The Institutional Cost of Violence: Political Trust under Pressure in Nigeria

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Abstract:

This study examines how increases in political violence affect political trust in Nigeria, a country with frequent electoral violence and deep social divides. While prior research links violence to voter turnout or candidate preferences, less is known about its effect on institutional trust. Using individual-level Afrobarometer data and geo-referenced ACLED records (2003–2022), we construct a measure of excess violence based on deviations from a six-month regional moving average to test whether unexpected surges in violence erode trust. We find that excess political violence is associated with a significant decline in trust in the president, while we observe no statistically significant change in trust in ruling or opposition parties. We also show that violence lowers perceived ability to remove leaders through elections, pointing to a broader decline in democratic accountability. These results support two mechanisms: scapegoating, where the president is blamed for instability, and institutional belief, where trust in the presidency declines alongside confidence in democratic institutions. By examining multiple dimensions of trust, this study contributes to the literature on violence and democratic attitudes. It shows how citizens respond differently to violence depending on the symbolic weight of political actors and highlights the importance of distinguishing between trust in leaders and trust in institutions.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the research question of whether increased exposure to political violence reduces trust in democratic institutions in Nigeria. We define political violence as covert or overt efforts to shape the distribution of political power and electoral outcomes through violent means, including killing, maiming, arson, excessive force against protesters, and property destruction (Omotola and Oyewole 2025, 947). Political trust refers to public confidence in political institutions and electoral processes, shaped by their perceived responsiveness, economic performance, corruption, and ability to ensure security (Harding and Nwokolo 2024, 942). Although political violence has been a persistent feature of Nigerian politics since independence in 1960, Nigeria remains understudied in the electoral violence literature, especially compared to countries like Kenya (Anyika and Ani 2021, 21). This gap in the literature motivates the focus of our study, which contributes new empirical evidence from Nigeria and offers a more contextually grounded perspective on how violence shapes institutional trust. Nigeria also presents a particularly compelling case given its institutional complexity and sociopolitical heterogeneity: it is Africa's most populous democracy, with deep ethnic, religious, and regional divisions, as well as stark geographic inequalities. These features make it a uniquely rich context for studying the political consequences of violence.

Nigeria operates under a presidential system with four-year term limits, holding general elections every four years alongside sub-national or off-cycle elections between presidential cycles (Omotola and Oyewole 2025, 947). Both general and off-cycle elections are regularly accompanied by political violence, with variation in intensity and frequency across time providing a useful foundation for analyzing how fluctuations in violence relate to political trust (Omotola and Oyewole 2025, 957). The struggle for political power in Nigeria is characterized along long-standing religious, ethnic, and geographic lines. The country consists of a Muslim-majority North and a Christian-majority South, and is home to three dominant ethnic groups: the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the South (Anyika and Ani 2021, 25). These identity-based divisions are reinforced by sharp geographic inequalities, particularly the concentration of oil reserves in the South, which has contributed to vastly different economic outcomes across regions (Nossiter 2011). Together, these features make Nigeria a highly relevant context for examining how political violence affects trust.

This analysis combines individual-level survey data from Afrobarometer with geo-referenced daily records of political violence from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for Nigeria, covering the period from 2003 to 2022. From Afrobarometer Rounds 2 through 9, we compile measures of political trust alongside individual-level demographic covariates. From ACLED, we extract daily records of political violence incidents and associated fatalities, which we aggregate to the region-month level to align with the structure of the survey data. The two datasets are then merged based on interview month and region, with the unit of observation defined as an individual respondent in a given region and month.

Our empirical strategy estimates the effect of excess political violence on political trust by focusing on short-term deviations from typical violence levels. We construct a region-month-level measure of excess violence, defined as the difference between the number of violent incidents in a given month and the six-month moving average for that region. This allows us to move beyond the mere presence of violence and instead capture unexpected spikes that may trigger shifts in trust within a context where political unrest is persistent. We adopt this framework instead of a traditional difference-in-differences design, which relies on untreated comparison groups and clearly defined treatment windows—both of which are difficult to establish in Nigeria, where political violence is widespread across regions and occurs throughout electoral cycles. This approach is better suited to assessing how fluctuations in violence affect political trust in a context of persistent instability.

The first key finding is that excess political violence is associated with a decline in trust in the president. This relationship becomes statistically significant only after accounting for regional and temporal heterogeneity, suggesting that local context and timing shape how citizens respond to instability. Although the effect size is modest, its consistency across models and its emergence only in fully specified regressions indicate a meaningful association. This supports the central hypothesis that increases in violence erode confidence in political institutions. The result is especially important given the symbolic weight of the presidency in Nigeria's political system. As the most visible figure of the state, the president appears to absorb public frustration during moments of crisis, reinforcing the idea that presidential trust is particularly vulnerable in unstable environments.

The second key finding is that excess political violence does not significantly affect trust in either the ruling or opposition parties. Across all model specifications, the coefficients are

small and statistically insignificant, indicating no robust association. This contrasts sharply with the results for trust in the president and suggests that citizens distinguish between partisan organizations and executive leadership when evaluating institutional performance during periods of violence. While political parties are central to democratic systems, they may be perceived as more diffuse, bureaucratic, or less directly accountable. The absence of an effect here reinforces the interpretation that trust in the presidency is uniquely responsive to violence—consistent with the scapegoating mechanism, in which blame is directed at the most visible figure of the state rather than the broader partisan system.

