Inequality and Political Violence*

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Abstract

Recent studies suggest that inequality is a major factor associated with civil conflict. The micro-processes underlying this association, however, remain poorly understood and empirically untested. Drawing on social psychological literature and micro-level data, we examine the mechanisms through which inequality generates conflict. Based on prior experimental work, we argue that individual relative deprivation—the key mechanism invoked to explain the inequality conflict nexus—is unlikely to motivate individual participation in political violence. Subsequently, we suggest that group relative deprivation is likely to motivate political violence. An analysis of unprecedented survey data, representative of almost one billion people, provides strong evidence to support these claims. The results highlight the importance of integrating social psychology into conflict research and substantiates the recent shift in focus from individuals to groups in the study of inequality and conflict.

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1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a re-awakening of interest in the relationship between inequality and political violence. In contrast to much of previous work (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003), recent studies show that inequality—when correctly specified—is a powerful predictor of political violence, including large-scale civil conflict (Buhaug, Cederman, and Gleditsch 2014; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Deiwiks et al. 2012; Østby 2008; Østby, Nordås, and Rød, 2009). However, the mechanisms that underlie the inequality-conflict nexus remain poorly understood and empirically untested (see Cederman and Wucherpfennig 2017: 24–25; Østby 2013: 213, 224).

The causal steps linking inequality to violence have typically been theorized as follows: (i) objective inequality (e.g., in income) between individuals or groups results in perceptions of inequality (i.e., relative deprivation or “grievances”) among the disadvantaged, (ii) which motivates and facilitates the mobilization of the disadvantaged to challenge the status quo, increasing the risk of civil conflict (see, e.g., Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Gurr 2010; Stewart 2008; Østby 2013). While state- or group-level analyses have shown that inequalities indeed predict political violence (cited above), the causal steps linking the two variables remain largely untested against appropriate, individual-level data.

Recent surveys have challenged the claim that objective and subjective inequalities correspond. Economically better-off individuals commonly perceive themselves as
worse-off than objectively worse-off individuals, and vice versa (Langer and Mikami 2013; Langer and Smedts 2013; Rustad 2016). Here, we examine the subsequent claim that *perceived* inequality motivates individual participation in political violence. For more than four decades conflict researchers have assumed that relatively deprived individuals are prone to political violence. To date, however, this remains a largely unsubstantiated claim.

We re-evaluate this cornerstone assumption by drawing on insights from other fields, in particular, social psychology, where effects of inequality on precursors of political violence (e.g., prejudice and outgroup hostility), have been analyzed as extensively (see Jost and Kay 2010). Incongruent with much of early conflict research, psychological studies suggest that individual relative deprivation is unlikely to motivate political violence. By contrast—and in line with more recent conflict research—the psychological literature suggests that group relative deprivation can motivate political violence.

While psychologists have analyzed precursors of political violence, they have not linked inequality to participation in real-world political violence, and have primarily relied on samples from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and developed populations (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). By contrast, while political scientists have analyzed the association between inequality and civil conflict, typically relying on global samples, they have not tested the theorized mechanisms—pertaining
to individuals—against individual-level data (for a critique of this, see Arjona and Kalyvas 2012).

The dearth of individual-level studies in conflict research has largely been due to the lack of micro-level data from conflict-affected states (Østby and Urdal 2010: 17–18). Here, we utilize the Afrobarometer Data (2015), which not only contains items on individual-level inequality and participation political violence, but also is of exceptional coverage: 51,587 individuals from 34 African states. As such, our analysis represents the first multi-national test of the relative deprivation theory, focused, specifically, on individual participation in political violence.1

Consistent with the psychological literature, and incongruous with much of previous conflict research, we find little empirical support for the claim that individual relative deprivation motivates political violence. Furthermore, as suggested by psychological studies, we find that group relative deprivation motivates political violence. These findings are also consistent with recent conflict research, emphasizing the role of group-based (or horizontal) inequalities (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Stewart 2008; Østby 2008). Unlike state- or group-level research, however, we present direct individual-level evidence on the mechanisms that account for the inequality-conflict nexus.

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1 Previous individual-level research on the inequality-conflict nexus has focused either on attitudes towards violence (e.g., Rustad 2016) or participation in non-violent forms of collective action (e.g., Walker and Mann 1987), assuming that expressed support for violence or participation in protest relates to actual participation in political violence. As we discuss below, these assumptions appear to be untenable.
In addition, building on early research on inequality and conflict, we analyze the effects of two other forms of deprivation: “decremental” and “progressive” (see Gurr 210, 46–56; also Davies 1962). We find that the first, arising out of a comparison of oneself to oneself in the past, does not motivate violence, whereas the second, arising out of a comparison of oneself to oneself in the future, does. This finding seems consistent with prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; 1984): a possibility of losing what one has should result in stronger motivation to pre-empt the likely loss than the perception that something has already been lost.

Importantly, our analysis reveals that the effects of relative deprivation measures substantially vary across the 34 countries (from significantly negative to significantly positive). This illustrates how reliance on data from particular countries (or regions) can produce conclusions diametrically opposite to the aggregate patterns across countries, and highlights the need to test theories against multi-national data.

Taken together, our study contributes to research on inequality and political violence in the following ways. Theoretically, we renovate a four-decade-old theory on the inequality-conflict nexus with insights from recent psychological research. Empirically, we establish a robust relationship between two types of deprivation and individual participation in political violence, relying on data of exceptional coverage and quality. Substantively, we show that only two specific forms of relative deprivation—group relative deprivation and progressive deprivation—motivate political violence. This highlights the critical role of group-based differentials and economic downturns in
instigating civil conflicts. Methodologically, our study underscores the importance of scrutinizing individual-level mechanisms with individual-level data.

