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Democracy and peace

Can democracy solve the problem of political violence?

Daxecker, U.E.

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Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, mevrouw de Decaan, dear members of the academic community, friends and family,

Last weekend, we had elections to the European Parliament. I hope that many of you went to go vote. Perhaps it was a bit of nuisance - in the Netherlands, you had to go after a busy day at work. Or if you live elsewhere in Europe, you had to plan your weekend around it. But you went to vote anyway because it gives you a say – however small – in what the future of European politics looks like. This is what voting is all about. It gives us a way to express our agreement or disagreement with how we are governed, and allows us to do so peacefully. This is a prominent claim in the study of politics - what makes democracy special, and sets it apart from all other types of regimes, is that gives us a peaceful way to manage the conflict inherent in all societies.

There is, however, a problem with this view. Today, almost all countries in the world hold elections, but disagreement is often not settled as peacefully as expected. Many forms of violence persist in democracies, whether it is violence against minorities and immigrants, criminal violence, or violence against the electoral process itself. This violence happens not just in countries in the Global South, such as India or Nigeria, but also in wealthy democracies in the Global North. Even in the European Parliament elections, we saw several attacks against politicians, including against a sitting MP in Germany. If democracy is supposed to be a peaceful way to settle disagreements, why do people attack its representatives? Beyond the European Parliament elections, we had protests that turned violent at this university last month. Was it appropriate for the university to call in police, knowing that this could lead to violence? Were the tactics used by protestors, such as barricades and masks, permissible or did they cross a line? What kind of conflict and disagreement is acceptable in a democracy? The relationship between democracy and peace is central to my work, and I am excited to continue it as Professor of Democracy and Conflict at this university. In my work, I explore how democracy protects against severe political violence, why it fails to play this role against other forms, and how we can limit violent tendencies in democracies.

I will try to answer these questions, but let me first tell you why I became interested in them. Being Austrian, I was lucky to be born when it was a democracy. But the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust were formative events for me. Both of my grandfathers fought on the Eastern front in World War II. They experienced horrible things and probably did some bad ones, too. As is typical for their generation, though, they did not like to talk about the war very much. The person who best described this period was my fellow Austrian Arnold Schwarzenegger. After the war, he said that “Austria was a country of broken men.” My parents, born in wartime, have childhood memories of growing up under Allied occupation, with my father in the American zone, and my mother in the Soviet zone – you can guess which one was better.

Another reason for why the war was influential for me is that Austria’s role in it was intensely debated when I was growing up. Until the 1980s and 1990s, the most prominent account of Austria’s role was the victim’s thesis, claiming that Austria had been the first victim of Nazi Germany. Not very credible since millions had voted to join the Nazis, and masses came to cheer on Hitler in Vienna. A critical engagement with that history did not happen until

more than 40 years after the war ended, when I was a teenager. This shows that questions around violence and morality, especially guilt, are very difficult ones.

In my lecture, I want to make three main points. First, I will talk about why and how democracy protects against severe forms of political violence, and that we need to cherish it for that. Then, I will complicate the story, and explain why some forms of violence persist in countries with democratic institutions. Parties can continue to use violence by hiding it from public view, or by misinterpreting it. I will end my lecture by talking about why there is a rise in violent tendencies today, and how we can respond to them. Throughout my talk, I will support my claims by taking you to the places I do research in - India and Nigeria, two of the largest democracies in the world. I will also relate my work to events much closer to home, including the student protests.

Democracy protects against severe violence

Let me first explain what I mean by democracy and political violence. By democracy, I mean countries that hold regular and competitive elections and that protect important freedoms such as freedom of the press or association. Put simply, democracy gives citizens some say in how they are governed. Seen in historical perspective, democracy is the exception and experiments with it were rare until the end of World War II. Today, most countries have some democratic elements, and democracy has become one of the most important topics in the study of politics.

