Political violence & anti-system voting in interwar Italy

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Abstract

What is the effect of political violence on electoral support for anti-system parties? We argue that the effect of violence is asymmetric and predominantly benefits nationalist, radical-right parties. Posing as defenders of the nation, nationalist parties benefit from violence by their political opponents and violence targeted against perceived threats to the nation. Two potential mechanisms underlie this asymmetric effect. First, nationalist violence becomes an acceptable means of defense in the eyes of status quo-oriented voters if they attribute blame to out-groups who used violence first. Second, nationalist violence itself increases the salience of a threat to the nation, and voters concerned with preserving the status quo see radical right parties as its most effective defender. To test this argument, we collect novel actor-based and geospatial data of political violence in interwar Italy. Using a difference-in-differences estimator, we model the effect of violence on vote shares of anti-system parties at the municipality-level in the 1919 and 1921 elections. Our results indicate increasing electoral support for the nationalist Fascist party in municipalities that experienced violence committed by either the far right or left after the 1919 election. In contrast, the radical left Socialist party loses electoral support if violence occurs. These results are robust to different specifications, modeling choices, and measurement approaches. We conclude by discussing the relevance of our findings for violence in liberal democracies today.

Keywords: electoral violence; voting; anti-system parties; interwar Italy; fascism; democratic deconsolidation

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Does political violence destabilize democracies? If so, how? Political theorists have long warned of the dangers of political violence for democratic stability: O'Donnell et al. (1986: 11), for example, argue that 'when violence becomes widespread and recurrent, the prospects for political democracy are drastically reduced.' In a similar vein, Schedler (1998: 96) concur: 'the list of ... assassins or gravediggers of democratic rule ... includes private men-at-arms (guerrillas, drug cartels, violent street protesters).' More recently, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) include politicians' 'toleration or encouragement of violence' in their list of warning signs of authoritarian behavior in democracies at risk of backsliding. Against the backdrop of political violence in rich and long-established democracies, such as a failed attempt to overthrow the US Presidential election in January 2021, the murder of democratic politicians by extremists in Germany and the United Kingdom, and the murder of journalists in Malta and Slovakia, understanding the effects of violence on democracy gains urgent relevance.

We investigate the effect of political violence on electoral support for anti-system parties. Our theoretical argument identifies nationalist ideology as a key moderating variable that influences threat perceptions asymmetrically. Certain segments of voters at least tacitly support violence against perceived threats to the nation. Violent acts by these 'enemies of the nation' decrease their electoral support and increase electoral support for nationalist parties. Posing as defenders of the nation, extreme right-wing parties electorally benefit from the violence that they target against the perceived threat.

We test these expectations in the context of interwar Italy, which experienced considerable political violence between non-state actors. The main political division was ideological between the fascist right and the revolutionary left. Historians describe the 'Red Menace' posed by communist parties across Europe that threatened both nationalist myths through an international vision of world revolution and property rights in the shadow of the Russian Revolution (Brustein and Berntson, 1999; Gerwarth, 2012). Across Italy, fascist black shirts clashed with socialist activists between 1919 and the March on Rome in 1922 that resulted in the appointment of the Fascist party

leader Benito Mussolini as prime minister, and the subsequent breakdown of democratic rule.[1]

We introduce newly collected violence event data for Italy between 1919 and 1922. The data generally follow the classification scheme introduced by the UCDP Global Event Database (Sundberg and Melander, 2013), and contain information on the actors involved in the violence, the location and time of the events, and the number of casualties. Our unit of analysis is the municipality. We focus on two parliamentary elections in November 1919 and May 1921. Held against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis after the end of World War I, the 1919 electoral contest resulted in unprecedented gains for the Socialist party and subsequently widespread violent labor unrest that raised fears about communist rule. Reactive fascist attacks on socialist actors, tacitly approved by state officials, were followed by strong Fascist electoral gains in 1921. We use Geographic Information Systems to match violent events on municipalities, and employ a difference-in-differences design that estimates the changes in vote shares over time between violence-affected and non-affected municipalities.

Our findings align with our theoretical expectations. We observe a relatively greater increase in electoral support for the Fascist party in municipalities that experienced either fascist or socialist violence between 1919 and 1921 compared to municipalities that did not. In contrast, the Socialist Party (PSU) lost support in municipalities that experienced violence prior to the 1921 election, relative to non-violent areas. These results are both substantively sizable and robust to a host of robustness checks, modeling choices, and measurement strategies.

Our article is important in the context of the rise of radical right parties and increasing levels of violence in established democracies in Europe and North America (e.g. Art, 2022; Kalmoe and Mason, 2022). As of now, social scientists are struggling to assess the risk posed by contemporary radical right parties to democratic survival because few, if any established democracies have yet failed. Comparison cases of democratic failures are typically drawn from regions that feature

[1] We capitalize Fascist/Socialist or Fascism/Socialism whenever we refer to the respective parties or their members. We use lower-case denominators, fascist/socialist, to describe supporters of the respective parties/ideologies that need not be party members.

fewer commonalities with European and North American democracies, such as Latin America or civil war-plagued countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South/Southeast Asia (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Walter, 2022). We suggest that historical cases of democratic failure offer a promising alternative counterfactual to contemporary struggling democracies.

Our article provides insights on several themes of the special issue, including the conditions under which violence in democracies can be used to mobilize support and is supported by voters, as well as by identifying which parties are more likely to benefit or lose from violence. We also contribute to three emerging research areas. First, our findings weigh in on a recent debate on the relationship between political violence and voter alignment with radical right parties in contemporary democracies (Eady et al., 2023; Eger and Olzak, 2023; Krause and Matsunaga, 2023; Pickard et al., 2023). Our results from an interwar democracy that actually failed align with those studies that find a positive effect of violence by the radical right and its opponents on voter support for radical right parties. Second, our work on the short-term effects of violence complements studies that find a positive effect of medium to long-term legacies of interstate violence on radical right-wing party support in interwar democracies (Acemoglu et al., 2022; De Juan et al., 2024). Third, by putting the spotlight on violence between two non-state actors, our study adds to the literature on electoral violence that typically investigates violence perpetrated by incumbents or opposition parties against civilians (Höglund, 2009; Birch et al., 2020).

Political violence and democratic stability

Beyond the scholarly consensus that military coups were threatening democratic survival during the Cold War (Bermeo, 2016), few studies explore the risk political violence poses to democratic survival, and they do not reach clear conclusions (Przeworski, 2019; Rød et al., 2020). An alternative scholarly perspective identifies democratic elections and political violence as complements in the competition for power (Staniland, 2014; Harish and Little, 2017). Such electoral violence

– the intentional use of violence by political actors 'to influence the electoral process . . . [in] the pre-election phase, the day or days of the election, and the post-election phase' (Höglund, 2009: 415-416) – results in deaths in 30% of elections held outside OECD countries. More than 50% of such elections experience non-lethal violence (Daxecker et al., 2019). Most studies investigate when, where, and why electoral violence occurs (Daxecker, 2014; Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017; Rauschenbach and Paula, 2019; Müller-Crepon, 2022). Others explore what effects electoral violence has on voter participation (Trelles and Carreras, 2012; Condra et al., 2018; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020), chances of incumbent victory (Hafner-Burton et al., 2018), or victim attitudes and behavior (see contributions in the special issue by Birch et al., 2020: 8).

This research on electoral violence outlines how violence decreases democratic quality and undermines the democratic process, particularly by depressing turnout. It has less to say on the risk political violence poses for democratic survival. Three main reasons account for this focus. First, research on electoral violence is becoming more and more disaggregated both in space and time (Birch et al., 2020: 8), whereas democratic survival is a system-level, structural concept. Connecting these two levels of analysis raises thorny conceptual and data challenges. Second, widely-used measures of democracy create important hurdles to investigating the relationship between violence and democratic survival. They emphasize Dahl's (1971) 'competitiveness' dimension over its 'inclusiveness' counterpart, thus implying that threats to participation investigated in the electoral violence literature pose a lesser risk to democratic survival. More worryingly, V-Dem, the Polity data, and to a lesser extent the dichotomous measure by Boix et al. (2013) explicitly refer to violence in their definitions of democracy, thus making any analysis between political violence and democratic survival circular.

Third, research on the actors of electoral violence is inchoate. According to Birch et al. (2020: 7), the field 'has not yet sufficiently developed theories that explain the various perpetrators and targets of electoral violence.' Most studies conceptualize the perpetrators of electoral violence as interested in manipulating electoral outcomes to their own advantage but implicitly accepting

elections as a means of distributing power. Yet recent work distinguishes between actors who use violence to further political goals within a rough democratic framework and those who pursue a vision of government that is clearly non-democratic (Harbers et al., 2023).

We build on these contributions and suggest a novel approach to overcome some of the difficulties in investigating the effect of political violence on democratic breakdown. Specifically, we draw on Harber et al.'s (2023) distinction between intra- and anti-systemic violence to study the threat of democratic breakdown through support for anti-system parties. Classic comparative work stresses the role of *anti-system parties* in threatening democratic survival (Sartori, 2005 (1976); Capoccia, 2005). Anti-system parties oppose the existing system of government, either by pursuing an alternative regime type or by pursuing changes to the boundaries of the polity (secessionism) (Capoccia, 2005: 34). We define democracy in a minimal way through free and fair elections for the legislature and the executive, and full male suffrage (cf. Boix et al., 2013: 8). We consider parties as anti-system if they suggest or actively pursue changing the rules that reduce the freedom or fairness of elections, limit suffrage, or pursue secession. Our central research question then becomes how organized violence affects electoral support for anti-system parties.[2]

We thus build on the strengths of the electoral violence literature *and* learn about the risk of democratic breakdown as a result of violence. First, by studying the effect of violent events on electoral outcomes, we keep the benefits of a disaggregated research design. Second, increasing local-level electoral support for anti-system parties can translate into system-level democratic breakdown, as we know from Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, and our article thus offers one way to address the levels-of-analysis problem identified above. Third, we take up Birch et al.'s (2020: 7) challenge to further theorize actors and their targets.

[2]From here on, we will simplify the language by using the term 'violence' to refer to political or organized violence.

Violence, nationalism, and voting for anti-system parties

The effects of violence on support for anti-system parties are far from clear. Both historical and contemporary anti-system parties frequently feature violent wings or are affiliated with violent non-state organizations, and use violence against political opponents (e.g. Staniland, 2014). Yet, evidence from around the world suggests that voters dislike politicians associated with violence because they fear for their own safety, generally prefer peaceful interactions, or fear negative economic consequences of violence (Burchard, 2020; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020; Garcia-Montoya et al., 2022; Rosenzweig, 2023). In contrast to this emerging consensus, we propose a conditional effect of violence on voters. Specifically, we argue that nationalist parties can reap electoral benefits from violence if it occurs in 'defense of the nation'. Whether or not parties benefit from violence depends on their type and the existence of a (perceived) threat to the nation. Going beyond classic definitions of nationalism as a political ideology that aspires to congruence between state borders and cultural group boundaries (Gellner, 1983: 1), we draw on recent conceptualizations with an attitudinal dimension that elevates in-group over out-group members (cf. De Juan et al., 2024).[3] Nationalism typically is a reactive ideology or attitude that arises in response to out-group rule (Gellner, 1983), and foreign or domestic threats (Shayo, 2009: 155).

Where such threats exist or are perceived to exist, they increase nationalist attitudes among voters (Callens and Meuleman, 2024). In turn, violent threats by out-groups translate into greater electoral support for radical right parties that promise to defend the nation (Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014; Giavazzi et al., 2024). Simultaneously, violence increases rejection of the out-group and affiliated political parties (Ferrín et al., 2020). While this finding is well established in the context of ethnically diverse societies (Lyall et al., 2013; Hadzic et al., 2020; Berman et al., 2024), we extend it to ideologically divided electorates.[4] When the content of any ideology or its framing

[3]Our definition resembles understandings of nationalism as exclusive, ethnic, or counterrevolutionary which all define a clear out-group in the form of ethnic or national minorities or class enemies (e.g. Snyder, 2000; Schrock-Jacobson, 2012). In this study, we focus on nationalism by the majority group, though our theoretical argument could also be applied to minority groups that constitute local majorities.

[4]We assume that voters associate parties with an ideology and the supporters of that ideology with the party,

in political discourse convinces voters that the ideology constitutes a threat to the nation, violence in its name will elicit strong negative reactions and drive voters to support nationalist parties.

