

An Impassable Road to Glory*

Loss and Displacement in the Republic of Armenia[†]

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Abstract

This study considers the impact of individual attitudes to both historical and recent territorial losses on political behavior. It explores the connection between individual attitudes towards lost territories and their influence on incumbent support and participation in anti-government protests. Using data from an original survey conducted in Armenia, the paper estimates the causal impact of individual concern over lost territory, leveraging exogenous variation induced by exposure to displaced persons and the visibility of Mount Ararat. The analysis shows that those valuing lost territory more are prone to withdrawing government support, emphasizing candidate traits related to symbolic compliance, and engaging in risky protests. This effect

*From the poem *I love my sweet Armenia...* by famed nationalist poet Yeghisheh Charents, inscribed on the Ararat Arch monument near the Armenian-Turkish border.

[†]This article refers to some geographical features by names that are disputed by multiple countries that lay claim to them. For the sake of readability, the most commonly-used English-language names are used throughout (for instance, Mount Ararat is referred to as Ararat, not as Agri or Masis), but this should not be taken as implying any particular stance by the author on their ownership.

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is mediated by emotional distress related to territorial losses. Notably, social network position, rather than media consumption or political partisanship, drives these effects, highlighting a potent grassroots check on political elites in nascent democracies. These findings extend the existing understanding of irredentism, uncovering the role of public attitudes in contexts beyond interstate conflicts. They also deepen insights into the legacies of political violence, revealing how present contexts shape interpretation of historical collective trauma. Lastly, the study enriches knowledge about nationalism and populism in emerging democracies, spotlighting how divergent narrative beliefs about the nation can impact behavior even in a context of universally high nationalism.

1 Territorial losses as a source of opposition

The power of territorial claims rooted in perceived historical grievances to generate conflict outcomes is well-documented, remaining a major source of both interstate and civil war throughout modern history (Wimmer & Min, 2006; Toft, 2014; Siroky & Hale, 2017; Cederman et al., 2021). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a clear indication of the continued significance of nationalist claims to territory based on historical losses, as a key component of Vladimir Putin’s efforts to legitimate the war to his domestic audience has involved representing the Ukrainian state as “wholly created by Russia” by means of “separating, ripping [from Russia] its historical territories” (Putin, 2022).

Yet, irredentism at the level of state policy, even in relatively closed political systems, is unlikely to survive without the existence of corresponding attitudes among the general population (Shelef, 2020). However, despite the recognition of territorial claims as a driving force behind conflict, remarkably little is known about either the causes or consequences of mass attitudes towards historical territorial losses. Nevertheless, there is good reason to suppose that individual irredentism has important consequences for political behavior. In previous work (Carter & Pop-Eleches, 2023), I show on the basis of systematic cross-national survey data that individual

concern for past losses is strongly associated with support for populist outsider parties and was a driving force behind the rise of the far-right nationalist party, AUR, in Romania in 2020.

In this article, I extend these findings using a pre-registered¹ original survey carried out in the Republic of Armenia in 2023 to study the causal effect of the relative value placed by individuals on lost territory on partisan preferences and patterns of participation. A major obstacle to studying the consequences of caring about lost territories is that these attitudes are highly endogenous. While education, political alignment, media consumption, and geographical proximity to lost territories all play an important role, these factors are all either a matter of individual choice or highly confounded with other aspects of political geography. The Armenian setting makes it possible to overcome this limitation by introducing two sources of exogenous variation in the salience and content of attitudes towards past losses: the visibility of Mount Ararat, an important symbol of historical “Greater Armenia” (*mets hayk*), and the intensity of exposure to internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the 2020 conflict with Azerbaijan.

The Armenian setting is marked by both an unusually high overall salience and variety of historical losses. While not officially claimed by the present-day Armenian government, the lands corresponding to the classical and medieval kingdoms of Greater and Lesser Armenia far exceed the current borders of the Republic of Armenia and are a key reference point for contemporary Armenian popular nationalism (Suny, 1993). These historically distant losses have been overlaid, moreover, on a series of more proximate events. Of these, two are particularly notable: first, the 1921 Treaty of Kars established the borders between Soviet Armenia and the Turkish Republic, ceding large amounts of formerly Armenian land, including Mount Ararat itself, to Turkey. Second, the renewal of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 resulted in the loss of significant territory belonging to the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, as well as the loss of control of the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia with Karabakh and the displacement of over 90,000² people from Artsakh

¹The associated pre-analysis plan can be found at <https://osf.io/wn9am>.

²While official estimates indicate that approximately 91,000 people were displaced, all interviewees with direct experience in the resettlement process agreed that the actual figure was likely much higher.

into the republic of Armenia.

