

# Terrorism, Trust, and Identity: Evidence from a Natural Experiment in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *We study the effects of terrorism on political trust and national versus ethnic identification. Making use of unexpected attacks by the extremist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, which occurred during the fieldwork of a public opinion survey in 2014, we show that even in a context of weak state institutions and frequent terrorist activities, terror attacks significantly increase political trust. We also find that the attacks significantly reduced the salience of respondents' national identity, instead increasing ethnic identification. These findings run counter to arguments that "rally around the flag" effects following terror attacks result from increased patriotism. The results have important implications for understanding the effects of terrorism in contexts of weak state institutions, frequent political violence, and politically salient ethnic divisions.*

**Verification Materials:** The materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VOO3TD>.

Political trust plays a key role in the working of mass democracy and the provision of public goods. Trust in institutions stimulates political participation, enables the effective provision of public services, underpins compliance with government regulations, encourages policy reforms with long-term benefits, and affects social trust, which in turn is vital for economic efficiency and social cohesion (Citrin 1974; Gyorffy 2013; Uslaner 2018). Existing research has highlighted various determinants of political trust, including the nature and operation of institutions, economic performance and inequality, corruption, and exposure to violence during civil wars (Juan and Pierskalla 2016; Newton, Stolle, and Zmerli 2018). In addition, studies in Europe and the United States have shown that terrorist attacks can increase political trust (Coupe 2017; Dinesen and Jaeger 2013; Perrin and Smolek 2009; Putnam 2004). The most prominent explanation for this impact of terrorism on trust presents it as a "rally around the

flag" effect whereby attacks generate a heightened sense of patriotism and collective national identity.

Significant gaps remain, however, in our understanding of how terrorism affects political trust. First, it is not known whether these findings extend beyond the context of the United States and European cases in which the relationship has been studied to date. In particular, it is unclear whether we should expect these findings to hold in contexts where political institutions are more fragile and political violence is more frequent. This is true of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where nascent democratic institutions are increasingly challenged by terrorist violence. For example, frequent terror attacks are carried out by groups such as Al-Shabaab in East Africa and by affiliates of ISIL and Al Qaida in West Africa. It is pertinent, therefore, to ask whether terrorism in these contexts has similar effects on political trust. Second, there is limited systematic evidence about the mechanism by which terrorism increases political trust. If rally

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effects arise because terrorism generates a stronger sense of patriotism and collective national identity, we might also expect to see an increase in national identification following terror attacks.

We investigate these questions with a natural experiment in Nigeria, where terrorist violence has been widespread over the past decade. Making use of unexpected attacks by the extremist group Boko Haram in December 2014, which occurred during the fieldwork for a public opinion survey, we provide well-identified evidence that even in a context of weak state institutions and frequent political violence, terrorist attacks significantly increase political trust. The survey data also enable us to effectively investigate the impact of terrorism on collective identities as a potential mechanism underpinning any effect of terrorism on political trust. Doing so, we find that the attacks by Boko Haram actually reduced national identification, increasing the salience of ethnic identities instead.

These findings run counter to expectations about rally effects resulting from increased patriotism. Therefore, after presenting the main results, we consider possible reasons why the patriotism mechanism may not operate in this particular context and explore two potential alternative mechanisms underpinning the impact of terrorism on political trust: anxiety and opinion leadership.

Our findings contribute to the existing literature on terrorism and trust by extending the focus of study to a context where violence is more frequent and institutions are less stable. As far as we are aware, this article also offers the first systematic evaluation of the impact of terrorism on collective identity and suggests that, in this case at least, the effect of terrorism on political trust is not driven by an increase in national identification. More generally, the findings contribute to our understanding of the determinants of political trust and to literature on national versus ethnic identification. The findings also have important implications for understanding the political effects of terrorism in contexts where ethnic divisions are politically salient.

## Terrorism and Political Trust

Various studies have investigated the effects of terrorism on political trust, with particular attention being paid to the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Research has found that the 9/11 attacks were followed by a substantial increase in trust in the national government and other state institutions (Perrin and Smolek 2009; Putnam 2004; Skocpol 2002). This tends to be explained as a variant of the rally effect first highlighted by John Mueller, which

referred to increases in presidential approval following international events affecting the United States that are “specific, dramatic, and sharply focused” (Mueller 1970, 21).

Subsequent work extended evidence of rally effects from presidential approval to political trust (Hetherington and Nelson 2003; Perrin and Smolek 2009) and broadened the findings beyond the United States context. For example, studies investigating rally effects in Europe have found similar positive effects of terrorism on institutional trust in Norway (Wollebaek et al. 2012), Spain (Dinesen and Jaeger 2013), and France (Coupe 2017), and on social trust in Sweden (Geys and Qari 2017).<sup>1</sup> Although some findings suggest these effects do not persist over the long term, even short-term effects can be influential, depending on the timing of attacks.

Following the work of Mueller (1970), prominent explanations for rally effects have focused on the role of patriotism. Scholars of the United States in particular have suggested that national crises, such as terror attacks, generate a stronger sense of patriotism and collective identity (Skocpol 2002), and research has highlighted increased displays of patriotism in the United States following the 9/11 attacks (Gaines 2002). This reflects the claim that the 9/11 attacks resulted in “a more capacious sense of ‘we’ ... a powerful idea of cross-class, cross-ethnic solidarity” among Americans (Putnam 2004, 343). Moreover, it fits with arguments from social identity theory that intergroup conflict heightens individuals’ motivation to maintain a positive view of groups to which they belong (Lambert, Schott, and Scherer 2011). This mechanism therefore suggests that terror attacks increase political trust because they bolster support for representations of collective identity, such as national political institutions. By this argument, we should also expect terror attacks to generate a heightened sense of national identification.

A notable limitation of existing work on the political effects of terrorism, however, is that the findings have been restricted to stable democracies where terror attacks are relatively rare events.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we do not know whether findings from the United States and Europe apply to other contexts, in particular those where political institutions are less stable and political violence is more frequent. There are good reasons to think that the relationship between terrorism and trust may not hold

<sup>1</sup>Arvanitidis, Economou, and Kollias (2016) find mixed evidence of the effects of terrorism on trust across Spain, Norway, Belgium, and France. Other findings suggest terrorism influences voting (Balcells and Torrats-Espinoza 2018; Bove, Efthymoulou, and Pickard 2021; Montalvo 2011) and immigration attitudes (Bohmelt, Bove, and Nussio 2020).

<sup>2</sup>See Belmonte (2020) for a useful exception.

in such contexts. For example, where state institutions are unstable, citizens may be less likely to view them as representations of collective identity (Bates 2008; Uslander 2018). Furthermore, citizens may become desensitized to political violence in contexts where terror attacks are frequent, dampening their potential effects (Funk et al. 2004).

Indeed, one might expect political trust to decrease following terror attacks in weak states if citizens in such contexts seek alternative sources of protection because institutions continually fail to provide security (Bates 2008). This expectation is reinforced by findings from studies assessing the effects of violence on institutional trust in contexts of frequent conflict and state fragility. In particular, Gates and Justesen (2020) show that presidential approval and political trust in Mali are negatively affected by Tuareg rebel attacks on state military targets, and Deglow and Sundberg (2021) find a negative correlation between conflict intensity and trust in the police in Afghanistan.

