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WHY DO SOME POLITICIANS WITHDRAW FROM POLITICS WHILE OTHERS DO NOT IN VIOLENT ELECTIONS?



Why do some politicians withdraw from politics
while others do not in violent elections?

Juan Diego Duque-Salazar

Development Dissertation Brief, 2025:05

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

Juan Diego Duque-Salazar is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University. This report summarizes the findings from the dissertation “Political Ambition in the Shadow of Violence: Elections, Gender and Political Machines in Colombia (Duque-Salazar, 2025). The dissertation was defended at Uppsala University on May 9, 2025. Juan Diego has published in international journals such as Journal of International Negotiations and Colombia Internacional. He also has done field work in conflict-affected countries such as the Philippines and Colombia.

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Sammanfattning

När våldsamheter uppstår i samband med demokratiska val – varför drar sig vissa politiker tillbaka från politiken medan andra inte gör det? Våldsamma val har länge varit en återkommande utmaning i utvecklingsdemokratier. Kandidater måste navigera i dessa högriskmiljöer när de konkurrerar om politiska ämbeten. Ändå är det så att vissa politiker uthärdar dessa hot och fortsätter sina karriärer, medan andra lämnar den politiska arenan. Denna rapport sammanfattar en vetenskaplig avhandling som undersöker denna gåta genom att analysera varför, när och hur säkerhet i samband med val påverkar kandidaters politiska ambitioner i Colombia. Rapporten presenterar tre huvudfynd. För det första dämpar säkerhetsproblematik kandidaters politiska ambitioner genom att öka både de materiella och de icke-materiella kampanjkostnaderna. För det andra är politiker som är inbäddade i det politiska maskineriet – informella politiska nätverk – mindre påverkade av säkerhetsrisker. För det tredje är denna effekt könad: kvinnor gynnas mer av stöd från det politiska maskineriet än män. Eftersom kvinnor ofta går in i politiken med sämre ekonomiska och nätverksmässiga resurser än män, bidrar stödet från det politiska etablissemang till att jämna ut spelplanen och stärka deras förmåga att navigera i våldsamma kampanjer.

Resultatet har tagits fram genom en multimetod-ansats där jag använder nya kvantitativa och kvalitativa data från nationella och lokala val i Colombia. Sammantaget bidrar rapporten till (i) vår förståelse av politiska ambitioner i våldsamma kontexter, (ii) den roll som informella politiska nätverk spelar för att stärka kandidaters politiska resiliens, samt (iii) de könade effekterna av dessa nätverk för kvinnors politiska deltagande. Sammantaget har resultaten viktiga implikationer för de utmaningar som utvecklingsdemokratier står inför, och för kvinnors politiska representation i våldsamma kontexter.

Abstract

In the context of election violence, why do some politicians withdraw from politics while others do not? Violent elections have long been a persistent challenge in developing democracies. Candidates must navigate these high-risk environments as they compete for office. Yet, while some politicians endure these threats and continue their careers, others exit the political arena. This report examines this puzzle by investigating why, when, and how political violence influences the political ambitions of candidates in Colombia. The report presents three main findings. First, violence dampens the political ambition of candidates by increasing material and non-material campaign costs. Second, politicians embedded in informal clientelist political networks, that I refer to as *political machines*, are less affected by election violence because they provide security information, campaign funding and protection. Third, this effect is gendered: women benefit more from machine support than men. As women often enter politics with fewer financial and network resources than men, the support of political machines levels the playing field, enhancing their ability to navigate violent campaigns. I provide evidence for these three arguments through a multi-method approach, utilizing novel quantitative and qualitative data from national and local elections in Colombia. Altogether, this report contributes to (i) our understanding of political ambition in violent settings, (ii) the role of informal political networks in enhancing the political resilience of candidates, and (iii) the gendered impacts of these networks for women's political participation. Taken together, the findings have important implications for the challenges of inclusive democracies and for women's political representation in violent settings.

The rising threat of violence against politicians during elections

Violence against politicians is a global phenomenon that is on the rise (Kleinfeld 2024). Violent incidents against politicians are increasing in countries as diverse as United States, Sweden¹, Slovakia, Japan, Ecuador, Mexico and Colombia. Most of these attacks against politicians are more frequent during electoral cycles (ACLED 2024, 5), suggesting that they are part of a broader form of political violence known in the literature as election violence. The Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO) documents instances of lethal electoral violence from 1989 to 2017, including violence against politicians (Fjelde and Höglund 2022). According to DECO, politicians and candidates account for 13 percent of the victims worldwide and they make up a particularly high proportion of all election-related violence in the Americas and Europe. For instance, countries like Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil recorded the highest violence against politicians during local elections in Latin America in 2023 (ACLED, 2024).