2 Gaps in Understanding the Inequality-Conflict Nexus

Early quantitative studies on the inequality-conflict nexus produced inconsistent results (Mitchell 1968; Nagel 1974; Parvin 1973; Russett 1964; Sigelman and Simpson 1977; Tanter and Midlarsky 1967; Weede 1981). This contrasted both theoretical work (Davies 1962; Gurr 2010; Runciman 1966) and case studies (e.g., Midlarsky and Roberts 1985) asserting that inequality is a major cause of civil conflict. Initially, the mismatch between quantitative research on the one hand, and theoretical literature and case studies on the other, was attributed to the measurement error and poor quality of the inequality data (e.g., Lichbach 1989). Recently, the focus shifted to inadequate operationalization of the key variables. Previous studies have mainly used proxies of inequality in the total population (vertical inequality), which do not account for inequality between particular groups (horizontal inequality) (e.g., Østby 2008), and have not differentiated between ethnic and non-ethnic conflicts (e.g., Buhuag, Cederman, and Gleditsch 2014).

Improved conceptualization and measurement of inequality and conflict has produced more consistent results, with vertical inequality having a positive association with non-ethnic conflict and horizontal inequality having a positive association with ethnic conflict (Bartusevičius 2014; Besançon 2005; Buhaug et al., 2014; Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011; Deiwiks et al. 2012; Østby 2008). Indeed, inequality,
in particular group-based, seems to have recently gained recognition as one of the most powerful predictors of civil conflict (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013).

While researchers have devoted substantial effort to identifying the empirical association between the two variables, the theorized mechanisms through which inequality influences conflict remain underexplored. Early theoretical work proposed that objective inequalities in income or land generate perceptions or feelings of relative deprivation, which can then motivate participation in violence challenging the economic status quo (Gurr 2010; Nagel 1974; Runciman 1972; Sigelman and Simpson 1977). Recent studies have further added that inequalities overlapping with identity groups (i.e., horizontal inequalities) may also facilitate the mobilization of the disadvantaged for a collective action against the state (Buhaug, Cederman, and Gleditsch 2014; Cederman, Weidman, and Gleditsch 2011; Østby 2008; 2013; Stewart 2008).

Yet, vertical or horizontal inequalities potentially relate to a number of other factors that can contribute to civil conflict. For example, state or sub-state indicators of inequality may reflect a concentration of resources in the hands of the ruling elite, which incentivizes intra-elite fighting over central power, leading to civil conflict (e.g., Boix 2008). To assess whether inequality generates conflict via relative deprivation or via other mechanisms we need to scale down to the individual level. In fact, in his seminal work, Gurr (2010, 29–30) suggested using survey techniques to directly account for the key variables driving the inequality-conflict nexus. This notwithstanding, we still lack empirical evidence showing that perceived inequalities motivate political violence.
Testing hypotheses about individual-level processes requires data on human perceptions and behavior, preferably from people in societies with political conflict. Yet, collecting such data in conflict-affected states is not an easy task (see Arjona and Kalyvas 2012). So far, only a few studies have collected systematic data on individual participation or willingness to participate in political violence (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Oyefusi 2008; 2010), or perception of inequality (Langer and Mikami 2013; Langer and Smedts 2013), and only one on perception of inequality and attitudes towards political violence (Rustad 2016).

Importantly, these studies have challenged the claim that subjective and objective inequalities correspond—a correspondence that state- or group-level analysis have hitherto unequivocally assumed. In particular, based on surveys in Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Kenya, Langer and Mikami (2013) have shown that members of some ethnic groups that were not the most (objectively) disadvantaged perceived themselves as the most disadvantaged, whereas members of other ethnic groups perceived their status as better than it actually was. Furthermore, based on analysis of the fourth wave of Afrobarometer data, Langer and Smedts (2013) found a negative relationship between actual and perceived horizontal inequalities.

There are many reasons why actual and perceived inequalities might not correspond: poor quality of actual data, manipulation of public discourse by elites, inaccurate media reporting, etc. (see Langer and Smedts 2013). The important point here is that, unlike assumed in prior research, objective measures of inequalities may not reflect perceived
inequalities. Hence, analysis involving objective measures of inequality may not inform about the relationship between perceived inequalities and peoples’ willingness to participate in violence. To account for political violence, thus, we need to focus either on the factors that affect perceived inequality, such as public discourse, or on direct measures of perceived inequalities.

Considering this, Rustad (2016) has conducted a survey in the Niger Delta, measuring both actual and perceived inequalities, and assessing their effects on individual attitudes towards political violence. Importantly, Rustad found little evidence for a correlation between objective and subjective inequalities. Furthermore, consistent with the claim that people act on their perceptions of reality rather than reality itself, perceived inequalities were better predictors than actual inequalities of attitudes towards violence.

While Rustad’s (2016) study has provided important insights, it contains several limitations. The survey questionnaire focused on attitudes towards violence, and not on participation in violence. Although it seems plausible to assume that attitudes towards violence predict participation violence, our analyses below indicate that the correlation between the two is weak. Furthermore, findings based on data from the Niger Delta can be confounded by various region-specific factors, precluding generalization of the results beyond this particular area. (Indeed, our analysis shows considerable variation in the effects of inequality on violence across countries, see Figures 2–3.)
These concerns can now be largely addressed with the fifth wave of Afrobarometer Data (2015). These data contain indicators of both perceived inequalities and participation in political violence, and come from a large number of countries. We present this data in the subsequent section; now we turn to elaborating the theoretical mechanisms proposed to explain the inequality-conflict nexus.