Although these existing findings are useful, the types of violence investigated differ from terrorism in important ways. The effects of rebel attacks against military targets are likely to be different from those of terrorism targeting civilians because the latter represents a direct and more salient threat to the safety and well-being of individual citizens. Similarly, intensity of exposure to conflict between organized groups and the state, as Deglow and Sundberg (2021) study in Afghanistan, captures the impact of a very different type of violence than terror attacks, which—more in line with the original rally literature—are specific, dramatic, and sharply focused events.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it remains unclear whether findings from the United States and Europe should be expected to hold in contexts of frequent violence and state fragility. Instead, consideration of contextual factors and of evidence on the effects of other forms of violence in such contexts generates the expectation that terrorism may not increase political trust where violence is frequent and state institutions are fragile. To date, however, this has not been tested directly. An important contribution of our work is therefore to evaluate the impact of terrorism on political trust in a context of institutional instability and frequent political violence.

In addition, we go beyond the existing work by looking at whether terrorism leads to a concomitant strengthening of collective national identity. This allows us to evaluate a prominent mechanism underpinning any ef-

fect of terrorism on political trust. Specifically, if arguments about terrorism stimulating trust through an increase in patriotism are correct, we should expect any positive effect of terrorism on trust to be accompanied by an increase in national identification.

However, several contextual factors may limit the extent to which this mechanism is likely to operate. The first concerns the relationship between identity cleavages. Specifically, if religious cleavages overlap with ethnic divisions, jihadist terrorist attacks may prime ethnic prejudices (Giani 2021), thereby undermining collective national identities at the expense of ethnicity. This may well be the case in Nigeria, where a salient religious cleavage overlaps to a large extent with ethnic divisions (Anugwom 2019). Given the jihadist nature of Boko Haram, their attacks in Nigeria could undermine national identification, instead increasing the salience of ethnicity. A second relevant factor is the origin of the terrorist group responsible for the attacks. Original arguments about the role of patriotism in rally effects emphasized the impact of crises resulting from international events representing foreign threats to the nation (Mueller 1970). This perspective might imply scope conditions on the patriotism argument, limiting it to attacks by foreign groups. Consequently, attacks by domestic groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, may not be expected to galvanize citizens behind the collective national identity.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the patriotism mechanism might be undermined by local perceptions of terrorist groups. Specifically, attacks may also prime ethnic prejudices if the perpetrators are viewed through an ethnic lens (Kam and Kinder 2007), thereby increasing the salience of ethnicity. This might also be true in Nigeria, where studies have suggested that Boko Haram is perceived by many Nigerians as ethnically based (Olaniyan and Asuelime 2014; Pieri and Zenn 2016).

Taken together, these factors suggest that in contexts of salient and overlapping identity cleavages, attacks by domestic terrorists might not be expected to generate a heightened sense of patriotism that could increase political trust. We discuss these factors further in relation to the Nigerian context in the section entitled “Explaining Stronger Ethnic Identification” and consider potential alternative explanations for rally effects in the section “Alternative Mechanisms.”

To summarize, the above discussion implies four concrete expectations about how terrorist attacks affect political trust: (1) existing work in the United States and Europe expects terrorism to increase political trust; (2)

<sup>3</sup>For Deglow and Sundberg (2021), conflict intensity affects trust in the police by altering the nature of policing over time. While repeated terror attacks could have a similar effect on trust in the police, that would be distinct from the immediate impact of specific attacks on generalized political trust.

<sup>4</sup>Wollebaek et al. (2012) find a positive impact of domestic terrorism in Norway on institutional trust, which they attribute to mobilization of national unity.

within this work, prominent explanations focusing on patriotism imply that terror attacks should also increase national identification; (3) in contrast, theoretical arguments about the implications of frequent violence and fragile institutions, alongside existing evidence on the impact of violence on trust where these conditions prevail, create the alternative expectation that terrorism will not increase political trust in such contexts; and (4) in addition, consideration of how the impact of terrorism may be conditioned by identity cleavages, the origins of terrorist groups and local perceptions of them create the alternative expectation that terror attacks should not increase national identification.

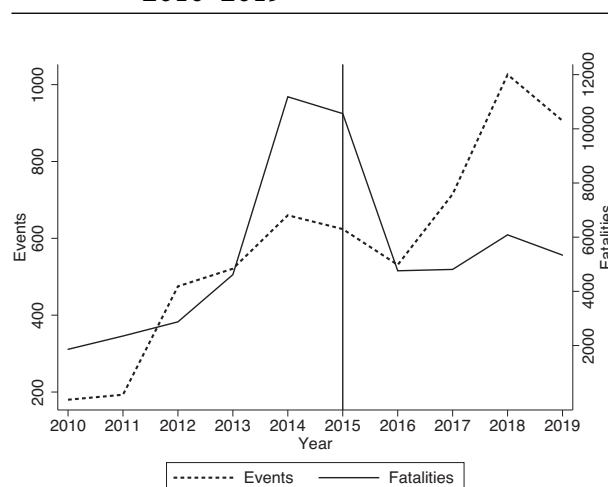
## Case

The recent history of political institutions in Nigeria is one of substantial instability. Prior to colonialism, Nigeria's political structure was greatly influenced by the empires, kingdoms, and communities of more than 290 ethnic groups. During the colonial period, the United Kingdom ruled in part through these traditional structures, and after independence the first Nigerian republic was based on the British parliamentary system. The civilian government was toppled by a military coup in 1966. This led to further coups, exacerbating political uncertainty and ethnic violence, culminating in a civil war from 1967 to 1970. The war was followed by a succession of unstable military regimes that faced repeated coup attempts and various forms of insurrection (Okafor 2009). Since the first republic, subsequent civilian administrations have been modeled after the American presidential system.

The return to civilian rule and establishment of the fourth republic in 1999 marked a turning point in Nigeria's recent political history. Since then, the country has been a presidential federal republic, with multiparty elections held every four years. Although largely shaped by political violence, manipulation, and ethnic voting, these elections finally resulted in Nigeria's first peaceful electoral transfer of power in 2015. As a result, Nigeria has been ostensibly democratic since 1999, although—as elsewhere across Africa—Nigeria's political institutions remain fragile.

Nigeria has a history of political violence, which has seen a substantial upsurge in the last decade. Figure 1 presents violent conflict events and fatalities between 2010 and 2019, using data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2020).<sup>5</sup> The trends show a marked increase in violence

**FIGURE 1 Violent Conflict Trend in Nigeria, 2010–2019**



Notes: The solid vertical line indicates when the survey data used in this study were collected.

intensity over the past decade, with an annual death toll exceeding 10,000 in 2014 and 2015. The rise in violence since 2010 coincides with the development of three armed groups: Boko Haram in the north, Fulani Militants in the middle belt, and Niger Delta Militants in the south.<sup>6</sup>

Boko Haram was originally formed in 2002 to address perceived issues of bad governance in northern Nigeria. The group became violent after a protest in July 2009 was met with a police crackdown. The frequency of terror attacks in the ensuing three years prompted the declaration of a state of emergency in several northern states in 2013. By 2016, it was estimated that more than 10,000 civilians had died and over 2.5 million displaced as a result of Boko Haram's attacks (Segun 2016). Maps in Figure 2 show the spatial distribution of these attacks, which are largely concentrated in the northeastern part of the country, surrounding the Boko Haram stronghold in Sambisa Forest.