I have observed such threats during my fieldwork in 2023 in Caquetá, Colombia, a region long scarred by armed conflict. In October 2023, I shadowed Fernando, a local candidate for governor, for several weeks until his final campaign rally (Photo 1). I often see the exhaustion etched into his face after those big rally events are finished. After three relentless months on the trail, marked by danger, stress, and constant movement, his weariness was palpable. I had accompanied him to dozens of events across volatile territories, where the threat of violence was never far—whether from rebel factions, criminal networks, or rival political actors. But this wasn't new terrain for Fernando. Violence had shaped much of his life. Raised in a conflict zone and

¹ Studies in violence against politicians has been quite prominent in Sweden (Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson 2021; Håkansson 2021, 2024b, 2024a; Håkansson and Lajevardi 2024)

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coming from a local political family, he had already lost two close relatives who were also political candidates. And yet, despite it all, he stood on that stage in October 2023, bringing his campaign to a close—never once considering withdrawal. What drives candidates like Fernando to persist in the face of electoral violence? And why do others, when confronted with similar threats, choose to step away from political life? Are women and men affected differently by this violence?

Photo 1: Francisco giving a speech in the last political rally of his campaign the 2023 local elections, Caquetá, Colombia October, 2023.



Source: Author's photograph from field notes.

My dissertation contributes to answering these research questions by developing and testing a novel framework to understand how the decision to exit or remain in politics, i.e., political ambition, of political candidates is shaped by

the insecure environment that politicians need to navigate in violent elections. To achieve this, I developed a multi-method approach, combining statistical analysis of over 9,000 survey responses from 2023 local candidates across 37 political parties, ethnographic accounts from local political campaigns, and more than 100 in-depth interviews with local and national politicians in Colombia.

My findings confirm that election violence suppresses political ambition, but these negative impacts vary depending of the type of politician. Those politicians embedded in strong informal personalized networks, i.e., *political machines*, are less likely to leave politics after violent elections; otherwise, when they are not embedded, they are more vulnerable to violence, particularly women candidates with little political experience. Overall, men show a stronger political resilience in violent elections even when they are not embedded in informal political networks, as they also rely on other social networks to dodge the risks of violence. This brief report will explore the main findings from my dissertation, establishing the conceptual foundations, describing the data sources, and discussing the findings in light of current challenges to democratic development worldwide.

Election insecurity

Election violence is a growing global issue, spanning diverse political settings—from consolidated democracies like the United States, Sweden, and Germany to countries where democratic norms are still taking root, such as the Philippines, India, Nigeria, and Colombia. Scholars have examined various forms of election violence including ethnic riots, voter coercion, party clashes, violent protests, and political assassinations (e.g. Bekoe 2012; Birch 2020; Wilkinson 2004). Unlike broader forms of political violence such as civil wars or state repression, election violence is specifically intended to shape the electoral process (Höglund 2009). Its primary targets often include critical electoral stakeholders such as voters, candidates, officeholders, party activists, election workers, and the media.

Election violence includes direct attacks on political candidates, which can be lethal but are more often non-lethal, involving acts of harassment, intimidation, and threats (Bekoe 2012; Birch 2020; Wahman 2024). For instance, in a survey of 512 candidates running for office in Colombia's 2022 legislative elections, fewer respondents reported experiencing physical violence (30%) compared to non-physical forms, such as intimidation (52%), threats (38%), and harassment (71%) (Duque-Salazar and Salazar Escalante 2023). Thus, as Wahman (2023, 4) notes, 'actual events [of direct physical violence] are often the tip of the iceberg in environments entrenched in fear and intimidation'. This suggests that examining political violence during elections requires a broad definition that encompasses both direct acts of violence and threats thereof.

I use the term *election insecurity* to describe campaign environments characterized by various forms of violence, ranging from physical attacks to online harassment. While political candidates can become direct targets, they might also witness or hear about violence against their peers—an equally powerful signal that campaigning is risky or unsafe. The concept of election insecurity thus com-

prehensively captures the full spectrum of violence and threats that candidates may face during campaigns, likely shaping how they weigh the costs and benefits of running for office—a calculation that directly influences their political ambition.