3 Relative Deprivation Theory

Why is inequality associated with civil conflict? To date, Gurr (2010) provides the most elaborate theoretical model addressing this question (for alternative, early accounts see Davies 1962; and Runciman 1966). The model suggests that inequality between individuals or groups in particular goods or conditions can generate relative deprivation, defined as the “actors’ perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities”. Value expectations refer to “the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled” and value capabilities to “the goods and conditions they think they are capable of getting and keeping” (Gurr 2010, 24). In short, relative deprivation is a discrepancy between what one has and what one believes one ought to have.2

2 In other words, “A person is relatively deprived of X when (i) he does not have X, (ii) he sees some other person or persons, which may include himself at some previous expected time as having X (iii) he wants X and (iv) he sees it as feasible that he should have X” (Runciman, 1966, 10).
As the definition implies, relative deprivation only occurs over values to which people think they are rightfully entitled.\(^3\) The standards of such an entitlement are determined by some reference point, generally other individuals or groups (but may also include own status in the past or abstract ideals; see Gurr 2010, 24–25). The theory thus implies that inequalities alone can generate relative deprivation, as presence of inequalities implies presence of advantaged individuals or groups that constitute reference points (on this particular point, see, Yitzhaki 1979).

The actual goods or conditions over which deprivation occurs vary across countries and include welfare (e.g., physical goods), power (e.g., to vote), and interpersonal (e.g., ability to participate in associations) values (ibid. 25–26). For operational reasons, and due to their comparability across countries, subsequent empirical research has primarily focused on physical goods, such as income or land (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 2004).\(^4\) This research has thus implicitly assumed that income or land constitute goods (or proxy for conditions) that are universally and sufficiently valued to generate deprivation among those lacking them. In fact, some studies explicitly suggested using income Gini coefficient (or related indices) not just as indicators of income inequality

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\(^3\) As Rumerl notes: “…we all have many wants that remain unsatisfied… I want a better memory, unlimited research funds, a new car, and so on, but lack of these things hardly makes me unhappy” (1977).

\(^4\) Exceptions include Besancon (2005) that focus on inequality in education or Wimmer, Cederman, and Min (2009) who focus in inequality in access to political power.
but also as measures of aggregate level of relative deprivation (e.g., Yitzhaki 1979; Hey and Lambert 1980).\(^5\)

When relative deprivation occurs, individuals experience discontent, commonly referred to as “grievances”, which in turn constitute “potential for collective violence” (Gurr 2010, 29; for theoretical elaboration see ibid. 30–37). The key assumption of the model is that there exist a psychological mechanism that generates violence-motivating discontent in response of relative deprivation.\(^6\) The presence of such a mechanism has been assumed in most subsequent research on civil conflict, including recent studies on horizontal inequalities.

The path from motivation for political violence to the actual political violence in Gurr’s model involves numerous intervening and moderating variables, such as justification and likely efficacy of violence, as well as political opportunity structures (for a complete causal model, see Figure 15 in p. 320). Given our research focus, however, we omit these variables, since Gurr’s theory (and subsequent research) holds

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\(^5\) As Yitzhaki suggests: “the impact of deprivation resulting from not having X when others have it is an increasing function of the number of persons in the reference group who have X... By quantifying this statement, we shall show that one plausible concept of deprivation in a society can be represented by \(uG\), where \(G\) is gini coefficient and \(u\) is the income that each person would have in an egalitarian society (\(u\) is average income)” (1979, 321).

\(^6\) For Gurr, the link between relative deprivation and discontent motivating violence was provided by the frustration-aggression mechanism (see Dollart et al. 1939; Miller 1941; Berkowitz 1989; Rummel 1977). It is beyond the reach of the current study whether relative deprivation produces discontent via frustration-aggression or some analogous psychological mechanism. What matters here is the general assumption underlying conflict research that human psychology generates motivation for violence in response to relative deprivation.
that presence of relative deprivation, *ceteris paribus*, increases the probability of civil conflict.

As mentioned above, value capabilities are defined by comparison to some reference point. These reference points determine the patterns (or types) of deprivation. There are four such patterns according to Gurr. The first, basic one (i.e., relative deprivation) reflects an instantaneous discrepancy between one’s value expectations and value capabilities. Typically, this discrepancy arises out of a static comparison of oneself or one’s group to others (we return to the individual vs. group distinction below).

The other three patterns of deprivation concern changes in value expectations or capabilities over time (Gurr 2010, 46–56). “Decremental deprivation” arises when value expectations remain unchanged but value capabilities decline. Specifically, this discrepancy arises out of losses. The reference point here is thus own status or possessions in the past. “Aspirational deprivation” occurs when value capabilities remain unchanged but expectations increase. This happens due to a change in expectations of what one ought to have, while the value capabilities remain unchanged. “Progressive deprivation” is a special form of aspirational deprivation, occurring when steady and simultaneous improvement in value expectations and capabilities is followed by stabilization or decline of the latter. This type of deprivation is analogous to the J-curve of Davies (1966), and most often reflects a situation of economic growth followed by a sharp downturn.
3.1 Common Assumptions in Conflict Research

For more than four decades, Gurr’s theory has served as the basis of much empirical research on inequality and conflict. However, researchers have primarily focused on the aggregate implications of the relative deprivation theory, without questioning its key assumptions, essentially pertaining to individual-level psychological processes. While focusing on whether inequality leads to higher likelihood of civil conflict, conflict studies have not questioned whether inequality (or its consequent, relative deprivation) in fact motivates individuals to partake in political violence.