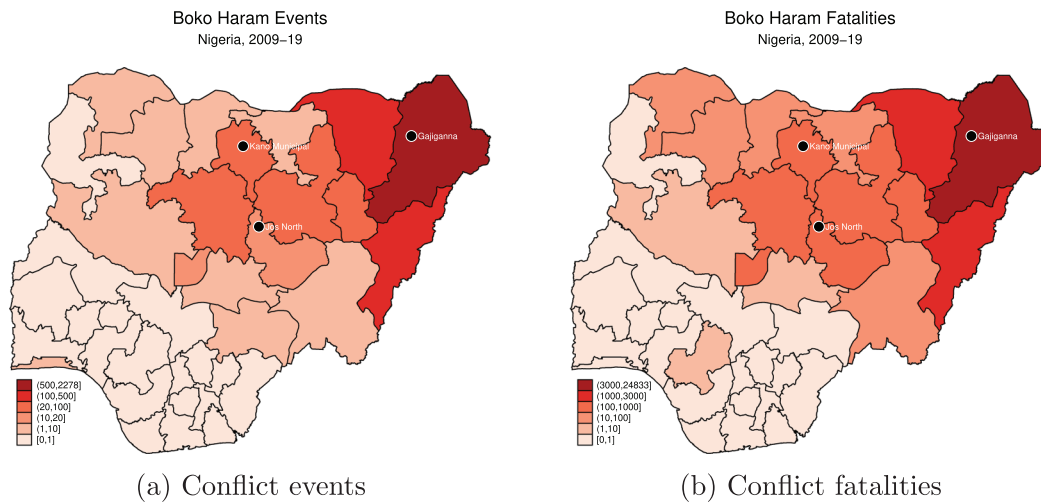
Ongoing conflict over grazing routes between Fulani herdsmen and indigenous farmers has also led to considerable loss of life, and demand for local control of oil revenue has long been the cause of conflict between militants and the state in the Niger Delta.<sup>7</sup> Figure 3 shows the proportion of events and fatalities by each group between 2010 and 2019. For all years other than 2010

<sup>6</sup>See *The Economist* on "Insecurity in Nigeria: Fighting on all fronts": <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21695882-bad-governance-has-bred-uprisings-boko-haram-biafra-fighting-all-fronts> (last accessed May 20, 2021).

<sup>7</sup>See <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/07/economist-explains> (last accessed May 20, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>We define violent events as events with at least one fatality.

**FIGURE 2 Maps of Conflict Events and Fatalities Related to Boko Haram, 2010–2019**



*Notes:* Maps (a) and (b) show the location of conflict events and fatalities related to Boko Haram in Nigeria, based on the number of events/deaths by conflict actors reported in ACLED. Black dots show the locations of terror attacks investigated in this study.

and 2018, the proportions attributed to Boko Haram far outweigh those attributed to the Fulani and Niger Delta militants.

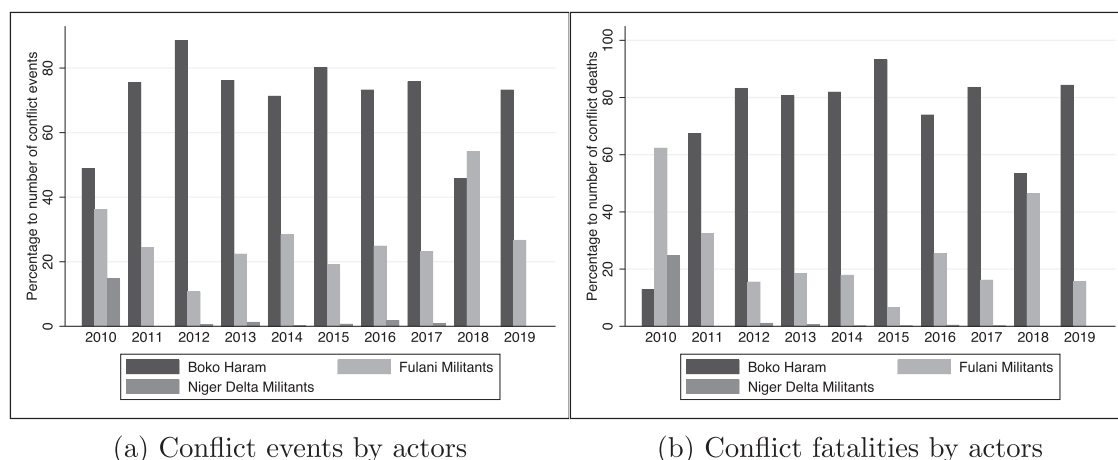
## Method

We identify the effects of terrorism by exploiting the unexpected occurrence of Boko Haram attacks that oc-

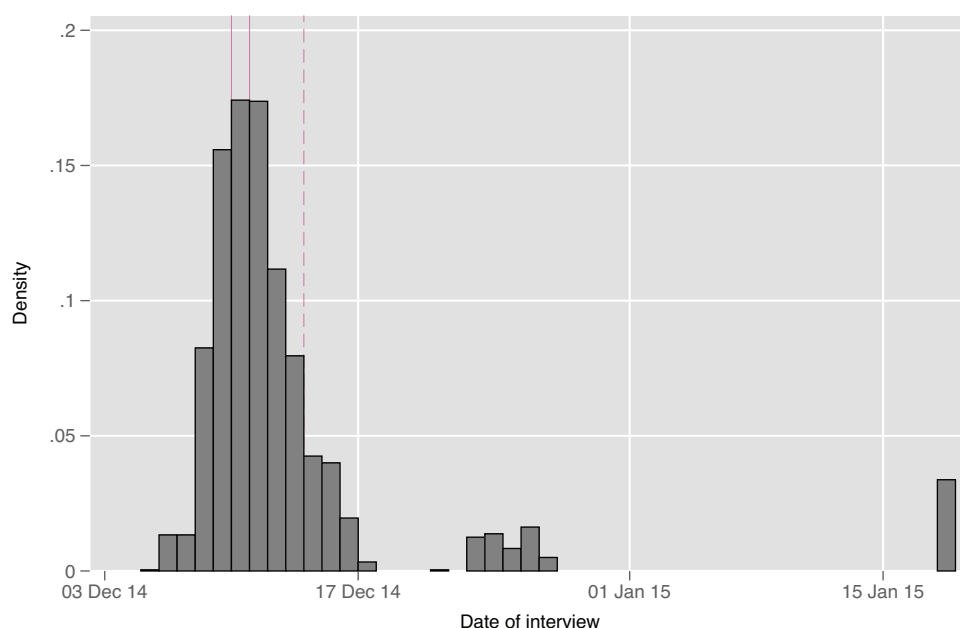
curred in December 2014, during fieldwork for Round 6 of the Nigerian Afrobarometer Survey.<sup>8</sup> This unexpected event during survey design (UESD) approach uses

<sup>8</sup>Afrobarometer (2015). Boko Haram attacks are frequent in Nigeria, but few substantial attacks coincide with fieldwork dates surrounded by a peaceful window to enable identification. Such a window exists for the attacks on December 10 and 11, 2014. Smaller attacks occurred during Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 7 but not on dates providing sufficient before and after samples within peaceful windows.

**FIGURE 3 Annual Conflict Events and Fatalities by Actor, 2010–2019**



*Notes:* Panels A and B show the proportion of annual conflict events and fatalities related to Boko Haram, Fulani Militia, and Niger Delta Militants in Nigeria, based on the number of events/deaths by conflict actors reported in ACLED.

**FIGURE 4** Distribution of Interviews

Notes: Solid lines mark dates of attacks investigated in this analysis. The dashed line marks the date of a later attack in Gumsuri, which went unreported for three days.

unforeseen and salient events as a form of natural experiment, splitting respondents into control and treatment groups (Munoz, Falco-Gimeno, and Hernandez 2020). Given the unexpected nature of terrorist attacks and the fact that they tend to be highly salient, the UESD is well suited for identifying the effects of terrorism. Under certain assumptions about excludability and ignorability (evaluated in detail in the section entitled “Robustness”), this design allows us to estimate the causal effect of Boko Haram attacks on political trust and collective identification in Nigeria.