Political ambition

The decision to run for office is a distinct form of political activity. Unlike other forms of political participation, such as attending rallies, joining protests, or going to the polls, it demands a significant amount of time, resources, and personal commitment. Potential candidates must assess whether the potential rewards of holding office outweigh the material and non-material costs associated with electoral campaigns.

The desire, willingness, or decision to run for office, whether for an initial term, re-election, or a higher position, has been termed *political ambition* (Schlesinger 1966). At its core, running for public office is a pursuit of political power. While there are multiple avenues to attaining power, seeking elected office remains the primary formal route in democratic systems. Lawless and Fox (2005) distinguish between two facets of political ambition: *nascent* and *expressive* ambition. Nascent ambition refers to the pool of eligible citizens who consider running for office before being recruited by a political party, while expressive ambition describes citizens who have decided to become candidates and publicly declare their intent to run.

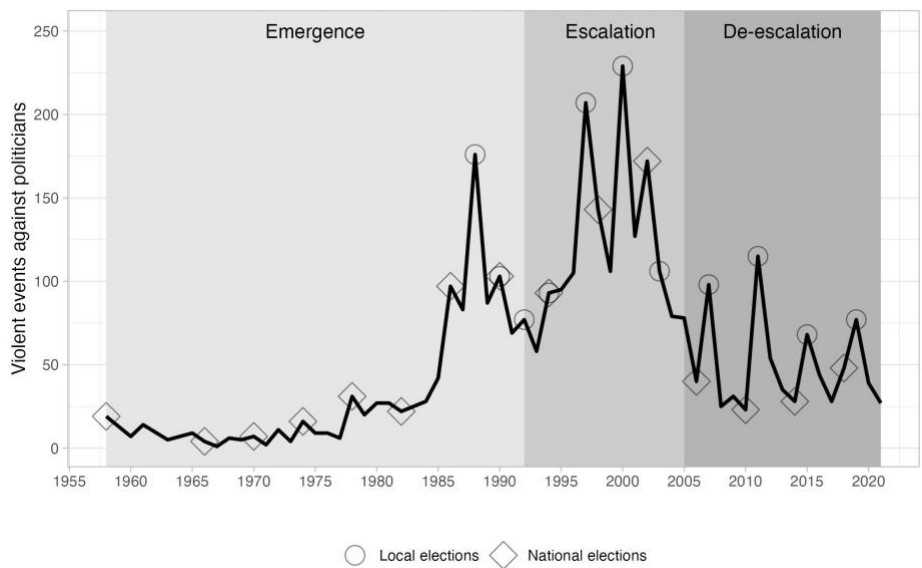
I focus on *expressive ambition* because I am interested in assessing how an insecure electoral environment influences candidates' likelihood of continuing or exiting electoral politics after a campaign. Therefore, I do not examine other forms of political ambition, such as the desire to seek higher office after being elected or the decision to enter an electoral race before being recruited by a political party. My focus is on candidates who have already participated in at

least one campaign. I define political campaigns as organized events or activities designed to secure electoral support by communicating a candidate's or party's platform, policies, or political ideologies to the electorate. These campaigns take place after the party nomination process and precede election day. My analysis is limited to general campaigns, excluding other types such as primary elections.

Violence against politicians in Colombia

Political violence against politicians has been a frequent and recurrent phenomena during elections in Colombia. The VAP-COL dataset, which I compiled for my dissertation, records instances of violence against politicians between 1958–2021. I identified 3,470 violent events across 60 percent of Colombia's territory, encompassing assassination, kidnapping, intimidation, and harassment against regional and national politicians between 1958 and 2021.

Figure 1. The evolution of violence against politicians from 1958–2021



Ref: VAP-COL, author's dataset.

Figure 1 illustrates the temporal variation. Violence levels first peaked in 1986 following the introduction of local elections and surged again between 1997 and 2005, coinciding with the peak of the armed conflict. Although violence against politicians has declined since 2007, more than 50 politicians per year continued to be victims of some form of physical violence between 2007 and 2021. Violent events were more frequent during electoral periods than outside them, with 55 percent of incidents occurring during subnational or legislative election years. Of these, at least 63 percent took place during subnational elections. Figure 1 shows that most of the violent picks occurred during electoral cycles.