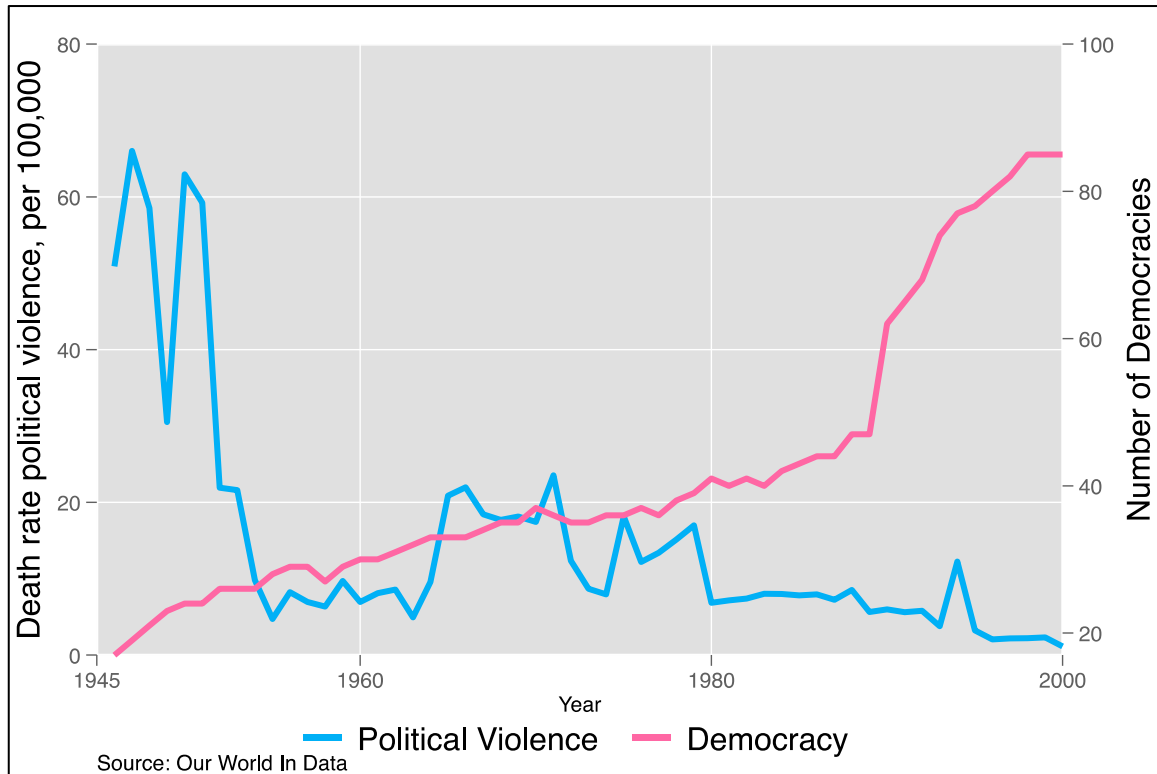
By political violence, I mean the threat or use of force by actors who have political goals. The question of violence, including why it is used, and who should get to use it, has occupied philosophers from Hobbes to Weber, and it is foundational for our discipline. Political violence can be attractive because it can be used to coerce someone to comply with a demand. Most often, political violence is used by the powerful against the weak; in the current world, this means that the state or close allies are the primary perpetrators. Political violence can take many forms and vary in scale and intensity. By severe violence, I mean large-scale violence that kills and injures many, such as major wars, government repression, or genocide and ethnic cleansing. Less severe forms remain common, such as rioting, electoral violence, or ethnic violence.

The terms democracy and political violence carry important normative meaning. I suspect that many of you think of democracy as good and desirable, and violence as bad and reprehensible. I agree. Democracy, despite its flaws, is much preferable to alternatives. Of all forms of government, democracy gets us closest to being free from domination. Political violence, on the other hand, causes tremendous harm and suffering to human and economic life, in the short and long run. It can alienate people and lead them to withdraw from public life, or radicalize them, polarizing society in the process. But we need to recognize that our views of democracy as good and violence as bad are subject to social norms, meaning that they differ across countries and groups, and are not shared by everyone (Fiske and Rai 2014). Let's take violence. Even though most people strongly dislike violence in the abstract, this is not the case for all actors involved. Perpetrators often believe that violence is not only necessary but even justified to deal to a situation. As social scientists, we need to understand these views and why people hold them, rather than assume everyone shares prevailing social norms.