Afrobarometer conduct regular nationally representative public opinion surveys in 37 countries across Africa. Round 6 of the Nigerian Afrobarometer Survey was fielded between December 5, 2014, and January 19, 2015. Figure 4 shows the distribution of survey interviews over time. The vast majority of interviews were completed early in this period, with 90% of respondents interviewed by December 16, 2014, and 96% within three weeks of the start date.

We focus our attention on a series of Boko Haram attacks on December 10 and 11, 2014. Two attacks were carried out on December 10, 2014. In the first, two female suicide bombers killed themselves and eight civilians, and injured numerous others, at the busy Kantin Kwari textile market in Kano. On the same day, Boko Haram gunmen stormed the town of Gajiganna, not far from their stronghold in Sambisa Forest, destroying

houses with petrol bombs. Eleven people were killed, and 17 were hospitalized. The following day, 32 people were killed and 47 hospitalized when twin car bombs exploded in the evening in the central Nigerian city of Jos. One bomb went off in front of a popular fast food outlet, and the other exploded at the entrance to a busy bus terminal. The attacks occurred half an hour apart, with the second killing several rescue workers who had responded to the scene of the first.

These attacks left over 50 people dead and many injured. The three events were spread across a sizeable area of Nigeria (see Figure 2), and the attacks in Jos were outside Boko Haram’s normal area of operation. All three attacks were highly salient, receiving widespread coverage in the Nigerian media. Details of this coverage are included in the supporting information (SI), along with evidence from Google Trends data that information on the attacks was widely accessed in Nigeria. This gives us confidence that knowledge of the attacks was widespread amongst Nigerians in the immediate aftermath of the events.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>A further attack occurred in Gumsuri on December 14, 2014, resulting in over 30 deaths. News of this attack did not break until December 17 because gunmen destroyed local communication towers. Only after survivors arrived in Maiduguri did information about the event emerge (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/12/18/boko-haram-kills-dozens-in-northeast-nigeria> (last accessed May 20, 2021). Our

Our estimation strategy splits the sample into treatment and control groups, consisting of respondents interviewed before and after the attacks, respectively. We drop respondents interviewed on the actual days of the attacks (December 10 and 11) because it is not possible to know precisely who on these days was interviewed before and after the attacks had occurred and information about the attacks was available.<sup>10</sup> We use this setup to estimate the linear ordinary least squares (OLS) model:

$$Y_{is} = \delta Post_{is} + \beta X_{is} + \gamma Z_s + \epsilon_{is} \quad (1)$$

For the analysis of political trust  $Y_{is}$  is an index of political trust for respondent  $i$  in state  $s$ . The measure is constructed by averaging responses to questions asking how much people trust a set of political institutions that includes the president, parliament, the Independent National Electoral Commission, the Federal Inland Revenue Services, the respondents' local government council, and their state governor.<sup>11</sup> We also estimate a series of separate linear probability models for each institution, where  $Y_{is}$  represents indicators coded one if the respondent says they trust the institution at all and zero otherwise.

To investigate whether the attacks increased collective national identity, we use responses to a question asking respondents whether they identify more as Nigerian or as a member of their self-identified ethnic group. This question is useful because it measures the strength of attachment to a collective national identity, while also acknowledging that individuals hold multiple and often competing identities (Green 2020).<sup>12</sup> As Wimmer (2017) notes, the strength of national identification as captured by this question is distinct from its valence or an individual's moral evaluative identification with the nation, which might be better captured by measures of national pride. Although ideally we would examine both, questions about national pride are not available in the data.

main results restrict the analysis to respondents interviewed before this later attack. Estimates using samples that include respondents interviewed from December 14 onwards are robust to controls for exposure to this attack from December 14 and/or December 17.

<sup>10</sup> Although the survey data contains time stamps, limited reception means these do not always accurately reflect the time interviews were conducted. In addition, we cannot know precisely when during the days of the attacks information about them became widely available.

<sup>11</sup> This measure takes the average of the set of binary responses coded one if the respondent says they trust the institution at all and zero otherwise. The results are equivalent with a measure that scales responses using Cronbach's alpha.

<sup>12</sup> This may also be a weakness, since the question creates a forced duality between national and ethnic identities, such that an increase in national identification requires a concomitant reduction in ethnic identification, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, given the theoretical claims motivating the analysis, it is arguably preferable to capture the strength of an individual's attachment to the collective national identity.<sup>13</sup> To this end, we estimate the effects of terror attacks as in Equation 1, where  $Y_{is}$  is an indicator coded one if the respondent feels only Nigerian or feels more Nigerian than they feel a member of their ethnic group and zero otherwise.

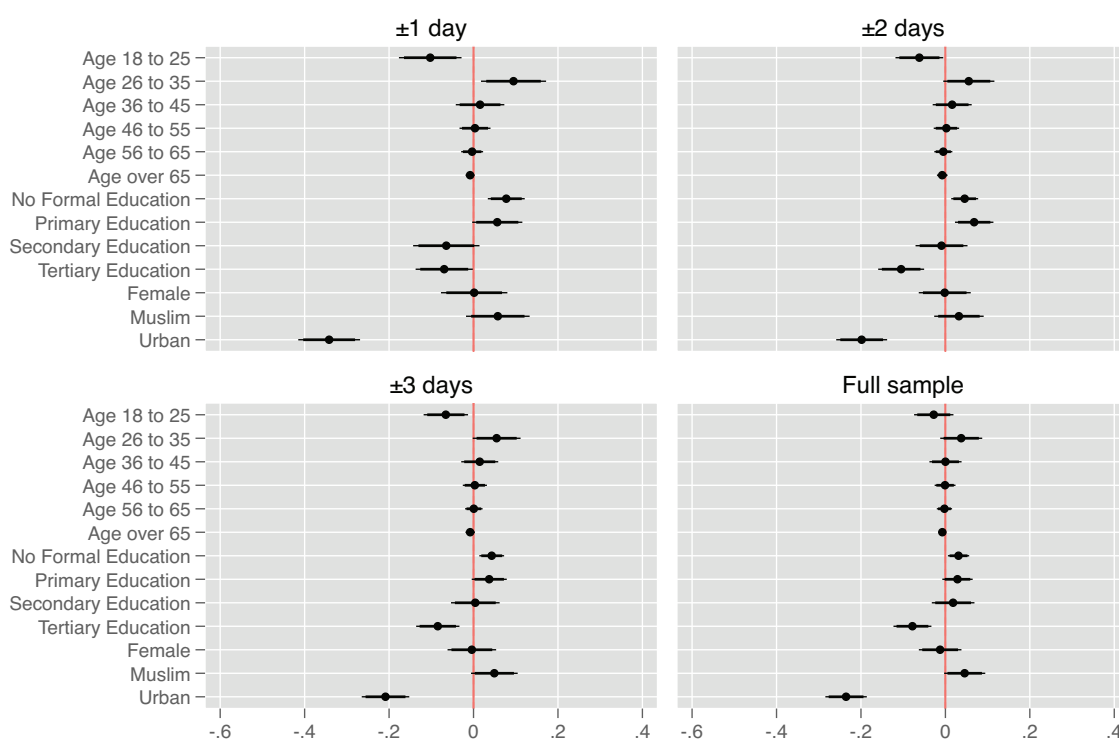
In all models,  $Post_{is}$  is a binary indicator coded one if the respondent was interviewed after the attacks took place and zero if they were interviewed before. This means that  $\delta$  is the main parameter of interest and gives an estimate of the causal effect of the terror attacks on institutional trust and national identification.  $X_{is}$  is a vector of demographic controls that includes categorical measures of age and education, and indicators for whether the respondent is female, Muslim, and lives in an urban area.<sup>14</sup>  $Z_s$  represents a set of state fixed effects. Summary statistics are included in the SI (pp. 1–2). Below we discuss the pretreatment balance of observable characteristics across the treatment and control groups, and in the section entitled “Robustness” we consider other potential threats to identification.