During the interwar period, socialist or radical left actors were commonly associated with threats to the nation. Both historians and political scientists emphatically describe the widely held fear of the spread of the Russian Revolution that engulfed European countries from Portugal to Romania (Gerwarth, 2012; Weyland, 2021). Discussing the motivations for radical left violence after World War I in Europe, Weyland (2021: 84) emphasizes the absence of rational cost-benefit calculations: 'contrary to such a careful, discriminating approach, rebellions erupted in many variegated settings', most of them 'objectively unpropitious' for successful revolution. In turn, the extent of radical left violence heightened the perception of a threat to the nation, even among the moderate left (Weyland, 2021: 80). Economic and cultural anxieties merged in the minds of voters as radical right politicians across Europe equated socialism with foreign domination. One typical strategy was the evocation of anti-semitic conspiracy theories in a putative link between communism and Jewish political dominance. Radical left violence reinforced the nationalist narrative that communism constituted a mortal threat to the nation, thereby mobilizing voters to support nationalist parties while reducing support for radical left parties, which were explicitly internationalist or non-nationalist in their ideological orientation.

H_{1a} Violence by non-nationalist actors increases electoral support for nationalist anti-system parties.

H_{1b} Violence by non-nationalist actors decreases electoral support for non-nationalist anti-system parties.

When the perceived threats against the nation go along with the experience of actual violence, voters find violence against the threat more acceptable (Canetti et al., 2013). Yet how does radical

regardless if supporters are party members or not. Thus socialist/radical left or radical right *actors* encompass both party members and supporters of an ideological party.

right violence translate into electoral gains for radical right parties? First, we explain why voters punish nationalist radical right parties less or not at all relative to non-nationalist parties. Second, we suggest why radical right parties even benefit from violence associated with them.

First, nationalism as a reactive ideology facilitates the framing of radical right violence as a defense against outside threats. Regardless of the actual motivations of perpetrators, which may vary widely (Kalyvas, 2003), radical right parties justify violence as a defense of the nation and blame their political opponents for its occurrence. Justifying the necessity of radical right violence will be more successful if actual events support blame attribution because out-group actors committed violence first.[5] Violence by out-group actors evokes fears that heighten the desire for security, which in turn triggers defensive violence against the biggest threat (e.g. Petersen, 2002: 25). However, even if radical right violence occurs unprovoked, blame attribution towards the targets of violence may still be successful for psychological reasons, in particular loss aversion (Kahneman et al., 1991). Nationalism's reactive nature appeals to voters who are particularly sensitive to (status) threats, whereas non-nationalist, forward-looking ideologies like communism or inclusive cosmopolitanism promise future rewards. As long as radical right parties successfully frame violence as serving the defense of the status quo, nationalist violence should be more acceptable to voters than violence by other actors.

Second, building on the established literature on issue ownership (cf. Budge, 2015), nationalist violence increases the *saliency* of a threat to the nation. In turn, voters perceive nationalist far-right parties as the most effective defenders of the nation. Importantly, perpetrators of violence need not be aware of this link. In their eyes, violence becomes necessary to protect the nation from internal foes, e.g. communists who aim to undermine the status quo, external enemies including foreigners who threaten the nation's unity, or both. Nationalist perpetrators act in response to out-group violence rather than in anticipation of electoral gains. Voters who long for law and order and a culturally homogeneous nation see in radical right parties the best custodian of these values,

[5] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping us to clarify this argument.

and violence as proof of their efficacy. Violence against the perceived outside threat then signals that radical right parties will reassert order and stability.[6]

H_{2a} Violence by nationalist actors increases electoral support for nationalist anti-system parties.

H_{2b} Violence by nationalist actors decreases electoral support for non-nationalist anti-system parties.

Case selection

Encouraged by Birch et al. (2020: 10), we focus on historical cases to investigate the threat of violence to democratic survival. Interwar Italy constitutes a most-likely case of the effect of violence on democratic breakdown (Gentile, 2013: 85). As such, the case is important to developing theoretical expectations about the link between violence, electoral support for anti-system parties, and eventual democratic breakdown. Therefore, it might hold important lessons for contemporary democracies, as we discuss in the conclusion below.

After the Versailles Treaty did not grant Italy several promised territories, persisting class inequalities gave rise to rural and urban labor struggles and massive Socialist gains in the 1919 election (Gerwarth, 2016: 23). The Socialists encouraged violence among the population to expedite the revolution, and more than one million urban workers and rural sharecroppers heeded their call (Berman, 2019: 222): 'Violent class struggle, including continuous strikes in the state and private sectors, reached a climax in September 1920, when workers occupied more than six hundred factories, and set up governing bodies of workers' councils in industrial towns and cities, leaving the impression that Italy was on *the brink of Bolshevik rule*' (emphasis added Gerwarth, 2016: 205). Taken together with the Socialists' opposition to Italy's entry into World War I, the widespread revolutionary violence created the impression of a threat to the nation.

[6] See Krause and Matsunaga (2023) for a related argument.

In line with our emphasis on the reactive nature of nationalism, Benito Mussolini positioned the recently founded Fascist party to oppose the 'Red Menace.' For Italians opposed to communist revolution, fear of socialism became acute as the Italian Socialist Party's 'extremist pronouncements and bold demand-making . . . stimulated the outbreak of mass contention' (Weyland, 2021: 123). Indeed, 'the Red Biennium. . . made much of the business community and middle classes fearful of the Socialists' (Berman, 2019: 221). Mussolini connected revolutionary socialism in Italy to Leninism, which he characterized as 'Asiatic' (Alcalde, 2017: 36). Thus framing the Socialists as a threat to the nation, Mussolini appealed to voters afraid of socialist policies and the prospect of revolution.

Fascist Black Shirts joined unaffiliated self-defense groups and former soldiers, and attacked socialist strongholds by burning down workers' clubs and chambers of labor, beating socialist representatives, and killing radical left activists and strikers (Berman, 2019: 222). Supporting our argument, Weyland (2021: 125) points to the centrality of Italian nationalism that 'allowed these groupings to recruit eager, fervent supporters.' A police report from the time underlines the reactive nature of violent nationalist actors: 'Their only intention is to punish the socialist, communist or catholic perpetrators of real or presumed insults or unjust acts' Gentile (quoted in 2013: 90). In line with our argument that voters blamed the Socialists for the violence, Mussolini stated: 'Our punitive expeditions, all that violence that occupies the headlines, must always have the character of a just retaliation and legitimate reprisal' (Gentile, 2021: 132). And voters bought this nationalist message: 'The liberal bourgeoisie had justified fascist violence as a reaction to maximalist extremism, seeing in fascism, as the 'Corriere della Sera' stated in mid-March, 'the most exasperated expression of the risen national conscience' (Gentile, 2021: 124).[7]

Simultaneously, other actors left free rein to radical right activists, thus allowing the Fascist party to own the issue of law and order. Government authorities mostly did not interfere (De Fe-

[7]Online Appendix F contains excerpts from a center-right newspaper that exemplify the vilification of communists in the Italian press of the early 1920s.

lice, 1965: 602–603), making voters look for effective defenders of their interest: 'The liberal government's seeming unwillingness to take a forceful stand against factory occupations, and the Socialists, meanwhile, convinced many Italians that neither the [ruling] liberals nor the democratic regime more generally could or would protect their interests' (Berman, 2019: 221). They thus turned to the nationalist Fascist Party. After break-through electoral gains in the 1921 parliamentary elections, Mussolini launched his March on Rome on October 28th, 1922 (Franzinelli, 2003). The Italian King appointed Mussolini as Prime Minister, effectively opening the road to dictatorship (Carsten, 1967).

Data

We adopt a disaggregated research design with high-resolution units of analysis. In the absence of individual-level data, we are forced to rely on ecological inference by studying 5,775 Italian historical municipalities.[8] These highly disaggregated units each contain few individuals, which moves our analysis closer to individual-level decisions, and thus minimize the risk of ecological fallacies. Italy held national elections in 1919 and 1921. For each of these election-years, we obtained results for all major parties. We then distinguish between pro and anti-system parties. We identify both the Fascist and Communist/Socialist parties as anti-system. While hindsight facilitates that assessment, historians agree that in the aftermath of World War I a sizable faction of the Italian Socialist Party (PSU) aimed to install a non-representative democratic system, as evidenced by the decision to join the Communist International and by the revolutionary character of its platform (Cardoza, 1982; Gentile, 2021). At its 1919 congress, the Italian Socialist Party adopted a new statute claiming that 'the violent seizure of power by the workers will mark the transfer of power from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, establishing the transitional dictatorship of the proletariat' (cited in Gentile, 2021: 67).[9]

[8] Missing data for some variables occasionally reduce the number of municipalities included in our models.
[9] Translated by the authors.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, both violent actions and public declarations in the early 1920s reveal the intent of the Fascist party to limit participation by political opponents and aim for non-democratic forms of government (De Felice, 1965). In a speech made in April 1921 in Bologna, for instance, Mussolini declared that 'although one may deplore violence, it is clear that, in order to impose our ideas on the brains, we had to beat the stubborn skulls ... We are violent whenever it is necessary to be so' (cited in Gentile, 2021: 176).[10]

Data on anti-system voting in Italy are drawn from Acemoglu et al. (2022), who collected information on Fascist and Socialist Party vote shares using several local and national newspapers, archives and data previously compiled by Corbetta and Piretti (2009).[11] Figure 1 shows the distribution of votes for the two anti-system parties for the 1921 election in Italy.

[Figure 1 about here]

In order to assess the relationship between violence and anti-system voting, we collected new data on political violence for the interwar period following the well-established definitions and classification guidelines by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) (Sundberg and Melander, 2013). We consider all acts of organized violence between (agents of) a government and a non-state actor (Gleditsch et al., 2002), between two non-state actors (Sundberg et al., 2012), and by a government or a non-state actor against civilians (Eck and Hultman, 2007). Our information on violent events includes their location, timing, the actors involved, and the number of casualties or injuries.

We deviate from the UCDP coding rules in three ways. First, we do not limit ourselves to organized violence that occurs within the context of armed conflicts. As long as we observe organized

[10] Translated by the authors.

[11] In 1919, the Fascist Party ran its own lists, while in 1921 it joined an anti-socialist electoral coalition including liberal and nationalist candidates, the *Blocco Nazionale*. For 1921, therefore, the Fascist vote share equals the proportion of elected Fascist candidates from the electoral bloc. Within the bloc, the number of successful Fascist candidates is identified thanks to information from the fascist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* in almost half of the municipalities, and imputed in the remaining half (Acemoglu et al., 2022: 1248). The Socialist vote share in 1921 includes votes for the splinter Communist party (Acemoglu et al., 2022: 1277).

political actors committing physical violence, we classify the events. Second, we include non-fatal violence. At a minimum, we require information that confirms the violence resulting in at least one injury. Third, we collect data on event-reports rather than events. For the purpose of this study, we aggregate event-reports to events by location and day.[12] In all other ways, we follow the UCDP GED coding rules, including its temporal, geographic, and casualty precision coding rules. That implies that we come up with a conservative count of violence because we ignore any report that lacks basic information on when or where the event took place, or who was involved.

Data collection proceeded in steps: First, we consulted relevant historical studies and country experts to prepare case-specific summaries of the major political actors, cleavages, and episodes of violence during the interwar period.[13] Second, we constructed country-specific dictionaries with all major *political actors* and word roots that describe *violent actions*, such as kill, wound, or clash. We evaluated the efficacy of the dictionary on historical newspapers by comparing its matches against articles from periods in which historical scholarship described high levels of violence. We then optimized the dictionary by (i) adding additional terms found in newspaper articles that described violent events but were not captured by our initial dictionary, and (ii) by removing search terms that were not associated with newspaper articles describing violent events.[14] Third, we searched the archives with the help of our dictionaries and classified the identified articles.

Specifically, we draw on two national Italian newspapers, *La Stampa* and *L'Avanti!*, which we selected among the most widespread journals at the time to include different geographical foci and ideological leanings. Published in Turin, *La Stampa* was mostly focused on Northern Italy and voiced the views of the liberal ruling class while remaining unaffiliated with any political party. *L'Avanti*, by contrast, was sponsored by the Italian Socialist Party and, in its Rome edition, provided more extensive coverage of southern Italy.[15] To investigate the reliability of our data, we

[12]Thus, we do not insist on two independent confirmations of an event to be included in our data, though it is possible to apply such a criterion by only considering events reported by different sources.

