
# The Effect of Violence on the Support for Democracy in Nigeria

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**Abstract**

This dissertation investigates whether sustained exposure to Boko Haram's insurgency has influenced citizens' democratic attitudes in Nigeria's North East. While civil conflict is often assumed to weaken democratic legitimacy, the study examines whether prolonged insecurity may instead foster demand for accountable governance.

The analysis draws on Afrobarometer survey data from 2005–2022, merged with georeferenced conflict records from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED). A Difference-in-Differences (DiD) design exploits the escalation of insurgent violence after 2014, comparing changes in support for democracy in the North East to trends in other regions.

The results show that residents in the North East were approximately 7.7% more likely to support democracy in the post-2014 period than comparable respondents elsewhere. This effect persists across robustness checks and is not attributable to pre-existing regional differences. Heterogeneity analysis indicates that women in conflict-affected states exhibited the largest attitudinal shift, consistent with the disproportionate gendered impact of Boko Haram's violence.

These findings contribute to debates on the political consequences of violence by demonstrating that insurgency does not uniformly erode democratic support; under certain conditions, it can catalyse pro-democratic mobilisation. The study also advances methodological practice by combining nationally representative surveys with high-resolution conflict event data in a quasi-experimental framework.

Overall, the dissertation highlights the paradoxical possibility of democratic resilience amid insecurity, with implications for both theory and policy. Strengthening electoral integrity, civic education, and gender-inclusive governance in conflict-affected regions is essential to convert heightened democratic aspirations into durable institutional consolidation.

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## Executive Summary

This dissertation examines how the Boko Haram insurgency has shaped citizens' support for democracy in North Eastern Nigeria, the region most severely affected by violence. The study uses nationally representative Afrobarometer survey data from 2005–2022 combined with conflict records to investigate whether prolonged exposure to insecurity undermines or strengthens democratic attitudes.

The analysis highlights four main findings.
First, exposure to insurgency has reinforced democratic aspirations rather than weakened them. Residents of the hardest-hit North Eastern states were, on average, **7.7 percentage points more likely to support democracy** than those in less-affected regions. This suggests that communities experiencing high-intensity conflict have increasingly demanded political accountability, rather than turning away from democratic institutions.

Second, these effects are not uniform across the population. The most robust heterogeneity emerges along gender lines: women in conflict-affected states experienced a significant 20% larger post-2014 increase in democratic support than men. This indicates that female respondents, who faced disproportionate risks from Boko Haram's tactics such as abductions and restrictions on public life, were especially likely to strengthen their commitment to democracy in response to insurgent violence. By contrast, differences across age, education, and urban–rural residence are statistically insignificant, suggesting that the pro-democracy shift cut across most social divides.

Third, robustness checks confirm that these patterns are not explained by pre-existing regional differences. Placebo tests using pre-insurgency years show no significant effects, strengthening the case that the observed changes are directly attributable to the Boko Haram conflict.

Finally, while insurgency has increased commitment to democracy as a principle, it has also underscored fragility in state performance. Citizens continue to express mistrust in government institutions, highlighting that conflict-driven support for democracy does not automatically translate into confidence in political leadership.

These findings carry important implications. They challenge the assumption that violence inevitably erodes democratic legitimacy. Instead, they demonstrate that prolonged insecurity can **galvanise demands for democratic governance** under certain conditions. Policymakers and international partners should recognise that even in conflict-affected societies, citizens remain committed to elections and accountability. This underlines the need for policies that:

1. Strengthen electoral integrity and accountability mechanisms in conflict-affected states.
2. Expand civic education and youth participation initiatives to consolidate democratic gains.
3. Address regional inequalities in education and economic opportunity, which shape how different groups respond to insecurity.

In sum, this research provides the first systematic, large-scale evidence on the democratic consequences of insurgency in Nigeria. It advances the debate on democracy under stress by showing that

violence can, paradoxically, foster stronger democratic commitments. The study also contributes methodologically by combining nationally representative survey data with granular conflict records in a quasi-experimental design, offering new insights into the relationship between violence, resilience, and democratic aspirations.

# 1 Introduction

Democracy in Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria, has been repeatedly tested by authoritarian legacies, elite mismanagement, and persistent violent conflict. Among these challenges, the Boko Haram insurgency represents one of the most sustained threats to political stability in the post-1999 democratic period. Since its emergence in the early 2000s and escalation after 2014, Boko Haram has caused tens of thousands of deaths and displaced millions, particularly across the North East. While the insurgency is geographically concentrated in states such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, its political and symbolic effects extend far beyond the immediate conflict zone. Violence of this magnitude shapes national discourse, influences perceptions of state legitimacy, and may alter democratic attitudes both within and outside the affected region.

Existing scholarship highlights a paradoxical relationship between conflict and democracy. On one hand, violence erodes trust in institutions, exacerbates grievances, and weakens confidence in democratic governance. On the other, conflict may foster cooperation, stimulate collective action, and sharpen demands for accountability. This duality raises a central puzzle: does insurgency undermine democracy by deepening disillusionment, or does it paradoxically strengthen democratic commitments by forcing citizens to seek protection in political institutions? In Nigeria, this question remains particularly salient, given the scale of Boko Haram's violence and the fragility of democratic consolidation.

This dissertation asks: **What is the effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on citizens' support for democracy in Northeastern Nigeria?**

By situating Boko Haram within broader debates on conflict and democratic legitimacy, the study investigates whether exposure to sustained violence reduces democratic support through institutional disillusionment, or whether it enhances democratic commitment by sharpening demands for more accountable governance.

The study pursues three objectives. First, it seeks to test whether insurgent violence has a measurable effect on citizens' support for democracy by exploiting geographic variation in conflict exposure. Second, it aims to disentangle whether the observed effect aligns more closely with theories of democratic erosion or with theories of conflict-induced civic mobilisation. Third, it assesses whether these effects are uniform across social groups or whether they vary by gender, education, or employment status, thereby shedding light on the differentiated political consequences of conflict.

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides the first systematic evidence on the democratic consequences of Boko Haram, a conflict often analysed through security, counterterrorism, or humanitarian perspectives but rarely through its political effects. Second, by merging Afrobarometer survey data (2005–2022) with ACLED conflict event data, it applies a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences strategy that allows for stronger causal inference than purely descriptive approaches. Third, the study situates Nigeria within comparative debates on war and democracy, engaging with global evidence on how conflict reshapes political preferences (Bauer et al., 2016; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004).

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Section 2 is the contextual background where Boko Haram is situated within Nigeria's historical, religious, and political context. Section 3 reviews the literature on conflict, state formation, and democratic attitudes, with particular attention to African and post-conflict contexts. Section 4 outlines the data sources and empirical strategy, highlighting the methodological challenges of identifying causal effects. Section 5 presents the empirical findings, including robustness checks and heterogeneity analysis. Section 6 discusses the implications for theory and policy, particularly regarding democratic resilience in conflict-affected societies. Section 7 concludes by reflecting on the broader lessons for the relationship between insurgency and democracy in Africa.

# 2 Contextual Background

To fully address this research question, it is essential to situate Boko Haram's emergence within Nigeria's layered historical and political legacies. The insurgency did not arise in a vacuum: its roots lie in long-standing tensions between Islamic authority, colonial structures, and postcolonial state fragility. Tracing these dynamics highlights how both historical grievances and contemporary failures hollowed out Nigeria's democratic promise, creating fertile ground for insurgent violence.

The emergence and escalation of Boko Haram cannot be fully understood through the lens of ideology alone. Rather, the movement's rise is deeply rooted in Nigeria's layered historical legacies of authoritarian governance, religious contestation, and chronic institutional failure. While its rhetoric was undeniably Islamist, Boko Haram found traction among populations alienated not just from the secular state but from traditional religious authorities as well. Mohammed Yusuf's denunciation of the Nigerian state as anti-Islamic was not merely theological; it was an indictment of decades of corrupt governance and violent repression.

## 2.1 Historical and Religious Roots

The emergence of Boko Haram must be understood within northern Nigeria's complex Islamic authority structures. Three key groups have historically dominated the region's religious landscape: hereditary emirs descended from 19th century jihad leaders, mass-based Sufi orders (particularly Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya), and reformist Salafi movements (Paden, 1973). The Sokoto Caliphate, established by Uthman dan Fodio (1754–1817), and the Bornu empire under al-Kanemi's dynasty (1776–1837) created competing centers of Islamic authority that colonial powers later manipulated (Loimeier, 1997).

