

## **Violence and Political Participation: Problematizing the Relationship between Violence and Political Involvement**

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How does violence affect political involvement? Threats and violence is generally seen as a hindrance to political participation. However, in South Africa, where there has been intense levels of political violence, political engagement has been relatively high ever since the first election in 1994. In KwaZulu-Natal, conflicts have been particularly severe and spates of political violence still occur, especially around elections. Despite these outbursts of political violence, people generally vote. However, the impact of violence on political engagement varies. While some individuals distance themselves from politics as a result of the violence, others are mobilized and motivated to engage in politics due to violence. This study is based on in-depth interviews in several locations in KwaZulu-Natal affected by political violence prior to and after the first elections in 1994. Field research took place during 2009 and 2010, and includes approximately 60 interviews with survivors of violence. Our study shows that political violence and threats have different and even contradictory consequences. It forces some people to vote and participate more actively in politics. Other individuals refrain from political participation due to violence. Several themes are explored in the article. First, we suggest that political violence and intimidation can explain part of the relatively high levels of political participation. Even though the vote is secret, the actual act of voting is publicly known. It is easy to identify who has voted by the ink on the finger and a sticker in the passport. In some cases, people vote for a certain party due to threats and violence. Political parties have forced people to attend meetings and to work actively for the party. Once engaged by a political party, it can be difficult to withdraw, because of the fears of being accused of spying for another party. Second, while most people vote, some individuals try to distance themselves from active political involvement, as it is seen as too dangerous. Political activists have withdrawn from more public activities and some have even refrained from voting. Others have voted for another party due to the violence. For instance, in some previously IFP-dominated areas, the party has lost support due to violence. When people felt free, they declined to vote, while others voted for ANC to a higher extent.