[13]Our research team includes four native speakers of Italian.

[14]The newspaper archives did not allow full text access. We could thus not use computer-assisted optimization routines.

[15]L'Avanti! was published in three regionally defined editions. While the general content did not differ between

compare it to two databases compiled by historians. First, Franzinelli (2003) collected fascist violence events from (local) newspapers and archival sources. His data mirrors both the geographic and temporal distribution of our data (see Online Appendix B, Figures A4 and A5). Second, Gentile (2021) compiled casualty figures of fascist violence from ministerial and police reports at the regional level, which correlate strongly with our newspaper-based data. Furthermore, the comparison to Gentile's casualty data indicates that Calabria and Sicily, the regions for which our outcome data is missing, do not constitute influential outliers (Figure A6). Finally, our newspaper-based data features more events than Franzinelli's data and more casualties and injuries than Gentile's.

Between January 1st, 1919 and May 15th, 1921, the date of the second parliamentary election in our sample, we classified 636 unique events in *La Stampa* and 260 events in *L'Avanti!* (see Table A3). These events were linked to fascist or socialist violence in 111 and 169 distinct municipalities, respectively (see Table A4).[16] According to historical accounts, most of the violence took place in northern and central regions of Italy (Gentile, 2021; De Felice, 1965), and the geographic distribution of our data confirms this (see Figure A2). In line with the respective geographical foci of the two newspapers, we identify relatively more events of *La Stampa* in northern Italy than in the country's south, whereas the pattern reverses for *L'Avanti!*.

We construct our key explanatory variables from these data in the following way. To investigate the electoral effects of political violence, we consider two categorical variables that capture whether fascist or socialist actors engaged in violence causing deaths within a municipality before the 1921 elections. As both socialist and fascist actors were often involved in the same violent events, we also measure exclusively radical left or right violence. Violence involving radical left actors without fascist participation mainly took place in the so-called *biennio rosso* (red biennium), a period (1919–1920) characterized by mass strikes and occupations of factories and land. For in-

editions, the placement of editorial offices did bring more attention to geographically more proximate events. As La Stampa was situated in the north of the Italy, we opted for the southern edition of L'Avanti! to maximize coverage.

[16] Violence rose dramatically after the May 1921 election. Our data from La Stampa on the period May 1921 to late October 1922, when Mussolini was appointed Prime Minister, yields more than one thousand additional events.

stance, in December 1919 clashes between socialist strikers and the police in Mantua led to four deaths. Similarly, in April 1920 eight people died and more than forty were wounded in a conflict between farmers and the police during a trade union demonstration near Bologna. Exclusively fascist violence was far less common than radical left violence and involved clashes with police forces or attacks on other social groups.

We have information on a number of relevant control variables including important socio-structural characteristics such as Italian municipalities' population size, their number of day laborers, sharecroppers, landlords, industrial workers, industrial firm shares, bourgeoisie shares, literacy rates, and agricultural/industrial strikes in 1913-14 which will help us control for baseline support for the Socialist party (all from Acemoglu et al., 2022).[17] These controls have two drawbacks. First, several contain information measured after exposure to violence, and in certain cases, these variables might introduce post-treatment bias. Second, all these controls are time-invariant and should not directly affect a difference-in-differences estimate. To address these shortcomings, we estimate our main models with and without controls, and interact the controls with a dummy for the period after the 1919 election to investigate if their effects vary between the two electoral cycles.

Empirical analysis

Our preferred research design is a difference-in-difference estimator using linear regression to analyse the association between violence and vote shares (e.g. Cunningham, 2021: Ch.9). Adopting the diff-in-diff to our analysis challenge means the following: First, we compute the average differences in vote shares of anti-system parties over time (different elections) in the same unit (municipality). Second, we compare the average inter-temporal differences of units that experienced violence (treatment) to those that did not (control).

The identifying assumption for this research design is that, if no treatment occurred, the dif-

[17] Additionally, Acemoglu et al. (2022) provide information on geographic features including elevation and municipality size that might affect violence, but their relationship with voting is theoretically unclear.

ference between the treated group and the untreated group would have been constant over time. In our case, this means that absent political violence the change in fascist and socialist vote share across elections would have been the same in the group of municipalities which experienced political violence and in those which did not. While it is impossible to prove this assumption, showing that voting trends prior to violence exposure were statistically indistinguishable between units that later experienced violence and those that did not go a long way in bolstering the credibility of this research design. We test the parallel trends assumption for the Socialist vote shares in the 1913, 1919, and 1921 elections but not for the Fascist party, which did not exist in 1913. Figure 2 shows that voting patterns for the parties did not differ significantly between violence-affected and unaffected municipalities prior to treatment (in 1913).

[Figure 2 about here]

We estimate the following models:

$$voteshare_{itp} = \beta_1 \times period_2 + \beta_2 \times violence_{itp} + \beta_3 \times violence_{itp} \times period_2 + \epsilon_{it} \qquad (1)$$

We estimate the vote share for each unit i at each election t and run separate equations for each anti-system party p. We are primarily interested in the estimate β_3, which captures differences in electoral trends from the 1919 election (period 1) to the 1921 election (period 2) between municipalities that experienced violence and those that did not. We run two regression models, one for fascist and another for communist violence. We expect that β_3 should have a positive effect on Fascist vote shares, but a negative effect on Socialist vote shares ($H2$).

Finally, we note that our research design focuses on local (within-municipality) effects. We made this choice because we argue that proximity to violence intensifies its impact. Proximity heightens the (emotional) reaction to violence because it increases the likelihood that voters are directly affected as they know the perpetrators, victims, or locations of violence, or experience insecurity or loss. Moreover, word-of-mouth spreads information about violence close to its occurrence, in particular, in contexts where a substantial part of the population does not read newspapers.

In line with existing research on the impact of violence on voting, we expect that the consequences of violence 'are mostly felt and manifested at the local level' (Berrebi & Klor, 2008).

Results

Table 1 presents our main estimation results. Models 1 and 2 estimate the effect of violent events involving extreme right and left actors on the vote share of the Fascist party. Models 3 and 4 do the same for the vote shares of the Socialist party. As expected, the estimates of fascist violence in Models 1 and 2 are both positive, whereas the coefficients of socialist violence in Models 3 and 4 are both negative. All estimated treatment effects are statistically significant and substantially meaningful. Clashes between the actors of the radical right and left, i.e., almost all of the events captured by the fascist violence indicator, increase the vote share of the Fascist party by 7.3 percentage points relative to 1919 and municipalities that did not experience violence. Simultaneously, they suppress the Socialist vote share by more than 12 percentage points. The effects of socialist violence, both against fascists and other targets, are only slightly weaker: it increases the vote share of the Fascist party by 5.5 percentage points and decreases the Socialist party's electoral result by 9.6 percentage points. Thus, the effect of violence on vote shares is clearly asymmetric. Voters support nationalist anti-system parties when experiencing violence by the non-nationalist Socialist party ($H1a$) and by the nationalist Fascist party ($H2a$). Conversely, voters punish radical left parties that are seen as a threat to the political and economic status quo in municipalities where these parties committed violence ($H1b$) and in municipalities that experienced violence by the radical right ($H2b$).

One question about the results presented in Table 1 is whether the estimates of fascist and socialist violence are individually meaningful. After all, fascist violence in our sample almost always involves clashes with socialist actors. To address this issue, we test for the independent effect of radical left violence in Figure 3. The plot compares the coefficient estimates of radical left violence from Table 1, with an alternative measure that captures only municipalities which

Table 1. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence and antidemocratic party support in Italy, 1919-1921.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * fascist violence	0.073^{***}		-0.122^{***}	
	(0.007)		(0.035)	
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.055^{***}		-0.096^{***}
		(0.006)		(0.028)
No. of municipalities	5356	5356	5170	5170
R-squared	0.172	0.170	0.008	0.008

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$; constituent terms of the interaction not shown.

experienced socialist but not fascist violence. In line with our expectations, we find that the effect of exclusively radical left violence continues to exert a positive and significant effect on the vote share of the Fascist party and a negative effect on the vote share of the Socialist party. More importantly, neither of the two estimates of exclusive radical left violence differs significantly from our main coefficients, and the two estimates are statistically distinct from one another, thus reinforcing the hypothesized asymmetric consequences of political violence.

As an additional test, we use a trichotomous treatment variable to distinguish the effects of exclusively socialist or fascist violence from their combined impact. The results, shown in Table 2, support our hypotheses. In particular, they confirm the significant impact of socialist violence and indicate a marginally significant effect of exclusively fascist violence on the Fascist vote share at the 10% level, with no significant effect on Socialist votes. It is reassuring that both the marginally significant coefficient of exclusively fascist violence on the Fascist vote share and the insignificant effect on the Socialist vote share in Table 2 are substantively nearly identical to the corresponding estimates of fascist-communist violence in Table 1. That we find any statistically significant results is all the more surprising since these estimates are based on information from just 14 municipalities.

[Figure 3 about here]

Table 2. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence and vote shares of anti-system parties in Italy, 1919-1921 (trichotomous treatment).

	Fascist vote share	**Socialist vote share**
	Model 1	**Model 2**
Period 2 * only socialist violence	0.040^{***}	-0.081^{***}
	(0.010)	(0.020)
Period 2 * only fascist violence	0.071^{+}	-0.127
	(0.041)	(0.080)
Period 2 * socialist & fascist violence	0.076^{**}	-0.125^{*}
	(0.027)	(0.052)
No. of municipalities	5356	5170
R-squared	0.173	0.009

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{+}p < .1$

Finally, we employ matching methods for time-series cross-sectional data as an alternative modeling approach that investigates whether our results hold when we select a set of control units that resemble treated units (Imai et al., 2023). The matching estimates of our coefficients of interest remain significant and in the expected direction (see Online Appendix E, Figure A10). While in some cases effect sizes decrease, they still remain substantial. For instance, in the propensity score weighting models, radical left violence reduces the Socialist vote share by 5.1 percentage points and increases the Fascist vote share by 3.4 points. Similarly, fascist violence raises the Fascist vote share by nearly 5 percentage points and decreases the Socialist vote share by almost 11 percentage points.

Before examining the robustness of the results, we note that our estimated effects are sizable. From a theoretical vantage point, large effects are plausible within a political system undergoing massive political change, as was the case in Italy following World War I. For instance, the Italian Socialist Party's vote share fluctuated from 17.6% in 1913 to 32.3% in 1919 and 24.7% in 1921. Similarly, the Italian People's Party won more than 20% when it first contested elections in 1919. This pattern is consistent with the comparative evidence reported by Bartolini & Mair (2007: 96–100), who document a phase of high electoral volatility in interwar Europe. From an

empirical perspective, we emphasize that our effects are estimated at the municipality level and therefore capture local, not national, variation in vote shares. Thus, localities with particularly high volatility may drive the reported effect sizes. Accordingly, the estimates from our main specifications can be interpreted as upper bounds for the true effects. Conversely, population-weighted (Online Appendix E, Table A 14) and matching models (where units are matched on covariates including population) constitute a more conservative estimate of the effects of violence.

Robustness tests

Our main results show that political violence by nationalist radical right actors and radical left actors has a positive effect on radical right vote shares but diminishes electoral support for the left. Evaluating treatment and control units with respect to Socialist vote shares prior to treatment, we found no indication that these units developed distinctly (Figure 2). We are reassured by these parallel pre-treatment trends, which suggest that fundamental differences between treated and control units are unlikely. Nevertheless, several other threats to the robustness of our results remain including omitted variable bias and strategic selection of treatment units. The latter constitutes a form of reverse causality in which the perpetrators of violence strategically commit violence in those units in which they expect the highest payoffs in terms of vote shares. We begin by discussing the threat posed by strategic selection before describing additional tests to confront the threat of omitted variable bias.