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Women are also prominent victims of this violence. 190 female politicians were violently attacked over the 58-year period, representing around 5.5 percent of all victims. While male politicians have historically been more frequent targets of election violence, the proportion of female victims has risen over the last two decades as more women have entered politics. Women constituted 5% of all victims between 1994 and 2005, 8 percent between 2006 and 2021, and, in recent years, women have made up 12 percent of all candidates targeted with violence. This indicates that violence against female politicians is also on the rise showing a concern how this violence may also impact women's political ambition differently than men.

This prevalence of violence against local politicians is partly explained by the intersection of a weak party system and a protracted armed conflict. Colombia's party system has transitioned from one of the most institutionalized in the region to one of the least (Albarracín, Gamboa, and Mainwaring 2018). This decline can be attributed to three major political shifts. First, the 1958 power-sharing agreement between the Liberal Party (LP) and Conservative Party (CP) weakened programmatic and ideological divides, entrenching personalization and patronage politics. Second, political decentralization reforms in the 1980s and 1990s shifted political conflicts to local offices, reducing national party control and empowering local and regional political patrons. Finally, electoral reforms in the 2000s encouraged the personalization of political campaigns, which increased the economic costs of running for office and making financial resources a crucial factor in mobilizing voters and securing office.

The fragmentation and decentralization of the political system shifted political competition from the national to the local political power. The weakening of national party elites' control over regional power granted regional elites' greater autonomy, allowing them to form alliances or compete independently for sub-national offices. Therefore, party labels became less important rather than the informal personalized political networks, i.e. *political machines*, developed by re-

gional politicians. However, this autonomy intersected with Colombia's long-standing armed conflict and criminal dynamics, allowing local politicians to engage with violent networks—guerrillas, paramilitaries, cartels, and criminal gangs—as tools for electoral competition. Violence against politicians was particularly severe in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the FARC and ELN expanded their military and territorial control. In response, paramilitaries, backed by regional politicians, emerged to protect their interests, leading to violent elections in which guerrillas and paramilitaries sought to influence electoral outcomes through intimidation and assassinations.

The conjunction of local political machines and violent actors facilitates the use of violence during elections. These local machines leveraged their local connections to align with violent actors, either to maintain their power or compete against political rivals. They utilize rebel groups, paramilitary organizations, and criminal networks to advance their interests in local political contests. (Ávila, 2010; Daly, 2022; Nieto-Matíz, 2019; Romero and Valencia, 2007; Valencia and Ávila, 2014).

With the demobilization of non-state armed groups between 2007 and 2016, physical violence against politicians decreased in Colombia. However, other non-physical forms of violence remain a persistent feature of local electoral campaigns, with many perpetrators being political rivals. According to the 2023 post-election candidate survey, 60.5% of surveyed candidates reported experiencing at least one of these forms of violence. The most common was the destruction of electoral propaganda (41.3%), followed by intimidation (37.8%), online harassment (37.5%), threats (19.6%), physical attacks (16.6%), destruction of property (15.4%), assassination attempts (9%), and sexual violence (4.5%). These figures show that violence is largely experienced by the majority of the candidates surpassing similar estimates in similar studies in UK, Sweden and the US (Collignon 2023; Håkansson 2023; Thomas and Herrick 2023), to extent that 70 percent of respondents agreed that there is a 'culture

of violence against political candidates among candidates', representing more than 6,600 respondents nationwide. Thus, the persistence of violence against politicians underscores that, despite Colombia's efforts to demobilize major violent actors, political violence against political candidates remains a significant challenge during national and subnational elections.

Research design and data sources

My dissertation uses a within-case design focusing on Colombia as the primary case. It employs a multi-method research design that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to understand the complexity of how election violence influences the political ambition of politicians. This integrated approach incorporates statistical analysis of survey data, ethnographies, and insights from qualitative interviews, which together provide both general patterns and a deeper causal account (Seawright 2016, 8).

To study the main general relationship between election insecurity and political ambition, I collected quantitative data that helps me to estimate and test the relationship between the election violence and political ambition. First, I conducted a post-election candidate survey for the 2023 local elections in collaboration with the Electoral Observer Mission in Colombia (*Misión de Observación Electoral*, MOE) and Universidad de los Andes in June 2024. The survey includes over 9,000 candidate responses across all regions and 37 political parties, covering topics related to election insecurity, informal political networks, and political ambition. Second, I collected observational data on violence against politicians (VAP-COL) to identify temporal and geographical trends in Colombia between 1958 and 2021. This dataset also guided the selection of Caquetá, a region with a long history of election violence against politicians, as a relevant sub-case, from which I draw most of my qualitative data.

