

How Political Repression Shapes Attitudes toward the State*

Omar García-Ponce
garcia.ponce@nyu.edu

Benjamin Pasquale
ben.pasquale@nyu.edu

*** Summary of the paper presented at the CCVW ***

March 20, 2014

Abstract

How does political repression influence civilian attitudes toward the state and its institutions? We study the case of Zimbabwe, which is marked by government repression, physical and economic insecurity, but also regular electoral competition. To isolate the causal effect of indirect exposure to violent political repression, we employ a novel identification strategy that exploits the timing and location of state-led violent events, relative to the timing and location of the nationally-representative Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2004, 2005, and 2009. This strategy compares individuals interviewed just days *after* repressive conflict events, to nearly identical individuals interviewed just days *before* such events, within the same district. We find strong evidence that individuals interviewed shortly after such small-scale, state-led violent events are substantially *more* likely to report that they trust the state institutions –particularly the president and the ruling party. We argue these findings contribute to a better understanding of how and why authoritarian leaders may benefit from the strategic use of violence.

*Omar García-Ponce and Benjamin Pasquale are Ph.D. Candidates in the Department of Politics at New York University. The full paper is available upon request from the authors.

Summary

Since at least Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, observers have questioned and theorized how and why political leaders instrumentally use force for political ends. Civilians, regularly targeted either directly or indirectly by state repression, may exhibit either greater allegiance or increasing hostility towards state leaders and institutions. Understanding systematically how civilians respond to violence is therefore central to understanding how and why governments use repression. Yet, there has been little systematic analysis of the individual effects of political intimidation or violence. According to Christopher Blattman and Edward Miguel, "[t]he social and institutional legacies of conflict are arguably the most important but least understood of all war impacts" (Blattman and Miguel, 2010, p. 42).

This gap in the literature makes it difficult to understand why states use violence outside of civil or interstate conflicts, why leaders promote (or allow) small-scale violence and intimidation by police, security forces, parties, mobs, vigilantes, and more. Despite the fact that coercion and repressive behavior remain pervasive in several regimes, the current literature does not offer clear answers to these questions. In a recent review on the study of government repression, Christian Davenport asks: "[w]hat are the 'benefits' of repression? Why do authorities believe that repressive action will lead them to their objectives, and does repression actually produce intended benefits? The answers are not clear" (Davenport, 2007, p. 17).

In this paper, we address the question on how, and to what extent, incidents of state-led violence influence civilian attitudes toward the state, specifically trust in institutions. We study the Zimbabwean context, an environment marked by government repression, physical and economic insecurity, but also regular electoral competition. The case of Zimbabwe is an ideal laboratory to test the relationship between political repression and civilian attitudes for at least two reasons. First, Robert Mugabe's regime has been characterized as a militarized form of electoral authoritarianism. Elections have been held on regular basis since independence, in 1980, but they have been neither free nor fair, and violence has been used routinely to repress opposition groups. A myriad of repressive and violent tactics have been used for instrumental political ends and specifically for electoral success. In response, an organized opposition –The Movement for Democratic Change– has used organized and frequent protests to build their own support and delegitimize the Mugabe regime.

Second, the case of Zimbabwe offers rich micro-level data on repression and political attitudes, which remain unexploited and can be used in novel ways to evaluate the attitudinal impact of violent political repression. On the one hand, the recurrent use of violence in Zimbabwean politics has been well documented over the past 10 years by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). On the other hand, despite the constant threat to public security, a series of household surveys aimed at measuring political attitudes have been conducted by the Afrobarometer in this challenging setting over the same time period. The combination of these two

data sources effectively translates into a data set with fine-grained temporal and spatial variation for the two measures of interest: political repression and political attitudes.

We make two contributions: one methodological, and one substantive. First, we develop a new method for identifying the short-term causal effects of indirect exposure to political violence. Any study measuring the effects of conflict or violence must address the central challenge that violence is not random. Perpetrators of violence make strategic choices, usually conditioned on specific information or structural factors –e.g., the identity of their targets, the geographic area, the availability of resources, and the tactic or method, among others. Our strategy exploits plausibly exogenous variation in exposure to violence generated by the timing and location of conflict events, relative to the timing and location of Afrobarometer surveys in Zimbabwe –a strategy that could potentially be used and refined in further research that relies on survey data in conflict zones.

Given the unanticipated nature of violence outbreaks during the Afrobarometer’s fieldwork, some respondents were arbitrarily interviewed just days after repressive conflict events, and others just days before. This quasi-random variation in recent, indirect exposure to violent political repression allows us to credibly isolate the causal effect of such exposure on attitudes toward the state. We identify the causal effect of recent, district-level exposure to violent political repression by explicitly comparing surveyed individuals whose districts experienced violent repressive events within a 30-day, 15-day, 10-day, 7-day, and 5-day window *prior* to the interview, to nearly identical individuals who were interviewed within the same district in an equivalent temporal window but *after* the violent events.

We focus on the short-term effects of violence to most precisely measure the the impact of such events, but also as we believe these short term effects are central to the decisions of state and non-state actors who perpetrate such violence. By matching citizen’s survey responses with violent events (both sub-nationally and within narrow temporal windows), our analysis is unlikely to be confounded by omitted variables –as any such bias would require unobserved variables that co-varied both within roughly the same week-period of the violent events and in the sub-national districts in which the events took place. Hence, our identification strategy rests on the claim that conflict events did not alter the systematic random sampling of the Afrobaromter surveys. We provide evidence that supports this statement.