Coming to democracy's protective function. There is strong and robust evidence confirming that democracy is successful in limiting severe forms of violence such as major

war, genocide, or repression. As you can see in figure 1, there has been a decline in the severity of political violence – measured as global death rates in violent political conflict - since the end of WWII. At the same time, the number of democracies has increased. Political violence has become less deadly while democracy has expanded. This implies that non-democracies are more prone to violence and vice versa.

Figure 1: Global Trends in Political Violence and Democracy



We can think of plenty of examples illustrating this relationship. I mentioned one at the start of my lecture – Nazi violence against perceived enemies at home and abroad could happen only after democracy was subverted. There are unfortunately many current ones, such as Chinese repression against its own citizens. China has a repressive infrastructure capable of monitoring and punishing dissent unlike any other country. We could also think of Putin’s Russia, where authoritarianism went along with increased repression at home and abroad. Another - and I recognize more difficult and controversial example - is Israel’s use of genocidal violence in Gaza. This violence comes on top of decades of occupation of Palestinian territories, denying equal rights to Palestinians in Israel, and identifying as a Jewish state. Israel is a democracy only for some, heavily repressing others.

Why does democracy limit severe violence? The reason for this is that it comes with accountability groups that constrain governments from using force. Accountability groups include the people (so all of you), who would presumably not vote for leaders who engage in severe violence against some citizens. It also includes the institutions of democracy, such as the courts or the legislature, which introduce checks and balances. Because of constraints from the public and institutions, democratic governments refrain from harmful policies such as severe violence abroad or at home. These insights are not new, and in fact date back to

Immanuel Kant's (1795) *Perpetual Peace* and many others who have written about this relationship.

I can imagine some of my colleagues thinking that this borders on tautology – once a regime uses severe violence, it stops being democratic, and vice versa. It is true that our definitions of democracy aren't compatible with severe violence, but I believe arguments about democracy's protective value stand. When democracy is institutionalized, it endogenizes – a fancy word for internalizes - many other desirable outcomes, including better policy decisions when it comes to force.

Given that violence is a way to stay in power, you may wonder why governments would ever commit to elections as peaceful transfers. The most elegant statement of this logic comes from political scientist Adam Przeworski in his impressively thin book *Why Bother With Elections*. I say impressively thin, because it is harder to write a short book than a long one. The same holds for emails, letters, maybe even lectures. According to the book, the shadow of the future makes it easier to accept constraints on power in the present. Leaders agree to hold elections because even if they lose, they can become winners again in the future (Przeworski 2018).

So far, I have told you that democracy allows the public and institutions to constrain governments from the worst excesses of violence, including major war, genocide, and repression. This is a big and important accomplishment, and we should cherish democracy for it every day. Now, I will explain why some forms of violence persist even in democracies

How violence persists

It is good news that severe violence does not happen in democracies. But other forms persist. There is, for example, the persistent criminal violence affecting Latin American countries that by now have decades of experience with democracy. Then there is violence against minorities and immigrants, which remains common in democracies around the world, not only in the Global South, but also in the Global North. Moreover, we also see violence against the institutions of democracy itself, such as attacks against politicians and the electoral process.

This violence has been a blind spot in academic work. Scholars of violence saw these instances as low intensity and perhaps not that serious. This can be quite wrong; for example, as the slide shows, a recent UN report estimates that criminal violence far exceeds what we witness in political violence. Scholars of democracy, on the other hand, were perhaps too confident of its ability to manage conflict peacefully. Violence in democracies was therefore not studied much at all, or only when it threatened the state, such as terrorism. The possibility that actors operating within the system, such as parties or their allies, could use violence was largely ignored. But this is becoming more difficult to maintain when we witness highly visible and symbolic displays of political violence. Think, for example, of the January 6 insurrection in the U.S., the yellow vests in France, or the recent spate of attacks against German politicians.