Although these Islamic systems were well-established, their role and legitimacy were fundamentally reshaped by British colonialism. The colonial state governed the north through indirect rule, empowering emirs while simultaneously subordinating them to British officials. Moreover, indirect rule facilitated the imposition of Muslim authority over non-Muslim populations in the Middle Belt, contributing to lasting religious tensions (Ochonu, 2014). This colonial dualism—strengthening traditional rulers while hollowing out their autonomy—was coupled with uneven investment. Southern Nigeria benefited from missionary schooling, commerce, and infrastructure, while the north remained underdeveloped. These disparities persisted after independence. By the 1980s, northern Nigeria had some of the

lowest education and economic indicators in the country, with the northeast particularly marginalized. Between 1980 and 2006, poverty rates in the North East zone rose from 35.6% to 72.4% (Watts, 2013; NBS, 2011). Colonial legacies thus set the stage not just for spiritual contestation, but also material grievance.

The post-independence political environment exacerbated these tensions. Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 brought increased expectations but delivered limited change. Elections were often marred by violence and fraud, while state capacity remained weak. Governors and local elites used patronage and youth militias to consolidate control—one notable case being the 2003 Borno election, which helped empower Mohammed Yusuf (Adesoji, 2011; Aluko, 2017). Corruption permeated all levels of government, with billions lost to fraud, including funds meant for Boko Haram counterinsurgency efforts (Faul, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2010). These dynamics fostered disillusionment with formal institutions, especially in regions where state presence was already thin.

These failures culminated in the July 2009 crackdown on Boko Haram. Security forces razed the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque, detained Yusuf, and executed him in police custody. No serious investigation followed, and officials made little effort to distinguish between militant and ordinary followers. This act, widely viewed as state murder, radicalised the group's remaining members and accelerated its militarisation (Thurston, 2018; Amnesty International, 2014). The government's repressive response confirmed Yusuf's narrative that the state was irredeemably unjust and violent. These tensions between state, emirs, and reformists weakened institutional legitimacy and left democratic authority vulnerable to rejection.

### 2.2 Colonial Legacies and Regional Marginalisation

British colonial rule fundamentally transformed these traditional structures while maintaining their outward forms. The policy of indirect rule preserved the emirs' political roles but subordinated them to non-Muslim authority, creating what Murray Last (2008) has termed "a crisis of legitimacy in Muslim leadership." This colonial intervention created lasting tensions between Islamic and secular authority that would shape post-independence religious movements.

The Salafi reform movement led by Abubakar Gumi emerged from this context of religious and political ferment. Gumi, who served as northern Nigeria's Grand Qadi (chief islamic Judge under Sharia )after independence, initially worked within the system before turning against both the Sufi establishment and the traditional emirs following the 1966 military coup (Brigaglia, 2012). His Izala movement, founded in 1978, promoted a return to scriptural fundamentals while rejecting what it saw as Sufi innovations and the emirs' compromised authority.

Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf emerged from this Salafi circle but carried its logic to more radical conclusions. Where Gumi and his Izala followers had sought Islamic reform within the system, Yusuf declared the entire Nigerian state to be illegitimate (Thurston, 2018). His teachings at the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque in Maiduguri attracted followers among both the urban poor and educated but disillusioned youth who saw no future within the existing order. Yusuf's sermons rejected not only

Western education but the very foundations of Nigeria's political system.

The group's ideological evolution reflected this escalating rejection of the status quo. Beginning with criticism of Western education (symbolized by the term "boko"), it expanded into comprehensive rejection of democracy, secular law, and finally the Nigerian state itself (Higazi, 2016). Before 2013, most of Boko Haram's violence was directed at security personnel, political leaders, and symbols of state power. However, this began to shift under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, who assumed control after Yusuf's death. Shekau's strategy was markedly more extreme and indiscriminate, including attacks on civilians and the infamous 2014 Chibok abduction. This trajectory culminated in Boko Haram's 2015 pledge of allegiance to Islamic State, marking its transformation into a global jihadist movement while retaining distinctly local grievances (Warner & Matfess, 2017).

The state's militarised response to Boko Haram post-2009 did not restore order; it escalated the conflict. From 2013, Nigeria's Joint Task Force (JTF) engaged in widespread abuses: arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, torture, and the razing of entire villages. In Baga, over 200 civilians were reportedly killed during a military reprisal attack (HRW, 2013). The National Human Rights Commission warned that such tactics risked "a foreseeable humanitarian crisis" and legitimised Boko Haram's framing of the state as a brutal enemy of Muslims (Thurston, 2018). The emergence of government-backed vigilantes further blurred lines between civilian protection and extrajudicial violence. Regional marginalisation entrenched material grievances that shaped citizens' perceptions of state failure and democratic exclusion

### 2.3 Northeast Nigeria's Political Economy

The political economy of northeast Nigeria created conditions ripe for Boko Haram's growth. The region had long been marginalized within Nigeria's federal structure, receiving disproportionately small shares of national resources despite its large population (World Bank, 2022). Colonial infrastructure development had focused on linking agricultural and mineral resources in the north to southern ports, leaving the northeast as an economic backwater.

Post-independence governments continued this pattern of neglect. By 2014, the northeast accounted for just 10% of federal capital projects despite having 13% of Nigeria's population (UNDP, 2023). State governments in the region became heavily dependent on federal allocations, which comprised up to 80% of their revenues, leaving little capacity for independent development initiatives.

Economic conditions deteriorated sharply following Boko Haram's insurgency. Borno State, the epicentre of the conflict, saw its GDP contract by an estimated 60% between 2014 and 2022 as agricultural production collapsed and markets became inaccessible (UNDP, 2023). Youth unemployment reached 42% in 2015 according to official statistics, though the actual figure was likely higher in rural areas most affected by the insurgency (NBS, 2015). The collapse of livelihoods under Boko Haram deepened dissatisfaction with governance, reinforcing the contrast between insurgent rule and democratic promise.

### 2.4 Democratic Institutions in Nigeria

Nigeria's democratic institutions faced challenges in responding to Boko Haram's insurgency. The group's ideological rejection of democracy as "man-made law" (Thurston, 2018) directly attacked the foundations of the political system. More concretely, its campaign of violence systematically targeted institutions crucial for democratic governance: schools, courts, and electoral infrastructure.

The federal structure created additional complications. While state governments bore primary responsibility for education and local administration, security matters remained under federal control. This division left state governors facing public demands for security they had no constitutional authority to provide (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The federal government's declaration of a state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe in 2013 was not merely a security strategy; it had political undertones. These states were controlled by opposition parties, and their governors Kashim Shettima and Murtala Nyako were vocal critics of Abuja's approach. Nyako even accused the federal government of sponsoring "a genocide in Northern Nigeria." Such claims reinforced northern alienation and the perception that democracy served elite interests, not public accountability (Thurston, 2018).

Electoral participation rates in the northeast declined sharply as the insurgency intensified, from 42% in the 2011 elections to just 29% in 2019 (INEC, 2019). This decline reflected both the physical dangers of voting in conflict zones and growing disillusionment with democratic governance's ability to provide basic security.

Together, these overlapping historical, institutional, and political failures formed the conditions under which Boko Haram could emerge, evolve, and escalate. What began as a fringe theological movement in the northeast became a brutal insurgency, fuelled as much by grievance as by ideology. This paradox — declining participation but rising normative support for democracy — frames the attitudinal shifts analysed in the next chapter.

## 3 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the main theoretical and empirical literature on conflict, state formation, democracy, and development, with special attention to African contexts and the Nigerian case. It situates the Boko Haram insurgency within broader debates on the causes and consequences of civil wars, the conditions under which violence corrodes or reinforces democratic attitudes, and the methodological approaches scholars have employed to study these issues. The chapter proceeds thematically, beginning with theories of war and state formation, before turning to greed and grievance accounts of conflict, the democracy–development–conflict nexus, comparative evidence, and methodological debates. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and clarifying how this dissertation contributes.

### 3.1 Theories of War, State Formation, and Cooperation

One of the most influential perspectives in the study of conflict emphasises its profoundly destructive nature. Collier et al. (2003) characterise civil conflict as "development in reverse," arguing that violence not only destroys physical infrastructure but also erodes human capital and the institutional trust required for effective governance. Civil wars are estimated to reduce annual GDP growth by two to three percentage points, while post-conflict recovery often takes decades. Beyond macroeconomic decline, the consequences extend to social sectors: school attendance drops sharply, mortality rates increase, and life expectancy declines (Gates et al., 2012). These effects tend to be concentrated in conflict zones but often spill over to neighbouring regions, entrenching cycles of poverty and underdevelopment.