Next, I gathered qualitative data to validate the quantitative measurements, uncover underlying causal mechanisms, and enrich my argument with important nuances. This qualitative component, consisting of fieldnotes and interviews, was primarily utilized to understand why some politicians continue while others do not in violent regions such as Caquetá. It draws on secondary sources, over 100 in-depth interviews with politicians, campaign advisors, and country experts, as well as extensive field notes gathered over two 6-month visits between August 2022 and January 2024 in Colombia. This multi-method approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how political candidates assess their intentions to remain or exit politics during violent elections in Colombia.

Main findings

Election insecurity depresses political ambition

I present a theory about how politicians assess their intentions to continue in politics after the elections conclude. After election campaigns conclude and the results are announced, winners and losers must evaluate the costs and benefits of either remaining in or exiting electoral politics after navigating campaign environments marked by frequent political violence (i.e. physical assaults, vandalism of campaign materials, intimidation, and online harassment). I take a broader definition of violence to encompass the full spectrum of acts of violence and threats that candidates face during political campaigns, which I refer to in this report as *election insecurity*.

In line with previous research on the consequences of election violence for voter's political participation (e.g., Bratton, 2008; Burchard, 2020; von Borzyskowski et al., 2022), I argue that election insecurity weakens political candidates' ambition. Election insecurity substantially raises the material and

non-material costs of campaigning. The material costs increase because politicians must invest in protective measures such as escorts, bulletproof vests, and armored vehicles to shield themselves from the risks of violence. At the same time, election insecurity imposes non-material costs, including mental effort, psychological toll, uncertainty, and fears of violence from non-state armed groups and political rivals. Given these high material and non-material costs, a first expectation is that politicians who campaign in electorally insecure environments are more likely to exit politics and choose not to compete in future electoral rounds compared to candidates who run campaigns in less insecure environments.

The first main finding of this dissertation is that election insecurity dampens the political ambition of candidates. The statistical analysis indicates that local candidates in the 2023 election who perceived high insecurity during their campaigns were less likely to report strong intentions to run for office in the future attempts. This negative impact is robust even after accounting for key factors such as gender, age, candidacy experience, income, education, visibility, incumbency, and prior exposure to violence. However, the estimated effects are substantively small, on a scale from 1 to 100, election insecurity reduces on average, by only 4 points, all else equal.

These findings underscore the detrimental impact of political violence on political participation, aligning with previous research on the effects of election violence on voter turnout (e.g. Bratton 2008; Gallego 2018; Wahman 2023, 119–23). Furthermore, this finding contributes to the growing body of research on violence against politicians, which has shown that exposure to violence discourages political ambition (Daniele, Dipoppa, and Pulejo 2023; Håkansson 2024b; Håkansson and Lajevardi 2024). The results of this study show that political violence also impacts political participation at the elite level, highlighting that violence remains a persistent barrier to political participation.

Informal political networks (or political machines) diminish the suppressive impact of violence on political ambition.

The previous findings indicate that violence can dampen political ambition, yet many politicians continue to pursue a career in politics despite these violent experiences. Why? I argue that the decision to exit or continue in electoral politics is also shaped by the informal political institutions in which candidates are embedded. Specifically, I focus on how the support of informal (or personalized) political networks shapes the political ambition of candidates operating in electorally insecure environments.

Through these informal political networks, what I denominate *political machines*, politicians employ clientelist and patronage strategies to consolidate political power, mobilize voters, secure protection, and win elections (e.g., Auerbach and Thachil, 2023, p. 5; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Scott, 1969, 1972; Szwarcberg, 2015). Embeddedness within these political machines creates distinct social groups among candidates, with some having access to both material and non-material benefits of the political machines, while others are excluded from these benefits when campaigning. I argue that these informal political networks are not confined to party boundaries, as the traditional literature on party politics suggests. Instead, in weak party systems, politicians may belong to *multi-party machines* that transcend party labels, as their embeddedness is driven more by personal ties than by formal partisanship.