We argue that strategic selection bias is unlikely to drive our results for two main reasons. First, we find that violence committed by radical left actors actually decreases the vote share of the Socialist party and leads to Fascist party gains. This effect runs counter to the logic of strategic selection. If radical left actors indeed targeted municipalities where they expected the greatest vote gains, then we would underestimate the backlash effect of socialist violence. Our results would be biased upward if radical left actors targeted municipalities where they expected the greatest losses in the 1921 election. However, our data reveals that most socialist violence actually took

place in Socialist industrial strongholds, where the Socialists lost less support in the 1921 election (see Online Appendix D). Second, historical accounts and our data show that Fascist violence was mostly reactive rather than anticipatory (e.g. Alcalde, 2017: 50&77). Radical right actors targeted socialist activists in response to electoral gains and revolutionary violence. Similarly, our data reveal that violence by the radical right did not cluster simply in rural areas, where the Fascist party achieved their largest gains, but was also common in industrial and urban areas where the Socialist party experienced smaller losses in the 1921 elections (see Figure A2 in Online Appendix A). These patterns accord with an interpretation that the radical left committed violence in pursuit of a global communist revolution, not electoral gains (Gerwarth, 2016: 204). Similarly, the reaction by the nationalist right was driven by fears of the revolution, not strategic anticipation of vote gains.[18]

Another threat to the robustness of our findings stems from omitted variables that correlate spatially and temporally with the violence we observe between the 1919 and 1921 elections. Next to the matching methods discussed above, we investigate the effect of spatial clustering of violence and voting (Online Appendix C, Tables A5 and A8). Furthermore, we re-estimate our main specification from Table 1 with municipality-fixed effects and a range of time-invariant geographic and socio-demographic control variables from Acemoglu et al. (2022) that we interact with the dummy variable for the 1921 election to check if contextual, municipality-specific factors change the influence on election outcomes over time. The results of these models reduce the size of our main estimates by up to 40% but remain statistically significant (see Online Appendix C, Tables A6 and A7). We further probe the sensitivity of our results to omitted confounders using the simulation approach developed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020). Even if we overlooked a confounder ten times as strong as one of our most influential controls, the share of veterans by municipality interacted with the post-1919 period, this would not invalidate our results (see Figures A7 and A8 in Online Appendix C).

One omitted variable that we do not have data for at the municipality level is turnout. Our re-

[18] See the Case Selection section above for a description of actor motivations.

sults are principally consistent with an interpretation suggesting that any violence repels voters and reduces turnout across the board, but less so among voters of the Fascist party. Implying reduced turnout, Berman (2019: 222) characterizes fascist tactics as 'remarkably successful' in reducing strikes and socialist activities. We address this concern with two pieces of evidence. First, descriptive data at the electoral district level shows generally increasing turnout between the 1919 and 1921 elections, and no consistent relationship between violence and turnout (Online Appendix A, Figure A3). Second, the Fascist party gained more votes in violence-affected municipalities situated in rural, agricultural regions rather than in the Socialist industrialized strongholds (see Online Appendix D, Figure A9). Taken together, these patterns reject an interpretation that emphasizes reduced turnout among core supporters of the Socialist party, the industrial working class.

Finally, we ran multiple additional tests to probe the sensitivity of our results to different modeling strategies such as measurement choices in terms of varying temporal windows of the treatment periods (Online Appendix E, Tables A9-A11), alternative operationalizations of our treatment variables (Tables A12 and A13), and population-weighted models (Table A14).

Conclusion

In this article, we argue that political violence asserts an asymmetric effect on the electoral support of anti-system parties. Whereas political violence committed by nationalist, radical right actors improves their electoral standing with the electorate and reduces vote shares for radical left actors, violence by the latter has the reverse effect. We attribute these asymmetric consequences to differences in threat perceptions experienced by voters. Right-wing actors paint violence by ideological opponents as a threat to the nation and portray themselves as its defender. Violence by the radical right then emphasizes their capability to restore order and protect the nation, in particular if the state does not intervene forcefully. Our empirical analysis of interwar Italy lends support to our theoretical argument. Radical right violence led to an increase in votes for the nationalist Fascist

party but decreased vote shares of the internationalist Socialist party. Conversely, violence by the radical left has a detrimental effect on Socialist vote shares but boosts the electoral fortunes of the Fascist party. Our research design makes it plausible that our results have a causal interpretation.

Our results contrast with recent work that highlights public backlash against radical right violence in contemporary democracies (Eady et al., 2023; Pickard et al., 2023), while eerily echoing findings of violence increasing electoral support, including in this special issue (Eger and Olzak, 2023; Krause and Matsunaga, 2023; Prasad et al., 2024). Importantly, our analysis is the first that investigates actual electoral outcomes, rather than intended vote choice, in a democracy that later failed. Some observers question the relevance of interwar regime outcomes for the threat faced by contemporary democracies by pointing to the unique dynamics of ideological competition between communists and fascists in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and World War I (e.g. Weyland, 2021; Acemoglu et al., 2022). In contrast, we stress the parallels between past and present nationalist ideologies, and increasing levels of violence (Riaz et al., 2024). If our conclusions travel to the present, the rise and spread of local violence today has the potential to translate into increased support for radical right parties at the national level, and ultimately threaten democracies if those parties should take power.

Yet like many single-case analyses, our research constitutes just one piece of a broader puzzle. To probe the generalizability and scope conditions of our argument, it is imperative to compare our results to other cases and types of violent nationalist competition and vote choice. In particular, our study leaves open three further questions. First, it cannot separate the effects of nationalist and radical right violence. Investigating the consequences of violence by nationalist actors with a leftist ideology, e.g. the Basque ETA in Spain and the Kurdish PPK in Turkey, or of violence between competing ethno-nationalist movements, such as in interwar Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, will help clarify how far our argument travels. Second, we focus exclusively on anti-system parties. Even though Golder (2016: 478) describes present-day radical right parties as 'inherently 'anti-system', and parties like the *Republicans* in the United States or the *Alternative for Germany* push

for limits to suffrage, most do not oppose majoritarian democracy openly. Only additional research on political violence and support for contemporary radical right parties will answer this question. Third, our data does not permit us to test the individual-level implications in voter choices. Do voters condone violence when they perceive a threat to the nation? Work by Krause and Matsunaga (2023: 2289-2290) suggests that contemporary radical right violence raises the salience of immigration, arguably one threat to the nation perceived by nationalists, which in turn drives support for radical right parties.

Next to addressing threats to democratic survival, our study also raises new questions for the literature on electoral violence. Specifically, our study heeds the call by Birch et al. (2020: 7) to 'explain the various perpetrators and targets of electoral violence.' We stress the motivations and constraints faced by nationalist and non-nationalist anti-system parties when engaging in non-state violence. Existing work on electoral violence might explore how party ideology of incumbents as opposed to opposition parties affects the consequences of electoral violence, especially when determining vote choice. Moreover, our study contrasts with findings of voters' dislike of violence (Burchard, 2020; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020; Garcia-Montoya et al., 2022; Eady et al., 2023). Future work should explore the conditions of voters' rejection of violence, which constitutes a strong 'guardrail' against democratic deconsolidation.

Replication data The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/ and https://dataverse.harvard.ed All analyses were conducted using R version 4.4.3.

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Online Appendix for

Political violence & anti-system voting in interwar Italy

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A Descriptive Statistics

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics: Anti-System Voting in Italy

Election Year	Party	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1919	Fascists	5775	0.0038	0.032	0	0.66
1919	Socialists	5775	0.32	0.27	0	1
1921	Fascists	5358	0.051	0.071	0	0.8
1921	Socialists	5172	0.3	0.23	0	1

Table A2. Descriptive statistics: Independent and Control Variables, Italy 1919–1921

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Period 2	11550	0.5	0.5	0	1
Fascist violence	11550	0.019	0.14	0	1
Socialist violence	11550	0.029	0.17	0	1
Excl. leftist violence	11550	0.016	0.12	0	1
1911 Pop. (logged)	11550	7.7	1.1	4	13
Mun. Area (logged)	11550	7.5	1.1	2.3	12
Max. Altitude	11550	836	841	1	4810
Veteran (1896-1900) Share	11550	0.14	0.023	0.069	0.2
Foot Soldiers Casualties	11550	0.032	0.016	0	0.38
Day Laborer Share	11550	0.21	0.12	0.01	0.68
Landlord Associations	11550	0.05	0.22	0	1
Industrial Worker Share	11550	0.12	0.22	0	6
Literacy Rate 1911	11550	0.75	0.2	0.1	1
Bourgeoisie Share	11550	0.085	0.032	0.028	0.24

Table A3. Descriptive Statistics: Violent events in Italy, 1919–1921

Newspaper	Number of events
La Stampa	636
L'Avanti!	260
Total	**896**

Table A4. Descriptive Statistics: Number of treated municipalities in Italy, 1919–1921

Treatment	**Treated municipalities**	**Untreated municipalities**
Fascist violence	111	5664
Socialist violence	169	5606
Excl. socialist violence	90	5685

Figure A1. Actors involved in events of political violence in Italy, 1919–1921.

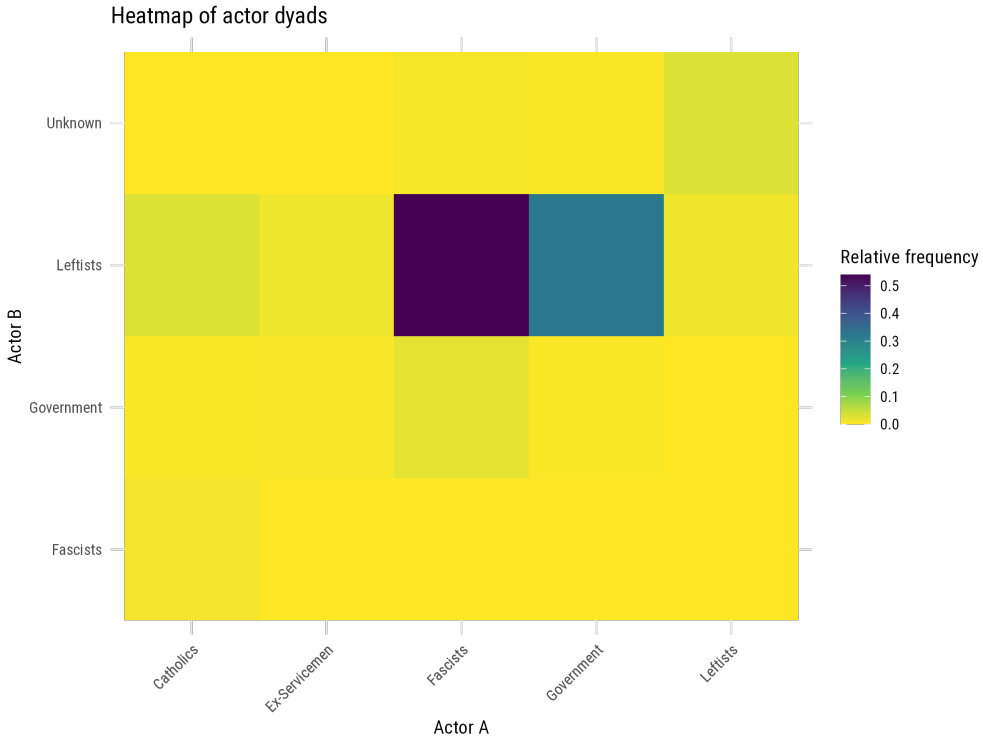


Figure A2. Political violence in Italy, 1919–1921.