While recent studies on the inequality-conflict nexus have shifted focus to inequalities between groups, the assumptions of relative deprivation theory continue to be invoked. Unlike commonly claimed, Gurr’s early work accounted for grievances arising out of comparisons of one’s group to other groups (and not just individual comparisons). In fact, research prior to Gurr has already distinguished between “egoistical” and “fraternalist” deprivation (Runciman 1966).

However, early theories on relative deprivation have primarily focused on the motivational aspect of deprivation (i.e., whether individual or group-based inequalities motivate political violence). By contrast, recent research on horizontal inequalities has stressed the mobilization aspect of inequalities overlapping with identity groups. That is, horizontal inequalities may not only motivate political violence but also facilitate collective action among members of deprived groups (Buhaug et al. 2014; Cederman et al. 2011; Østby 2008; Stewart 2008b). Ethnic groups share a common identity and
horizontal inequalities can strengthen the salience of these identities (e.g., Østby 2008, 147; 2011, 31–34). Salient social identities, in turn, can facilitate the mobilization of solitary individuals for collective action.

While emphasizing mobilization, research on horizontal inequalities has also stressed the link between inequalities and motivations for violence. In other words, this research has aimed at specifying the conditions that create conflict (e.g., inequality aligned with particular identities; see Stewart 2008 18 –19), while still assuming that particular types of inequality underlie a motivation to mobilize for conflict. For example, Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011) write: “Before grievances can be acted upon, they need to be cognitively linked to social identities…” (481), suggesting that they do not challenge that conflict is motivated by grievances, but that they examine the specific conditions that must be present for this to occur. Indeed, they specify that

Violations of norms of justice and equality will typically arouse feelings of anger and resentment among members of the disadvantaged groups…we postulate that resentment based on intergroup comparisons involving HIs [horizontal inequalities] often provokes ethnic mobilization (481–2).

In addition, the insight that inequality-rhetoric can be used to mobilize people invokes the central assumption of the theory of relative deprivation:

The perception of injustice generates grievances that serve as a formidable tool of recruitment… “injustice frames” play a central role in mobilization
processes…rather than classifying inequality as a pure “grievance” factor we view its impact as a mobilization resource (482).

Although this seems to downplay the causal role of grievances, it still invokes the assumption that relative deprivation (or a perceived injustice related to inequality) increases motivations for collective action. If inequality-related grievances did not make people want to mobilize, how could injustice framing contribute to mobilization? Injustice rhetoric would simply be ineffective.

Other research on horizontal inequality takes a similar view (e.g., Østby 2008; 2013; Stewart 2008). While it examines the conditions under which particular grievances motivate people to participate in collective action, it includes the key assumption that inequality-related grievances drive motivation for conflict. For example, Stewart writes: “Large scale group mobilization…is unlikely to occur in the absence of serious grievances” (2008, 12).

### 3.2 Hypotheses about relative deprivation

The literature reviewed above thus relies on several assumptions or hypotheses that specifically pertain to individual-level psychological processes. The first, most prominent, hypothesis concerns individual relative deprivation:

\[ H1. \text{Relative deprivation based on a comparison of one’s own situation to the situation of other individuals motivates political violence.} \]

The second hypothesis concerns groups:
**H2.** Relative deprivation based on a comparison of the situation of one’s own group to the situation of another group (or other groups) motivates political violence.

As mentioned above, individuals might compare themselves to their past or expected future situation:

**H3.** Relative deprivation based on a comparison of one’s current situation to one’s past situation motivates political violence.

**H4.** Deprivation based on a comparison of one’s future situation to one’s current situation motivates political violence.⁷

4 Psychological Studies of Relative Deprivation and Collective Action

A substantial amount of social psychological research has focused on individual-level processes that underlie the link between deprivation and participation in collective action. This research has largely developed independently from political science research on the inequality-conflict nexus, and has not linked individual-level factors to large-scale violence, such as civil war. Most psychological studies have focused on

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⁷ The four types of relative deprivation included in the current study do not reflect the full set of possible comparisons. For example, Smith et al. (2012, 205) mention that individuals might compare themselves with individuals from other social groups, or compare the situation of their own group across different points in time. However, we think that the four types included in the current study include several interesting comparisons that have been the focus of substantial theory and research.
social justice and civic forms of collective action, such as protest (for reviews see Jost and Kay 2010; Tyler and Smith 1998). In addition, some studies have examined whether relative deprivation relates to precursors of group-based violence, such as increased outgroup prejudice (e.g., Guimond and Dambrun 2002).

Overall, psychological research has yielded two conclusions pertaining to the deprivation-political violence link. First, the “perception of relative deprivation in and of itself does not seem to be a sufficient cause of anger, protest behavior, or participation in collective action” (Jost and Kay 2010, 1135). In fact, psychological studies suggest that individual relative deprivation is more likely to generate inward-directed emotions, such as depression or anxiety (e.g., Hafer and Olson 2003; Walker and Mann 1987)—likely leading to political inactivity—rather than political violence. This constrasts much of political science research on the inequality-conflict nexus (although, not the recent studies on horizontal inequalities), following the (largely untested) assumption that deprived individuals are prone to political violence.

