Violence and Political Trust in Post-War Societies: Evidence from Northern Uganda

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Given that 90 percent of conflicts initiated in the 21st century were reoccurring, the problem with civil wars is not preventing their rise, but permanently ending the conflicts that already broke out.\(^1\) Past research indicates that particularly relevant in successful peace and democracy building is political trust.\(^2\) If people do not trust their government to act on their grievances and consider their claims, they are more willing to support renewed violence.\(^3\) What determines the level of political trust in post-war societies? Recent studies examining the effect of violence on individual political perceptions offer contradictory results. While some scholars argue that violence has a corrosive impact on trust, others deliver evidence for a trust-enhancing effect.

This project examines the link between exposure to violence and political trust using household survey data taken in 2005 and 2011 from the Lira and Pader Districts in Northern Uganda under the supervision of Mount Holyoke Professor Sarah Adelman. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group that began attacking Ugandan districts in the mid-late 1980s, escalated its attacks on Northern Uganda in 2002 and 2003, displacing thousands of people and forcing remaining households into Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. After years in camps, most IDPs were resettled between 2006 and 2008.

Throughout this period, the sample encompassing 1,122 people shows a significant decline in political trust. Measured by respondents’ agreement with the statement *I believe the government does what is right for the people*, trust decreased from about two thirds in 2005 to about one fourth in 2011. To quantify people’s exposure to violence, this study uses data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) from 1997-2011 and estimates the number of conflicts and fatalities of each individual within 5 miles distance. Using an ordered logit model, preliminary results indicate that exposure to violence increases political trust, but conflicts with high numbers of fatalities erode people’s trust in their government.

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