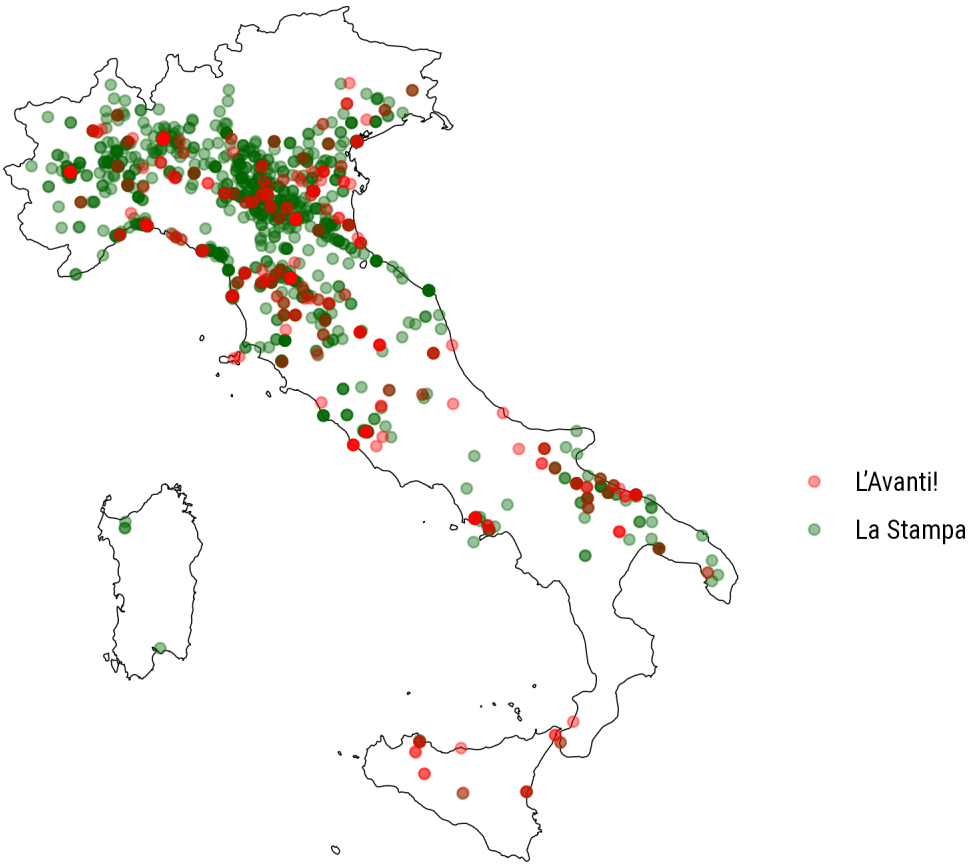
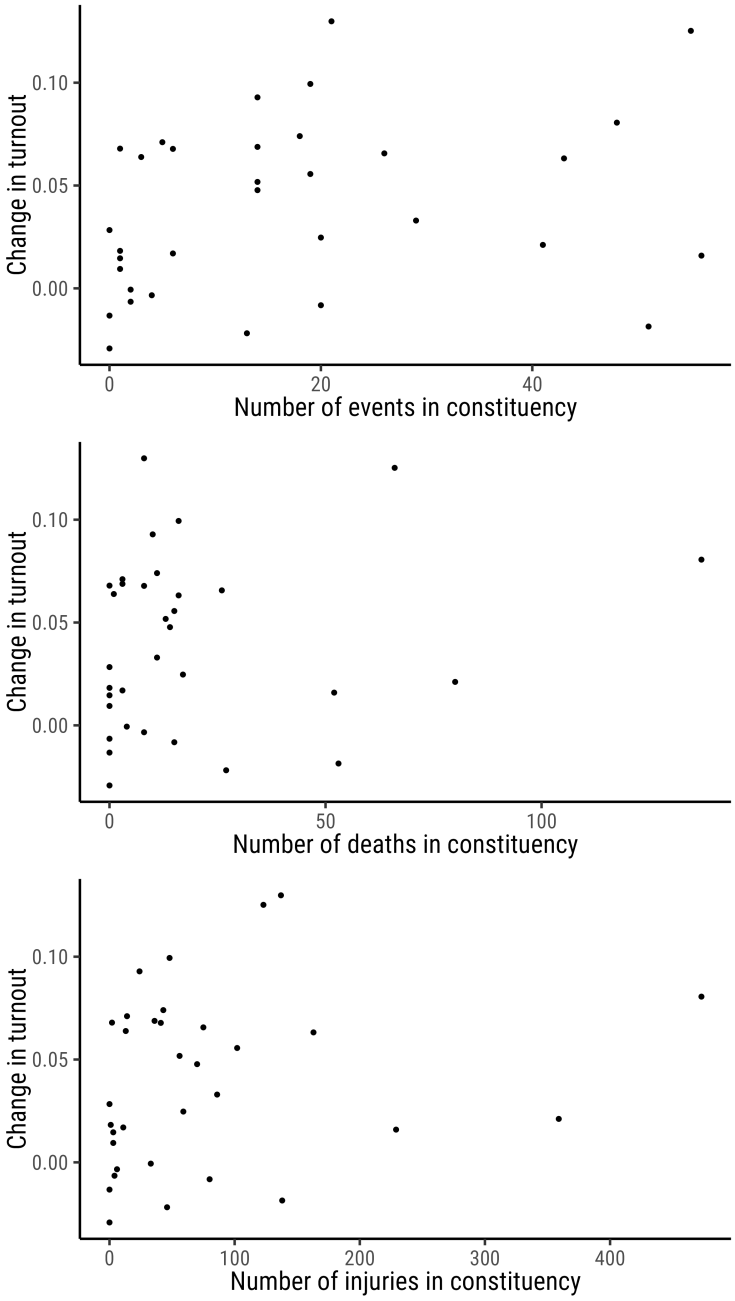


Figure A3. Political violence and changes in turnout (1919–1921) in Italy.



B Data Validation

In this section, we validate our original data by comparing them to data collected through other sources. First, we demonstrate that our data exhibit similar geographical and temporal patterns to the violent events compiled in a historical atlas by Franzinelli (2003), also used by Acemoglu et al. (2022). As illustrated in Figure A4, both datasets show comparable geographical clustering (concentrations in Northern Italy, Tuscany, and Apulia). Figure A5 also reveals that the temporal distributions align closely, with a peak in violent events occurring just before the 1921 general elections.

To further validate our data, we collected the data reported by Gentile (2021), who draws on ministerial and police reports to compute casualties and injuries at the provincial level (second-level administrative divisions below regions). Gentile's data covers the provinces within Sicily and Calabria regions, where most municipalities with missing election results are clustered. Figure A6 presents scatter plots comparing the two datasets, with Sicilian and Calabrian provinces highlighted in red. The plots indicate a strong correlation between casualties and injuries across the two sources. Moreover, the results suggest that none of the provinces in Sicily and Calabria are outliers in terms of political violence, mitigating concerns about systematic bias due to missing data.

Figure A4. Geographical distribution of newspapers and Franzinelli's (2003) data

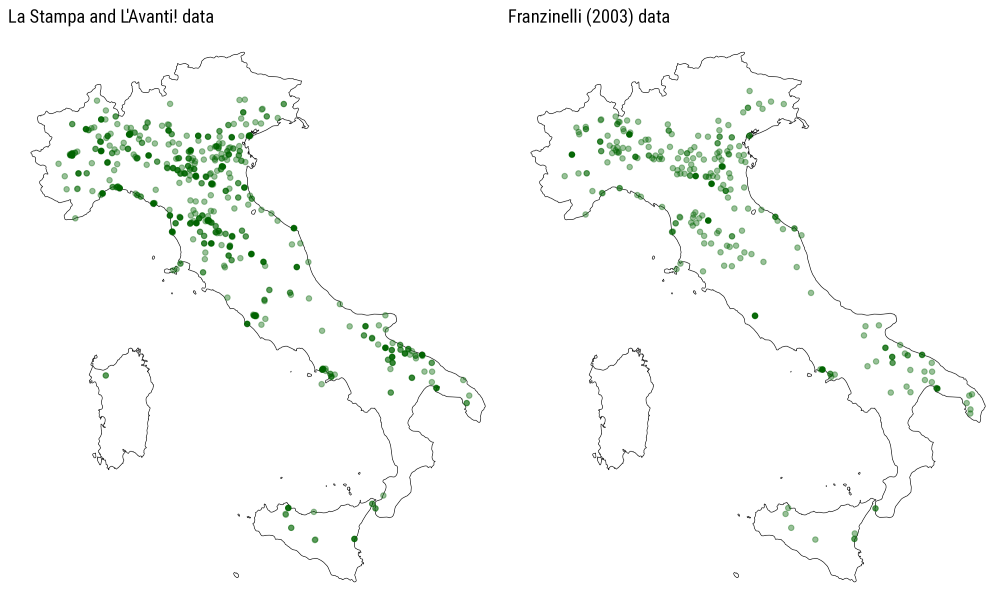


Figure A5. Temporal distribution of newspapers and Franzinelli's (2003) data

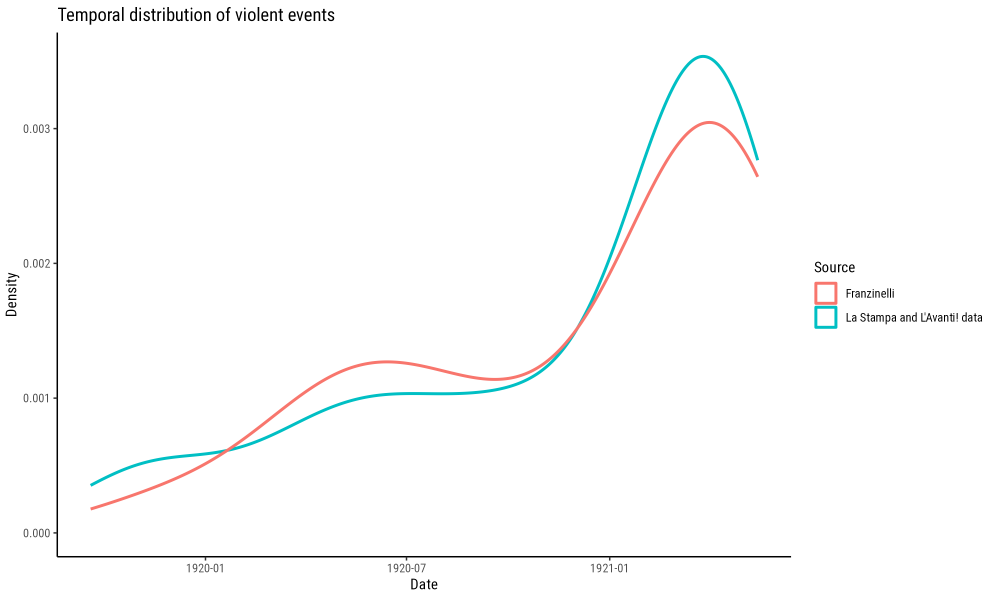
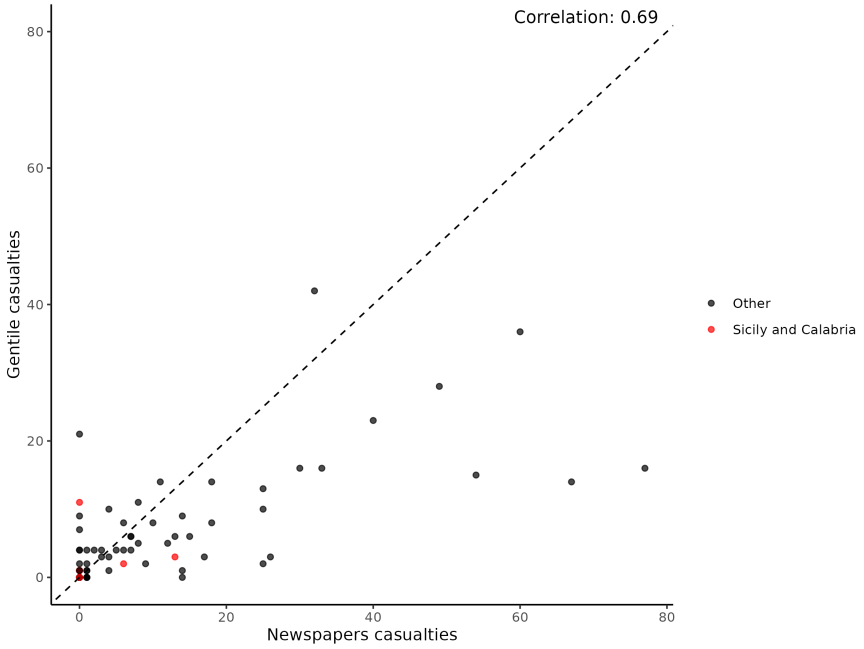
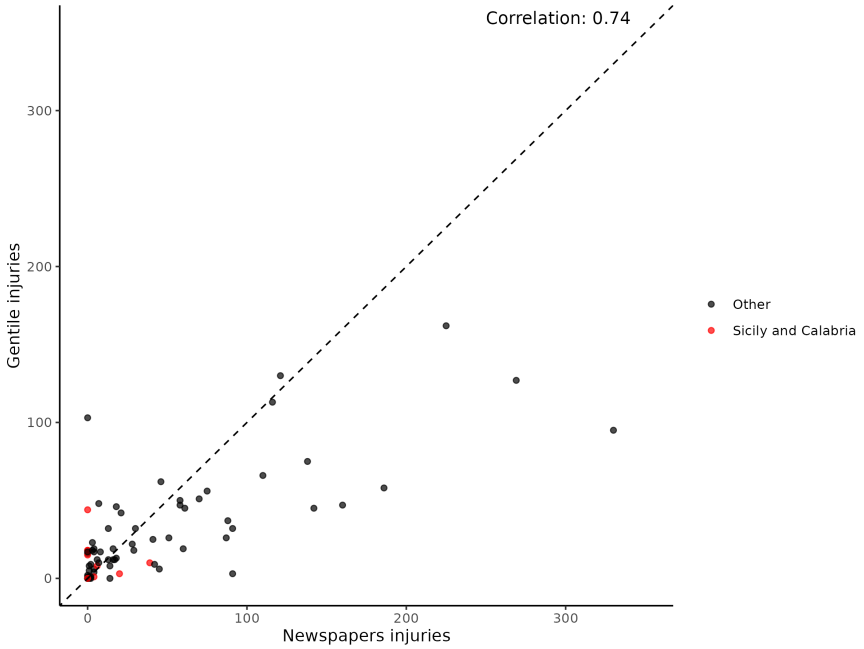


Figure A6. Casualties and injuries at the provincial level in newspapers and Gentile's ((2021)) data.