Our second contribution is to demonstrate how indirect exposure to violent repression may influence attitudes towards the state. We find strong causal evidence that indirect exposure to state repression leads citizens to report higher trust in the state institutions, specifically in the president, the ruling party, the parliament, the local officials, and the police. As shown in Figure 1, respondents interviewed within 10 days after a state-led violent event took place in their district are about 15% more likely to say that they "trust the president a lot," and about 18% less likely to declare that they "do not trust the president at all," relative to respondents that were interviewed within 10 days before a sate-led violent event took place in the same district.

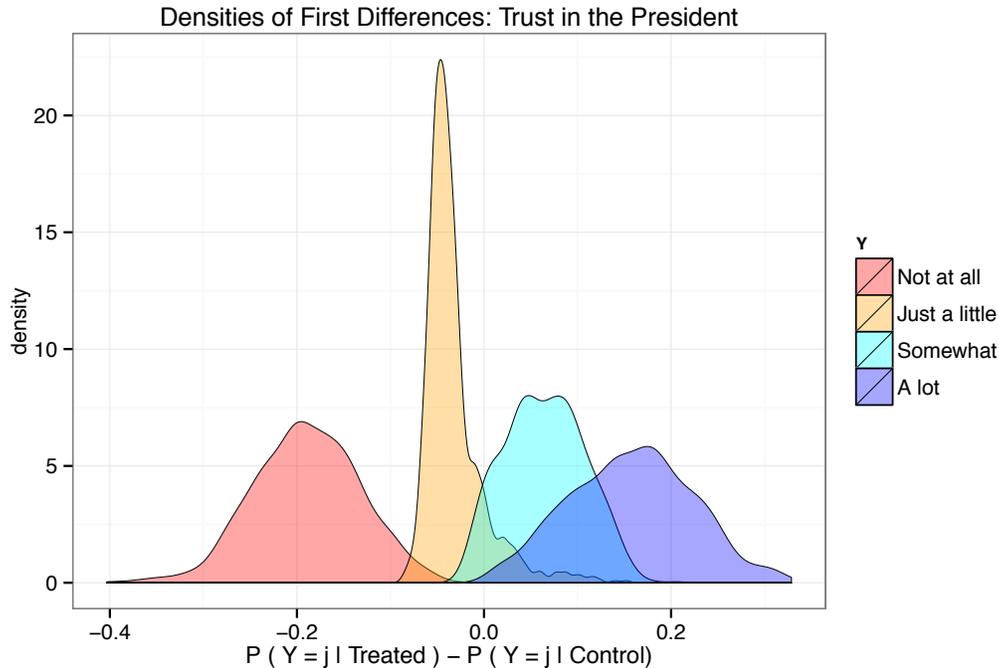


Figure 1: **The Effect of State-led Violence on Reported Trust in the President:** This plot shows the simulated first differences in the predicted probabilities of observing each of the four outcomes of *trust in the president* as a result of a change in the treatment status, holding other attributes at their sample means, based on ordered logit estimates.

Complementary results show that as the state uses repression to consolidate control and support within a given area, respondents report they feel more free to express themselves politically. We also find the magnitude of the effect of repression on support for the state increases as the timing of the survey approaches the 2005 parliamentary election in Zimbabwe. Lastly, we examine the effect of protest events organized by non-state actors, and find indirect exposure to such events reduces trust and support for government leaders, pushing civilians towards greater fear of the state. This result is causally identified using a similar empirical strategy, and supports historical accounts of state repression and violent political competition in Zimbabwe.

We argue these results contribute to a better understanding of how and why leaders may benefit from the use of violence. Short-term political gains can be achieved by the strategic use of violent repressive events that shift the attitudes of civilians living geographically proximate to such events. These findings are of particular interest for the study of electoral violence. New research has shown electoral violence in Africa to be (a) common, (b) generally perpetrated by the incumbent, and (c) more frequent prior elections than afterwards (Straus and Taylor 2012). Our empirical results provide causal evidence to explain these stylized facts and help adjudicate between rival hypotheses that might predict electoral violence.

Conflict Consortium Virtual Workshop (CCVW)

Our findings are somewhat counterintuitive. Why is that indirect exposure to state repression leads to higher levels of self-reported trust in the president? There are at least two alternative explanations. On the one hand, it is entirely possible that we are observing a genuine increase in trust. The entrenchment of violence against civilians creates new daily insecurities, which are likely to translate into greater support for the state to enhance local political order. On the other hand, it is reasonable to hypothesize that we are observing preference falsification, i.e., individuals repress their true opinions because of fear of further violence or punishment. This imposes key challenges to be addressed in the framing and the empirical analysis of our paper.

The idea of workshopping the paper was precisely along those lines. We received highly valuable input to move forward with our project. Based on the discussion, we can conclude two things. First, we do not have enough evidence to claim that indirect exposure to repression events increases genuine trust in the Zimbabwean state. We cannot rule out the possibility that the reported levels of trust are insincere. The findings on increased freedom of expression as a result of exposure to violent repression are particularly suspicious, and it is difficult to make sense of the psychological mechanisms behind them.

Second, the findings are quite robust and conceptually interesting on its own. Regardless of whether the self-reported measures of trust are genuine or not, our evidence reflects that Mugabe's regime employs a highly effective repressive strategy. Exposure to violent repression either induces greater support for the state or preference falsification, which in either case is indicative of how violence can be strategically used by leaders to achieve political gains. In the next steps of our project, we expect to move forward in this direction, both in terms of the general framing of the paper and the refinement of the empirical analysis.

References

- Blattman, Christopher and Edward Miguel. 2010. "Civil War." *Journal of Economic Literature* 48(1):3–57.
- Davenport, Christian. 2007. "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10:1–23.