But why and how does political violence happen in countries where institutions should be able to prevent it? I will highlight two main types, drawing on insights from my European Research Council project "Elections, Parties, and Violence." There is a lot of work in progress, such as my book manuscript "The Logic of Party Violence," co-authored with my colleague Neeraj Prasad (Daxecker and Prasad 2024).

(1) Hiding violence

One way for parties to avoid the constraints of democracy is to hide violence (Daxecker 2012, Daxecker 2014). In the book project, we show how this unfolds in Indian elections. India has held competitive elections for more than 70 years. The Election Commission of India runs state and national elections and is seen as capable of deterring and documenting fraud and violence. But what we have found in interviews and local news in some places tells a different story. While there is little overt violence, parties, especially the governing party, can still use violence and threats. They can do this through local party workers who visit opposition voters' houses in the night before elections, telling them not to vote. The quote from a local newspaper Indian state West Bengal illustrates these dynamics:

“Rudraprasad Kundu, aka Mona, known to be a powerful leader of the Trinamool, went from door to door at night on the eve of the poll day, threatening them to abstain from going to the poll booths. Most of the families didn't go to cast their votes, out of fear. Only three families went to vote. Next evening, Rudraprasad and his army attacked the three families with axe, sticks and rods. The families were beaten black and blue.”

Natunchithi, West Bengal, May 7, 2019

As the quote shows, the governing party Trinamool Congress sends out local leaders like Mona to threaten the opposition on the eve of elections. These threats are effective, deterring most voters. And what happens to voters who defy these orders? As article shows, they are beaten as a punishment

Sometimes, democratic reforms can themselves make it easier to hide violence. When transitioning to democracy, countries often decentralize power, such as introducing local elections. But as the work of two PhDs in my project shows, these elections receive less attention, making it easier to hide violence from accountability groups. In her dissertation on party violence in West Bengal, India, Noyonika Das finds that the governing party uses extensive violence in local elections. In these elections, opposition candidates do not even manage to run for office, being threatened, injured, or even killed when trying to file nominations. Similarly, Maureen Fubara, also PhD in the project, shows that local governments in Nigerian elections recruit private armies whose purpose it is to beat up opposition supporters. This violence started once power was given to local governments. But rather than bringing government closer to the people, as decentralization is supposed to do, these reforms have decentralized despotism instead, to borrow Mamdani's (1996) words.

Privatizing violence is another way to hide it. I just mentioned this happening in Nigeria, but criminal violence in Latin American countries is another example. Politicians often have close links with criminal actors but distract from these by labelling violence as criminal. Once violence is seen as apolitical, politicians can treat it as secondary, or as a security problem that justifies force rather than engaging with someone's demands. In a special issue I am editing with Andrea Ruggeri and Neeraj Prasad for *Journal of Peace Research* (Daxecker et al. 2025), several articles explore criminal violence in Latin America and how it is depoliticized by those who profit from it.

Political parties in democracies go to great lengths to hide violence. What is important, though, is that the actors and goals of this violence are just like the more serious forms I talked

about earlier. Those behind the violence are often governments - those who have power. And the aim of violence is coercion. That is, force is used to get the victims to comply, such as keeping citizens from voting, or candidates from running.

For democracy, hidden violence is a sign of democracy that's been disrupted. There is nothing wrong with democracy itself, but rather with the politicians who choose to ignore it. This does not mean it will be easy to address [my colleagues might remind me after]. But my point here is that this violence is not a dysfunction of democracy. This is different from the second form of violence that persists, which is a product of democratic competition. Let me explain.

(2) Reinterpreting violence

A second -- and I would say even more dangerous -- way for violence to persist is to change its interpretation. What I mean by that is that parties (or other strategic actors) sponsor violence, but say that it was justified or even necessary to defend their own supporters against some other group. There are two features of violence that make this possible. First, violence attracts intense attention from those viewing or hearing about it (Brass, 1997, 2005; Fiske and Rai, 2015). It affects not only those directly involved, such as perpetrators and their victims, but also a much larger audience (Kalyvas, 2006; Schattschneider, 1960). This attention can be used to "socialize" -- or expand -- a conflict, as Schattschneider (1960) wrote in the *Semi-Sovereign People*. Second, violence often comes with a lot of uncertainty. When there is violence, we want to know what really happened, we want to know who started it, etc. But in the immediate aftermath, there is often confusion and disagreement about the facts on the ground. Contested narratives emerge.