The third key result is that excess political violence modestly reduces citizens' belief in their ability to remove leaders through elections. Although the effect is not significant in simpler specifications, it becomes statistically significant once region and time fixed effects are added, suggesting that perceptions of institutional accountability are shaped by both localized violence and broader political context. This finding provides additional support for the institutional belief mechanism: rather than interpreting violence as a temporary disruption, citizens appear to view it as evidence that democratic institutions are not functioning as they should. Because the presidency is often seen as a proxy for institutional effectiveness, it becomes a focal point for this disillusionment. The fact that violence reduces both trust in the president and belief in democratic processes indicates a broader erosion of confidence in political institutions.

Recent studies in the comparative politics literature examine how electoral violence shapes political participation and perceptions of democratic legitimacy. In a vignette experiment in Kenya, Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas (2020) found that voters were less likely to support candidates associated with violence, and turnout declined when voters had to choose between two violent contenders. These effects persisted across ethnic and partisan lines, underscoring the central role of violence in shaping political trust. Similarly, Collier and Vicente's (2014) field experiment in Nigeria demonstrated that anti-violence campaigns reduced perceptions of electoral violence and increased voter turnout. This evidence reinforces a causal link between political violence and participation, suggesting that efforts to reduce violence can strengthen democratic engagement. In line with this, Fetzer and Kyburz (2024) show that stronger local institutions are associated with lower levels of violence, highlighting the role of institutional capacity in maintaining political stability. Together, these studies emphasize how violence affects political behavior in settings characterized by weak institutions and societal divisions. Building

on this work, our study shifts the focus from voter participation to institutional trust, using self-reported measures to examine how excess violence shapes citizens' perceptions of political authority and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

A separate body of literature focuses on how citizens interpret political leadership in presidential systems, particularly where institutions are weak or highly personalized. In such settings, the president is often perceived not just as a political actor, but as a representative of the state and its democratic institutions (O'Donnell 1994). Research shows that in countries like Nigeria, trust in the president serves as a proxy for broader institutional trust (Adaba and Boio 2024), with presidential performance interpreted as an indicator of whether the political system is functioning effectively. This representative function makes the presidency especially vulnerable during periods of instability, as citizens may conflate executive failure with institutional breakdown. Our study builds on this literature by showing how excess political violence reduces trust in the presidency and lowers perceived institutional accountability, reinforcing the idea that presidential trust can reflect deeper concerns about the functioning of democracy itself.

2. Context

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse federation of 36 autonomous states, each with its own political, demographic, and institutional characteristics (World Bank). These states vary widely in both population and land area. Kano State in the north has a population of over 13 million, while Bayelsa State in the south has fewer than 2 million residents. In terms of geographic size, Niger State covers more than 76,000 square kilometers, whereas Lagos State occupies just over 3,000 square kilometers. This wide variation contributes to substantial differences in how violence is experienced and how political trust is formed, which establishes an imperative to add individual-level controls as well as map measures of violence to respondents in specific regions to account for exposure to violence.

Historically, the use of violence is commonplace in Nigerian politics, threatening the overall political stability of the country. These persistent incidents of electoral violence in political processes have led some scholars to view violence as part of Nigeria's political culture (Anyika and Ani 2021). In recent history, the general elections of 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 were engulfed in incidents of violence, with fatalities ranging from 100 to 800 (27–31). Further, Omotola and Oyewole (2025) find evidence that off-cycle and subnational elections that happen in between general elections are similarly violent: there is no systematic correlation or

spike in violence based on the type of election. Violence occurs before and after elections, and some incidents of political violence are also entirely uncorrelated with electoral cycles (ACLED). This ensures sufficient random variation in our independent variable of excess political violence.

Figure 1 - Spatial Distribution of ACLED Violence Data in the 2007 and 2011 Presidential Elections