While both of these losses are well-known and emotionally charged for most Armenians, they remain open to interpretation with regards to their historical causes, the responsible parties, or their significance for current politics. In this paper, I estimate the causal effect of this variation using a combination of an instrumental variables (IV) design taking advantage of exogenous variation in the location of displaced populations and in the visibility of Mount Ararat, demonstrating that those who place the greatest importance on lost territory are more likely to withdraw their support from the government, emphasize programmatic over clientelist features of prospective candidates, and participate in dangerous anti-government protests without regard to personal risks. Notably, these effects are driven by the aversive emotions elicited by thoughts of territorial losses among those who view them as important, particularly pain and anxiety. Moreover, the attitudes held by individuals towards lost territory, as well as the narrative content of stories they tell about the most salient losses, are almost entirely explained by their social network position, and not by media consumption patterns or political partisanship, suggesting that territorial issues may act as a powerful “bottom-up” constraint on elites.

These findings have important implications for several areas of political science. First, they build directly on the extensive literature on the role of irredentism and territorial disputes in international conflict. While a large volume of research demonstrates the enduring power of disagreements over ownership of territory to provoke violent conflict (Chazan, 1991; Saideman & Ayres, 2000; Ambrosio, 2001; Wimmer & Min, 2006; Saideman & Ayres, 2008; Toft, 2014; Siroky & Hale, 2017; Shelef, 2016, 2020; Cederman et al., 2021) as well as the prevalence of irredentist attitudes as quasi-sacred values among ordinary people (Ginges et al., 2007; Atran & Axelrod, 2008; Ginges & Atran, 2009; Zellman, 2018), the role played by public attitudes to lost territory outside of interstate negotiations has gone essentially unexplored. Importantly, while overall levels of concern for lost territories among Armenians are predictably high, I show that the overwhelming majority of respondents do *not* frame the issue in conflictual terms, instead emphasizing it as a source of pain and dissatisfaction with the systems that allowed it to come to

pass.

This article also contributes to the growing body of work on the legacies of political violence (Balcells, 2012; Beissinger & Kotkin, 2014; Rozenas, Schutte, & Zhukov, 2017; Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Walden & Zhukov, 2020; Wang, 2021; Bautista et al., 2023), which has demonstrated the often dramatic and occasionally contradictory long-term behavioral consequences of both targeted and indiscriminate violence by states or warring parties on subsequent support for incumbents. Both direct and indirect memory of political violence, ranging from victimization in the Armenian Genocide or Stalinist repressions to participation in the ongoing war with Azerbaijan are near-universal in Armenia, with modest consequences for present-day behavior on average (Schaub, 2023). Unlike previous work, I focus not on the direct legacies of exposure to violence, but on how the current political environment shapes the way these legacies are *interpreted* by ordinary people and applied to political decisions. Importantly, while the average effects of past exposure on both behavior and attitudes are minimal in this context, I demonstrate that these “legacies” can be activated by subsequent events.

Finally, the article’s findings provide new insights into the role of nationalism and populism in partial democracies (Nodia, 1992; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; Yiftachel et al., 2004; Singh, 2015, 2021; Storey, 2012; Pop-Eleches, 2010; Brubaker, 2020). The drawing of physical boundaries is at the core of nationalism as a concept (Gellner, 2008 [1983]; Anderson, 2006 [1983]), yet the role of individual “mental geographies” (Knight, 1982) is rarely considered in empirical studies of nationalism. While nationalist attitudes are as widespread in Armenia as partisanship is scarce, I empirically document the presence of competing ideas about the nation itself, demonstrating that differing perspectives can lead to opposite patterns of political participation despite equal strength of national identification.

2 Lost Territory, Emotions, and Political Decision-Making

As mentioned in the previous section, no previous work has directly addressed the effect of losses of territory on domestic politics in comparative perspective. Nevertheless, this issue is closely tied up with long-standing debates in several fields: in comparative politics, the mechanisms underpinning historical legacies and the origins of nationalism; in international relations, the interplay between international and domestic politics and the effects of sacred or indivisible values on negotiation; and in political psychology, the issues of identity choice and the effects of risk and uncertainty on political decision-making.

A growing body of research on historical legacies, which seeks to explore the ways contemporary political outcomes are conditioned by the past by identifying robust causal chains linking historical events, institutions, or regimes to present-day variation (Beissinger & Kotkin, 2014; Wittenberg, 2015). The primary goal of most work in this vein has been simply showing that a legacy *exists*: authors begin either with an outcome of interest, such as divergent regime types (Pop-Eleches, 2007) or support for ex-authoritarians (Darden & Grzymala-Busse, 2006), or with an impactful historical event, such as the introduction of schooling (Wantchekon, Klačnja, & Novta, 2015), the slave trade (Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011), colonialism (Lowe et al., 2017), or repression (Rozenas, Schutte, & Zhukov, 2017). The concern is then with causally identifying an effect of the latter on the former; although some discussion of mechanisms is necessarily involved, this is typically of secondary importance, and has rarely been treated in comparative perspective (but see Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014).