The political implications of this destruction are severe. Fragile democracies are especially vulnerable, as conflict undermines legitimacy and provides opportunities for authoritarian consolidation. Violence exacerbates citizen mistrust, often prompting states to adopt emergency measures that concentrate executive power. Examples abound in Africa: Sierra Leone's civil war in the 1990s saw democratic institutions collapse almost entirely; Uganda's prolonged conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army entrenched militarised governance; while in Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency has justified repeated states of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. From this perspective, Boko Haram's violence is expected to weaken support for democracy, since citizens may perceive democratic governments as unable to guarantee the most basic public good—security.

In sharp contrast, another body of scholarship emphasises the constructive role of war in forging strong states. The classic formulation, that 'war made the state, and the state made war' (Tilly, 1995), explains how European states developed institutional capacity under military pressure. Scholars from Carneiro (1970) to Diamond (1999) have reinforced this evolutionary perspective, arguing that conflict, while destructive, can forge long-term stability

More recent interdisciplinary contributions draw on evolutionary theory. Choi and Bowles (2007) argue that inter-group conflict fostered the co-evolution of parochial altruism and group cooperation, strengthening solidarity within threatened communities. Turchin (2016) extends this argument, suggesting that large-scale warfare accelerated the rise of centralised societies by generating strong incentives for collective action and political authority. Importantly, this perspective does not deny the destructiveness of war, but rather contends that its long-term consequences include stronger, more centralised, and sometimes more accountable governance.

Applying this framework to Africa requires nuance. Herbst (2000) noted that unlike Europe, many African states lacked the sustained external military competition that forced rulers to develop taxation and bureaucratic capacity. Instead, colonial borders created states without the wars of territorial consolidation that Tilly described. Nigeria illustrates this dynamic. The colonial state relied on indirect rule, empowering local emirs rather than building modern bureaucracies, and after independence, conflicts such as the Biafran War (1967–1970) and Boko Haram insurgency demonstrated state weakness rather than institutional consolidation. This raises an important question: does insurgency in Nigeria catalyse stronger demands for accountable governance, or does it further reveal the inability of the

state to transform coercive capacity into legitimate authority?

Alongside macro-historical accounts, a growing literature examines the micro-level psychological and behavioural consequences of violence. Bauer et al. (2016), in a meta-analysis of 16 studies across 10 countries, found that exposure to conflict often increased prosocial behaviour within affected communities. Survivors of violence were more likely to participate in local organisations, contribute to public goods, and display stronger forms of civic leadership. Conflict reshapes individual preferences and behaviour—a paradox often explained through the concept of parochial altruism: under external threat, individuals strengthen ties to the in-group, enhancing cooperation and solidarity while sometimes increasing hostility toward out-groups (Choi and Bowles, 2007). Evidence from Africa is consistent with this view. In Nigeria, anecdotal evidence points to similar dynamics. In Nigeria, this is illustrated by the emergence of vigilante groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force in Borno State. These findings suggest that while violence weakens trust in the state, it can paradoxically foster civic engagement at the community level.

### 3.2 Civil War: Greed vs. Grievance Debates

Civil war scholarship has long revolved around the tension between "greed" and "grievance" explanations of rebellion. While some analysts emphasise the economic incentives that make conflict feasible, others stress the role of political exclusion, identity-based inequalities, and historical injustices.

The Greed/opportunity model, often referred to as the "feasibility hypothesis," is most closely associated with the work of Collier and Hoeffler (2004). Their cross-national analysis argued that rebellion is more likely when it is financially and logistically feasible, rather than when grievances are particularly acute. Empirical evidence supports aspects of this claim. Countries with significant primary commodity exports, such as oil in Angola for example, have experienced prolonged civil wars fuelled by resource rents. Diaspora communities have also played a role in sustaining insurgencies, as seen in the Tamil diaspora's support for the LTTE in Sri Lanka ( Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Opportunity models thus shift attention away from grievances, highlighting the structural conditions that lower the costs and increase the returns of rebellion.

Nigeria provides a compelling illustration. The country's oil wealth generates vast rents that insurgent groups may attempt to capture. Although Boko Haram is ideologically distinct from resource-based rebel movements, reports suggest that the group has financed itself through illicit trade, smuggling, and extortion in border regions (Forest, 2012). The porous frontiers of the Lake Chad Basin and the difficult geography of Borno State facilitated Boko Haram's mobility, providing sanctuaries in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. These conditions align with the feasibility hypothesis, suggesting that the opportunity structures of the Northeast lowered the barriers to sustained insurgency.

Nevertheless, critics note that opportunity models often downplay the role of grievances. The presence of lootable resources or difficult terrain does not automatically generate rebellion. Many resource-rich or geographically challenging countries remain peaceful, implying that grievances or motivations still matter for understanding why some opportunities are exploited while others are not.

In contrast, grievance-based explanations emphasise that civil wars arise from deep-seated injustices, perceived inequalities, and political exclusion. Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation argued that violence occurs when there is a gap between expected and actual political or economic outcomes. Horizontal inequalities—structural disparities between ethnic, religious, or regional groups—are especially salient. Stewart (2005) shows that such inequalities are strongly correlated with conflict onset, as marginalised groups resort to rebellion to address systemic exclusion. His analysis concluded that the Rwandan genocide, fueled by historical exclusion, is a key example supporting the grievance perspective (Stewart, 2005).

Building on both greed and grievance perspectives, rational choice approaches emphasise individual decision-making and the collective action problem of rebellion. Olson's (1965) logic of collective action suggests that individuals face strong disincentives to join insurgencies, since the risks of participation are high while the benefits of rebellion, if successful, are public goods. This creates a classic free-rider problem. For rebellion to occur, selective incentives or coercion must overcome these barriers.

Formal models illustrate these dynamics. Grossman (1991, 1999) framed rebellion as a household-level decision in which expected returns must outweigh opportunity costs, such as foregone wages. Gates (2002) introduced principal–agent models, showing how rebel leaders use selective incentives—such as looting rights or salaries—to sustain group cohesion. Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) provided empirical support in Sierra Leone, finding that while poverty and insecurity increased voluntary recruitment, many individuals were also coerced. Beber and Blattman (2008) showed that abduction substituted for incentives in Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, highlighting the range of mechanisms through which groups resolve collective action problems.

The greed–grievance debate has been criticised for being overly dichotomous. Kalyvas (2006) argues that civil wars are driven by complex interactions between local and national dynamics, making it misleading to reduce them to greed or grievance. Similarly, Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch (2011) highlight how horizontal inequalities interact with state capacity to produce conflict, while others emphasise how global factors such as arms flows and transnational networks shape insurgency feasibility. Recent work therefore seeks to synthesise perspectives, recognising that grievances provide motives while opportunities provide means. Boko Haram fits uneasily into these models: while its rise was not resource-driven, its exploitation of smuggling and porous borders reflects the feasibility hypothesis, while its rhetoric and recruitment strategies draw heavily on grievance narratives.

### 3.3 Conflict, Democracy, and Development

The relationship between conflict, democracy, and development has long been the subject of scholarly debate. While conflict is generally assumed to erode democratic institutions, weaken governance, and damage economic growth, research also highlights more nuanced and conditional effects. In some contexts, conflict fosters political participation, demands for accountability, and new forms of democratic engagement, particularly at the local level. In others, it undermines state legitimacy and encourages authoritarian responses. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for evaluating Nigeria's experience, where the Boko Haram insurgency intersects with fragile democratic institutions and

persistent underdevelopment.

### 3.3.1 Democracy, Income, and Conflict Dynamics

A key strand of literature investigates how the relationship between democracy and conflict varies by level of economic development. Collier and Rohner (2008) argue that democracy reduces the risk of civil war in wealthy societies but may increase it in poor ones. Their model suggests a conditional relationship: when income per capita is above a certain threshold (around US$2,750 in their estimates), democratic institutions reduce rebellion by providing credible accountability. Below this threshold, however, democratisation can destabilise states by lowering repression without providing meaningful accountability benefits.

In Western Europe, democratic consolidation coincided with industrialisation and rising incomes, reinforcing stability. By contrast, many African and South Asian democracies experienced repeated cycles of conflict, partly because low incomes limited the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Electoral competition often intensified grievances rather than resolving them, leading to instability.