In short, candidates embedded in multi-party machines gain access to campaign benefits that help mitigate the costs of election insecurity. Therefore, political machine support can insulate candidates, functioning like bulletproof vests that make them more resilient to violence and more likely to continue in politics. I refer to this process as the ‘*bulletproofing effect*’ of political machines. Specifically, I argue that candidates who belong to political machines gain access to 1) campaign funding, 2) security information, and 3) protection measures for prevent-

ing or mitigating the threats of electoral violent contexts. Consequently, the support of political machines can offset both the material and non-material campaign costs triggered by high levels of election insecurity.

To quantitatively test this argument, I developed a survey question based on my ethnographic fieldwork, asking whether the candidates received support from key players in these network-based machines. I inquired whether candidates had received economic support from local councils, regional politicians, parliamentarians, politicians of other parties, and regional businesspeople. The quantitative data provide evidence of this bulletproofing effect, demonstrating that political machines offer a protective advantage for candidates with strong network support compared to those without it.

This argument is refined by demonstrating that the bulletproofing effect is particularly strong for less experienced candidates. Those with limited campaign experience benefit more because they lack the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to navigate a violent election. As a result, less experienced politicians are more likely to withdraw from politics. Among candidates without machine support, the estimated negative effects are approximately twice as large as earlier estimates. Controlling for other factors, election insecurity reduces political ambition by an average of 8 points on a 100-point scale. This finding aligns with existing research in political science, which highlights the benefits of political experience for running successful campaigns (Franceschet and Piscopo 2014; Haime, Vallejo, and Schwindt-Bayer 2022; Huertas-Hernández and Sosa Londoño 2023).

Women candidates benefit more than men from the protection of informal political networks

I further argue that the bulletproofing effect of the informal political networks, i.e. political machines, is gendered. I argue that the campaign benefits of polit-

ical machines are more pronounced for female candidates than for male candidates because women, on average, possess less personal wealth to finance their campaigns and fewer social networks, which are key to mitigating the costs of electoral insecurity (e.g., Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2011; Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Piscopo et al., 2022; Put et al., 2023). The support of multi-party machines helps level the playing field by providing women with the financial and network resources they lack at the beginning of their political careers. This support is crucial for them, as it can mitigate the adverse effects of political violence but also increase their chances of winning office. By contrast, male candidates without machine support have greater personal wealth and more extensive social networks on average, making them less reliant on machine support to offset campaign costs in insecure settings. Therefore, political machines play a more significant role in shaping women's political resilience in violent electoral contexts than they do for men.

The empirical quantitative and qualitative analysis provides consistent evidence for these gendered mitigating effects, with additional nuances. The statistical analysis demonstrates that political machine support significantly reduces the adverse effects of election insecurity on women's political ambition. In contrast, male candidates are not affected by election insecurity overall, even when accounting for varying levels of political machine support. Hence, I find support for the gendered bulletproofing effect of political machines, with particularly robust results for inexperienced candidates. Overall, among women candidates without machine support, the estimated negative effects are approximately three times larger as the main effect of violence on political ambition. Controlling for other factors, election insecurity reduces political ambition for women by an average of 14 points on a 100-point scale

The qualitative analysis shows that women who receive political machine support often have personal ties to local patrons, either as family members of political elites or as female political brokers. Women are overrepresented in the

lower tiers of political machines, where they take on logistical and operational roles, primarily mobilizing voters for higher-level male politicians. A local patron in Caquetá stated in an interview: “Women enjoy politics, but in the background...all my electoral capital consists of women; I have 369 women working for me” (See photo 2). When some of these women can rise to the higher tiers of the network, they have access to campaign funding, security information, and shared protection measures through their patrons, facilitating to continue in politics despite the violent risks during the campaigns. Many of the women embedded in clientelist political networks interviewed reported little intention to withdraw. For instance, one stated that “Even if they threaten me, I will persist”, another one expressed “I never thought [to withdraw], with the war logic, I should have been dead”.

Photo 2. Female political brokers in charge of mobilizing voters in a campaign rally in Caquetá, October, 2023



Source: Author's photograph from field notes.

On the other hand, women who lack support from political machines can enter electoral races through affirmative action, through the candidate gender quota law which requires political parties to nominate at least 30 percent of female candidates on each party list in Colombia. However, because they enter without close ties to patrons, these women remain excluded from the political machines, limiting their access to campaign funding, security information, and protection measures. A female candidate without the support of a strong local machine expresses the vulnerability of running campaigns without networks: “Women could eventually be more vulnerable. If we don’t have the support of

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someone to protect us, for instance, a security team, a woman is seen as an easier target”.

