep rooted negative attitudes toward the political authority are more ready to embrace political violence. **Trust in parliament** is used to capture attitudes toward the political authority. The relationship between religiosity and support for political violence is ambivalent. Some found that religious people are more likely to support political violence, whereas others found proof on the contrary (Saudis *et al.*, 2007; Funderburk, 1986). **Religiosity** is measured by asking Liberians how important religion in their lives is. Hayes and McAllister (2005) and Haddad (2009) argue that young males are more likely to support political violence. **Age** is measured as an interval variable and **Gender** is measured as a dichotomous variable. Also, the more educated one is, the more likely that they will renounce violence as a plausible way of realizing one's goals (Silke, 2008; Khashan, 2003; Hayes and McAllister, 2005; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). **Education** is measured as an ordinal variable. Cohen *et al.* (2006), Noor *et al.*, (2008) and Noor *et al.*, (2012) show that strong loyalty to in-group is positively correlated with out-group violence. Hence, the more in-group/out-group distinction for an individual, the more the chances of support for political violence. In other words, the more somebody identifies himself/herself with their ethnic group rather than with the country as a whole, the more likely they are to accept political violence (Noor *et al.*, 2008). **In-group identity** is measured by asking people if they identify themselves more with their ethnic group or as a Liberian. General strain theory suggests that conditions disliked by individuals are likely to lead to violence (Agnew, 2010). When a group of people feel that they are being discriminated (Victoroff *et al.*, 2012; Silke, 2008) or when they feel powerless as a direct result of not being listened to by their governments, they should be more likely to accept political violence (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). **Group discrimination** is measured by asking people how often they think that their ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government. **Political efficacy** is measured by asking Liberians how easy or difficult it is to have their voices heard between the elections.

Results

Figure I shows that the dependent variable is not normally distributed. Most Liberians do not embrace violence as a means to achieve political goals. Table I provides a correlation matrix. These correlations are moderate at best. Hypothesized relationships between low level and high level of suffering and support for political violence are in the expected direction (-0.04 for property damaged and 0.07 for family loss). Table II provides the findings from the multivariate OLS model. R-squared shows that only 4% of the variance is explained (see table II). This proves, once again, that support for political violence is a very complex phenomenon and any attempt to explain it should be done with modesty. As the literature provides

contradictory findings, we deemed it more appropriate to calculate the p-values as two-tailed.

In line with the expectation in this paper, people whose property was damaged in the civil war are less likely to support political violence. Having property damaged in the civil war decreases support for violence by 0.20 units on the 5-point scale. However, this finding is significant only at the 90% confidence level. Also, in line with the expectation in this paper, Liberians who lost a family member are more likely to support political violence. Losing a family member in the civil war increases support for violence by 0.31 units on the 5-point scale. This finding is significant at the 99% confidence level.

Results also show that younger people are more likely to support political violence (significant at 90% confidence level). Education decreases support for political violence (significant at 90% confidence level). Liberians who identify themselves more with their ethnic group than with their nationality are more likely to support political violence (significant at 99% confidence level). The feeling of political efficacy decreases support for political violence (significant at 95% confidence level). Unexpectedly, Liberians who feel to be discriminated as an ethnic group are less likely to support political violence and those who trust the parliament more are more likely to support political violence (significant at 99% confidence level and 90% confidence levels respectively).

Figure I – Support for Political Violence (Histogram)