Nigeria exemplifies this dilemma. According to the World Bank (2024), its per capita income at the time hovered around $2,633 in 2012 and $3,088 in 2014. While democracy formally provides opportunities for participation, widespread corruption and weak accountability limit its substantive benefits. Elections are often marred by irregularities, elite capture, and violence (Suberu, 2007). For citizens in the North East, the promise of democracy has not translated into tangible improvements in security or welfare. This may fuel ambivalence toward democracy: citizens support it in principle but view it as ineffective in practice. Such dynamics suggest that conflict can deepen disillusionment with democratic institutions even as citizens remain normatively committed to democracy as an ideal. This debate is particularly salient for Nigeria, where democratic institutions remain fragile and the Boko Haram insurgency provides a critical test of whether protracted violence undermines or reinforces democratic commitments

### 3.3.2 The Role of Economic Development

Economic development plays a central role in shaping conflict dynamics. Numerous studies confirm that economic factors are robust predictors of conflict. Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti (2004) demonstrated that negative income shocks increase conflict likelihood in Africa, a finding reinforced by meta-analyses identifying low income as a primary risk factor (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006).

Research on post-conflict societies reveals mixed effects of violence on democratic attitudes. Some studies find that exposure to violence increases civic participation and engagement. Bellows and Miguel (2009), show that individuals exposed to violence were more likely to participate in community governance and contribute to local public goods. Similarly, Blattman (2009) finds that former abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda became more politically active and assertive in civic life after the conflict.

These findings suggest that violence can foster resilience by strengthening local networks of cooperation.

Yet the effects are not uniformly positive. In many cases, conflict erodes trust in national institutions even as it increases local engagement. Citizens may mobilise collectively in their communities while remaining deeply sceptical of central governments. In other cases, ongoing violence fosters authoritarian preferences, as citizens prioritise stability over democratic freedoms. The legacy of conflict is therefore deeply contingent, varying by the nature of violence, the trajectory of post-conflict reconstruction, and the effectiveness of state institutions.

Nigeria occupies a distinctive position because the Boko Haram insurgency is not a concluded conflict but an ongoing one. Most studies of democratic attitudes focus on post-conflict settings where peace has been restored and institutions are being rebuilt. In Nigeria, by contrast, violence persists, creating a situation where citizens must navigate everyday insecurity while continuing to participate in political life. This raises questions about the durability of democratic attitudes under chronic insurgency: do citizens become more committed to democracy as a form of resilience, or more disillusioned as the state fails to provide security?

### 3.4 Limitations and Contributions

Three major unresolved tensions emerge. First, the dual effect of war remains poorly understood. Why does conflict foster resilience and prosocial behaviour in some cases, but entrench authoritarianism and disillusionment in others? Despite evidence of conflict increasing prosocial behavior (Bauer et al., 2016), case studies show these effects are conditional; it can boost local participation without strengthening national trust (Bellows and Miguel, 2009) or simultaneously stimulate mobilization and deepen polarization (Arjona, 2016). This ambiguity underscores the need for more systematic exploration of the conditions under which conflict erodes versus strengthens democratic commitments.

Second, variation across contexts is insufficiently theorised. Large statistical studies often privilege generalisable patterns but obscure the institutional and cultural specificities that shape outcomes. For example, Collier and Rohner's (2008) income-threshold hypothesis explains broad differences between rich and poor democracies, but cannot fully account for subnational variation within a single country such as Nigeria. Similarly, grievance-based explanations stress legacies of marginalisation, while opportunity-based accounts emphasise feasibility, yet neither framework alone explains the persistence of insurgency in the Nigerian Northeast. Comparative case analysis suggests that conflict outcomes are conditioned not only by structural variables but also by histories of state formation, the salience of religious identities, and the credibility of state institutions.

Third, the literature struggles to connect attitudes with behaviour. Much of the evidence on democratic resilience relies on survey data, where respondents express normative support for democracy. Yet the translation of these attitudes into behaviour—such as voting, protesting, or demanding accountability—remains uncertain. Do individuals who voice support for democracy actually act in ways that sustain it? The gap between attitudinal resilience and behavioural commitment is an unresolved question with significant implications for understanding democratic consolidation in conflict-affected societies.

From a methodological standpoint, Nigeria presents an opportunity to advance the literature through the integration of survey and conflict event data. Previous studies often rely either on individual-level survey responses or aggregate conflict measures, but rarely combine the two. By merging Afrobarometer data on democratic attitudes with ACLED records of Boko Haram violence, this dissertation employs a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences design that strengthens causal inference. Furthermore, the use of repeated cross-sectional survey data over nearly two decades enables an examination of whether the democratic effects of conflict are transient or persistent. While panel data would be ideal, repeated Afrobarometer waves provide a valuable opportunity to approximate longitudinal dynamics at the population level. This methodological strategy positions the study at the intersection of experimental rigour and broad comparative relevance.

In doing so, the dissertation makes three distinct contributions. It provides systematic evidence on democratic attitudes during an ongoing insurgency, rather than in a post-conflict context where most existing studies focus. It advances methodological practice by integrating nationally representative survey data with high-resolution conflict event records, offering a more robust empirical strategy than purely descriptive or case-based approaches. Finally, it contributes contextually by refining theoretical models—such as the income-threshold hypothesis and grievance/feasibility frameworks—through subnational evidence from Nigeria, where the dynamics of conflict and democratic resilience interact in distinctive ways. Taken together, these contributions test whether insurgency erodes or strengthens democratic engagement, and extend broader debates on the nature of democratic resilience under protracted insecurity.

# 4 Methodology

## 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a *quasi-natural experiment* using a *Differences-in-Differences (DiD)* design to estimate the causal impact of Boko Haram conflict exposure on democratic attitudes in Northeastern Nigeria. The DiD framework compares changes in democratic support before and after the escalation of Boko Haram's insurgency across treatment and control regions, allowing for credible causal inference under the parallel trends assumption.

**Treatment group.** The treatment region is the North East, defined as the six states most affected by the insurgency: *Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe.* These states experienced sustained exposure to violence, displacement, and insurgent control.

**Control group.** The control group comprises the remaining thirty-one states, organized into Nigeria's five official geopolitical zones:

- **North Central**: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja).
- **North West**: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara.

- **South East**: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo.
- **South South**: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Rivers.
- **South West**: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo.

This subdivision reflects Nigeria's administrative and political structure and facilitates meaningful regional clustering when estimating treatment effects. By exploiting both *temporal variation* (pre- and post-2014 conflict escalation) and *spatial variation* (treatment vs. control regions), the DiD strategy identifies how insurgency exposure reshaped democratic attitudes.

### 4.2 Data

The analysis relies on secondary data from two main sources: the **Afrobarometer survey** and the **Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED)**. Together, these sources allow for the examination of how exposure to political violence affects democratic attitudes in Nigeria between 2005 and 2024.

Afrobarometer is a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional survey conducted across Africa. For Nigeria, I use waves 3–9 (2005–2024), which provide detailed information on political attitudes, socio-demographics, and governance. The survey records each respondent's state of residence and includes key individual characteristics such as urban/rural location, age, gender, education, and employment status. Of particular importance is the *support for democracy* variable, which asks respondents whether they regard democracy as the best form of government, prefer alternative forms, or are indifferent. I classify individuals as supporting democracy only if they select the strongest pro-democratic response, excluding ambivalent or neutral answers. Support for democracy is coded as a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent selected democracy as the best form of government, and 0 otherwise. This binary measure captures committed democratic preference rather than passive agreement.

ACLED systematically records data on violent conflict and protest events worldwide. For Nigeria, ACLED documents event type (e.g. battles, violence against civilians, riots, protests), actors involved, dates, locations (up to three administrative levels), and fatalities. The dataset enables precise geospatial and temporal coding of insurgent violence, allowing for disaggregation at the state level.

The two datasets are merged at the state-year level using temporal and spatial identifiers giving a total sample size of 12,518. ACLED conflict measures—including annual fatality counts, frequency of events, and violence types—are aggregated to match Afrobarometer's survey waves. This process produces a composite dataset in which individual-level survey responses can be analysed in relation to the level of conflict exposure in the respondent's state and year.