That is precisely what happened last month with the student protests over the war in Gaza. Protests became violent, generating intense attention and bringing the issue on the national agenda. But almost immediately, competing narratives were shared, with the university, mayor, police, students protesting, colleagues, sharing their own versions of what happened. The mayor and police justified why they used force to remove protestors, while those protesting legitimized provocative strategies, including violence. If I proceeded with this analysis, my next question would be about power dynamics -- who has the power to control the narrative? I won't complete this analysis here, but as a university community, we urgently need to talk about what went wrong, and take seriously the demands of those protesting.

Thinking about power relations in the narrative battles brings me back to my research. I have said that violence attracts attention and can lend itself to being misinterpreted. This is where political parties as powerful actors come in. In the book, we argue that parties can take advantage of the confusion around violence to displace or even invert blame. In other words, uncertainty around violence can be used for strategic purposes. Politicians sponsoring violence can construct narratives around it that portray their own supporters as victims and claim that violence was justified or even necessary to protect them against the outgroup. This violence and the narratives around it do not come out of thin air. Rather, parties choose from existing grievances and use violence to make them more salient. Grievances can be centered around ethnic, class, or religious identities; what is important is that politicians choose identities that are not already politicized. When sponsoring violence around these secondary identities, parties

aim not only to displace blame for it, but also to make the identities more salient to gain new supporters in the process. The violence has important political goals.

Let me return to India to illustrate how parties use violence to mobilize support. In India, Muslims are overwhelmingly the victims of religious violence, but Hindu nationalist parties such as the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the party of prime minister Modi – nevertheless portray Hindus as victims. How is this possible? I’ll show this for the case of Hindu processions. On the surface, these processions celebrate a religious holiday, but politicians often sponsor them with the aim of provoking violence. Processions can provoke because participants carry guns or swords, chant slogans that are seen as offensive by the minority, or stop in front of a mosque to disrupt religious services. It is not unusual for violence to break out and escalate, leading to houses and businesses being vandalized, people being injured, or even deaths. As soon as this violence happens, contested narratives emerge, and the BJP use its networks to spread its own narrative to supporters. These narratives claim that violence was necessary to protect Hindus from injustices or threats coming from Muslims. There are many examples besides processions, such as often false incidents in which Muslims allegedly forced Hindu girls to marry them, are accused of eating or trading beef, or supposedly damaged Hindu items of worship. In the book and a forthcoming article at *Journal of Politics* (Daxecker et al. 2024), we show that parties benefit politically from violence, using it to make religion a more salient identity. The figure illustrates this.

Figure 2: Exposure to vandalism and outgroup attitudes



On the left, you can see a WhatsApp message we shared with respondents in a survey. The message claims that a Hindu idol was vandalized. On the right, you can see the effect of this message on people’s outgroup attitudes. When exposed to alleged vandalism of a Hindu idol,

both Hindus and Muslims become less friendly towards the out-group. We also confirm this finding with qualitative material from interviews.

“The situation is so polarized that now Hindu means BJP and Muslim means TMC. Someone wearing a skull cap is TMC!”

Interview with violence witness, Bhatpara, West Bengal, August 10, 2019

In locations affected by violence, religion becomes synonymous with partisanship. Taken together, our findings show that violence can sharpen group boundaries that have not yet been politicized. Violence has electoral consequences.

These dynamics are not unique to India, also unfolding in Europe and the U.S. To be very clear, there are important differences. Violence is less common, less serious, and more often takes the form of violent rhetoric. It is also not usually directly sponsored by politicians. But the underlying logic is similar. Right wing groups close to the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* in Germany, for example, have been involved in violence against immigrants. Such violence has contributed to migration becoming an important cleavage, and research confirms it has benefitted the party (Dancygier 2023; Krause and Matsunaga 2023). In the U.S., extreme rhetoric and violence against minorities, immigrants, and the electoral process seems to produce benefits for Republicans. For example, violence against the electoral process, such as on January 6, has helped unify and mobilize the base of the Republican Party. As in India, we observe narrative activity around violence that deflects and inverts blame. Former President Trump continues to glorify the January 6 violence and speaks of the perpetrators as martyrs. At his campaign rallies, he plays songs of them singing the national anthem, overlaid with him reciting the pledge of allegiance.