(a) Casualties



(b) Injuries

C Robustness to Omitted Variables

In this section, we probe the robustness of our results to omitted confounders. We first investigate the influence of neighborhood effects. Table A5 adds coefficients that capture the occurrence of violence in neighboring municipalities to our main difference-in-differences design from Table 1 in the manuscript. The models thus compare the changes in vote shares of anti-system parties between the 1919 and 1921 election between municipalities that saw fascist/socialist violence in neighboring municipalities and those that did not. Additionally, the specifications contain the original diff-in-diff effect of violence within the municipality. We note two key results: First, neighboring violence has a near-identical influence on anti-system vote shares as violence within municipalities. The estimated effect sizes resemble local violence in direction, size, and significance levels. Second, adding violence in neighboring municipalities only affects the estimated effects for local violence to a limited extent. None of the effects of local violence diminishes by more than 18%. Thus, the combined local and neighborhood effect of violence almost doubles compared to a mere local effect and increases support for the Fascist party by almost 13 percentage points on average. Our results thus indicate that Fascist violence did not only operate by 'ruthlessly destroy[ing] socialism and its network of civic and political centres' (Alcalde, 2017: 75) but by evoking the Fascist party as defenders of order and/or scaring potential supporters of the Socialist Party. Hearing and reading about violence in neighboring municipalities affected vote choice by nearly as much as violence within the same municipality. The limited number of victims within municipalities further reinforces the interpretation that violence affects voters not because they experience it directly but because it paints the right as effective defenders against the Socialist threat and creates an atmosphere of fear.[19]

Next, we re-estimate the main results from Table 1 once with municipality-fixed effects and once with multiple time-invariant controls that we interact with our election-dummy ($Period\ 2$). The fixed effects-specification tests for the influence of any municipality-specific effects that might affect our results. It particularly removes any variation that stems from differences between municipalities that experience violence only in $Period\ 2$ but not in $Period\ 1$ and municipalities that experience violence in both periods, the so-called always-takers. Adding period interactions with time-invariant controls helps us to evaluate the robustness of our results to a wide variety of socio-demographic and geographic controls that might exert a different effect on our outcomes of interest due to Fascist mobilization or other unobserved changes that occur in individual municipalities between the 1919 and 1921 elections. To probe the sensitivity of our results to additionally unob-

[19] On average, there were 1.13 fatalities and 4.56 injuries per event.

Table A5. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence in neighbouring municipalities and antidemocratic party support in Italy, 1919-1921.

	Fascist vote share		Socialist vote share	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * Fascist violence	0.061^{***}		-0.101^{**}	
	(0.007)		(0.034)	
Period 2 * Neighbor fascist violence	0.068^{***}		-0.120^{***}	
	(0.004)		(0.020)	
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.047^{***}		-0.082^{**}
		(0.006)		(0.028)
Period 2 * Neighbor socialist violence		0.049^{***}		-0.087^{***}
		(0.004)		(0.017)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.204	0.192	0.028	0.027

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$; constituent terms of the interaction not shown.

served confounders, we implement Cinelli & Hazlett's (2020) simulation-based approach. We conclude the section by considering whether adding control variables might introduce post-treatment bias.

Table A6 adds municipality-level fixed effects to our main models from Table 1. The estimates of violence on Fascist vote share are unchanged, reflecting the onset of fascist violence only after the strong showing of the Socialist party in 1919. The estimates of violence on changes in the Socialist vote share are slightly depressed but do not call into question the confidence in these results.

Table A7 re-estimates our main specifications and adds a range of potential confounder variables interacted with the dummy variable for the 1921 election ($Period\ 2$). Adding these controls reduces the effect of fascist and socialist violence on Fascist vote shares by one third and 40% respectively. Similarly, the decrease of the violence effects on changes in Socialist vote shares is almost exactly mirrored: fascist violence diminishes by 38.5% and socialist violence by 35.9%. In spite of these reductions of the estimated effect, all treatment effects remain statistically significant and substantively important.

Figures A7 and A8 simulate the vulnerability of our main treatment effects to potentially unobserved confounders following the procedure introduced by Cinelli & Hazlett (2020). The two plots in the top row of each graph show the effects of an unobserved confounder on the effect size of our main explanatory variables, fascist and socialist violence respectively. The bottom row

displays the effect of potential confounders on t-values of our main treatments. Crossing the red line indicates reversion of estimated sign or drop of t-value below 1.995 ($p > .05$). Black triangles denote the estimated effect of our main explanatory variables. Red diamonds indicate the effect of a simulated confounder at five times the effect size of the share of veterans born between 1896 and 1900 interacted with period 2, our strongest control, on our main estimates.

The simulation reveals two insights: first, the estimated signs of all our treatment effects are fairly robust to unobserved confounders. Omitting a confounder ten times the estimated effect size of our strongest control, the interaction between period 2 and the share of veterans born between 1896 and 1900, would barely alter the estimated effect sizes of fascist or socialist violence on the vote shares of the Fascist and Socialist party respectively.

Second, our estimates of fascist and socialist violence on changes in *Fascist vote shares* are more robust to omitted confounders than the respective treatments on *Socialist vote shares*. In the latter case, a confounder five times the size of the interaction between period 2 and the share of veterans born between 1896 and 1900 almost drops the estimated coefficients for fascist and socialist violence below the 95%-level of statistical significance. Moreover, such a confounder need only explain a very limited amount of variation in the outcome variable (partial R^2 of the confounder and outcome on the y-axis). In contrast, the effects of socialist and fascist violence on changes in Fascist vote shares is robust to a much larger confounder.

However, adding control variables to our main specification also runs the risk of inducing post-treatment bias, especially when a control is actually the cause of both the main explanatory variable, and its outcome (Cinelli et al., 2024). Some of the controls that we employ clearly risk inducing such bias, as Acemoglu et al. (2022) rely on the 1921 and 1931 censuses to measure socio-demographic characteristics such as the share of industrial workers or day laborers in a given municipality. These measurements may be clearly affected by both violence prior to the 1919 and 1921 elections, and the respective election outcomes.

The worst offender of post-treatment bias is the spatial lag of our outcome variable that we add in Table A8. Electoral outcomes in municipality j are certainly influenced by our outcome of interest, the vote shares of the Fascist and Socialist parties in municipality i. Moreover, we know that our main explanatory variables affect electoral outcomes in neighboring units, thus creating a situation in which electoral outcomes in municipality j may be caused by both X_i and Y_i. They therefore constitute 'common effects' or a 'bad control'. The dilemma is, of course, that not including the spatial lag creates omitted variable bias, as Y_j clearly affects Y_i. The key question that arises is whether the common association arises from a causal relationship between Y_i and Y_j. Most likely, the strong spatial autocorrelation rather represents common and deep socio-structural

characteristics that two neighboring municipalities share. We find it less likely that the choices of voters in municipality j truly cause the vote choices in municipality i or vice versa. Even if some of them did, they would both be affected by our treatment, political violence. Thus, we argue that models that control for many of the geographic and socio-demographic characteristics rather than the spatial lag capture some of the common, underlying features of municipalities, and diminish the risk of omitted variable bias when not including the spatial lag, while avoiding the introduction of post-treatment bias.

We present one candidate for a potentially strong confounder, the influence of neighboring units on the outcome in a given municipality. At first glance, it seems plausible that units as small as municipalities should affect each other. Indeed, we find evidence of strong spatial autocorrelation when we fit our main specifications with spatial autoregressive (SAR) regression models in Table A8 (Anselin, 2013: Ch.6). All our estimates of spatial correlation (rho) exceed 0.6, a very sizable value. While our treatment effects on Fascist vote shares continue to be precisely estimated and point into the right direction in Models 1 and 2, only fascist violence has a significant effect on Socialist vote shares (Model 4).[20] These results indicate that political violence continues to increase the support of anti-system parties from the radical right, while its effect on radical-left parties is less robust. Importantly, we still reject the null of no difference between violence effects on the two different anti-system parties.

[20]It makes little sense to discuss the size of the treatment effects because they are mediated by the spatial autoregressive parameter.

Figure A7. Simulating omitted variables to probe robustness of fascist (left column) and socialist violence (right column) on Fascist vote share in Models 1 & 2, Table A7.

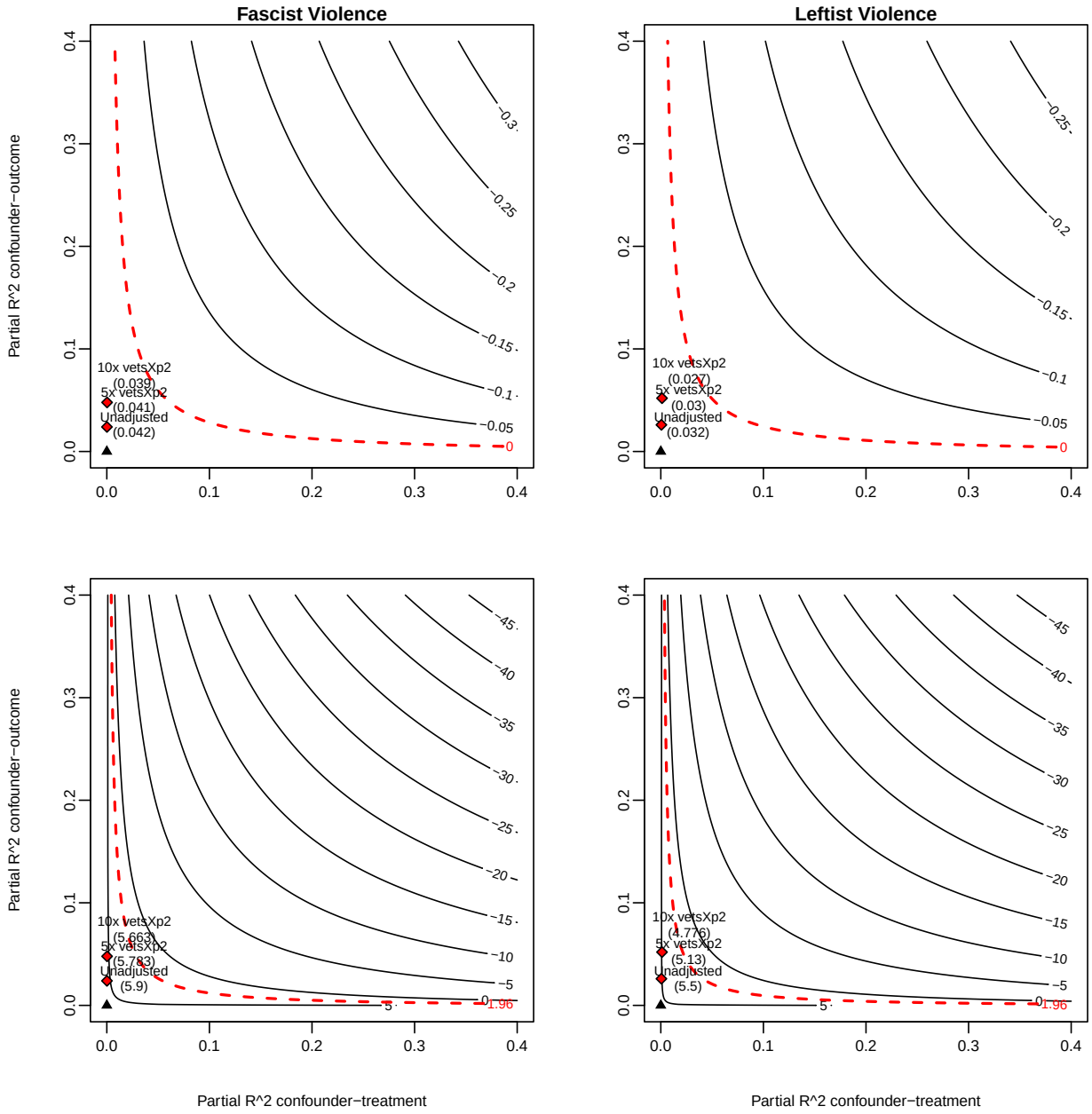


Figure A8. Simulating omitted variables to probe robustness of fascist (left column) and socialist violence (right column) on Socialist vote share in Models 3 & 4, Table A7.