As a result, women without the support of political machines are more likely to fear violence and perceive heightened potential threats, including from non-state armed groups, political rivals, and even fellow party members who are connected to party patrons. Thus, the hostile electoral environment dampens their political ambition compared to women with machine support and male candidates. Many leave politics disillusioned with the system but continue to engage in civic activism. A female candidate interviewed expressed this activism by stating, “I believe there are other ways to engage in politics, not necessarily by running for office. I think that I am actually very political in other ways”.

Additionally, the quantitative results raise a puzzling question: Why do men remain more resilient to violence even without the support of the political machine in violent elections? The qualitative data provide two plausible explanations for why men exhibit greater political resilience in violent contexts despite lacking access to machine resources. First, men tend to have greater financial resources, which enhances their ability to withstand the pressures of election violence. This economic advantage allows them to self-finance their campaigns, reducing their reliance on political machines for funding. In some cases, men can also afford high-cost protection measures independently, although this is a more limited option. Interestingly, some even prefer not to use such measures, like bodyguards and armored cars, because they perceive them as an increased risk to their security. Nevertheless, this financial autonomy provides a critical buffer against the challenges of election insecurity.

Second, although both men and women report similar levels of civic engagement, men tend to hold leadership positions within these civic networks. These positions grant them greater authority and access to security information, which is particularly valuable in violent electoral contexts. While women actively participate in civic organizations, they are often in peripheral roles

without access to broader security networks. This insight also refines theory by suggesting that it is men's social authority and financial autonomy—rather than civic involvement alone—that enhances their ability to navigate violent elections without political machine support, and hence they are likely to continue with their political careers.

Conclusions

This dissertation develops a novel theoretical framework for understanding how electoral violent contexts, informal political networks, and gender independently and jointly shape politicians' intentions to run for office. Doing so, it makes three main contributions to our understanding of political ambition in developing democracies, contexts where significant research gaps remain in the study of candidate emergence (Gulzar 2021).

First, the study expands our understanding of the impacts of election violence on the behavior of political elites in settings where severe political violence is widespread. The literature on the micro-dynamics of civil war and election violence has made substantial progress in understanding the consequences of political violence across various outcomes, such as voter turnout, civic engagement, political trust, and other societal and political outcomes (e.g., Celestino and Gleditsch, 2013; De Juan and Pierskalla, 2016; Deglow, 2016; Deglow and Fjelde, 2020, 2023; Fjelde and Olafsdottir, 2024). However, this research has focused mostly on how violence influences ordinary citizens. Scholars of election violence have studied political elites mostly as perpetrators or instigators of political violence rather than direct victims of it (e.g., Berenschot, 2019; Klaus, 2020; Turnbull, 2021). While this angle is critical, many candidates who run for office also experience violence directly and must develop strategies to navigate insecure campaigns.

The main findings of this dissertation demonstrate that election insecurity dampens political ambition, extending our understanding of how violence shapes the political participation of elites. These results are crucial for understanding how violence affects the democratic supply side—who is willing to stand for office. Finding that violence disengages politicians highlights how violence can make the path to power inherently exclusive, undermining fundamental democratic principles of fairness and inclusiveness.

Second, by focusing on informal political networks, this study helps uncover the role of informal institutions in shaping the political behavior of politicians. This approach responds to recent calls for a shift from party-centered approaches to network-centered approaches for understanding how clientelist or patronage networks function in developing democracies (e.g., Auerbach et al., 2022; Hicken et al., 2022). Research on informal political networks has made significant progress on uncovering the inner workings of political machines for voter mobilization (e.g., Auerbach and Thachil 2023; Auyero 2001; Hicken et al. 2022; Stokes et al. 2013). Additionally, studies on election violence have shown how patronage networks have incentives to use or instigate political violence for electoral purposes (e.g., Berenschot, 2019; Hoffmann, 2010; Klaus, 2020; Utas, 2012; Vaishnav, 2017; Wilkinson, 2004). Yet, scholars have overlooked the role of these informal networks in preventing or mitigating violence against their members. In part, this gap exists due to the challenges of collecting the micro-level data on political elites in violent settings, which would allow for systematic examination of how these networks function.

This dissertation contributes to filling these gaps by providing evidence that political machines are key to the political resilience of politicians. Informal political networks provide campaign resources that increase politicians' capacity to avoid violent risks and protect themselves from attacks. By illuminating the protective effects of political machines, this study highlights the role of this informal institution in shielding politicians from the risks of violence.

