

# Contextual Exposure to Wartime Violence and Support for Democracy: Evidence From a Natural Experiment in Colombia

## Research Report

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What is the effect of contextual exposure to civil war-related violence on individual support for democracy? More specifically, are citizens living in violent contexts more or less prone to support democracy as a form of government? To what extent are they satisfied with how democracy works in their own country? A considerable body of literature suggests that wartime victimization may positively affect political participation and civic engagement as measured by variables such as voting, participation in social and political groups, and intragroup altruism. However, most research has focused on direct victimization and does not provide evidence on whether contextual exposure to wartime violence influences support for democracy. This gap in the literature is noteworthy for two reasons. On the one hand, support for democracy has a critical role in democratic consolidation, one of the most pressing challenges facing war-torn societies. On the other hand, although civilian victimization is a widespread phenomenon in intrastate conflicts, contextual exposure to wartime violence—i.e., living in communities impacted by violent events—is the most prevalent form of exposure.

In this project, I argue that contextual exposure to violent attacks perpetrated by non-state armed actors has contrasting effects on different dimensions of regime support. On the one hand, it increases the probability that citizens prefer democratic rule over other forms of government because it reinforces the appeal of polities that promote inclusion and non-violent conflict resolution. On the other hand, it reduces satisfaction with democracy because it exposes the state's inability to protect civilians, maintain order, and peacefully resolve societal conflicts, leading citizens to view democratic institutions as ineffective in

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meeting their expectations for security and governance. I test this argument in the context of Colombia, a South American country that has endured over six decades of internal war.

Empirically investigating the causal link between contextual exposure to wartime violence and support for democracy presents formidable methodological challenges. Violent events do not occur at random in conflict-affected countries. Unobserved time-varying community-level factors, including socioeconomic variables and local political dynamics, can simultaneously affect the probability of violent events and regime support levels, leading to spurious associations or masking truly existing ones. I address these challenges by implementing a novel difference-in-differences instrumental variables (diff-in-diff IV) strategy that leverages two sources of local variation in the incidence of rebel violence in the Colombian civil war. Temporal variation comes from national-level fluctuations in military spending during Álvaro Uribe's administration (2002-2010). Cross-sectional variation comes from municipalities' geographic proximity to natural protected areas (NPAs), which insurgent organizations have historically used in Colombia as hiding places and bases of operations. Exploiting these two sources of variation, I construct the interaction between military spending and proximity to NPAs and use it as an instrumental variable for contextual exposure to rebel attacks.

The CLACS Field Research Grant provided essential support for advancing this project. The rationale behind my instrumental variable is that, as military spending increased, the probability of rebel attacks should have declined more sharply in municipalities near large National Protected Areas (NPAs), since these regions were a central focus of counterinsurgency operations during President Uribe's tenure. The grant enabled me to conduct interviews with researchers at the Bogotá office of the Stockholm Environment Institute, which helped me validate a key identification assumption of my empirical strategy: that the NPAs I examine—National Natural Parks, Regional Natural Parks, Natural Reserves, Unique Natural Areas, and Flora and Fauna Sanctuaries—were created independently of local conflict dynamics.

With the support of a local non-profit organization promoting peaceful conflict resolution, I also established crucial contacts that will allow me to interview former commanders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) later this winter. Furthermore, I

presented my project to the Director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in Colombia and to faculty members in the Department of Political Science at Los Andes University, receiving valuable feedback that will inform the next stage of my analysis and helping me expand my academic network in the process. Finally, the grant funds allowed me to renew my Stata license, the statistical software I use for data analysis in this project.