To precisely estimate the effect of the attacks, we restrict the analysis to a narrow bandwidth around the attack days. This limits the possibility that we are identifying compound treatment effects, where the estimates might conflate the effects of terrorism with other factors, such as the government's response to the attacks. We report estimates from a range of bandwidths, but the concentrated nature of the survey fieldwork means that we have sufficient statistical power from as narrow as two days either side of the attacks. Figure A.1 in the SI (p. 4) shows the statistical power for the range of bandwidths, demonstrating that we have a sufficient sample to detect an effect of one-fifth of a standard deviation change in the outcome variable with 80% power even when the analysis is restricted to respondents interviewed two days either side of the attacks.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that narrower bandwidths are not always preferable with the UESD because the smaller samples can reduce

<sup>13</sup> This fits with work in social psychology that views national identity and patriotism as a form of social identity, and therefore takes it to be a sense of group attachment or belonging (Huddy and Khatib 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Results are robust to controls for measures of accessibility, infrastructure, and the presurvey security situation, which could be related to the survey rollout and could influence levels of political trust. See SI Section B.2, pp. 13–14.

<sup>15</sup> Figures generated using replication code from Munoz, Falco-Gimeno, and Hernandez (2020).

**FIGURE 5 Covariate Balance across Treatment and Control Groups**

Notes: Panels show bivariate balance plots across treatment and control groups for bandwidths of one, two, and three days, and the full sample.

power without necessarily reducing bias (Munoz, Falco-Gimeno, and Hernandez 2020).

We check for pretreatment covariate balance across the treatment and control groups, and find significant differences across some covariates (see Figure 5). In particular, respondents in the treatment group are slightly older, have lower levels of education, and are less likely to live in urban areas. This is potentially problematic if younger people, urban residents, and/or those with higher levels of education are less trusting of political institutions. This could be the case if, for example, these categories of respondents are more likely to be exposed to information about corruption.<sup>16</sup> Analysis of the correlates of institutional trust in the control group show no significant relationship between trust and either age or education, though urban residence is negatively correlated with trust (see SI Table A.3, p. 3). We deal with this imbalance in two ways. First, we include controls for these covariates. Second, following Munoz, Falco-Gimeno, and Hernandez (2020), we preprocess the data using entropy balancing.

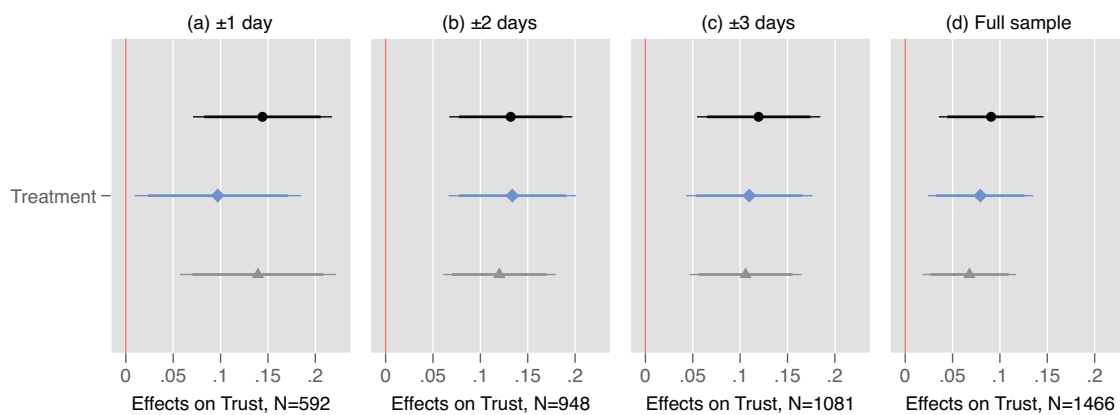
<sup>16</sup>Urbanites across Africa are less supportive of incumbents and less satisfied with democracy (Harding 2020), factors which are likely to correlate with institutional trust.

## Results

### Trust

Figure 6 shows the estimated effects of Boko Haram attacks on the political trust index. The panels show effects estimated within bandwidths of one, two, and three days, and estimates using the full survey sample. Estimates are presented for models with only state fixed effects (circles), with controls for covariates (diamonds), and with data preprocessed using entropy balanced weights (triangles). Bars show 90% and 95% confidence intervals. For estimates using bandwidths between 1 and 3 days before and after the attacks, the estimated effect of terrorism is to increase political trust by roughly one-third of a standard deviation of the pretreatment mean. The estimated effect is slightly smaller but still statistically significant when the full sample is used. These sizeable effects are robust to the range of bandwidths and model specifications estimated.

It is possible that the effects are greater for respondents living closer to the attacks. The inclusion of state fixed effects controls for much of this potential geographic variation, but further analysis provides no evidence of larger effects for respondents closer to the

**FIGURE 6 The Effect of Terror Attacks on Political Trust**

Notes: Panels show effects estimated within bandwidths of one, two, and three days as well as using the full survey sample. Estimates are for OLS models with only state fixed effects (circles), with controls for covariates (diamonds), and with data preprocessed using entropy balanced weights (triangles). Bars show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

attacks. First, estimates interacting exposure to the attacks with a north/south indicator show the effects are not significantly different for respondents in the north, where all three attacks occurred (SI Figure B.5, p. 20). Second, estimates interacting exposure with measures of distance to the attacks also show the effects on trust are not conditional on proximity (SI Figure B.6, p. 21).

As shown in Figure 7, similar results hold when we analyze the effect on trust in each of the individual institutions. These results are from models estimated within a 2-day bandwidth. This is our preferred specification because it offers the narrowest bandwidth that provides sufficient power, but results hold across the other bandwidths (SI Figure B.2, p. 16). The effects are positive, substantial and significant for each of the different institutions, although for the electoral commission and state governors the effect is significant at the 90% level. This demonstrates that the effect of terrorism on the trust index is not driven by trust in any single institution.

These results largely mirror those from previous studies run in the United States and Europe, which have found that terror attacks increase trust in political institutions.<sup>17</sup> Extending this work to Nigeria, our results show that even in a context of fragile institutions and frequent episodes of political violence, terrorism can increase institutional trust. Existing studies in other contexts have attributed this relationship to a rally effect. As discussed in the section named “Terrorism and Political Trust,” the most prominent explanation for such effects is that terror attacks increase political trust because they increase patriotism, bolstering support for representations of the collective group identity such as national

political institutions. If these arguments linking rally effects to a heightened sense of patriotism are correct, we should also expect to see the Boko Haram attacks leading to an increase in national identification.