This violence has troubling implications for theories of democracy. Violence against Muslims in India happens not because democracy is lacking, but rather because electoral competition itself creates incentives for violence. Unlike the violence I talked about earlier – both severe and more hidden forms – the goal is not to coerce those targeted with violence, but rather to appeal their own supporters. Violence is a strategy of *persuasion* rather than *coercion*.

This violence also requires a different response. More democracy is not the solution. But understanding the power of narratives and identity is still helpful – one possible response for parties is to pitch narratives around more moderate identities to voters. This will mean identifying new issues and ideas, rather than trying to beat radical parties at their own game.

At the beginning of my lecture, I told you that democracy can protect from severe violence. Then, I showed how political parties continue to use other, less severe forms, either by hiding violence, or by changing its interpretation. In the last part of my lecture, I will talk about why we see a rise of extreme and violent tendencies in established democracies today, and what to do about it.

The rise of violent tendencies and how to respond

There is a lot of excellent work on the rise of radical and extreme parties and threats to democracy today, including by many people in this room. The best explanations argue that major structural changes interact with political responses to produce the emergence of violent tendencies. Globalization, deindustrialization, the end of the Cold War, and new

communication and transportation technologies are important structural developments contributing to the decline of the working class and rising inequality between globalization winners and losers in the Global North. These structural shifts have political consequences because of the response – or lack of a response – by political parties. In the 1990s and 2000s, mainstream parties often adopted neoliberal agendas and did not respond much at all to the globalization losers. But perceptive politicians on the margins recognized this reservoir of discontent. In Europe, politicians created or coopted niche parties. In the U.S., they formed radical movements in existing parties, such as the Tea Party. Parties also took advantage of new technological tools, talking directly with prospective voters on social media.

This story is largely correct, but also misses something important. It does not give enough attention to processes of identity formation and mobilization necessary for the emergence of grievance politicians and their voters. The analytical and methodological tools of scholars studying the Global South and insights from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and media studies have a lot to offer here. This scholarship has long highlighted the importance of collective identities and the work that goes into creating and maintaining them. As humans, we are social animals and have an intrinsic need of belonging. But group identities do not form on their own, and they do not form neutrally. Rather, they are articulated by entrepreneurs – a fancy word for people who could be politicians, or Tiktok influencers. Identities do not form automatically in response to structural shifts, but are activated and manipulated by politicians. As my work shows, parties understand the importance of this boundary work, and know that violence and extreme rhetoric can be helpful in the process. One takeaway is that we should dedicate more attention to the study of group identity and the role of parties for identity and group mobilization. We also need to understand better how politicians do this work today, which is different from how parties used to structure competition. The methodological workhorses of political science, such as survey data, large N analyses, and causal inference designs, play an important role in this but are not enough. We need more soaking and poking, talking to people, and better tools to study digital forms of communication.

Where does all of this leave us? Threats to democracy are not hard to find. In the Netherlands, the largest number of votes went to the *Partij van de Vrijheid* (PVV), a party that wants to ban Islam, stop migration, and has called the parliament and media fake. Some of these ideas are now supposedly in a fridge, but how long until Wilders lights the fuse?]. In the European Parliament elections, radical right-wing parties did very well. And in the U.S., the Republican Party has been coopted by an extreme faction that endorses violence, which will be a problem even if Trump loses. How can we deal with extreme and violent tendencies that seems to be a product of democracy? Does democracy have anything to offer in response? It can be tempting to think that we can institutionalize our way out of this, such as implementing special protections for marginalized groups, or placing limits on extreme parties, which is being discussed for the AfD in Germany. But unless majorities support these solutions, they are quite undemocratic. Instead, I think the main takeaway is that democracy is never quite finished. Democracy is a changing thing. It requires that we define and redefine what kind of conflict acceptable, what issues need our attention, and who is part of the polity. Just think about democracy 100 years ago – it was only for men! We need to keep in mind that in a democracy, resolving these conflicts requires constructing majorities, and alternative ones are possible. Those unhappy with the status quo can and should lobby to construct different majorities. I