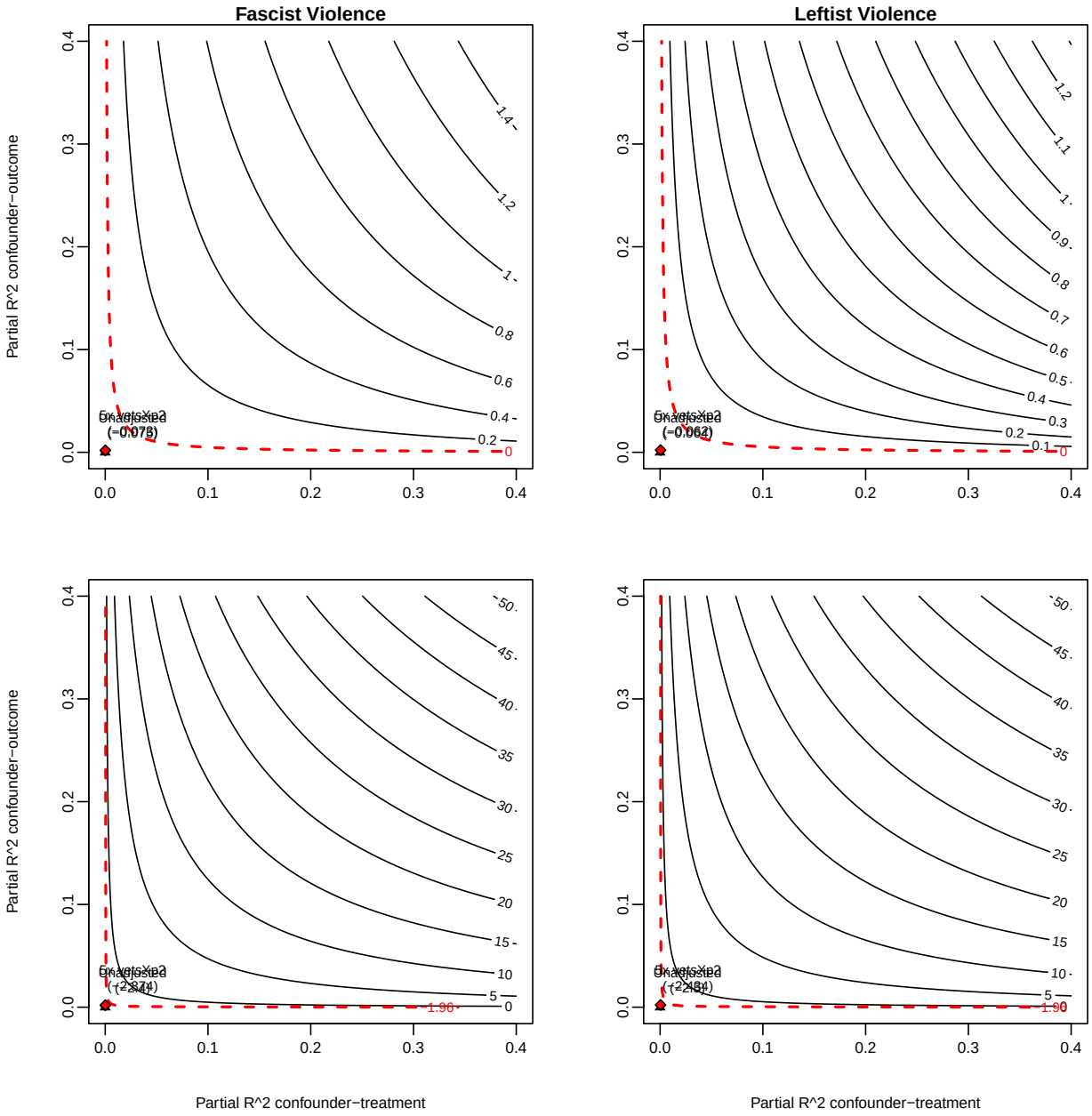


Table A6. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence and vote shares of anti-system parties in Italy, 1919-1921 with municipality-level fixed effects.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * fascist violence	0.073^{***}		-0.108^{***}	
	(0.000)		(0.000)	
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.055^{***}		-0.079^{***}
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Constant				
Linear Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.025	0.024	0.001	0.001

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A7. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence in Italy, 1919-1921 with period-control interaction

	Fascist vote share		Socialist vote share	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
P2 * fascist violence	0.042^{***}		-0.075^{*}	
	(0.007)		(0.031)	
P2 * socialist violence		0.032^{***}		-0.064^{*}
		(0.006)		(0.025)
P2	-0.136^{***}	-0.135^{***}	0.057	0.053
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.059)	(0.060)
P2 * 1911 Pop. (logged)	-0.003	-0.003	0.008	0.009
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.007)	(0.007)
P2 * Mun. Area (logged)	0.010^{***}	0.010^{***}	-0.017^{*}	-0.017^{*}
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.007)	(0.007)
P2 * Max. Altitude	-0.00001^{***}	-0.00001^{***}	0.00001^{*}	0.00001^{*}
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.00001)	(0.00001)
P2 * Foot Soldiers Casualties	0.259^{***}	0.265^{***}	-0.156	-0.169
	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.278)	(0.278)
P2 * Day Laborer Share	0.065^{***}	0.063^{***}	0.233^{***}	0.236^{***}
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.048)	(0.048)
P2 * Landlord Associations	0.060^{***}	0.064^{***}	-0.175^{***}	-0.180^{***}
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.021)	(0.021)
P2 * Industrial Worker Share	-0.004	-0.004	0.007	0.006
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.020)	(0.020)
P2 * Literacy Rate 1911	0.062^{***}	0.059^{***}	-0.101^{***}	-0.099^{**}
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.030)	(0.030)
P2 * fascist violence in Neighborhood	0.049^{***}		-0.088^{***}	
	(0.004)		(0.018)	
P2 * socialist violence in Neighborhood		0.034^{***}		-0.068^{***}
		(0.004)		(0.016)
P2 * Veteran (1896-1900) Share	0.312^{***}	0.327^{***}	-0.380^{*}	-0.406^{*}
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.187)	(0.187)
P2 * Bourgeoisie Share	0.242^{***}	0.244^{***}	0.814^{***}	0.814^{***}
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.161)	(0.161)
Constituent terms included	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.283	0.276	0.270	0.272

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A8. Diff-in-diff spatial lag regression models of political violence and antidemocratic party support in Italy, 1919-1921.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * fascist violence	0.035^{***}			-0.047^{*}
	(0.005)			(0.023)
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.030^{***}	-0.033	
		(0.004)	(0.018)	
N	10344	10344	10344	10344
ρ	0.602^{***}	0.604^{***}	0.662^{***}	0.661^{***}
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Lagrange Multiplier test	394.32^{***}	377.39^{***}	28.54^{***}	25.43^{***}
Log Likelihood	18058.050	18060.530	3115.601	3116.204
AIC	-36104.100	-36109.070	-6219.201	-6220.408

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

D Heterogeneous Effects

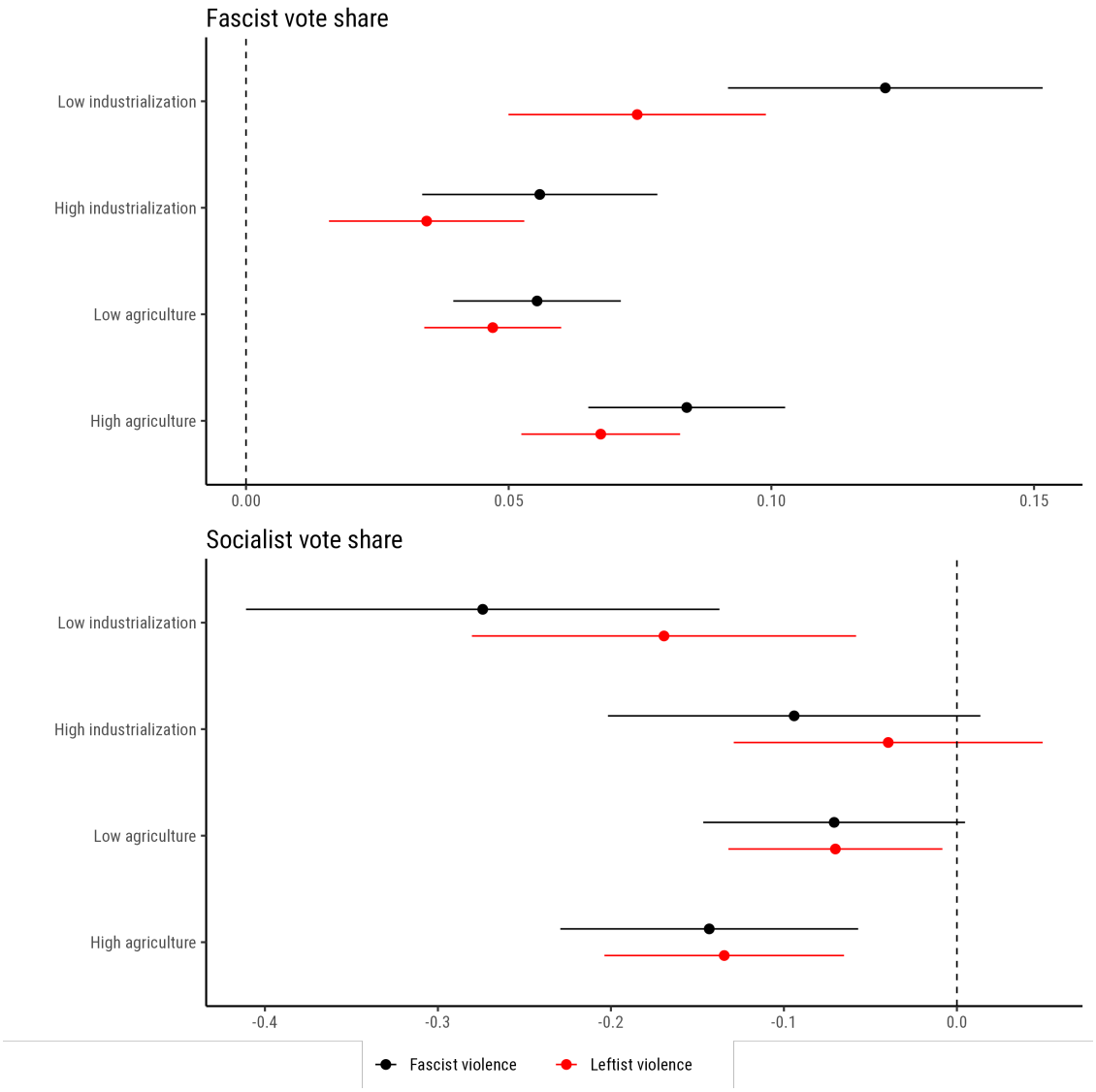
In this section, we provide tentative results by exploring the heterogeneous effects of violence on support for anti-system parties. To do so, we split our sample two ways. First, we distinguish between more and less industrialized municipalities; second, we separate municipalities where agriculture dominates from those in which it does not.[21] We then explore whether the effects of violence differ between those samples.