Second, collective behaviors seem to be predicted by group rather than individual deprivation (Jost and Kay 2010; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, and Bialosiewicz 2012). This is due to the fact that group deprivation elicits negative, outward-directed emotions, such as anger, which can motivate participation in collective action (Leach, Iyer, and Pedersen 2007; Walker and Smith 2002). This conclusion seems to be consistent with recent conflict research highlighting the role of horizontal inequalities. However, conflict research on horizontal inequalities has primarily focused on how group-based
inequalities aid mobilization, without empirically addressing the key assumption that such inequalities motivate violence. Thus, while research on horizontal inequalities has identified an empirical association between group-based inequalities and civil conflict, it has not yet identified the actual mechanism that accounts for this.

Conflict researchers have only recently acknowledged the importance of horizontal inequalities. However, there has been substantial social psychological research on the effects of individual and group deprivation on social protest (e.g., Walker and Mann 1987). In a meta-analysis of more than 200 studies of relative deprivation, Smith et al. (2012) examined the evidence for the “fit hypothesis”. The fit hypothesis suggests that relative deprivation primarily motivates behaviors that match the deprivation. When one feels deprived due to comparing one’s group with another group, then this should primarily motivate group-based behavior (i.e., behavior aimed at reducing the group deprivation, such as joining one’s fellows in a protest march). In contrast, when one feels deprived due to a comparison with another individual, then this should primarily motivate individual-based behavior (i.e., behavior aimed at reducing the individual deprivation, such as aggression towards the person who treated you unfairly). The meta-analysis supported the fit hypothesis. Studies in which the deprivation and behavioral outcomes were matched (both individual-level or both group-based) tended to show larger effect sizes than studies in which the deprivation and behavioral outcomes were not matched (one individual-level, one group-based). These findings suggest that the relation between relative deprivation and political violence is specific.
As political violence is group-based (in the sense of the perpetrators acting as representatives of a political group), only a particular kind of relative deprivation—group deprivation—should be a robust predictor.

4 Research Design

4.1 The Afrobarometer Data

To test the four hypotheses we analyzed data from the fifth wave of the Afrobarometer (2015). The Afrobarometer is a large-scale, multi-national project that surveys nationally representative samples of citizens of voting age on topics related to governance, civil society, public services, and living standards. The fifth wave included 34 African countries with a sample size of 1,200 or 2,400 per country. The surveys used clustered, stratified, multi-stage probability sampling, where random selection with a probability proportionate to the population size was applied at every stage.

4.2 Dependent Variable

We used two indicators to account for our dependent variable. The first was constructed using self-reports of participation in political violence ($PV_{participation}$): “Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Used force or violence for a political cause?” The answer options included $0 = “no, would never do this”, 1 = “no, but would do if had the chance”, 2 = “yes, did it”, 3 = “yes, would do it if had the chance”. The second indicator was constructed using self-reports of support for political violence ($PV_{support}$): “Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Supported political violence for a political cause?” The answer options included $0 = “no, would never do this”, 1 = “no, but would do if had the chance”, 2 = “yes, did it”, 3 = “yes, would do it if had the chance”.
2 = “yes, once or twice”, 3 = “yes, several times”, 4 = “yes, often”, and 9 = “don’t know”.

Our primary interest is in whether people took part in political violence—not whether higher levels of deprivation lead to higher incidence of participation in violence.⁸ Therefore, we recoded this variable into binary, aggregating the first two responses into 0 = “no” and the last three into 1 = “yes” (dropping “don’t know”). Binary-response variable is also better amendable to our statistical analysis, which uses fixed-effects (the plausibility of models fitting ordinal data with fixed-effects continues to be debated).⁹

Admittedly, \( PV_{\text{participation}} \) may suffer from certain measurement and reporting problems. While the question refers to violence for a political cause (and suggest that this is something “people sometimes take as citizens”), there is no guarantee that all interviewees understood what “political violence” entails. Moreover, we cannot identify the exact form of political violence the interviewees had in mind when answering this question (although, this item immediately succeeded a question of whether interviewees “attended a demonstration or a protest march”, implying participation in a violent collective action against the state). Therefore, this indicator is somewhat imprecise, only allowing us to make inferences about general tendencies to participate in politically motivated violence—not about particular forms of violence (e.g., civil war).

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⁸ This distinction is similar to that in state-level research where onset and intensity of civil conflict are considered as distinct phenomena, affected by different factors.
⁹ Alternatively, we could have opted for analysing the original ordinal scale with an OLS estimator with fixed-effects; however, the response variable contains relatively few categories, with unequal intervals in between (an analysis, not reported here, shows that ordered logit regression produces rather unequal cut-off points).
Furthermore, individuals may not report participation in political violence because of fears of reprisals from the state. Thus, self-reports, particularly in repressive states, may underestimate the extent to which people participate in anti-state violence. In addition, the question above asks interviewees to indicate whether they participated in political violence over the last year. Given that some of the relative deprivation measures (described below) reflect interviewees’ experience over the last year, this does not allow ruling out recursive effects (i.e., political violence may influence perceptions of inequality).