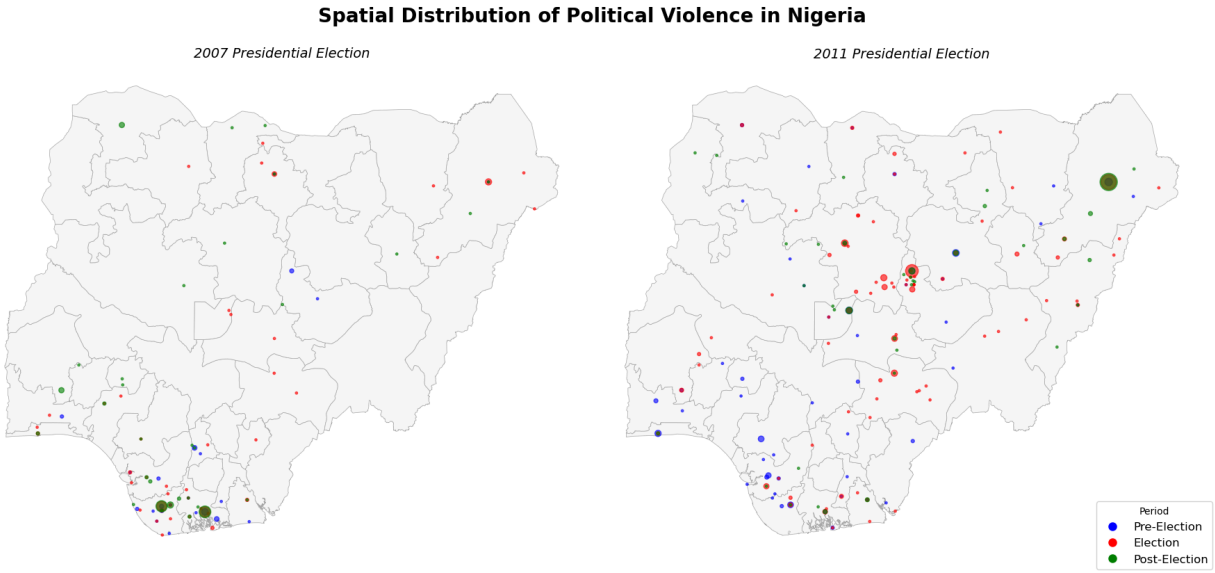

Figure 1 highlights the persistence of electoral violence in national Nigeria elections, demonstrating the broad spatial distribution of incidents in both the 2007 and 2011 presidential elections. Incidents are classified into (1) pre-election violence, (2) election campaign period violence and (3) post-election violence, each of which are roughly 6 months long, congruent to the average length of presidential political campaigns (Rawlence and AlbinLackey 2007, 499), which span the beginning of political primaries to election day.

Figure 1 has two significant implications for our research design. Firstly, comparing the 2007 and 2011 elections, there are stark differences in where incidents were most concentrated. In 2007, violence predominantly occurred in the southernmost part of the country while in 2011, violence was widespread in all states, but with an outsized proportion occurring in the north. To explain this difference, understanding the context surrounding the 2011 presidential election is informative as it emphasizes the unique religious and geopolitical divides that affect levels of violence. Jonathan Goodluck, the incumbent Christian President, was re-elected controversially despite widespread allegations of voter fraud and manipulation in the Muslim-majority north (Nossiter 2011). Consequently, violence was most pronounced in religiously divided northern

settlements (Human Rights Watch 2011), reflected in figure 1. Secondly, when attempting to isolate the causal effect of electoral violence on political trust, the widespread distribution of violence makes it difficult to use any region of Nigeria as a non-violent counterfactual. As such, comparing political trust in high violence vs. low violence regions is infeasible; to circumvent this constraint, we construct a measure of excess violence relative to a 6-month moving average.

In addition to the context of political and social instability, a growing body of research explores how trust in political institutions forms and evolves in fledgling and fragile democracies like Nigeria. In many African contexts, trust is often shaped not only by institutional performance but also by social identity, historical legacies, and informal networks (Logan 2009). Institutions such as the presidency, local government, and national electoral commissions often serve as proxies through which citizens evaluate state legitimacy. In Nigeria, trust is frequently mediated by regional affiliation, perceptions of ethnic favoritism, and expectations around state responsiveness. Public opinion data from Afrobarometer (2024) shows that trust in institutions varies widely across demographic and regional lines, making it essential to account for this heterogeneity when analyzing the effects of political violence on trust.

Recent work in the institutional legitimacy literature shows that reducing violence through interventions like information campaigns can improve voter turnout and strengthen trust in institutions (Collier and Vicente 2014). This makes it especially important to understand how political violence shapes institutional trust in fragile democracies. In contexts like Nigeria, where instability is frequent and institutions are unevenly trusted, political violence can weaken public confidence in the state's ability to provide security and uphold democratic norms. However, these effects are not always uniform. Citizens may respond differently depending on which institutions they view as responsible or capable of managing instability. This study builds on that literature by using disaggregated trust measures to examine how excess political violence shapes attitudes toward the president, political parties, and the public's ability to remove leaders through elections. This approach helps identify the specific institutional channels through which violence affects democratic legitimacy. The analysis also accounts for Nigeria's political and demographic variation to reflect the heterogeneous interactions of violence and trust across different regions.

3. Data

This analysis integrates individual-level survey data from the Afrobarometer with geo-referenced daily records of political violence from the Armed Conflict Location & Event

Data (ACLED) for Nigeria, spanning 2003 to 2022. The resulting pooled cross-sectional dataset consists of 19,124 individual-level observations, where each observation corresponds to a unique respondent surveyed in a specific month-year and region.

Afrobarometer surveys measure public attitudes on political, economic, and social issues across African countries and are administered in rounds, each conducted in a span of approximately one month in its respective year (ex: Round 2 in October 2003; Round 9 in April 2022). This study draws on nine Afrobarometer survey rounds conducted in Nigeria, specifically Rounds 2 through 9, including the intermediate Round 3.5. In addition to attitudinal data, Afrobarometer records the interview date, respondent region (one of Nigeria's 36 states), and key demographic details such as residential setting (urban or rural), gender, age, and highest level of education. As shown in *Table 1*, the sample is evenly split by gender (50% female) and residential setting (46.6% urban), which is representative of Nigeria's population (Osama 2023). The average respondent is 32.5 years old, and the mean education level is 4.2 on a 0–9 scale, corresponding to roughly "some secondary school / high school." This demographic variation allows for more precise control of individual-level confounders.