Figure A9 depicts the heterogeneous effects of fascist violence (black point-ranges) and socialist violence (red) on Fascist (top) and Socialist vote shares (bottom). Regardless of the sub-sample, the effect of violence by either actor increases Fascist vote share (top). Notably, the effect is particularly pronounced in less industrial and more agricultural municipalities. The differences between these sub-samples are statistically significant. Conversely, violence substantively reduces the Socialist vote share (bottom), especially in less industrialized municipalities. The impact of violence on Socialist electoral results is slightly stronger in more agricultural municipalities but the differences fail to reach statistical significance.

Taken together these analyses suggest that violence had less of an effect on highly industrialized, Socialist strongholds. Thus, our results reject an interpretation that emphasizes reduced turnout among core supporters of the Socialist party, the industrial working class. These patterns suggest that the alternative explanation, where violence generally leads to electoral losses but depresses turnout more among out-group voters, is unlikely to hold in our case. Rather, violence predominantly reduced the large gains the Socialists had made in the 1919 election in more rural constituencies with their promise of land reform, a finding that is consistent with historical interpretations (Brustein & Berntson, 1999: 163-4).

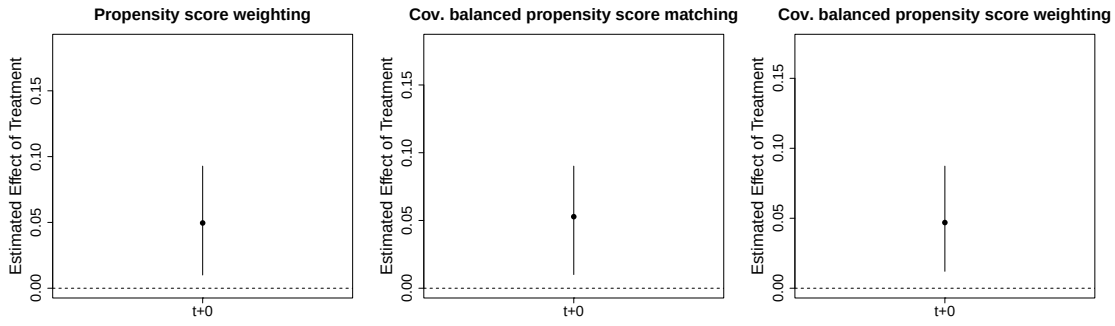
[21] We split the sample at the respective medians of the variables *Share of industrial workers* and *Share of sharecroppers*.

Figure A9. Heterogeneous effects of political violence on electoral support

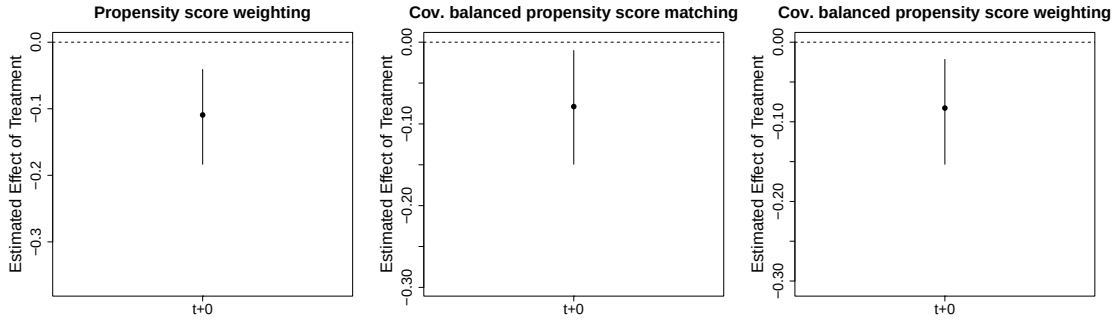


E Robustness to Modeling Choices

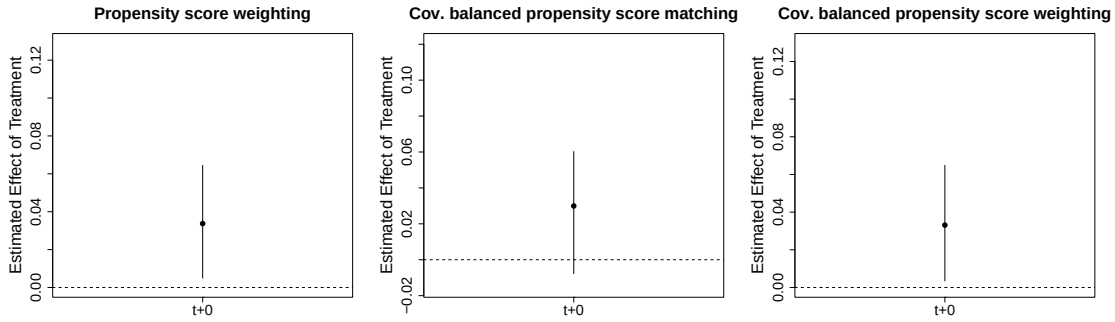
Figure A10 plots the results obtained with different matching methods (propensity score weighting, covariate balanced propensity score weighting and matching) and bootstrap standard errors.



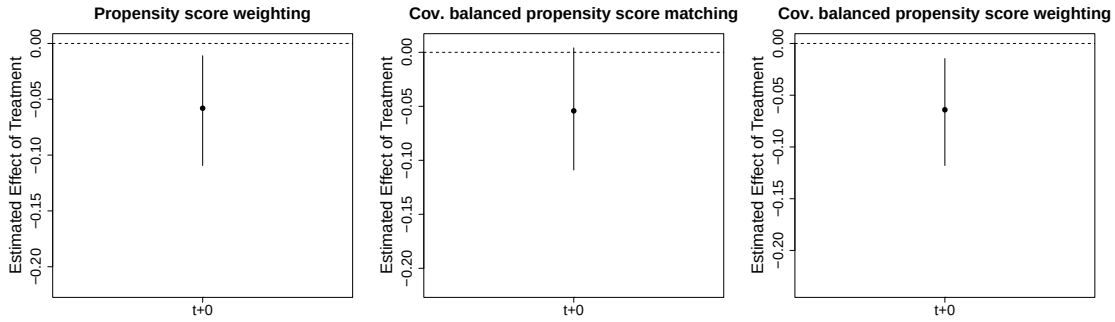
(a) Fascist violence on Fascist vote share



(b) Fascist violence on Socialist vote share



(c) Socialist violence on Fascist vote share



(d) Socialist violence on Socialist vote share

Figure A10. Matching estimates of the effects of political violence

Table A9. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence in the four weeks prior to the elections.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * Fascist violence	0.062^{***}		-0.104^{**}	
	(0.008)		(0.040)	
Period 2 * Leftist violence		0.047^{***}		-0.085^{*}
		(0.007)		(0.035)
Period 2	0.046^{***}	0.046^{***}	-0.012^{*}	-0.012^{*}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Fascist violence	-0.003		0.186^{***}	
	(0.006)		(0.028)	
Leftist violence		-0.003		0.149^{***}
		(0.005)		(0.024)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.314^{***}	0.313^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.166	0.164	0.006	0.005

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A10. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence between five and eight weeks prior to the elections.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * Fascist violence	0.088^{***}		-0.167^{***}	
	(0.010)		(0.046)	
Period 2 * Leftist violence		0.064^{***}		-0.122^{**}
		(0.008)		(0.038)
Period 2	0.046^{***}	0.046^{***}	-0.012^{*}	-0.011^{*}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Fascist violence	-0.001		0.228^{***}	
	(0.007)		(0.032)	
Leftist violence		-0.002		0.167^{***}
		(0.006)		(0.027)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.314^{***}	0.314^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.171	0.167	0.006	0.004

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A11. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence between nine and twelve weeks prior to the elections.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * Fascist violence	0.089^{***}		-0.169^{***}	
	(0.010)		(0.048)	
Period 2 * Leftist violence		0.062^{***}		-0.121^{**}
		(0.009)		(0.041)
Period 2	0.046^{***}	0.046^{***}	-0.012^{*}	-0.012^{*}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Fascist violence	-0.002		0.199^{***}	
	(0.007)		(0.034)	
Leftist violence		-0.003		0.145^{***}
		(0.006)		(0.028)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.314^{***}	0.314^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.169	0.166	0.004	0.003

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A12. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence and antidemocratic party support in Italy, 1919-1921 with violence operationalized as injuries or deaths.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * Fascist violence	0.064^{***}		-0.113^{***}	
	(0.006)		(0.026)	
Period 2 * Leftist violence		0.054^{***}		-0.100^{***}
		(0.005)		(0.022)
Period 2	0.045^{***}	0.044^{***}	-0.010^{*}	-0.009
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Fascist violence	-0.003		0.184^{***}	
	(0.004)		(0.018)	
Leftist violence		-0.003		0.168^{***}
		(0.003)		(0.016)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.310^{***}	0.308^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.176	0.175	0.011	0.013

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A13. Diff-in-diff regression models of political violence and antidemocratic party support in Italy, 1919-1921 with violence operationalized as injuries.

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * fascist violence	0.050^{***}		-0.097^{*}	
	(0.008)		(0.040)	
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.049^{***}		-0.101^{**}
		(0.008)		(0.037)
Period 2	0.046^{***}	0.046^{***}	-0.012^{*}	-0.012^{*}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Fascist violence	-0.004		0.150^{***}	
	(0.006)		(0.028)	
Socialist violence		-0.004		0.161^{***}
		(0.005)		(0.026)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.314^{***}	0.314^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.163	0.164	0.004	0.005

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

Table A14. Diff-in-diff population-weighted regression models of political violence and vote shares of anti-system parties in Italy, 1919-1921 (population-weighted models).

	Fascist vote share		**Socialist vote share**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Period 2 * fascist violence	0.040^{**}		-0.068^{*}	
	(0.015)		(0.027)	
Period 2 * socialist violence		0.028^{**}		-0.006
		(0.009)		(0.030)
Period 2	0.056^{***}	0.054^{***}	-0.005	-0.013
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Fascist violence	0.006		0.202^{***}	
	(0.005)		(0.031)	
Socialist violence		0.003		0.065
		(0.003)		(0.043)
Constant	0.001	0.002	0.310^{***}	0.324^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.030)	(0.030)
N	11133	11133	10947	10947
R-squared	0.257	0.246	0.072	0.014

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$

F Newspaper Quote Examples

In this section, we report excerpts from *La Stampa*, the center-right newspaper from which we collect data. Collectively, the reports highlight a derogatory/vilifying portrayal of leftist actors (including Christian Democrats), describing them as "extremist" or "subversives." This negative characterization occurs regardless of their status as victims or perpetrators of violence. The Italian-speakers in our research team confirm that the quotes are more broadly representative of the reporting in center-right newspapers, such as La Stampa. Unsurprisingly, L'Avanti reversed the portrayal of the role of communists and fascists in reports of violent events.

> La Stampa, 13 April 1921, Crema: The honorable Miglioli hit with a stick by a fascist
>
> Yesterday, on the train coming from Cremona [...] the former MP Miglioli was travelling, a well-known **extremist** Christian democrat. The Secretary of the Fasces of Combat in Crema, tenant Giuseppe Bianco, [...] asked him about the insults that he repeatedly hurled in the Chambers of Deputies against the fascists and invited him to headquarters of the Fasces in Crema to retract. [...] [The fascist] hit the former MP with a stick in the head.

> La Stampa, 16 April 1921, Rome: Violence against two **extremist** MPs
>
> [...] Yesterday Camillo Bezzi, head of the local [Spoleto] communists and mayor of that city, went to the nearby Trevi [...]. [H]e was challenged by some fascists coming from Foligno who, after a brief exchange of words, hit him with punches, provoking abrasions on his nose.

> La Stampa, 18 April 1921, Florence: Communist ambushes against fascists
>
> [...] 22 fascists from Arezzo went to Foiano nella Chiana to deliver speeches and distribute political manifestos. The political gathering was held and no incidents were recorded. The fascists stayed in Foiano until around 4 PM, by which time they jumped on their camions and left the town, greeted by the applause of many people. As soon as they went, around 40 local settlers and **subversives**, armed with muskets, revolvers, and axes, hidden behind a pile [of garbage] alongside the provincial street, 1.5 km from Arezzo, waited for the camion to pass; and when its profile appeared on the road, they welcomed it with a volley of rifle shots that fully hit the camion.[...] It was a terrible moment. [...]

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