To account for these concerns, we implemented a number of additional analyses (see Extensions and Robustness Tests) and introduced an alternative indicator, $PV_{willingness}$, which constitutes a constrained version of $PV_{participation}$. As indicated above, interviewees who have not reported participation in political violence could also indicate whether they would if they had a chance. While this item does not indicate the actual conflict behavior, it reflects peoples’ willingness to take part in political violence. Arguably, individuals who report willingness to participate in violence if they had a chance will more likely take part in such violence once such chance arises, ceteris paribus. Given that this item reflects interviewees’ willingness to take part in violence at the time of the interview, this measure overcomes the problem of recursive effects. In addition, given that willingness to participate in violence does not constitute actual violence, this indicator may suffer less from reporting bias (i.e., individuals may fear less to report willingness than actual participation). Finally, this measure allows assessing peoples’
willingness to take part in violence independent of opportunities for violence. People who have not participated in political violence could have taken part in it if they had an opportunity to do so (and opportunities for violence may be limited for reasons beyond the scope of this paper).

4.3 Independent Variables

Corresponding to the hypotheses presented above we introduce four proxies of deprivation. The first reflects individual relative deprivation ($RD_{\text{individual}}$): “Let’s discuss economic conditions. In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other [name of nationals]?” The answers included “much worse”, “worse”, “same”, “better”, “much better”, and “don’t know”, coded 0–4 respectively (dropping “don’t know”).

Group relative deprivation ($RD_{\text{group}}$) was proxied with the following question: “How often is [respondent’s ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?” Reply options included “never”, “sometimes”, “often”, “always”, “don’t know” (coded 0–3, with “don’t know” dropped). The formulation of the questions indicating $RD_{\text{individual}}$ and $RD_{\text{group}}$ are not entirely equivalent, as the latter contains the element of “unfair treatment” and does not explicitly refer to economic status. However, this is the only item in the questionnaire—explicitly referring to group-based discrimination—that could be used to proxy group relative deprivation. Furthermore, unfair treatment of one’s ethnic group is likely to include group-based economic inequalities. To assess the overlap between “unfair treatment” and perceived group-level inequalities we analyzed
the fourth wave of Afrobarometer. This data, in addition to the question above (identically formulated), contains the following item: “Think about the condition of [respondent ethnic group]. Are their economic conditions worse, the same as, or better than other groups in this country?” The reply options were the same as for RD_{individual} described above. The correlation between responses to the two items is .42, which shows that RD_{group} also reflects variation in group relative deprivation in economic status.

Decremental deprivation was proxied with replies to the following question: “Looking back, how do you rate the following compared to twelve months ago: “economic conditions in [country name]”; “your living conditions”. The interviewees could choose from among the same reply options as above (similarly coded 0–4).

Assuming that one’s own status is more important than state’s status for political violence, we used the response for living conditions as the main measure of individual decremental deprivation (DD_{individual}). We report results for subjective national economic conditions (state decremental deprivation, DD_{state}) in robustness tests. (The two measures are strongly correlated, Spearman’s $\rho = .69$.)

The final form of relative deprivation, progressive, was proxied with the following: “Looking ahead, do you expect the following to be better or worse: “economic conditions in [country name] in twelve months time?”; “your living conditions in twelve months time” (same reply options, coded 0–4). As with decremental deprivation, we
used individual progressive deprivation \((PD_{\text{individual}})\) in the main analyses and state progressive deprivation \((DD_{\text{state}})\) in robustness tests (Spearman’s \(\rho = .82\)).

### 4.4 Control Variables

As we relied on observational data, we controlled for a number of potential individual-level confounders. All analyses included country-level fixed effects; therefore, we did not control for the standard set of state-level variables typically controlled for in cross- or sub-national analysis, such as GDP per capita, population size, or peace years (e.g., Hegre and Sambanis 2006).

To avoid collinearity issues and retain as many observations as possible in the main analysis we only controlled for the most likely confounders, as identified in previous survey research on political violence: the absolute level of (economic) status, employment status, education, age, and gender (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Oyefusi 2008; Rustad 2016). In robustness tests, we introduced a number of other potential confounders (described below).

Researchers have argued that participation in political violence relates to opportunity costs: individuals with no or low income have less to lose and more to gain from joining an armed conflict than individuals with high income (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Individuals with no or low income may also perceive their (or their group) economic status worse than that of others (or their own in the past). This suggests that the hypothesized relationship between deprivation and political violence can be confounded by the absolute level of economic status. We capture this with two
measures. The first reflects interviewees’ assessment of their own absolute (as contrasted to relative) economic status: “Let’s discuss economic conditions. In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?” The answer options included “very good”, “fairly good”, “neither good nor bad”, “fairly bad”, “very bad”, and “don’t know”, coded 0–4 respectively (dropping “don’t know”). The second focuses on employment status: “Do you have a job that pays a cash income? If yes, is it full-time or part-time? If no, are you presently looking for a job?” (0 = “no (not looking)”, 1 = “no (looking)”, 2 = “yes, part time”, 3 = “yes, full time”). We recoded this variable into binary, collapsing the first two categories into 0 = “unemployed” and the last two into 1 = “employed”.

The relationship between deprivation and political violence can also be confounded by education, as education has been shown to affect both socio-economic status and support for political violence. Education was measured with the following categories: “no formal schooling”, “informal schooling only”, “some primary/middle schooling”, “primary/middle school complete”, “some secondary school/high school”, “secondary school/high school completed”, “post-secondary qualifications, other than university”, “some university”, “university completed”, and “post-graduate” (coded 0–9).