Table 1 — *Summary Statistics*

	(1) Observations	(2) Mean	(3) SD	(4) Min	(5) Max
Main Independent Variables					
Violent incidents *(in interview month)*	19,124	3.413	7.487	0	70
Fatalities from violence *(in interview month)*	19,124	12.70	44.78	0	491
Excess violence *(in interview month)*	19,124	0.428	2.715	–12.33	26.17
Excess fatalities *(in interview month)*	19,124	2.744	20.47	–93.83	279.7
Main Dependent Variables					
Trust in President	18,810	1.100	0.999	0	3
Trust in Electoral Commission	18,558	0.957	0.919	0	3
Trust in Elected Local Government	18,580	0.927	0.886	0	3
Trust in Ruling Party	18,574	0.943	0.932	0	3
Trust in Opposition Party	18,288	0.922	0.894	0	3
Additional Variables as Proxies for Trust					
Council reflecting views of voters	9,821	1.194	0.861	0	3
Ability to remove leaders from office	11,890	1.053	0.903	0	3
Fairness of last election	15,774	2.491	1.108	1	4
Fear of becoming a victim of violence	11,790	1.766	1.090	0	3
Individual-Level Controls					
Female *(1 = Female, 0 = Male)*	19,124	0.500	0.500	0	1
Urban *(1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)*	19,124	0.466	0.499	0	1
Age	19,056	32.48	12.33	18	97
Highest level of education *(0-9 scale)*	19,073	4.228	2.136	0	9

Notes: The dataset is a pooled cross-section of 19,124 individual-level observations drawn from nine rounds of the Afrobarometer, spanning 2003 to 2022. The number of violent incidents, sourced from ACLED, is calculated by counting the violent events that occurred in an Afrobarometer respondent's region during the month and year of their interview. Excess violence is defined as the difference between the number of violent incidents in the interview month and the six-month average of incidents in that region, calculated prior to the interview date. Trust variables are measured on a 0–3 scale, where 0 indicates "not at all" and 3 indicates "a lot" of trust in political institutions, based on Afrobarometer survey questions. Additional political trust proxies are measured on either a 0–3 or 1–4 scale. Individual-level controls include gender, urban residence, age, and highest level of education.

The outcome variable is political trust, constructed using survey questions that consistently appear across Afrobarometer rounds and reliably capture attitudes toward political institutions. Based on these criteria, the core measure was based on the question, "How much do you trust each of the following?" which asked respondents about their trust in five political institutions: the President, the electoral commission (INEC), elected local government, the ruling party, and opposition parties. Each institution was used to construct a separate outcome variable, coded on a scale from 0 ("Not at all") to 3 ("A lot"), with additional codes for "Don't know" and missing responses. As shown in *Table 1*, average trust is highest for the president (mean = 1.10), followed by the ruling party (0.94) and opposition parties (0.92), suggesting moderate baseline confidence but considerable variation across individuals. To broaden the analysis of institutional confidence, we also extracted four supplementary indicators as proxies for political trust: belief that local councils reflect voter views (mean = 1.19), perceived ability to remove leaders through elections (1.05), fairness of the last election (2.49 on a 1–4 scale), and fear of becoming a victim of violence (1.77). Together, these outcomes allow us to examine not only direct trust in political institutions, but also broader perceptions of democratic accountability and citizen security.

To construct the main explanatory variable, excess political violence, we used daily ACLED records of violent political events in Nigeria and their associated fatalities, which we aggregated to the month and region level to align with the structure of Afrobarometer interviews. We first created two baseline measures: (1) the total number of violent incidents and (2) the total number of fatalities in a respondent's region during the month and year of their interview. Fatalities were included as a control variable to account for variation in the severity of violence. The raw counts show substantial variation across respondents, with an average of 3.41 violent incidents and 12.7 fatalities in the interview month (*Table 1*). Since our interest lies in excess violence rather than its mere presence, we calculated a 6-month moving average of violent incidents for each region, including the interview month (ex: January to June, for a June interview). Excess political violence was defined as the difference between the number of incidents in the interview month and this six-month average. We applied the same approach to generate a measure of excess fatalities, which served as an additional control for the intensity of violence relative to typical levels. As shown in Table 1, the mean value of excess violence is 0.43 incidents, with a standard deviation of 2.72. While many respondents were not exposed to major deviations from baseline levels, others experienced substantial spikes (up to 26 incidents above

the average). This variation is central to our identifying strategy, which hinges on distinguishing unexpected increases in violence from the baseline conditions typical of each region.

While aggregating at the month-level captures the broader political context at the time of the survey, this introduces a key limitation: it may not precisely reflect the timing of individual interviews. Specifically, interviews conducted early in a month may not capture the effects of violence occurring later that same month. This affects both components of the excess violence measure: the number of incidents in the interview month and the six-month moving average. Ideally, we would define a rolling 30-day exposure window for each respondent (ex: June 17 to July 17 for a July 17 interview) and construct a corresponding six-month moving average based on the exact interview date (ex: February 17 to July 17). However, implementing this precise data structure would require substantial computation and restructuring at the individual level.