Furthermore, adopting an institutional perspective to explain political ambition enhances our understanding of how informal institutions influence political representation. In electoral regimes, candidates embedded in political machines may represent the policy preferences of different segments of the population compared to those without such access. Therefore, access to informal networks affects who can run for and win office, ultimately influencing the range of alternatives available to citizens when voting in violent settings. Understanding who drops out or remains in politics based on their embeddedness helps explain which social groups are likely to be underrepresented in the face of violent elections. The findings indicate that politicians more deeply embedded in clientelist networks survive longer in politics than those who do not rely on such practices. This suggests that political machines, in violent contexts, help entrench clientelist politicians, slowing democratic consolidation.

Third, along the same lines, I find that women outside political networks are the social group most affected by election insecurity, compared to both men and women with political machine support. These findings further contribute to the literature on feminist institutionalism, which emphasizes the role of gendered dynamics within informal institutions and violence (e.g., Bardall, 2011; Bjarnegård, 2013). This study shows that although women and men seem to perceive similar levels of campaign insecurity, they arrive at different conclusions about the costs and risks of remaining in politics in violent electoral contexts depending on their embeddedness in political machines.

Overall, I demonstrate that women who access informal networks benefit more than men, thus helping to level the playing field in violent elections. Conversely, women without access to the resources of political machines are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of election insecurity, even when compared to men who similarly lack political machine support. In fact, men appear, on average, to be less vulnerable to insecure electoral environments, regardless of their embeddedness (or lack thereof) in political machines. The findings on the gen-

dered effects of political machines contribute to an important and expanding body of literature that sheds light on the increasing and unevenly distributed and gendered costs that violence imposes on politicians (e.g., Collignon and Rüdig, 2021; Erikson et al., 2021; Håkansson 2024; Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024).

To what extent are the central claims of this dissertation—that political machines enhance politicians’ willingness to run for office in electoral environments—applicable beyond the case of Colombia? Studies in Perú, Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines have shown similar dynamics of patronage and personalized networks as well as high levels of violence against politicians (Arias 2017; Aspinall et al. 2022; Blume 2022; Deinla et al. 2023; Harish and Toha 2019; Muñoz 2019; Novaes 2018). These contexts share similarities with Colombia, since politicians often navigate campaigns in insecure environments. Thus, I expect similar consequences of such violence on political ambition in these contexts. Therefore, the argument presented in this study is likely to be most applicable in electoral democracies with weak party organizations, patronage systems, and incomplete state monopolies on violence.

Key points for policy-makers

- Violence against political candidates weakens political participation by discouraging candidates from pursuing their political careers. These effects are more severe for women without political networks and less experienced candidates, harming their right to equal political participation. This is a statement that apply beyond Colombia, and developing democracies.
- Candidates embedded in patronage and clientelist networks are more resilient to violence and are more likely to continue despite violence. This also indicates that violence entrenches both women and men politicians with non-democratic practices and behaviors in the political system and excludes those who want to change those exclusionary practices.
- In weak party systems, inexperienced and women candidates without political connections often receive uneven support for resources, networks, and information from party leaders, as the distribution of such resources is personalized (or informal) and not defined by formal processes. To safeguard those candidates, international actors should bolster political party institutions to tackle the unequal resource distribution, which is vital for navigating violent elections.
- To improve our understanding of how party institutions can effectively address political inequalities during violent elections, we need more research. Support quality research and initiatives aimed at understanding how political parties can reduce violence both within their ranks and towards other political rivals.

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Why do some politicians withdraw from politics while others do not in violent elections?

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This report summarizes a dissertation that examines why some politicians in Colombia pursue their political ambitions despite significant risks of violence, while others withdraw. Threats and security risks make election campaigns more costly and difficult, but strong political networks provide some protection, particularly benefiting female politicians. The research highlights key challenges for democratic development in many countries from multiple perspectives.

Rapporten sammanfattar en avhandling som har undersökt varför vissa politiker i Colombia fortsätter med sina politiska ambitioner trots stora risker för våldsamheter, medan andra hoppar av. Hot och säkerhetsrisker gör valkampanjer dyrare och svårare, men starka politiska nätverk ger ett visst skydd, som särskilt gynnar kvinnliga politiker. Forskningen belyser viktiga utmaningar för den demokratiska utvecklingen i många länder ur flera perspektiv.

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