### National versus Ethnic Identification

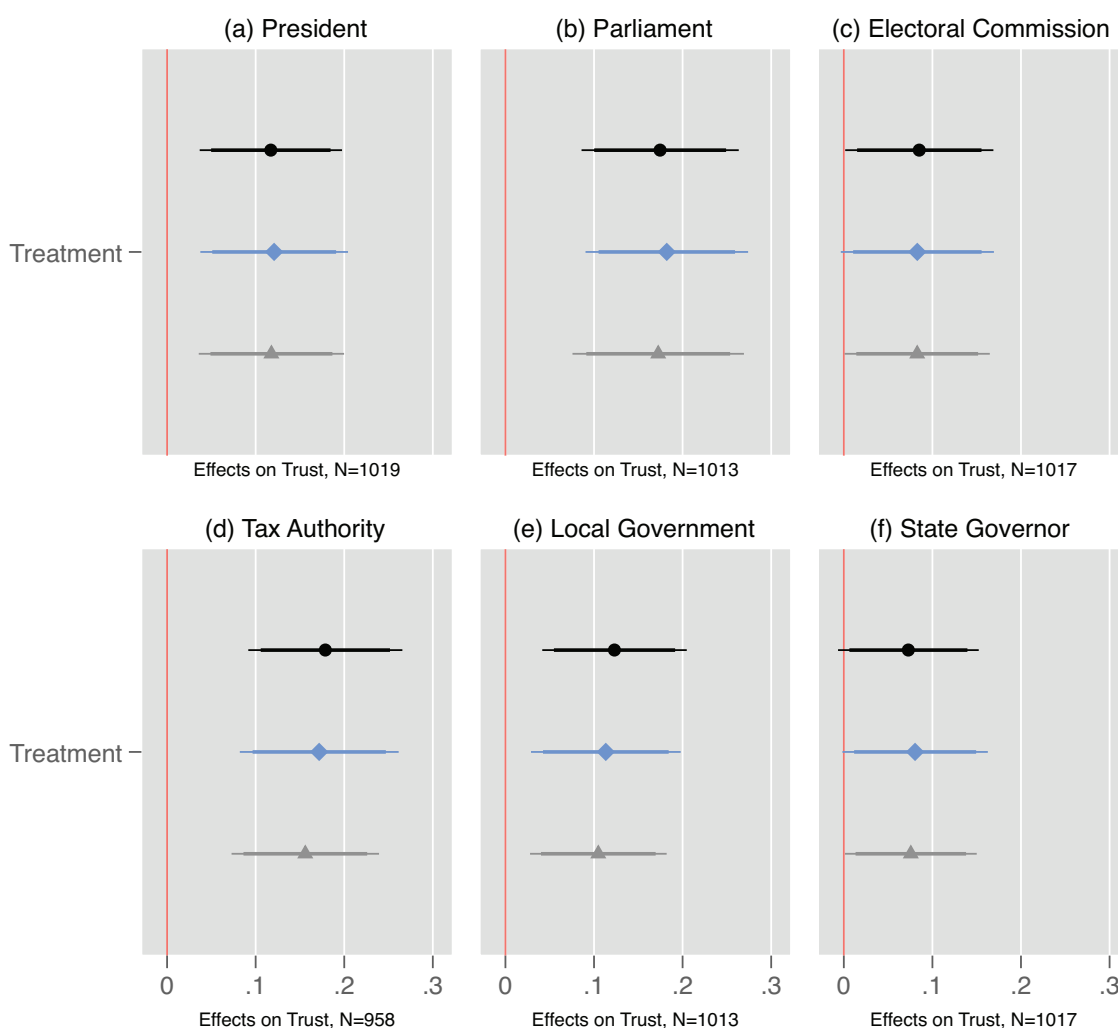
Figure 8 shows estimated effects of Boko Haram attacks on the salience of respondents’ national as opposed to ethnic identity. If the rally effect works through the patriotism mechanism, we should see a positive effect whereby exposure to the attacks increases the salience of national identification. In fact we see the opposite: the attacks decreased the salience of national identity. As with trust, for the estimates using bandwidths between one and three days, the effect is to decrease the strength of national versus ethnic identification by roughly one-third of a standard deviation of the pretreatment mean. Again, the estimated effect is smaller but still statistically significant when the full sample is used and is robust to the range of bandwidths and model specifications we investigate.<sup>18</sup>

While earlier studies have argued that terrorism leads to an increase in patriotism and collective national identity, this research is one of the few attempts to systematically investigate the causal effect of terrorism on identity.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to earlier studies’ claims, we find no evidence that the rally effect resulting from terror attacks is accompanied by a strengthening of national identity.

<sup>18</sup>Smaller sample sizes reflect the fact that fewer respondents answered the identity questions compared to the trust questions.

<sup>19</sup>Giani (2021) finds that foreign jihadist threats increase security fear in Europe but do not increase ethnic prejudice.

<sup>17</sup>The magnitude of the effects is also similar to previous studies.

**FIGURE 7 The Effect of Terror Attacks on Trust in Different Political Institutions**

*Notes:* Panels show effects estimated within a bandwidth of two days. Estimates are for OLS models with only state fixed effects (circles), with controls for covariates (diamonds), and with data preprocessed using entropy balanced weights (triangles). Bars show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

Instead, and importantly, we find evidence that terrorism by Boko Haram in Nigeria causes a decrease in national identification, while increasing the salience of ethnic identities.

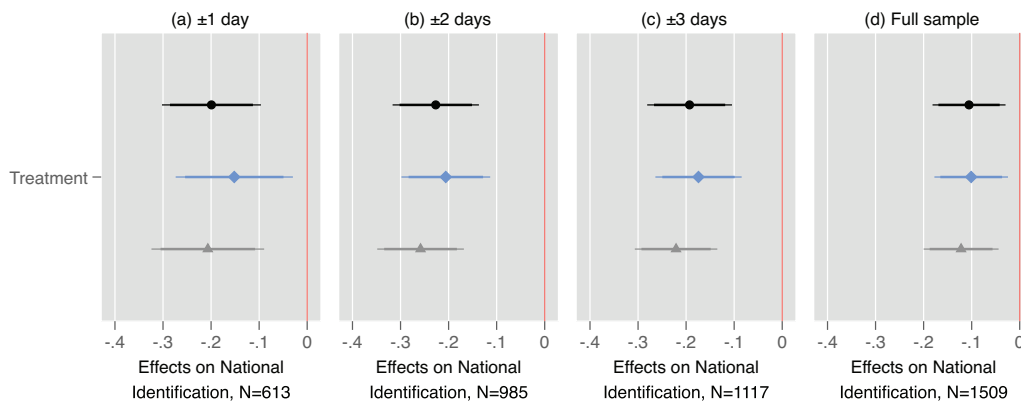
Again we consider whether the effects are conditional on proximity to the attacks. Unlike with trust, however, the negative effect of the attacks on national identification is significantly larger for respondents in the north. The negative effect is also larger for those living closer to where the attacks occurred, diminishing with greater distance from the locations of the attacks (see SI Section B.6, pp. 20-21).<sup>20</sup> We interpret these differences

in the conditional effects as further evidence that the observed rally effects do not operate through the patriotism mechanism and that the impact of the attacks on trust and identity operates through distinct channels.

In the section called “Alternative Mechanisms,” we discuss alternative mechanisms to explain the positive effect of terrorism on trust. Before doing so, we consider why terrorism might decrease national identification in this context and address potential concerns about the main results’ robustness.

**Explaining Stronger Ethnic Identification.** As noted in the section entitled “Terrorism and Political Trust,” there are at least three possible reasons why, in certain contexts, terror attacks may not increase patriotism. The

<sup>20</sup>This resonates with work showing that distance to locations of violence correlates with various political and economic outcomes (Charnysh and Finkel 2017).