4. Empirical Strategy

Our empirical strategy estimates the relationship between excess political violence and trust in political institutions. The model is specified as:

$$Trust_{i,r,t} = \beta(Violence_{r,t} - MA_{r,t}) + X_{i,r,t}\gamma + \lambda_r + \delta_t + \epsilon_{i,r,t}$$

where the dependent variable, $Trust_{i,r,t}$, represents political trust for individual i in region r at time t. The key independent variable is excess violence, defined as the deviation from the typical level of violence in the region at the time of the interview. Specifically, $Violence_{r,t}$ denotes the number of violent incidents in region r during month t and $MA_{r,t}$ is the six-month trailing average of violent incidents in the same region, capturing the baseline level of violence. The term $(Violence_{r,t} - MA_{r,t})$ thus reflects the excess political violence experienced in month t.

The vector $X_{i,r,t}$ includes individual-level controls, such as gender, age, urban residence, and education. Region fixed effects λ_r control for time-invariant characteristics specific to each region, while time fixed effects δ_t capture shocks common to all regions in a given month. The error term $\epsilon_{i,r,t}$ captures unobserved determinants of trust.

4.1. Limitations of Applying a Standard Difference-in-Differences Framework

This model estimates the association between excess political violence and trust in institutions by exploiting deviations from typical violence levels within regions over time. In this

sense, it is similar to a standard difference-in-differences (DiD) approach, where effects are identified through variation in a post-treatment indicator. However, applying this framework in the Nigerian context presents several challenges that complicate a straightforward DiD design.

Firstly, there is no region in Nigeria that is consistently free of political violence. A standard DiD framework relies on comparing outcomes between treated and untreated units. In our setting, nearly all regions experience some level of violence during the study period, which means there is no meaningful control group of unaffected units. As a result, we cannot define a clean binary treatment assignment. Instead, we focus on variation in the intensity of violence within regions, using excess violence as a continuous treatment measure.

Secondly, we are interested in the relationship between violence and trust across multiple time periods, rather than isolating short-term effects around a single event like an election. In settings with repeated elections, it is difficult to define consistent pre- and post-periods, since the post-election period of one cycle often overlaps with the pre-period of the next. This overlap makes it hard to identify when treatment starts and ends and weakens the parallel trends assumption. To address this, we compare monthly violence to a six-month moving average, allowing us to capture localized spikes in violence without relying on fixed event windows.

Lastly, both pre- and post-election periods often involve political violence, making it difficult to treat any specific window as a clear before or after period. When violence is ongoing, it is difficult to interpret changes in trust as responses to a discrete treatment shock. Our excess violence measure helps address this by focusing on unexpected surges, without assuming any period is free from conflict.

While our setup addresses key challenges with applying a standard DiD framework, it does not allow us to definitively determine a causal relationship. A direct causal interpretation would require stronger identifying assumptions or leveraging an exogenous source of variation in violence.

4.2. Identifying Assumptions

To interpret our results as capturing a meaningful relationship between excess political violence and political trust, we rely on a set of identifying assumptions. The two main threats to identification are (1) omitted variable bias and (2) reverse causality, both of which we address through our measurement strategy and model design.

One of the key identifying assumptions is that excess political violence is exogenous to political trust, conditional on controls and fixed effects. In other words, short-term spikes in violence are not systematically correlated with unobserved shocks that also affect trust. A potential threat to this assumption is omitted variable bias, which can arise in two ways: (1) from short-term regional shocks or (2) long-run structural differences across regions. For example, a sudden crackdown by local authorities could simultaneously increase violent incidents and lower trust in institutions, creating a spurious relationship. Similarly, some regions may have persistent political dynamics that make them more prone to violence and lower levels of institutional trust.

To reduce the risk of bias from unobserved factors, we rely on two main design features. First, Afrobarometer interviews are scheduled independently of regional political events, which makes it unlikely that survey timing aligns systematically with high-violence periods. Second, we define excess violence as the deviation from a six-month moving average of incidents within the same region. This approach helps isolate short-term, unexpected changes in violence that are less likely to be driven by broader trends in trust or persistent regional characteristics. We also include region and time fixed effects, along with individual-level controls, to account for unobserved heterogeneity across space and time. Together, these strategies help mitigate concerns about omitted variable bias and strengthen the credibility of our identification strategy.

Another key identifying assumption is that excess political violence is not driven by changes in individual political trust. This assumes that individual trust levels do not systematically lead to short-term deviations in violence at the region-month level. A potential threat to this assumption is reverse causality. For instance, during periods of low political trust, such as around contentious elections, citizens may be more likely to protest or resist state authority, prompting a violent response. This would introduce endogeneity and bias the estimates. We address this concern in two ways: (1) with over 19,000 individual-level observations, it is unlikely that variation in individual attitudes is driving aggregate violence patterns in a way that systematically affects our results, and (2) since the violence measure is aggregated at the region-month level, it reflects broader political conditions rather than individual-level shifts in trust.

5. Empirical Results

5.1. Trust in President

The results in *Table 2* suggest that excess political violence is associated with lower trust in the president. This relationship becomes stronger when accounting for regional and temporal heterogeneity, indicating that citizens may respond to local surges in violence by withdrawing support from executive leadership. The findings also reveal a meaningful distinction between the frequency and severity of violence. While a higher number of violent incidents erodes trust, greater severity, measured by fatalities, is associated with a slight increase in trust.