Finally, we controlled for age and gender (0 = “female”; 1 = “male”). Table S1 in the online Supporting Information provides summary statistics for all variables analyzed. Tables S2–S5 present descriptive statistics for the key predictor variables, \( RD_{\text{individual}} \), \( DD_{\text{individual}} \), \( PD_{\text{individual}} \), and \( RD_{\text{group}} \).
5 Results

We used multivariate analysis (Table 1) to estimate the probability of participating in political violence ($PV_{participation}$, Models 1–5) and the willingness to participate in political violence ($PV_{willingness}$, Models 6–10) as a function of the four types of relative deprivation. The table reports logit regression coefficients (log-odds), estimated while controlling for the individual-level covariates described above and unobserved country-level factors. Models 1 and 2 indicate that $RD_{individual}$ and $DD_{individual}$ negatively affect the probability of individual participation in political violence; however, the estimates are below the conventional thresholds of statistical significance. By contrast, Models 3 and 4 indicate that $PD_{individual}$ and $RD_{group}$ have negative and highly significant ($P < 0.001$) effects on political violence.

Models 1–4 analyzed the four measures separately. Model 5 included all four variables. The results remain similar, with $RD_{individual}$ and $DD_{individual}$ having non-significant effects and $PD_{individual}$ and $RD_{group}$ having significant negative effects.
Table 1. Effects of relative deprivation on participation and willingness to participate in political violence

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<th></th>
<th>PVparticipation</th>
<th></th>
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<td></td>
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<td>m6</td>
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<td>-0.050</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.035)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.059)</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
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<td>-2.608****</td>
<td>-2.077****</td>
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<td>(0.163)</td>
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<td>0.043</td>
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Standard errors in parentheses
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001, **** p < 0.0001
Subsequently, we conducted analyses for each country separately (including the same covariates as in Model 5). Figure 2 reports the estimated odds ratios with 95% CIs. The figure indicates between-country variation in the effects of all four types of deprivation. However, the CIs of $RD_{individual}$ (Figure 2A) and $DD_{individual}$ (Figure 2B) are below 1 (indicating significant negative effects) in only a few countries (Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Malawi; and Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania, respectively). By contrast, the CIs of both $PD_{individual}$ (Figure 2C) and $RD_{group}$ (Figure 2D) are below 1 in 10 countries (Mozambique, Liberia, Niger, Kenya, Senegal, Namibia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Uganda; and Tanzania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Ghana, Namibia, Mali, Liberia, Benin, South Africa, and Uganda, respectively). Note that coefficients above 1, indicating positive effects, all have very wide error bars (and all overlap with 1). This is due to a very small number of interviewees reporting participation in political violence in the corresponding countries (reported in parentheses). The figures show that the effects estimated in the combined analysis reflect the effects observed in most countries. That is, for only a few countries did the CI from the stratified analysis not overlap with the CI from the combined analysis (Sierra Leone, Liberia for $RD_{individual}$; Kenya for $DD_{individual}$; Mozambique for $PD_{individual}$; Tanzania, Mozambique for $RD_{group}$).
Fig. 2
As discussed above, $PV_{\text{participation}}$ may suffer from a number of measurement problems; therefore, we conducted analogous analyses with $PV_{\text{willingness}}$ as the dependent variable, which reflects interviewees’ willingness to participate in political violence if they had a chance to. As shown in Model 6, the coefficient of $RD_{\text{individual}}$ was significant ($P < 0.05$) when estimated separately. However, it becomes non-significant when other measures of deprivation are included (Model 10), suggesting spurious effects. As with $PV_{\text{participation}}$, the effect of $DD_{\text{individual}}$ was nonsignificant, whereas those of $PD_{\text{individual}}$ and $RD_{\text{group}}$ were significant ($Ps < 0.01$ and $< 0.001$), irrespective of whether analyzed separately or together.

Figure 3 shows substantive effects of the four types of deprivation, expressed in average predicted probabilities of participation in (upper panels) and willingness to participate in political violence (lower panels). Keeping other variables constant, someone who perceives their future economic status as “much worse”, compared to one perceiving it as “much better”, is more than twice as likely to report participation in political violence (4.83 vs. 2.14%), and almost twice as likely to report willingness to do so (9.48 vs. 5.86%). Similarly, someone who perceives their ethnic group as “always” treated unfairly, compared to one who perceives it as “never” treated unfairly, is more than twice likely to report participation in political violence (5.28 vs. 2.62%), and considerably more likely to express willingness to do so (9.49 vs. 6.48%). We discuss the implications of these results in the subsequent section; now we turn to extensions and robustness checks.
Fig. 3
5.1 Extensions and robustness tests

First, we examined the robustness of the main results to alternative operationalization of the key variables. Table S6 reports results analogous to those in Table 1 when $DD_{individual}$ and $PD_{individual}$ are substituted with state-referenced measures (i.e., $DD_{state}$ and $PD_{state}$). The results remain virtually the same, with $DD_{state}$ having non-significant and $PD_{state}$ significant negative coefficients (the effect sizes also remain similar).

In addition to $PV_{participation}$ and $PV_{willingness}$, we also analyzed $PV_{justification}$, indicating whether interviewees in principle support or justify political violence: “Which of the following statements is closest to your view? […] 1: The use of violence is never justified in [country name] politics today. 2: In [country name], it is sometimes necessary to use violence in support of a just cause”. The answer options included “agree very strongly with statement 1”, “agree with statement 1”, “agree with statement 2”, “agree very strongly with statement 2”. We recoded responses into a binary variable, aggregating the first two choices into 0 = “do not justify”, and the last two into 1 = “justify”. Consistent with previous estimates, the analysis indicates (Table S7) that $RD_{individual}$ and $DD_{individual}$ do not significantly predict justification of political violence, whereas $RD_{group}$ does. However, while the coefficient of $PD_{individual}$ remains negative, it becomes insignificant ($P = 0.208$ in the full specification, see Model 21 in Table S7).