While rich, both datasets present challenges. ACLED's reliance on media and local sources may undercount violence in remote or low-intensity areas. Temporal misalignment between Afrobarometer

survey years and peak insurgency escalation (e.g. Boko Haram's surge in 2014, but surveys conducted in 2015) may obscure short-term attitudinal responses. Furthermore, Afrobarometer's sampling design does not allow within-individual tracking over time, limiting the analysis to net changes in aggregate attitudes. Finally, there is no within-household identifier, precluding deeper family-level dynamics. These limitations necessitate cautious interpretation of effect sizes and underscore the need for careful robustness checks.

Descriptive statistics summarising individual characteristics and conflict exposure across treatment and control regions, before and after 2014, are presented in Chapter 5.

### 4.3 Empirical Strategy

This study adopts a *Differences-in-Differences (DiD)* estimation strategy to identify the causal impact of Boko Haram conflict exposure on democratic attitudes in Nigeria. The logic of the design is to compare changes in support for democracy in insurgency-affected states of the Northeast against unaffected control states, before and after the escalation of Boko Haram violence in 2009. The identifying assumption is that, absent the insurgency, both treatment and control states would have followed parallel trends in democratic attitudes.

The baseline estimation equation is specified as:

$$\begin{aligned} Support\_for\_Dem_{ist} = \beta_0 &+ \beta_1 Northeast_s + \beta_2 Post2014_t \\ &+ \beta_3 (Northeast_s \times Post2014_t) \\ &+ \delta_s + \theta X_{ist} + \epsilon_{ist} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where $Support\_for\_Dem_{ist}$ measures whether individual $i$ in state $s$ at time $t$ prefers democracy as the best form of government. $Northeast_s$ is an indicator for states located in the North East (treatment group), $Post2014_t$ captures the post-insurgency escalation period, and the interaction $(Northeast_s \times Post2014_t)$ is the Difference-in-Differences estimator. $\delta_s$ denotes state fixed effects, $X_{ist}$ represents is a vector including all the individual-level controls (e.g., age, gender, education, urban/rural), and $\epsilon_{ist}$ is the error term.

Formally, the parameter of interest $\beta_3$ identifies the *Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT)*. This represents the causal effect of sustained insurgency exposure on democratic attitudes among residents of the Northeast, relative to how their support for democracy would have evolved in the absence of the insurgency, as proxied by trends in unaffected regions. In other words, $\beta_3$ does not measure the average effect across all Nigerians, but specifically the differential shift experienced by those in conflict-affected states after 2014. The implication is that findings speak to the resilience (or erosion) of democratic attitudes in communities directly exposed to violence, rather than to national-level effects.

Several refinements are introduced to strengthen the robustness of the analysis. Standard errors are clustered at the state level, accounting for the correlation of responses within states, while Afrobarometer

survey weights are applied to ensure national representativeness of the sample. Beyond the baseline model, the empirical strategy incorporates placebo tests, heterogeneity analyses, and robustness checks in order to provide confidence in the validity of the Difference-in-Differences estimates and to test the stability of results under alternative specifications.

## 4.4 Identification Strategy

Due to the endogenous nature of conflict exposure, individuals and regions most affected by insurgent violence may differ systematically from those less exposed, in ways that also shape their political attitudes. For instance, Boko Haram deliberately targeted areas with weak state presence and high poverty, raising the risk that observed changes in democratic support simply capture pre-existing differences rather than the causal effect of violence. To address this concern, the study takes advantage of the exogenous escalation of violent conflict in North-East Nigeria after 2014, as mentioned in Section 2, treating it as a quasi-natural experiment. By exploiting both temporal and spatial variation in exposure, the research design strengthens causal inference and mitigates concerns of selection bias.

The design exploits both spatial and temporal variation: individuals residing in conflict-affected states constitute the treated group, while respondents in non-affected states serve as controls; outcomes are compared before and after 2014.

The identifying assumption is the *parallel trends* assumption: in the absence of treatment, average support for democracy would have evolved similarly in treated and control regions. This is visually confirmed in Figure 1, which shows nearly identical trajectories in average democratic support between 2005 and 2012 for the North-East (treated) and the rest of Nigeria (control), both fluctuating synchronously around 2.5–2.7 on Afrobarometer's 1–3 scale. Post-2014, however, support rises sharply in the treated region while remaining flat or declining slightly in the control group. The divergence coincides with the conflict escalation marked in 2014 in Figure 2, particularly the surge in violence against civilians, reinforcing the interpretation of conflict intensification as an exogenous shock to civic and political life in the North-East.

### 4.4.1 Placebo Tests

To verify that the estimated treatment effect is not driven by spurious pre-existing trends or coincidental changes unrelated to the Boko Haram conflict, placebo tests are conducted by assigning alternative treatment years in 2008 and 2012. Restricting the sample to pre-2014 waves, the baseline model is re-estimated under these false cutoffs. If the identification strategy is valid, the estimated coefficients for these placebo periods should be statistically indistinguishable from zero. To further bolster identification, I include individual-level covariates (education, gender, employment, and urbanicity).

This test provides reassurance that the post-2014 divergence reflects the insurgency rather than prior differences. The placebo analysis complements the visual inspection of pre-2014 trends in democratic support between treatment and control groups.

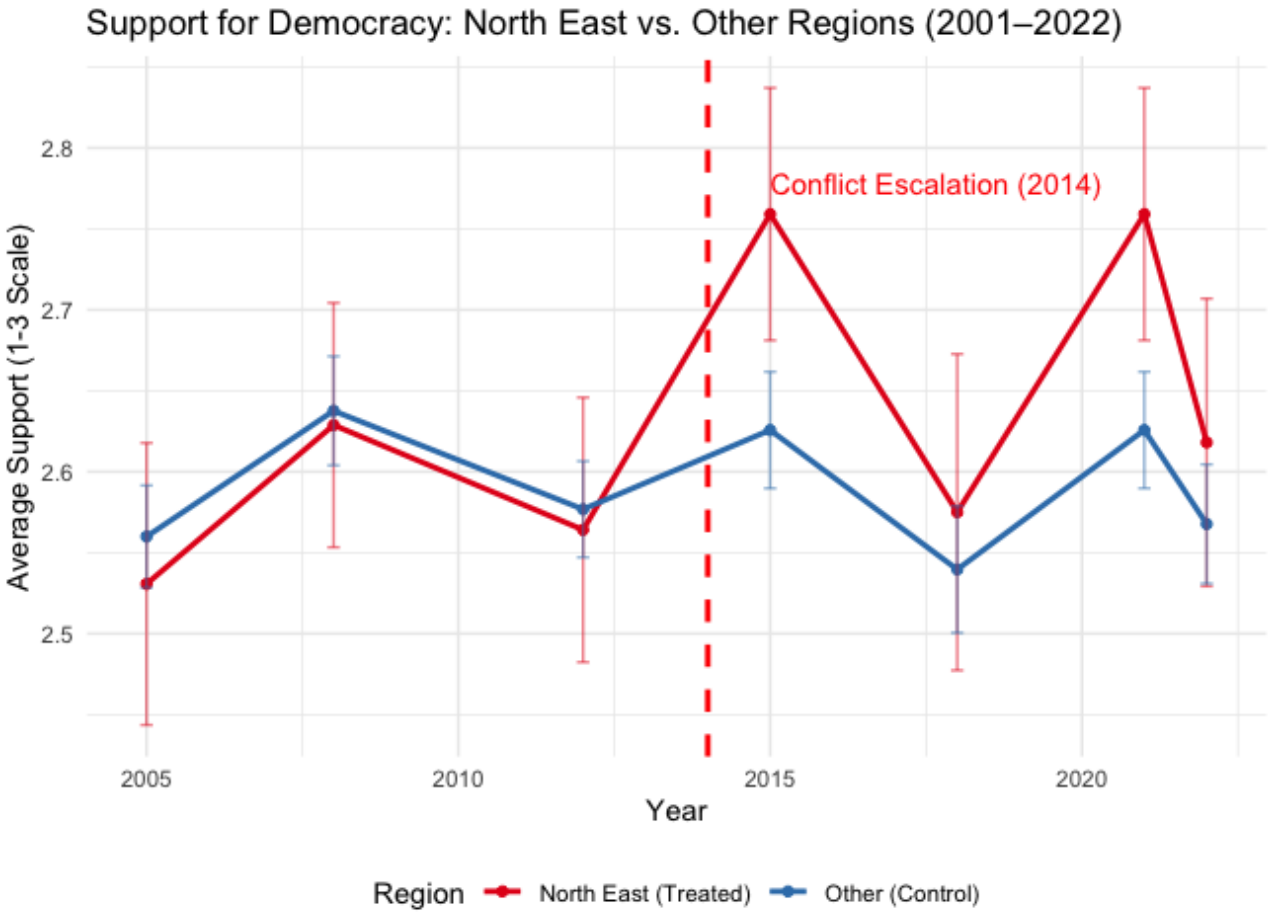


Figure 1: Pre-treatment Trends in Support for Democracy(Source: Afrobarometer and ACLED, (2024)

### 4.4.2 Heterogeneity Analysis

The average treatment effect may mask important variation across groups and contexts. To explore these differences, the analysis disaggregates effects by conflict intensity within the Northeast, by education, gender, age cohort, urban-rural residence, and employment status. These heterogeneity analyses provide a more nuanced interpretation of how conflict shapes democratic attitudes across different segments of society.