In Specification (1), which includes only the key independent variables, excess violent incidents during the interview month are negatively associated with trust in the president, although the effect is not statistically significant. Introducing individual-level controls in Specification (2) yields a similar coefficient (−0.0141), which remains insignificant. The relationship becomes statistically significant in Specification (3) with the inclusion of region fixed effects and remains so in Specification (4), which adds time fixed effects. In the fully specified model, a one-unit increase in excess violent incidents corresponds to a 0.0237-point decline in trust on a 0–3 scale. While the effect appears small, it could accumulate into a substantial erosion of trust over time, given the frequency of violent incidents in some regions.

In contrast, excess fatalities are positively associated with trust in the president across most specifications. The effect is statistically significant in Specifications (1), (2), and (4), with coefficients ranging from 0.00384 to 0.00426. This pattern suggests that while frequent violent incidents reduce trust, higher fatality counts may not have the same effect and are even linked to slightly greater trust. This may reflect the visibility of government responses following fatal events, which can be perceived as a sign of institutional presence or competence. Alternatively, it may reflect heightened feelings of insecurity, prompting individuals to express greater trust in political authority as a form of reassurance. In both cases, the relationship between severity and trust appears to be driven less by the objective level of violence and more by interpretations of the president's response.

Table 2 — *Dependent Variable: Trust in President*

	(1) Clustered SE	(2) Individual Controls	(3) Region FE	(4) Region & Time FE
Excess violent incidents *(interview month)*	-0.0128 (0.0139)	-0.0141 (0.0128)	-0.0205* (0.0105)	-0.0237** (0.0106)
Excess fatalities *(interview month)*	0.00426* (0.00219)	0.00384* (0.00207)	0.00252 (0.00189)	0.00384* (0.00190)
Female *(1 = Female, 0 = Male)*		-0.105*** (0.0183)	-0.0726*** (0.0181)	-0.0797*** (0.0177)
Urban residence *(1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)*		-0.0901** (0.0413)	-0.00126 (0.0274)	0.00845 (0.0237)
Age		-0.000180 (0.000802)	0.00261*** (0.000629)	0.00248*** (0.000604)
Constant	1.094*** (0.0532)	1.296*** (0.0872)	0.614*** (0.0563)	0.372*** (0.0590)
Individual Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Time FE	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	18,810	18,698	18,698	18,698
R-squared	0.005	0.021	0.092	0.142

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by region reported in parentheses. The sample includes individual-level survey data and is unbalanced across time and region. Specification (1) includes only the key independent variables: excess violent incidents and excess fatalities in the interview month. Specification (2) adds individual-level controls, including gender, urban residence, age, education level, and race. Specification (3) includes region fixed effects to account for time-invariant regional heterogeneity. Specification (4) incorporates both region and time fixed effects (interview year-month).

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

Among the individual-level controls, gender shows the most consistent association with political trust. Female respondents report significantly lower levels of trust in the president across all specifications. In Specification (2), being female is associated with a 0.105-point decrease in trust, and this relationship remains strong and statistically significant with the inclusion of region and time fixed effects in Specifications (3) and (4). Urban residence is negatively associated with trust in Specification (2), but this effect is not robust across models. Age shows a small but statistically significant positive association with trust once fixed effects are included, with coefficients of approximately 0.0025 ($p < 0.001$).

Overall, the inclusion of region and time fixed effects substantially improves model fit, with the R-squared increasing from 0.005 in the baseline model to 0.142 in the fully specified model. This suggests that unobserved regional and temporal factors account for a considerable share of the variation in political trust. The results support the view that excess political violence

is associated with declines in trust in the president, even after accounting for individual characteristics and contextual heterogeneity. We interpret this negative association as reflecting two potential mechanisms: (1) the president may serve as a scapegoat during periods of instability, where citizens attribute blame for violence to the head of state regardless of direct involvement; and (2) trust in the president may proxy for broader institutional confidence, such that political violence erodes belief in democratic governance more generally. To assess which mechanism is more plausibly driving the results, we estimate additional regressions using alternative measures of political trust.

5.2. Trust in Partisan Bodies

The results in *Table 3* suggest that excess political violence does not meaningfully affect trust in partisan bodies. Across all models, neither trust in the ruling party nor trust in the opposition responds significantly to violent events or fatalities. These results stand in contrast to those in Table 2, where excess violence was associated with a decline in trust in the president.

For trust in the ruling party, the coefficient on excess violent incidents is positive in the baseline model (Specification 1), but turns negative once region fixed effects are included in Specification (2) and remains negative in the fully specified model (Specification 3). However, across all three models, the estimates are small in magnitude and not statistically significant, suggesting that excess violence does not meaningfully affect trust in the ruling party. A similar pattern is observed for trust in the opposition. The coefficient is initially positive in Specification (1) and becomes slightly negative in Specifications (2) and (3), but remains statistically insignificant throughout. These findings contrast with the results for trust in the president, where excess violence is consistently associated with a significant decline in support.

Excess fatalities also show no consistent effect on trust in political parties. Across both sets of models, the coefficients are small, fluctuate in sign across specifications, and do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This further supports the view that spikes in violence during the interview month do not influence party-related trust in a systematic way.