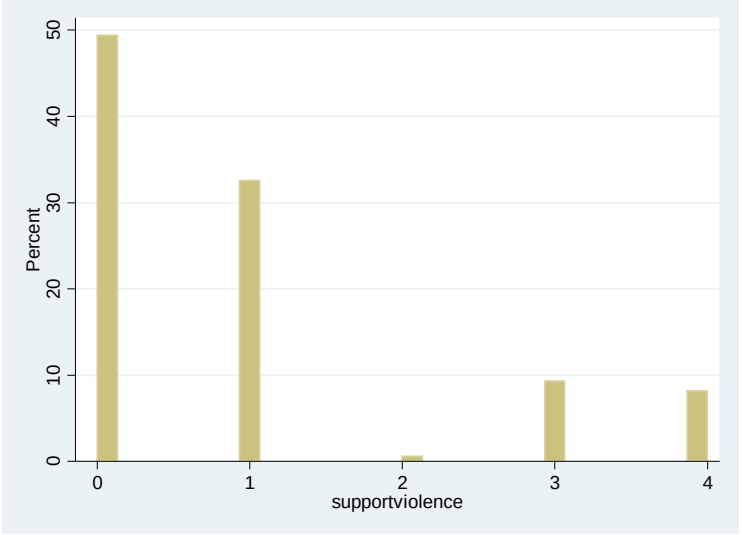


Table I – Correlation Matrix

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l
(a) Support for violence	1											
(b) Age	-0,05	1										
(c) Gender	-0,01	0,14	1									
(d) Education	-0,07	-0,14	0,21	1								
(e) Religiosity	-0,01	-0,04	0,01	0,09	1							
(f) In-group identity	-0,09	-0,01	0,04	0,06	-0,02	1						
(g) Relative deprivation	-0,03	-0,05	0,04	0,23	0,05	-0,06	1					
(h) Group discrimination	-0,1	-0,03	0,02	0,06	0,01	0,06	-0,1	1				
(i) Trust in parliament	0,06	0,07	0,04	-0,07	0,02	-0,08	0,1	-0,12	1			
(j) Political efficacy	-0,06	0,01	0,07	0,05	-0,05	-0,08	0,07	-0,02	0,02	1		
(k) Property damaged	-0,04	0,23	0,08	-0,13	-0,03	0,03	-0,09	0,06	0,02	-0,1	1	
(l) Family loss	0,07	0,04	0,04	-0,05	0,09	0,02	-0,04	0,07	-0,03	-0,02	0,23	1

Table II – Ordinary Least Squares Regression

	Beta	*P-values*
Age	-0.01	0,06**
Gender	0.05	0,56
Education	-0.03	0,1*
Religiosity	-0.07	0,48
In-group identity	-0.12	0,01***
Relative deprivation	-0.04	0,24
Group discrimination	-0.14	0,01***
Trust in parliament	0.06	0,08*
Political efficacy	-0.09	0,02**
Property damaged	-0.20	0,07*
Family loss	0.31	0,01***
Model fit		
N	1052	
R-squared	0,04	

Note: * significant at p<0.1 level, ** significant at p<0.05 level, *** significant at p<0.01 level (two-tailed).

Conclusion

Data presented in this paper suggests that exposure to violence does have an effect on support for political violence. However, this relationship seems to be far from being linear. Low-level of suffering such as having property damaged or minor physical injuries may lead to renouncing political violence. High-level of suffering such as losing a family member, however, leads to supporting political violence. We should warn the reader that this study should be replicated in other contexts with alternative measurement strategies in order to be certain about the causal relationship. In particular, there may be measurement issues with the operationalization of the independent variable due to the use of single-item measures. Nevertheless, the paper makes a contribution to the literature by moving away from the somewhat simplistic linear argument and suggesting a U-curved relationship between past suffering and support for political violence.

Appendix

Support for violence: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Statement 1: The use of violence is never justified in Liberian politics today. Statement 2: In this country, it is sometimes necessary to use violence in support of a just cause. (0) Agree very strongly with statement 1. (1) Agree with statement 1. (2) Agree with neither (3) Agree with statement 2. (4) Agree very strongly with statement 2.

Gender: Respondent's gender: (0) Female. (1) Male.

Age: How old are you? …

Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed? (0) No formal schooling. (1) Informal schooling only (including Koranic schooling). (2) Some primary schooling. (3) Primary school completed. (4) Some secondary school/high school. (5) Secondary school completed/high school completed. (6) Post-secondary qualifications, other than university e.g. a diploma or degree from a polytechnic or college. (7) Some university. (8) University completed. (9) Post-graduate.

Religiosity: How important is religion in your life? (0) Not at all important. (1) Not very important. (2) Somewhat important. (3) Very important.

Relative deprivation: In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those other Liberians? (0) Much worse. (1) Worse. (2) Same. (3) Better. (4) Much better.

Trust in parliament: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The National Legislature? (0) Not at all. (1) Just a little. (2) Somewhat. (3) A lot.

In-group identity: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Liberian and being a … (respondent's ethnic group). Which of the following best expresses your feelings? (0) I feel only (respondent's ethnic group). (1) I feel more (respondent's ethnic group) than Liberian. (2) I feel equally Liberian and (respondent's ethnic group). (3) I feel more Liberian than (respondent's ethnic group). (4) I feel only Liberian.

Group discrimination: How often is the (respondent's ethnic group) treated unfairly by the government? (0) Never. (1) Sometimes. (2) Often. (3) Always.

Political efficacy: How easy or difficult is it for an ordinary person to have his voice heard between elections? (0) Very difficult. (1) Somewhat difficult. (2) Somewhat easy. (3) Easy.

Property damaged: Now I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences during the two civil wars that occurred in Liberia between 1989 and 2003. As you know, during the civil wars there was violence in many parts of the country. During the civil wars, please tell me if YOU PERSONALLY were affected in any of the following ways: Damage to your personal property: (0) No. (1) Yes.

Family loss: Now I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences during the two civil wars that occurred in Liberia between 1989 and 2003. As you know, during the civil wars there was violence in many parts of the country. During the civil wars, please tell me if YOU PERSONALLY were affected in any of the following ways: Loss or death of a personal family member due to conflict: (0) No. (1) Yes.

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