understand this is difficult, and that it is scary to see democracy being stress tested like this. But pro-democracy coalitions have succeeded in unlikely circumstances before, such as the civil rights movement in the U.S., the anti-apartheid coalition in South Africa, or the opposition in last year's elections in Poland. In short, democracy may not save us, but it is our best bet.

Thanks

I have told you that we cannot take democracy for granted. Thankfully, other things are more certain. I know for sure that I stand here only because I had the help of many. I have spent my life and career in four different places – Innsbruck, New Orleans, Fort Collins, and now Amsterdam – which sadly means that many people cannot be here. Some of them may be watching online – thank you and hi! Let me also apologize in advance for forgetting to thank some of you.

I would like to thank the Executive Board of the university and our Dean Agneta Fischer for my appointment. There are many moments when I pinch myself for being allowed to work in a place that is so creative, diverse, and intellectually exciting. I am deeply grateful to my program Political Economy and Transnational Governance (PETGOV) and the Department of Political Science at UvA. PETGOV has been a wonderful home and I want to thank Julia Bader, Eelke Heemskerk, and Abbey Steele for their leadership of the group. There are many others in the group who I've learned and received support from. Brian Burgoon, Luc Fransen, Franca van Hooren, Geoffrey Underhill, Ruth Carlitz, and Annette Freyberg. In the Department of Political Science, I want to thank Liza Mügge as current chair, and Leila Abouyaala as department manager. There are many other colleagues who I am grateful to for many things, whether it is commenting on my work, mentoring, or just listening. Imke Harbers, Marlies Glasius, Jessica Soedirgo, Evelyn Ersanilli, Wouter van der Brug, and Gijs Schumacher. Thanks also to our teaching directors and coordinators, especially Judith Huigens, Joost Berkhout, and Roel van Engelen – you are fantastic.

In the last four years, I was lucky to direct a project on theme directly related to my lecture – the European Research Council funded project Elections, Violence, and Parties. I work with a great core team, Neeraj Prasad, Maureen Fubara, and Noyonyika Das. Neeraj came here less than three years ago, bursting with ideas, and became become a close collaborator in no time. Maureen and Noyonika, it is great to see your development as scholars. I've enjoyed working with many talented PhD students and learned a lot from them. Jessica Di Salvatore, Kris Ruijgrok, who I am happy is now a colleague, Nilmawati, Yasemin Sivri, Victor Alembik, Sebastian Pantoja-Barrios, and Bryan Peters.

Coming from a very disciplinary background, I did not immediately know what to do with a very interdisciplinary research institute, but now deeply appreciate it. At the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research AISSR, I would like to thank Justus Uitermark, Oke Onemu, Agnes Kiss, Simon Cisjouw, Janus Oomen, and Sibylle Krumpl. It's a pleasure to work with you. Elsewhere in AISSR and at UvA. Erella Grassiani is a great partner in crime for co-directing the Amsterdam Center of Conflict Studies. Whether it is to talk about research or else, I always enjoy spending time with Ward Berenschot, Rivke Jaffe, Theresa Kuhn, Line Kuppens, Stefania Milan.

I want to thank all of my students. Teaching is where we can make the biggest impact, and I am grateful to spend so much time with smart young people. A special thanks goes to

colleagues and students who have helped me learn Dutch over the years. This was often painful for them but occasionally funny. I will never forget when one of my students talked about the natiestaat. I don't remember which country we were talking about it, but it was not Nazi Germany. At first I was not sure what to do, but I eventually I said look, aren't you using the term Nazi state a bit too liberally, which is when I learned it means nation state, not nazi state.