Table 3 — *Dependent Variables: Trust in Ruling Party and Opposition Party*

	Trust in Ruling Party			*Trust in Opposition Party*		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Excess violent incidents *(interview month)*	0.00244	-0.00497	-0.00725	0.00427	-0.000539	-0.00118
	(0.0103)	(0.00891)	(0.00976)	(0.00919)	(0.00588)	(0.00546)
Excess fatalities *(interview month)*	0.00130	0.000416	0.00118	0.000409	-0.000712	-0.000313
	(0.00142)	(0.00118)	(0.00124)	(0.00108)	(0.000687)	(0.000664)
Female *(1 = Female, 0 = Male)*	-0.0621***	-0.0305*	-0.0374**	-0.0597***	-0.0318	-0.0344*
	(0.0154)	(0.0158)	(0.0154)	(0.0190)	(0.0205)	(0.0201)
Urban residence *(1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)*	-0.107**	-0.0326*	-0.0174	-0.0831**	-0.0102	-0.00672
	(0.0395)	(0.0178)	(0.0169)	(0.0377)	(0.0175)	(0.0184)
Age	-0.000174	0.00240***	0.00219***	-0.00150**	0.000913*	0.000974*
	(0.000787)	(0.000590)	(0.000578)	(0.000673)	(0.000521)	(0.000503)
Constant	1.117***	0.479***	0.274***	1.122***	0.500***	0.364***
	(0.0672)	(0.0459)	(0.0583)	(0.0610)	(0.0468)	(0.0534)
Individual Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Time FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	18,464	18,464	18,464	18,182	18,182	18,182
R-squared	0.021	0.092	0.113	0.014	0.077	0.091

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by region are reported in parentheses. All models include individual-level controls: gender, urban residence, age, education level, and race. Columns (1) show baseline specifications including only the key explanatory variables: excess violent incidents and excess fatalities measured in the interview month. Columns (2) introduce region fixed effects to account for unobserved, time-invariant differences across regions. Columns (3) further include time fixed effects to control for national trends or shocks occurring in specific months.

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

Together, these results suggest that the decline in trust observed in *Table 2* is specific to the presidency rather than indicative of broader disillusionment with political institutions. This pattern is more consistent with the *scapegoating mechanism*, in which citizens attribute blame for instability to the president directly, than with a generalized erosion of democratic confidence. In other words, excess political violence appears to undermine trust in the figurehead of the state, but not in the party system more broadly.

This divergence likely reflects the distinct symbolic and emotional roles occupied by the presidency. Compared to political parties, which are often perceived as institutionally remote and bureaucratic, the presidency embodies a more visible and personalized representation of the state. Accordingly, the president is typically viewed as the most personally accountable figure during moments of crisis. A growing body of research describes this shift in political accountability as part of the broader *presidentialization* of politics, in which individual executive leaders increasingly overshadow party organizations in the public imagination. As Jacobson

(2015) notes, the president serves as the "dominant public face" of their party, and evaluations of the president strongly shape perceptions of the party's competence and legitimacy. This personalization of leadership makes presidents especially vulnerable to blame when public expectations go unmet during periods of instability.

Presidential trust is also shaped by affective responses that are less relevant for institutions like political parties. Ragsdale (1991) finds that emotions such as pride and anger are strong predictors of presidential approval, often outweighing rational evaluations of performance. These emotional reactions become especially salient during periods of violence or instability, where the president often serves as a symbolic figure of strength or failure. Research by Erhardt et al. (2021) shows that fear tends to increase support for executive leadership, while anger leads citizens to assign blame to those in power. Because trust in the president is more emotionally charged, it is also more vulnerable to disruption when violence triggers heightened emotional responses. These dynamics help explain why trust in the president is particularly responsive to excess political violence, even when trust in political parties remains stable.

5.3. Ability to Remove Leaders from Office

The results in *Table 4* suggest that excess political violence modestly reduces belief of citizens in their ability to remove leaders they do not want from office through elections. This outcome captures broader trust in democratic processes and can be interpreted as a proxy for political trust. Rather than measuring confidence in a specific actor, it reflects whether citizens believe they can hold political leaders accountable through institutional means.

In Specification (1), which includes only the key independent variables, excess violent incidents are negatively associated with perceived ability to remove the president through elections, although the effect is not statistically significant. The coefficient remains similar in Specification (2) with the addition of individual-level controls, and becomes slightly more negative in Specification (3) with region fixed effects. The relationship becomes statistically significant in Specification (4), once time fixed effects are added, with a coefficient of −0.0163 ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that a one-unit increase in excess violent incidents is associated with a modest decline in the perceived ability to remove the president from office. While the effect size is relatively small, the effect emerges only after accounting for regional and temporal contexts. This suggests that the local context across Nigeria's 36 states and timing play a critical role in shaping perceptions of executive accountability.

By contrast, excess fatalities are not significantly associated with perceived ability to remove the president in any specification. The coefficients remain close to zero and statistically insignificant throughout, suggesting that the severity of violence, at least as measured by fatalities, does not influence views on the public's ability to hold the president accountable.