**FIGURE 8 The Effect of Terror Attacks on National versus Ethnic Identification**

Notes: Panels show effects estimated within bandwidths of one, two, and three days as well as using the full survey sample. Estimates are for OLS models with only state fixed effects (circles), with controls for covariates (diamonds), and with data preprocessed using entropy balanced weights (triangles). Bars show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

first relates to the relationship between identity cleavages. Nigeria's population is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims, and this religious cleavage overlaps with ethnic divisions (Anugwom 2019). Therefore, it is possible that the attacks by Boko Haram, a Salafi jihadist organization, primed religion, and thereby increased the salience of ethnicity as a proxy for religious identification. If so, one might expect stronger effects on national identity for Christians, and yet we see the opposite; Figure B.5 in the SI (p. 20) shows significantly larger negative effects for Muslims.

We investigate this further by separating these different aspects of identity, using questions asking whether respondents would dislike having neighbors from different ethnic groups or religions. If the attacks primed religious identities, they should increase the dislike of having neighbors from different religions. Instead, we find that while treated respondents are significantly more likely to say they would dislike having a non-coethnic neighbor, there is no such significant effect on the dislike of having neighbors from different religions (SI Figure B.3, p. 18). These results suggest that the decrease in national identification is not due to attacks priming religion.

Another possible explanation for why the attacks decreased national identification follows recognition of Boko Haram as a domestic terrorist organization. Much of the existing work on rally effects emphasizes the impact of national crises resulting from foreign threats, but Boko Haram was formed in Nigeria by Nigerians, remains based in Nigeria, and primarily recruits Nigerians (Anugwom 2019). Therefore, the absence of a foreign threat in this case may explain why the attacks did not galvanize people behind the collective Nigerian identity.

This raises a third related explanation: that Boko Haram is viewed as having an ethnic basis. Specifically, because Boko Haram's membership is predominantly Kanuri, a large ethnic group concentrated in northeast Nigeria with a history of territorial conflict with the Hausa-Fulani, its attacks are perceived by some Nigerians as targeted primarily against the Hausa-Fulani groups (Olaniyan and Asuelime 2014; Pieri and Zenn 2016). We discuss the basis of these perceptions further in Section B.4 of the SI (p. 17). If this is the case we might expect Hausa-Fulani respondents to be most likely to turn towards their ingroup ethnic identity as a result of Boko Haram attacks. This expectation fits with the heterogeneous treatment effects showing that the effect on identity is largest for Hausa respondents (SI Figure B.5, p. 20).

## Robustness

The benefit of the UESD approach is that, conditional on observed covariates, the analysis provides an unbiased estimate of the effect of the terror attacks on political trust and national versus ethnic identification. Identification of these effects relies on assumptions about excludability and ignorability (Munoz, Falco-Gimeno, and Hernandez 2020), which we evaluate here.

**Excludability.** The identification strategy requires that observed differences in trust and national identification between the treatment and control groups must only be due to the attacks. This assumption could be violated in several ways. First, differences in trust and national identification could be caused by *collateral events* triggered by

the attacks, such as a government response, rather than the attacks themselves. The narrow bandwidths within which we estimate the effects mitigate this problem, and we found no qualitative evidence of an immediate and direct government response to the attacks we study.

Differences in trust and national identification could also be caused by *simultaneous events* occurring at the same time as the attacks. On December 11, 2014, the same day as the explosions in Jos, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) announced that Vice President Namadi Sambo would run again as President Goodluck Jonathan's running mate. Also on that day, the main opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) party announced Muhammadu Buhari as the winner of their primary election. This is potentially problematic, if somehow these announcements affected political trust or national identification.

However, there are good reasons to think these announcements are unlikely to have affected the outcomes under investigation, not least because they were widely anticipated; the ruling party's vice presidential candidate did not change, and Buhari had contested the previous four elections as the main opposition party candidate.

Further analyses provide confidence that our estimates do not reflect the effect of the primary announcements. First, if the announcement of Buhari as the opposition party candidate affected political trust, we should also see an increase in trust in opposition parties, but we do not.<sup>21</sup> Second, we might expect larger effects for coethnics of the announced candidates. Sambo is Hausa and Buhari is Fulani, but we see no larger effects on trust for members of these groups (SI Figure B.5, p. 20). Similarly, both are Muslims from the north, but the effects on trust are no larger among northerners and are actually slightly smaller for Muslims. However, we do see that the estimated negative effects on national identification are larger for Hausa respondents.<sup>22</sup>

We considered this conditional effect in the section entitled "Explaining Stronger Ethnic Identification," but it is worth noting that if this were driven by the announcement of Sambo as Jonathan's running mate, existing theory and evidence would expect the opposite effect, because having a coethnic in the national leadership

has been found to increase national identification (Green 2020). In addition, analysis of Google Trends data shows no spike in searches for Namadi Sambo on the days of the attacks (see SI Figure B.12, p. 28), suggesting that the announcement of his candidacy had limited salience.

However, we do see a spike in Google searches for Buhari. Combined with the close relationship between the Hausa and Fulani groups (Mustapha 2006) and the fact that estimated effects on national identity are larger for Hausa respondents, this raises a question over whether the effect on identity is driven by the attacks or the primaries (or both). This issue is further complicated by the interaction between terror attacks and the elections resulting from Buhari's campaign focus on terrorism. Further analysis of media content presented in Section B.10 in the SI (pp. 30–35) suggests the attacks were at least as salient as the primaries, but it is important to caveat that we cannot separate the causal effects of the attacks and primary elections on identity with complete certainty.

Finally, differences in the outcomes of interest could be caused by *unrelated time trends*. Placebo tests, splitting the control group at its empirical mean, suggest that the results are not simply reflecting preexisting time trends (SI Figure B.7, p. 23). The results are also unaffected if we control for the interview date (SI Figure B.10, p. 26).

**Ignorability.** The identification strategy also requires that treatment status be independent of potential outcomes. Again this assumption could be violated in several ways. First, the treatment and control groups could differ due to an *imbalance on observables*, which may be related to the outcomes of interest. We deal with potential problems arising from the imbalance on observable covariates noted in the method section by either controlling for the observable covariates or preprocessing the data using entropy balancing, giving conditional ignorability. Another potential concern stems from the nature of the fieldwork process, which saw interviews rolled out by state.<sup>23</sup> This means that our treatment and control groups are not perfectly balanced across all states.<sup>24</sup> To deal with this we include state fixed effects in the analyses.

Despite conditioning on observable covariates, treatment status may also vary over unobservable factors. Within UESD designs a particular problem can arise due to *reachability*, if certain types of respondents refuse

<sup>21</sup>Results in SI Figure B.4, p. 19. The coefficient is only significant in estimates using the full sample, which suggests they are influenced by some other factor occurring after the attacks and primary announcements.

<sup>22</sup>These effects are also larger for northerners and Muslims, although these indicators are highly correlated with the Hausa dummy, and when all three interactions are estimated together only the conditional effect for Hausa respondents remains significant.

<sup>23</sup>There is no evidence from the survey documentation that the attacks influenced the fieldwork rollout.

<sup>24</sup>Of the 34 states included in the survey (out of 37 in total, including the Federal Capital Territory), a majority are represented in both treatment and control groups, providing substantial identifying variation in treatment.

to participate or are harder to reach, rendering them more likely to be interviewed posttreatment. Respondent selection in the Afrobarometer surveys does not require repeated call-backs, making reachability less problematic. And again, the narrow bandwidths within which we estimate the main effects work against this potential concern. As an additional check we run a placebo population test using data from Round 5 of the Afrobarometer series, splitting the sample into control and treatment groups based on whether they were interviewed before and after a specific date, with the date chosen such that the proportion of treated respondents matches that in the Round 6 survey. This analysis does not support a “treatment” effect on trust in the placebo population (SI Section B.7, pp. 22–26).<sup>25</sup> Since the surveys used very similar sampling and respondent selection procedures, this provides further confidence that the effects are not due to reachability.