### 4.4.3 Robustness Checks

To ensure that results are not driven by modelling choices or sample composition, robustness checks are conducted. These include varying the clustering of standard errors, redefining treatment intensity, excluding borderline states, and extending the model to an event study design. The event study estimates dynamic treatment effects across waves and allows for a formal test of the parallel trends assumption.

### 4.4.4 Limitations

Despite these methodological safeguards, several limitations remain, including measurement error in ACLED data, temporal misalignment between survey waves and insurgency peaks, cross-sectional data limitations, possible spillovers, conflict endogeneity, and limited external validity. Nevertheless, integrating individual-level survey data with disaggregated conflict records provides one of the most systematic assessments to date of how insurgency reshapes democratic attitudes in Nigeria.

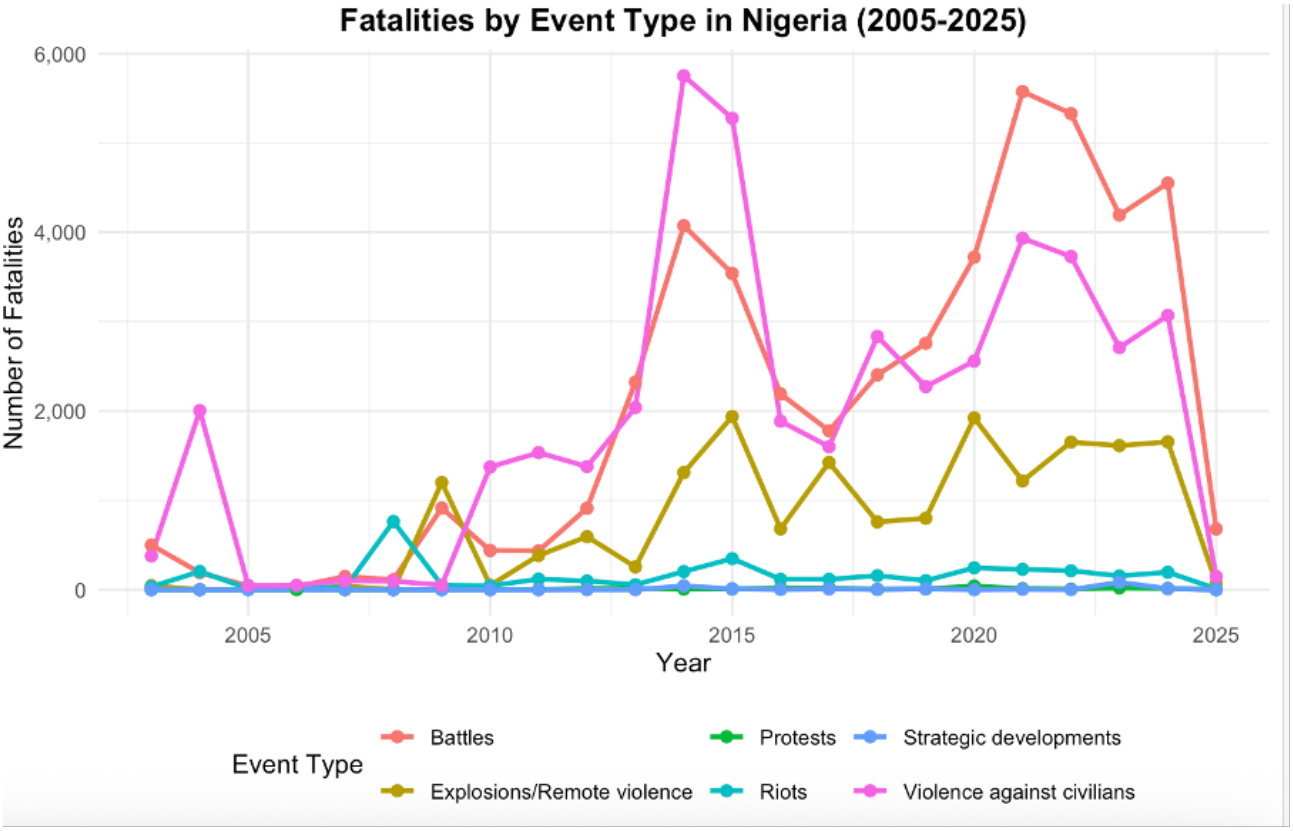


Figure 2: Fatalities by Event Time in Nigeria (Source: ACLED, 2024)

# 5 Results

## 5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarises the sample characteristics by treatment status (North East vs. the rest of Nigeria) and by period (pre- and post-2014). Several important patterns emerge.

The treated group is on average slightly older post-2014 (32.4 years) relative to the pre-period (30.2 years), while gender balance remains constant across groups ($\approx 50\%$ female). Unemployment rates declined modestly in the treated region post-2014 but rose slightly in the control region. The share of urban respondents is substantially lower in the treated group, reflecting the rural character of much of the Northeast.

In terms of democratic attitudes, support for democracy in the treated region increased from 67.9%

Table 1: Summary Statistics by Treatment and Period

| Characteristic (N = 12,518 ) | Treated Group | | Control Group | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre-2014 | Post-2014 | Pre-2014 | Post-2014 |
| Mean Age (SD) | 30.2 (9.6) | 32.4 (11.8) | 29.4 (9.9) | 34.2 (13.0) |
| % Female | 51.3 | 50.3 | 50.6 | 50.4 |
| % Unemployed | 53.1 | 48.4 | 51.3 | 53.4 |
| % Urban | 30.8 | 35.0 | 50.0 | 44.8 |
| % Support Democracy | 67.9 | 77.5 | 70.2 | 71.2 |
| % Educated | 57.8 | 50.5 | 74.2 | 60.5 |
| Fatalities (Mean, SD) | 1552.9 (1256.9) | 9853.0 (2067.4) | 1484.3 (1293.9) | 9769.2 (2112.6) |
| Total events (Mean, SD) | 496.1 (356.3) | 3303.6 (1458.1) | 491.5 (355.1) | 3314.8 (1456.7) |

to 77.5% after 2014, while the control region remained relatively stable (70.2% to 71.2%). However, educational attainment (measured with anyone with at least a secondary school education) declined in both groups over time, although the drop was sharper in the control states. Finally, conflict exposure—measured by fatalities and total violent events from ACLED—rose dramatically in both treated and control states after 2014, but the increase was more pronounced in the Northeast (fatalities: 1,553 $\rightarrow$ 9,853; events: 496 $\rightarrow$ 3,303). This sharp escalation underscores the importance of the 2014 insurgency intensification as a quasi-exogenous shock exploited in the empirical strategy.

Table 2 presents the baseline DiD estimates of the effect of conflict exposure on democratic support. The coefficient on the treated $\times$ post-2014 interaction is positive (0.0766) and statistically significant at the 5% level ($p = 0.010$). Substantively, this implies that respondents in the North East were approximately 7.7 percentage points more likely to support democracy after 2014 than they would have been absent conflict exposure, relative to trends in other regions.

Table 2: Baseline Difference-in-Differences Estimates

| Variable | Estimate | Std. Error | t-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Treated $\times$ Post-2014 | 0.0766 | 0.0283 | 2.70 | 0.010 |

### 5.2 Event Study

To further complement the identification strategy, an event study diagram was estimated and plotted to visually explore the dynamic change of the Support for democracy. Figure 3 plots year-specific treatment effects relative to 2012. Coefficients for pre-2014 years are close to zero and statistically indistinguishable from zero, providing support for the parallel trends assumption. After 2014, treatment effects turn positive and remain consistently above zero, indicating sustained increases in democratic support in the North East following the conflict escalation.