Outside of the university, I am glad to have met and worked with many colleagues who became mentors and good friends. Andrea Ruggeri, whom I met here and who is an inspiration, Gerald Schneider, who responds to random emails and becomes a mentor, Irfan Nooruddin, Kristian Gleditsch, Megan Turnbull, Liana Reyes-Reardon, Brian Phillips, Stina Hoglund, Hanne Fjelde, Annkatrin Deglow, Inken von Borzyskowski. I also owe a lot to people in the places I do research in. In India, I want to thank Harihar Bhattacharyya, Zaad Mahmood, Tanvir Aejaz, Shoaib Daniyal, Ashwani Kumar, Subhpratik Prasad, Snighdendu Bhattacharyya, Parna Ganguly, Suman Nath, Aryabin Hasan, Titas Ganguly, and Niranjana Sahoo. I've learned so much from you. In Nigeria, I want to thank Shola Omotola, Freedom Onuoha, and in Indonesia, Sayed Fauzan.

I started my academic career in Austria and then moved to U.S. I don't have a good origins story, deciding to study political science for no better reason than always loving politics, and after a failed attempt at medicine. But since a degree in Political Science in Austria is seen as ticket to become a taxi driver, I moved to the U.S. to do a Master's at the University of New Orleans. At UNO, I want to thank Charlie Hadley, who was dept chair, for his support. He picked me up from airport when I first arrived. I remember how impressed my son Felix was with his Mercedes. I ended up staying for the PhD; two other important people in the department were Dick Engstrom and Brandon Prins, mentor who became a co-author and friend. I also owe a lot to Gertraud Griessner and Guenter Bischof from Center Austria at UNO. After the PhD, I spent four years at Colorado State University. Am grateful to Bob Duffy and Michele Betsill for taking a chance on me – it was my one and only job interview and offer. All of this means that standing here today has to with a lot of luck, some ambition, and a sense of purpose. While the first two – luck and ambition – are necessary, I think the third one is important in the long run. Enjoying the process and believing that you are working on something more important than the next top 3 publication helps a lot to sustain a career.

This brings me to friends and family. I'm very happy two of my oldest friends are here, Chrissi Schwarz and Carmen Rainer. Excited to see Lisa Diener and Tabouthsie Dundas. I want to thank my in-laws in New Orleans, who sadly could not come. Wayne and Joni, Sarah and Trav, you've accepted me from the beginning. Glad that two members of extended family are here, Edward and Chris McGinnis, counting on you for bringing some New Orleans party energy to this event. I need to thank Del Brennan, my grandmother in law who has sadly passed away. She has taught me much about writing, which carry with me, including fighting a losing battle that "yet" is not always followed by a comma. Look it up!

I am grateful to my sisters Maria Laimer and Helene Daxecker-Okon and their families. I wish everyone could have sisters like this, but these two are mine and mine only. I am also thankful for the support of Agnes Braunhofer here, my dad's partner. We are lucky to have you. Sadly, my mother Annemarie cannot be here. I wish she would not have died so soon and suffered so much. But we had so much fun together, she was so stylish, and we loved discussing all kinds of things and watching TV together (especially Columbo). Then there is my dad. Das

mache ich lieber auf Deutsch. Mein Vater Franz war Augenarzt, aber seine echte Liebe war die Geschichte. Das muss irgendwie durchgesickert sein, weil ich würde behaupten, dass die Sozialwissenschaften das Beste von beiden Disziplinen kombinieren – der wissenschaftliche Ansatz der Medizin, aber die Materie und der Schreibstil der Geschichte. Danke für alles.

Last, my own family. My kids Felix, Anna, and Theodore. Felix came a little early but what a blessing that was, giving me sense of purpose. He will always be my homie. Anna is the girl I've been waiting for, and Theodore is gift from somewhere higher up. You have brought me so much joy, and can you please just stop growing up. My final thank you goes to Nick. We met over 20 years ago at Center Austria in New Orleans. I don't remember everything, but he was wearing funky looking shoes. A major hurricane and many moves later, the shoes were lost somewhere along the way, but I am so glad you're here with me – it means everything.

Ik heb gezegd.

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