We return to this in the discussion section.

Subsequently, we tested whether deprivation effects are specific to violence or reflect a general predisposition to being mobilized for a collective political action.
Specifically, we performed analogous analyses with $PD_{participation}$ and $PD_{willingness}$ as dependent variables, which are identical to $PV_{participation}$ and $PV_{willingness}$ but focus on whether interviewees “attended a demonstration or a protest march”. As shown in Table S8, results remain similar, with estimates for $RD_{individual}$ and $RD_{individual}$ consistently insignificant, $PD_{individual}$ significant or close to significance at 5% level in some specifications, and $RD_{group}$ significant in all models.

As discussed above, interviewees may not report (or may not report honestly) participation or willingness to participate in political violence due to fears of reprisals from the state. Therefore, we included three additional indicators reflecting interviewees’ perception of state repression: “During electoral campaigns in [country name], how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?”; “How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in [country name]?”; and “In your opinion, how often, in [country name] people have to be careful of what they say about politics?”). As shown in Table S9, controlling for perceived state repression does not affect our main results.

Given the sensitive nature of questions related to violence, we also controlled for whether interviewees’ answers were deemed (by interviewers) influenced by third parties and whether interviewees appeared suspicious or dishonest: “Did the respondent check with others for information to answer any question?” (0 = “no”; 1 = “yes”); “Do you think anyone influenced the respondent’s answers during the interview?” (0 = “no”);
1 = “yes”); “What was the respondent’s attitude towards you during the interview? E. Was he or she at ease, in between, suspicious?” (1 = “at ease”; 2 = “in between”; 3 = “suspicious”); “What was the respondent’s attitude towards you during the interview? F. Was he or she honest, in between, misleading?” (1 = “honest”, 2 = “in between”, 3 = “misleading”). Tables S10 indicates that estimates remain virtually the same. Finally, we also controlled for whether interviewees correctly understood the interviewers’ questions, with the following item: “What proportion of the questions do you feel the respondent had difficulty answering?” (0 = “none”; 1 = “few”; 2 = “some”; 3 = “most”; 4 = “all”) (coded 0–4, respectively). Results remain the same (Table S11).

6 Discussion

We tested how four different kinds of relative deprivation predicted participation in political violence across citizens of 34 African countries. The results showed that only two kinds of deprivation, progressive deprivation and group relative deprivation, were associated with participation in political violence. These results have a number of implications.

First, individual discontent due to perceived inequalities vis-a-vis others seems not to motivate participation in political violence. This implies that the early theoretical work on the inequality-conflict nexus, often assumed to be correct but rarely tested, may have overestimated the role of individual inequalities for violence. There might be several reasons why individual inequalities do not motivate political violence. For
example, comparing oneself with others might activate interpersonal goals (such as trying to improve one’s own situation relative to one’s neighbors) rather than attempts at making one’s political coalition better off. More generally, the lack of an association between individual deprivation and participation in political violence is consistent with the more recent work on the inequality-conflict nexus that emphasizes the mobilization potential of inequalities overlapping with concrete identity groups. Thus current findings support the recent shift from vertical to horizontal inequalities as factors explaining civil conflict.

Second, the results suggest that individual discontent due to a perception of imminent decrease in individual economic status strongly motivates participation in political violence. This finding is consistent with prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). When the default outcome is seen as a loss, individuals should prefer risk seeking. Progressive deprivation—having as the reference point one’s current situation and expecting that one’s situation in the future will be worse—is perceiving the default outcome as a loss. In contrast, decremental deprivation involves comparing one’s current situation to one’s situation in the past. This comparison leaves it ambiguous what would be the default future outcome. An individual might assume that the default future outcome will resemble the current situation. If so, the decision about whether to join a political protest might be evaluated in terms of gains, which would facilitate risk aversion. Similarly, individual deprivation (comparing oneself as worse off than others) also allows for expecting that the default future outcome will resemble
the current situation and that a decision to engage in political violence is evaluated in terms of gains. Thus, consistent with the prospect theory, the results show that the expectation of losing resources one already possesses is a better predictor of the kind of discontent that motivates political violence. This highlights the role of economic downturns in the outbreak of civil conflict. Previous research on economic growth and civil conflict has generated inconsistent results. However, as highlighted above, actual economic conditions may not correspond to perceptions of economic conditions; thus, state-level indicators of economic performance may not properly account for violence.

Finally, in addition to the specific implications discussed above, this study has general suggestions for future conflict research. The current study demonstrates the value of integrating psychological research into conflict studies. Testing the assumptions of the psychological and behavioral processes underlying conflict behavior with individual-level data is likely to yield more specific theories about political conflict. Furthermore, integrating psychology into conflict research suggests multiple avenues for research. For example, recent psychological research argues that humans are averse to unfairness, rather than inequality (Starmans, Seshkin, and Bloom 2017). This suggests that individual deprivation may matter, but that other conditions must be met to promote violent escalation (e.g., Crosby, 1976; Crosby et al., 1986). As another example, the current findings suggest that future research might benefit from focusing on the dynamics in socio-economic conditions. Focusing on static indicators of
inequality or the absolute level of well-being might insufficiently capture the perceptions of losses and gains that are relevant to political violence.

References