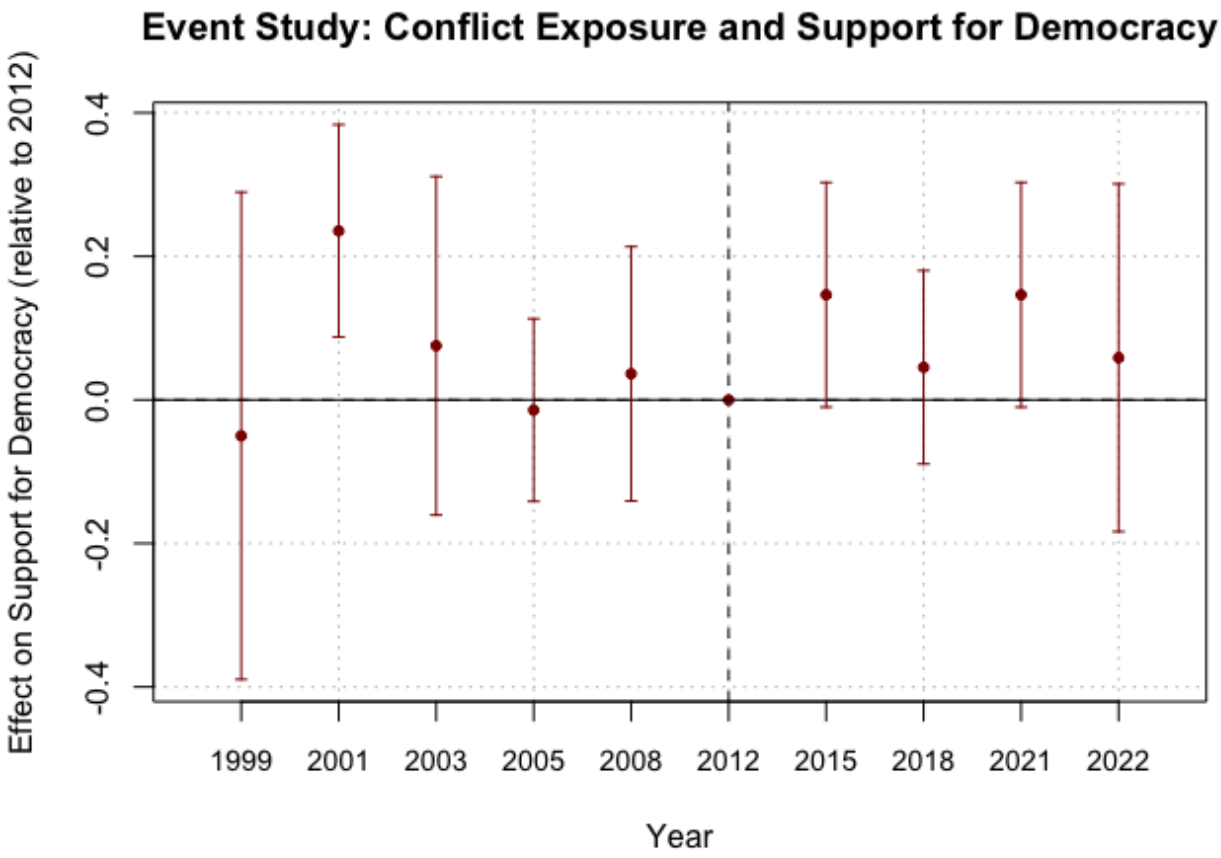


Figure 3: Conflict Exposure and Support for Democracy (95% CI) - Source: Afrobarometer and ACLED, (2024)

### 5.3 Robustness Checks

To assess the reliability of the baseline DiD results, several robustness checks were performed. Table 3 summarises the estimates.

Table 3: Summary of Baseline and Robustness Checks

| Specification | Estimate | Std. Error | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Baseline (Table 2) | 0.0766 | 0.0283 | 0.010 |
| Placebo 2008 | 0.0365 | 0.0599 | 0.546 |
| Placebo 2012 | 0.0444 | 0.0311 | 0.163 |
| Alternative Clustering | 0.0713 | 0.0462 | 0.183 |
| Sample Restriction (excl. Bauchi & Taraba) | 0.0834 | 0.0356 | 0.025 |

Both placebo models yield coefficients close to zero and statistically insignificant, supporting the parallel trends assumption. Re-estimating with clustering at the geopolitical zone level produces similar but less precise results. Excluding Bauchi and Taraba from the treated group leaves the coefficient

positive and significant, suggesting the baseline effect is not driven by borderline cases.

### 5.4 Heterogeneity Analysis

Finally, subgroup analyses test whether the effect of conflict exposure varies across education, gender, urban/rural residence, employment, and age cohorts (Table 4). Results indicate:

- **Gender:** Women in conflict-affected states exhibit a larger post-2014 increase in democratic support than men by 20.3% (interaction = 0.203, $p < 0.05$).
- **Education:** No significant differential effects by educational attainment.
- **Urbanicity:** Urban vs. rural differences are small and statistically insignificant.
- **Employment:** Weak evidence that employed respondents show slightly lower treatment effects ($p < 0.1$).
- **Age cohorts:** Effects are broadly similar across youth (18–29), middle-aged, and older (50+) groups, with no systematic heterogeneity.

Table 4: Heterogeneity of Conflict Exposure Effects on Democratic Support

| | Education | Gender | Urban/Rural | Employment | Age Groups |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Treated × Post-2014 | 0.042 | -0.227 | 0.178 | 0.151 | 0.095 |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Education ≥ 5 | 0.045 | | | | |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Gender | | 0.203 | | | |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Urban | | | -0.065 | | |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Employment | | | | -0.146+ | |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Youth | | | | | -0.014 |
| Treated × Post-2014 × Older | | | | | -0.048 |

Notes: Standard errors clustered by state. + p<0.1, p<0.05, p<0.01, p<0.001.

Taken together, the heterogeneity analysis suggests that the gender dimension of conflict exposure is the most robust moderator of democratic attitudes, while other subgroup differences are either weak or statistically insignificant. This pattern indicates that exposure to violence appears to strengthen democratic preferences relatively uniformly across most groups, with women in conflict-affected states showing the sharpest increase.

Overall, the results demonstrate that exposure to Boko Haram's escalation of violence after 2014 is associated with a significant increase in support for democracy in North-East Nigeria. The baseline Difference-in-Differences estimates, complemented by event-study dynamics, indicate that the effect is not driven by pre-existing differences and remains robust across multiple alternative specifications. While subgroup analyses reveal limited heterogeneity, the results suggest that women in conflict-affected states experienced the strongest attitudinal shift toward democratic support. Taken together, these findings underscore the plausibility of interpreting conflict as a catalyst for pro-democratic attitudes, highlighting how experiences of violence and fragility can reshape civic preferences in contexts of insecurity.

# 6 Discussion

This study set out to examine whether sustained exposure to Boko Haram's insurgency influenced democratic attitudes in Nigeria's North East. Using a Difference-in-Differences approach with Afrobarometer survey data (2001–2022) and ACLED conflict records, the analysis found that residents in the North East were approximately 7.7 percentage points more likely to express strong support for democracy in the post-2014 period than comparable respondents elsewhere in Nigeria. This shift persisted across a range of robustness checks, suggesting that it reflects a substantive change in political attitudes rather than a statistical artefact. The result is especially significant because it runs counter to the dominant view in the civil conflict literature that prolonged violence in fragile states invariably weakens democratic legitimacy, instead pointing to the possibility of conflict-induced political mobilisation.

## 6.1 Conflict and Democratic Mobilisation

The baseline estimate aligns with strands of conflict research that see political violence not only as corrosive to institutional trust, but also as capable of fostering demand for accountable governance when citizens perceive democratic processes as a defence against authoritarian alternatives. The result is consistent with theories of "conflict-induced civic engagement" (Bateson, 2012) and "reactive pro-democracy mobilisation" (Bellows, 2009), in which the lived experience of insecurity motivates citizens to seek more responsive governance. In the Nigerian case, Boko Haram's explicit rejection of democracy as "man-made law" (Thurston,2018) appears to have heightened its symbolic and practical appeal for affected communities. This rejection may have sharpened the contrast between violent non-state rule and democratic governance, presenting the latter as both a normative ideal and a functional route to restoring public order.