Table 4 — *Dependent Variable: Ability to remove from office*

	(1) Clustered SE	(2) Individual Controls	(3) Region FE	(4) Region & Time FE
Excess violent incidents *(interview month)*	-0.0110	-0.0114	-0.0139	-0.0163**
	(0.0113)	(0.0110)	(0.0102)	(0.00801)
Excess fatalities *(interview month)*	0.00209	0.00195	0.00110	0.00205
	(0.00189)	(0.00182)	(0.00145)	(0.00123)
Female *(1 = Female, 0 = Male)*		-0.00973	0.00267	0.00400
		(0.0187)	(0.0192)	(0.0193)
Urban residence *(1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)*		0.0112	-0.000700	-0.00367
		(0.0263)	(0.0275)	(0.0272)
Age		-0.00220**	-0.00104	-0.000593
		(0.000822)	(0.000744)	(0.000810)
Constant	1.050***	1.164***	0.761***	0.826***
	(0.0275)	(0.0689)	(0.0659)	(0.0812)
Individual Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Time FE	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	11,890	11,823	11,823	11,823
R-squared	0.002	0.007	0.033	0.049

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by region reported in parentheses. The sample includes individual-level survey data and is unbalanced across time and region. Specification (1) includes the key independent variables: excess violent incidents and excess fatalities in the interview month. Specification (2) adds individual-level controls such as gender, urban residence, age, education level, and race. Specification (3) adds region fixed effects to account for time-invariant regional differences. Specification (4) incorporates both region and time fixed effects (interview year-month).

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

These results differ from those in *Table 3*, which showed no relationship between excess political violence and trust in political parties, suggesting no broader loss of confidence in democratic institutions. In contrast, the findings here point to a decline in institutional trust: excess violence is associated with lower perceived ability to remove political leaders from office through elections. This pattern is more consistent with the *institutional belief mechanism* underlying trust in the president, in which trust in the president declines because the presidency is seen as a direct representative of the democratic institutions that citizens no longer believe are functioning as they should.

In presidential systems like Nigeria's, the president is expected to act in the national interest and represent the political system as a whole. As a result, the presidency often becomes a stand-in for broader institutional performance in the public imagination (O'Donnell 1994). In Nigeria, trust in the president is frequently used as a proxy for trust in government more broadly (Adaba and Boio 2024), and presidential performance is often interpreted as a signal of whether institutions are working as they should.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that excess violence reduces trust in the president because it reflects a broader failure of democratic institutions to provide protection and maintain order. In this view, trust in the president declines not because of blame placed on a specific individual, but because the presidency is closely tied to the institutions that are seen as unable to manage instability. As institutional confidence erodes, trust in the president declines alongside it. This is reflected in outcomes such as reduced belief in the public's ability to remove leaders through elections. These findings provide support for the institutional belief mechanism as the explanation underlying the results in Table 2. If excess violence lowers both trust in the president and perceptions of institutional accountability, it is more plausible that trust in the presidency reflects confidence in democratic institutions, rather than scapegoating.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the causal relationship between excess political violence and political trust in Nigeria using data from Afrobarometer and ACLED between 2003 and 2022. We find that increases in political violence relative to baseline levels are associated with a significant decline in trust in the president, while effects on trust in partisan bodies such as the ruling and opposition parties are not statistically significant. Furthermore, we show that excess violence reduces peoples' belief in the ability of elections to remove political leaders from office, which reflects declining institutional trust. These results hold after controlling for individual-level covariates, as well as region and time fixed effects.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on political violence and democratic trust, particularly within the field of comparative political behavior. While much of the existing work focuses on voter turnout or electoral preferences in response to violence, this study utilizes self-reported institutional trust and draws on evidence from Nigeria, where political divisions align with ethnic, religious, and geographic divides. We find support for the institutional belief mechanism, in which the presidency is viewed not merely as an individual position within

government but as a proxy for broader democratic institutions. This perspective adds nuance to existing research by showing how political violence may influence perceptions of institutional legitimacy, especially in settings where state authority is highly personalized.

Despite the strengths of our empirical design, several limitations remain. First, our analysis relies on cross-sectional data, which limits our ability to observe within-person changes in political trust over time. We partially address this by controlling for a wide range of individual-level characteristics that may correlate with both exposure to violence and levels of trust. Second, our measure of violence is aggregated at the region-month level and may not perfectly align with the timing of individual interviews, particularly for those conducted early in the month. While this introduces some imprecision, we rely on the assumption that monthly aggregates reflect the broader political environment surrounding the interview. Third, the ACLED data capture only fatalities as a measure of violence severity, likely understating the full extent of political instability. However, this approach is consistent with prior literature and facilitates comparability across studies. Finally, although our moving average approach accounts for persistent background violence and helps mitigate concerns about endogeneity, our identification strategy does not fully isolate exogenous variation in violence. We therefore interpret our findings as plausibly causal but not conclusive.

Beyond these findings, several areas remain underexplored in the broader literature on political violence and trust. First, while many studies examine short-term responses to violence, less is known about the long-term persistence of trust erosion. Without tracking individual-level changes in trust over time, it is difficult to determine whether declines in trust following violence persist over time or whether they eventually recover. Previous research suggests that political trust can either rebound or deepen depending on institutional responses and political context (Levi and Stoker 2000; Hetherington 2005), but this remains an open question, particularly in fragile democracies like Nigeria. Second, while we focus on trust in formal political institutions, we do not account for trust in informal institutions, such as religious or traditional authorities, which play significant roles in governance and state-society relations in many African contexts (Logan 2009). Finally, the ways in which violence interacts with factors such as media access, ethnic identity, or economic inequality are not well understood, despite their potential to shape how citizens interpret instability and assign blame. Future work could address these gaps by incorporating alternative data sources or research designs that can better capture these dynamics.

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