A related concern can arise due to *attrition* if treatment status is correlated with item non-response on the outcomes of interest. Analysis of non-response shows no such correlation with the political trust questions, but respondents in the treatment group are marginally more likely to answer the question about national versus ethnic identification.<sup>26</sup> Further analysis suggests this is because women were slightly less likely to respond to this question before treatment, but no less likely after. However, women were no more likely to identify on national as opposed to ethnic lines pre- or posttreatment, which suggests attrition is not driving the estimated effects (SI Figure B.11, p. 27).

Finally, the ignorability assumption can be violated by *noncompliance* if some members of the treatment group are not exposed due to lack of information about the attacks. This is unlikely to be the case because the attacks were highly salient events. In addition to the analysis in SI Section B.10 (pp. 30–35), coverage in local news reports provides evidence that information about the attacks was widely and readily available (SI Table B.4, p. 29). Furthermore, Google Trends data show large spikes in searches for key terms related to the attacks in their immediate aftermath, suggesting that this information was widely accessed (SI Figure B.12, p. 28).

<sup>25</sup>Afrobarometer (2013). As detailed in SI Section B.7 (pp. 22–26), we construct two different versions of the placebo test. Across these two versions, estimates using the placebo population only return three significant coefficients from 24 specifications varying by model and bandwidth choice, all three in the less preferred version.

<sup>26</sup>94.2% of respondents in the control group responded to the identification question compared to 97.6% of respondents in the treatment group.

## Alternative Mechanisms

In this section we consider two possible alternatives to the patriotism mechanism: anxiety and opinion leadership.

### Anxiety

One alternative explanation for rally effects following terror attacks is suggested by social psychology models focusing on emotional responses to threats, in particular anxiety. Experimental evidence has shown that anxiety during a crisis induces a desire for security and increases support for symbols of security, such as the government or president (Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991; Hetherington and Suhay 2011). By this reasoning, crises like terror attacks lead to a collective loss of sense of security, thereby increasing institutional trust as heightened anxiety turns citizens towards the state as an actual or symbolic source of security (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Lambert, Schott, and Scherer 2011; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Although the available data do not allow us to test this mechanism as rigorously as the patriotism channel, we explore three suggestive pieces of evidence.

First, following the approach of Giani (2021), if we assume that respondents closest to the attacks experience the greatest anxiety, then this mechanism would imply that the magnitude of effects increases with proximity. The results presented in Figures B.5 and B.6 in the SI (pp. 20–21) do not support this expectation. The effect of the attacks on trust is not significantly different for respondents in northern Nigeria, where all three attacks occurred, compared to those in the south. Similarly, the magnitude of the effect is not conditional on linear distance from any one of the three attacks or from the single closest attack.

The assumption that anxiety increases with proximity may be flawed if terrorism induces anxiety by priming recollections of past terror events or fears of future attacks for citizens living far from where the attacks occurred. Therefore, in a second approach, we explore whether the effect of the attacks is conditional on the previous history of attacks within a respondent's state. Again we find no evidence that this is the case (SI Figure C.1, p. 39).

Third, we attempt to explore the impact of the attacks on anxiety using additional items from the Afrobarometer survey. None of the survey questions offer compelling measures of anxiety or security concerns, but the best available asks respondents to state their top two priorities for additional government spending, with “security, like the police and military” one of the available

responses. We code two dummy variables for whether respondents cite security as (1) the top priority or (2) one of the top two priorities. While this captures security concerns to some extent, it does so only in a relative rather than absolute sense. It is possible that the attacks increased a respondent's anxiety and their demand for greater investment in security, without displacing alternative areas (such as education or healthcare) as their top priorities for additional spending. Nevertheless, analysis of this suggestive measure of security concerns also provides no support for the anxiety mechanism (SI Figures C.2 and C.3, pp. 40–41).<sup>27</sup> In sum, while the evidence is weaker than that against the patriotism mechanism, the results do not support the anxiety channel.

### Opinion Leadership

A second possible explanation is suggested by the early literature on rally effects, which noted the role of opinion leadership as an alternative to the patriotism mechanism (Brody and Shapiro 1989). By this approach, rally effects stem from the lack of critical comment by opposition leaders during crises, which leave the media with little to report that is not supportive of the president (Baker and Oneal 2001). The key critique of this explanation stems from its risk of circular reasoning, since the lack of criticism may be a response to the rally itself, as opinion leaders seek to remain in step with public support for the president (Hetherington and Nelson 2003, 38). Nevertheless, the idea that rally effects follow from a form of “media persuasion” whereby citizens are exposed to a supportive elite consensus (Schubert, Stewart, and Curran 2002) presents a plausible alternative explanation for the positive effect of Boko Haram attacks on political trust in Nigeria.

Even more than with the anxiety channel, we lack data to evaluate the opinion leadership mechanism in a compelling way. Nevertheless, the logic of this mechanism is in line with findings from Demarest, Godefroidt, and Langer (2020), who see surprisingly little differences in the framing of Boko Haram violence in 2014–2015 across southern Nigerian/Christian versus northern Nigerian/Muslim newspapers. Given that the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, was a southern Christian, a partisan model of media reporting might expect a southern (northern) newspaper to defend (criticize) the federal government's response. Therefore, the absence of significant partisan differences in the media's

framing of Boko Haram attacks fits with the claim that rally effects result from an absence of exposure to critical opposition in the immediate aftermath of terror attacks.

Further analysis of the Demarest, Godefroidt, and Langer (2020) data on newspaper framing of Boko Haram violence in 2014–2015 suggests that reports were significantly more likely to take a neutral perspective on the federal government's response in the week following a major Boko Haram attack (for details, see SI Section C.2, pp. 45–46). This increased neutrality appears to follow equally from reductions in positive and negative framing of the government's response. Moreover, the data only cover two national newspapers, and neither online nor broadcast media are considered. Nevertheless, this analysis suggests the opinion leadership mechanism may be a potentially fruitful avenue for future research.

### Conclusion

Terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States have been found to increase trust in political institutions. Extending these findings to Nigeria, we find—perhaps surprisingly—that the same relationship holds in a context where political violence is far more frequent and political institutions less stable. Exploiting the unexpected occurrence of terror attacks during fieldwork for a public opinion survey gives confidence that the estimated effects are causal. One explanation for this effect is that crises, such as terror attacks, increase patriotism, but we find no evidence that attacks by Boko Haram cause Nigerians to identify more along national lines. Instead, we see an increase in ethnic identification. This may be due to Boko Haram's status as a domestic rather than foreign terror organization and the fact that attacks by Boko Haram have been perceived by some Nigerians as having an ethnic basis.

These findings demonstrate that even in a context of frequent violence and institutional instability, terrorism can increase political trust. This does not appear to be driven by an increase in patriotism, and future research should further examine anxiety and opinion leadership as potential mechanisms underpinning the effect of terrorism on political trust. The findings also suggest that in contexts where society is divided along ethnic lines and where ethnic divisions are politically salient, domestic terrorism can increase ethnic identification and has the potential to accentuate ethnic divisions. Given the importance of these findings, future work should

<sup>27</sup> Analyzing several additional items that plausibly capture security fear also provides no evidence for the anxiety mechanism (SI Section C.1, pp. 38–44).

also further explore the mechanisms linking terrorism to ethnic versus national identification.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix A:** Summary Statistics, Balance, & Power

**Appendix B:** Additional Results

**Appendix C:** Alternative Mechanisms