Historical conditions in the North East help to contextualise this attitudinal shift. As discussed in section 3, the region entered the insurgency with a legacy of political marginalisation, weak state capacity, and widespread poverty. These structural disadvantages had long eroded trust in the state, but the intensification of conflict after 2014 presented a starker binary between violent non-state actors and the imperfect democratic state. The survey evidence suggests that, for many, this comparison reinforced the desirability of democratic governance, albeit more as an aspirational alternative than as a reflection of satisfaction with existing institutions. This reading resonates with (Collier, 2008), who argue that under certain conditions, exposure to conflict can catalyse reformist political mobilisation rather than anti-system sentiment, particularly when the state retains at least a minimal capacity to act as a counterweight to insurgent violence.

The event study results strengthen this interpretation by showing that pre-2014 trends in democratic support were parallel across treated and control regions, and that divergence emerged only after the conflict's escalation. This temporal pattern reduces concerns that the DiD estimate is capturing pre-existing regional differences. At the same time, the data complicate claims about "sustained exposure." The sharp post-2014 spike in democratic support in the North East was followed by a reversion toward baseline by 2018, suggesting that the effect was not permanently maintained. Instead,

the pattern appears episodic: pro-democracy sentiment surges in response to acute phases of insecurity, then declines once immediate pressures ease. A renewed spike around 2020–2021 coincided with the death of Abubakar Shekau and intensified ISWAP offensives, when civilian suffering and displacement again escalated. This trajectory implies that, unlike in Uganda and Sierra Leone where prolonged exposure was linked to more durable attitudinal change (Blattman 2009; Bellows 2009), in Nigeria democratic support has been mobilised reactively—flaring during major escalations of violence rather than accumulating steadily over time.

### 6.2 Social Differentiation and Gendered Effects

The heterogeneity analysis provides additional insight into how the impact of conflict exposure on democratic support varies across social groups. Gender emerges as the most robust moderator: women in conflict-affected states experienced a significantly larger post-2014 increase in support for democracy than men. This pattern may reflect the particular vulnerabilities women faced in insurgency contexts, where Boko Haram's tactics—most infamously the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok (Amnesty International, 2014)—included forced marriages, sexual violence, and restrictions on women's public life. These gender-specific harms made the stakes of political order particularly acute for women, for whom the defence of democratic governance was often bound up with the defence of basic rights and personal security.

Comparable dynamics are visible in other African contexts. Tripp (2015), for example, shows how women's disproportionate exposure to wartime violence in countries such as Rwanda, Liberia, and Uganda translated into heightened political participation and demands for institutional reform in the post-conflict period. In Nigeria, the Chibok abductions and subsequent campaigns like Bring Back Our Girls illustrate a similar trajectory, where gendered violence catalysed women's collective action and deepened their normative commitment to democracy as a defensive wall against authoritarian and insurgent abuses.

Other subgroup differences are weaker or statistically indistinct. Education levels, urban–rural residence, and age cohorts show no clear evidence of differential treatment effects, suggesting that the pro-democracy shift cut across these divides. Employment status displays a modest negative moderation effect, implying that employed respondents may have experienced slightly smaller attitudinal changes. This could be linked to the different ways in which employment mediates vulnerability to conflict, where those in stable work may have more economic insulation from the upheavals of violence, reducing the salience of democratic demands as a protective mechanism.

### 6.3 Robustness and Limitations

The robustness tests further reinforce confidence in the baseline findings. Placebo tests using 2008 and 2012 as false treatment years yielded small and insignificant effects, supporting the parallel trends assumption. Alternative clustering at the geopolitical zone level, while reducing statistical significance, preserved the direction and magnitude of the effect, indicating that the result is not an artefact of the error structure. Excluding borderline states such as Bauchi and Taraba from the treated group actually

produced a slightly larger and still significant estimate, suggesting that the effect is concentrated in areas of highest conflict intensity. This is consistent with broader evidence from the civil conflict literature, where political and attitudinal shifts are most pronounced in communities experiencing sustained and direct exposure to violence (Voors, 2012).

While the results are consistent with theoretical expectations, alternative explanations warrant consideration. One possibility is that the observed increase in democratic support reflects national-level dynamics unrelated to conflict, such as broader political mobilisation in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections. Another concern is social desirability bias in survey responses, especially given the politicised nature of democracy discourse in Nigeria. Yet such bias would likely be present across regions and time periods, and therefore unlikely to explain the divergence between treated and control groups. A further limitation is that the analysis measures stated attitudes rather than observed behaviour, making it unclear whether heightened support for democracy translates into concrete political action such as voter turnout or civic activism.

### 6.4 Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest three main directions. First, the gendered results underscore the importance of implementing Nigeria's *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security* (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2017), which prioritises women's participation in governance. Second, the findings align with the objectives of Nigeria's *Democracy Stabilisation Programme*, supported by UNDP after the 2015 elections, which seeks to integrate democratic governance into post-conflict recovery (UNDP, 2016). The evidence presented here indicates that such initiatives should target conflict-affected states where democratic demand is strongest. Finally, the divergence between high support for democracy and declining voter turnout in the North East—29% in the 2019 elections compared to 42% in 2011 (INEC, 2019)—highlights the need to reinforce civic education and electoral security. Strengthening INEC's capacity to conduct elections under insecurity would help translate attitudinal resilience into concrete democratic participation (INEC, 2017).

In sum, the findings contribute to the literature on the political consequences of civil conflict by showing that, even in contexts of weak democratic consolidation, sustained insurgent violence can generate increased public support for democracy. In Nigeria's North East, this shift appears to be rooted less in satisfaction with existing institutions and more in a comparative rejection of violent alternatives. From a theoretical perspective, the results refine rational choice and collective action arguments by showing that threats to personal security can recalibrate the perceived costs and benefits of political participation in ways that favour democratic engagement. From a policy perspective, they highlight the importance of gender-sensitive peacebuilding, targeted democratic stabilisation programmes, and electoral reforms that can convert attitudinal resilience into institutional consolidation.

# 7 Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how sustained exposure to Boko Haram's insurgency shaped democratic attitudes in Nigeria's North East, leveraging a quasi-natural experiment through a Difference-in-Differences framework. The key finding—that residents of conflict-affected states became more supportive of democracy after 2014—challenges conventional wisdom and contributes to ongoing debates about the political consequences of violence.

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it extends the scholarship on conflict and political attitudes by demonstrating that democratic resilience can emerge not only in post-conflict settings but also amid ongoing insecurity. Second, it highlights the importance of gendered experiences of violence, showing that women in particular exhibit heightened pro-democratic attitudes under conditions of insurgency. Third, it advances methodological practice by integrating nationally representative survey data with high-resolution conflict event records, applying a robust quasi-experimental design that mitigates concerns of endogeneity and measurement error.

The findings also carry significant policy relevance. They reinforce the empirical case for Nigeria's Women, Peace and Security agenda, suggesting that women's political engagement in conflict-affected areas is a critical resource for democratic consolidation. They support the strategic orientation of Nigeria's Democracy Stabilisation Programme, but highlight the need to prioritise conflict-affected states where civic demand for democracy is strongest. Finally, they underscore the urgency of strengthening electoral integrity in insecure contexts, as demonstrated by persistently low voter turnout in the North East. Together, these insights suggest that peacebuilding strategies in fragile democracies must combine security interventions with reforms that channel civic mobilisation into effective democratic participation.

Future research should extend this analysis along several lines. First, it should examine whether the attitudinal shifts observed here persist once insurgent violence subsides, or whether they dissipate in the absence of continued threat. Second, moving beyond repeated cross-sections, future work should track the same individuals over time to capture within-person changes in democratic attitudes. Such longitudinal data would help distinguish between temporary shocks and more durable shifts, while also clarifying the role of direct versus indirect exposure—for instance, whether experiencing violence personally or through loved ones differentially affects political preferences. Third, household-level dynamics deserve closer attention, since individuals living under the same roof may reinforce one another's views, raising the possibility of herd mentality or intra-family influence that repeated cross-sectional surveys cannot disentangle. Finally, complementing quantitative analysis with qualitative fieldwork would uncover the mechanisms through which conflict reshapes democratic preferences, particularly among women and other vulnerable groups. Addressing these questions would deepen our understanding of democratic resilience under insecurity and inform strategies to strengthen governance in conflict-affected societies.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the political consequences of violence are not uniformly corrosive. In contexts like Nigeria's north east, the insurgency strengthens the democratic commitment, providing

a foundation to rethink both the theory and practice of the under-threat democracy in Nigeria.

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