In particular, for a large subset of historical legacies, conscious representation of the historical event itself, as well as transmission of memories across generations, is at the heart of the causal relation. People do not simply passively receive historical experiences as treatments: they are actively involved in interpreting them, and often do so in response to the way they are framed by elites in political discourse, by their own relatives, and in the education system (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Darden & Grzymala-Busse, 2006).

As alluded to earlier, interpretations of history in general, and the politics of territory in particular, are perhaps most closely tied to nationalism (and identity politics more generally); indeed, the idea of shared history is one of the core elements of most definitions of nationalism (Gellner, 2008 [1983]; Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Much of the classic work on nationalism emphasizes the centrality of the territorial construction of memory in the development of modern nationalism (Gellner, 2008 [1983]; Smith, 1986; Smith, 1996). In order to imagine the national community, it is necessary also to associate with a particular place, and to draw spatial lines that separate co-nationals from others (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). These authors, however, generally advance a view of nationalism-as-ideology that is concerned with the conceptual coherence of nationalist thought, but does not convincingly deal with why or how people respond to nationalist appeals. Given the general incoherence of the political ideologies held by most individuals (Converse, 2006[1964]), this is a non-trivial issue, and points to the need to establish the micro-level mechanisms linking an actual violation of nationalist principles with the emergence of nationalist politics.

Indeed, despite the near-universal acknowledgement that beliefs about history are central to successful nationalist movements, the processes by which they are created, maintained, and transformed have received remarkably little attention. The main exception to this comes not from political science, but from psychology, where this connection between (national) identity and narrative representations of history has been the focus of research on “collective memory”. Following Halbwachs (2020 [1950]), who originally coined the term, much of this work has treated collective memory as something emergent located at the group (family, ethnicity, nation) level, more than simply an aggregation of individual memories. As such, the appropriate level of analysis is taken to be “social representations” (Moscovici, 2001 [1984]), or conceptual networks tied to actual connections between communicating actors.

This view of collective memory lends itself naturally to research designs based on a narrative analysis of commemorative texts (Temin & Dahl, 2017). Thus, for instance, (Wertsch, 2002) identifies the existence of a powerful narrative template based on overcoming conspiracies by

foreign enemies in representations of Russian history, which is continually repurposed to make sense of new events, such as the 2008 war with Georgia (Wertsch & Karumidze, 2009), while Olick (2013) examines how rhetorical constructions of historical responsibility have shaped the course of German politics. Other work has focused on the ways political actors deliberately construct narratives to win support and enhance legitimacy, such as patriotic education efforts by the Chinese state aimed at framing history in terms of a glorious past followed by a “century of humiliation” (Wang, 2008), or efforts by Hungarian and Slovakian nationalists to foment distrust through reference to past conflict (Pytlas, 2013).

A large literature in international relations has also recognized the significance of territory, and its association with nationalism, as a source of conflict. Much of this work emphasises the material value of territory, with interstate conflict assumed to be driven by desire to control strategic and economic resources (Gibler, 2007; Huth, 2009). An important strand, however, focuses on the peculiar meaning attached to land by nationalists and the potential for bargaining to break down due to claims of indivisibility – the integrity and sovereignty of the nation are held as quasi-sacred values and are thus not amenable to bargaining or compromise (Toft, 2010, 2014; Goddard, 2006; Shelef, 2016; Manekin, Grossman, & Mitts, 2019). In particular, Shelef (2016) finds that the loss of territory that is discursively constructed as a homeland leads to increased conflict at all levels of intensity compared to territory that is not viewed as integral to the nation, underlining the importance of purely subjective understandings of territory (Shelef, 2020).

The other distinctive feature of territorial loss as a political issue is precisely the element of *loss*. Territorial loss is not simply the inverse of territorial gain: while conquests may induce a brief collective euphoria (Greene & Robertson, 2018; Greene & Robertson, 2020), the nostalgia and negative emotions associated with losses can persist for centuries. Historical losses – especially of territory – frequently elicit powerful emotions, sometimes even motivating acts of violence or self-sacrifice. Indeed, a sizeable literature has explored the phenomenon of “collective victimization”, often in the context of ongoing territorial disputes, highlighting the tendency of such beliefs to provoke powerful emotions, especially anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety. These

emotions, it is argued, may lead to cycles of violence, fueling hostility towards outgroups (the perceived victimizers) and increased perceived cohesion of and altruism towards the ingroup (fellow victims) (Schmader & Lickel, 2006; Tam et al., 2007; Halperin et al., 2008; Vollhardt, 2012; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015).

While group attachments and emotions are somewhat intertwined in this account, the former are generally understood to be a precondition for the latter: people feel anger in response to what they view as injustice perpetrated against their group *because* they both identify with it and view it as possessing a high degree of entitativity and historical continuity. The presence of such dramatic emotions need not imply that reflection on territorial losses leads to irrational or illogical decision-making, however. Emotions are not at odds with cognitive processes; rather, the two are mutually constitutive, with affective states acting as a form of cognitive feedback that modulates decision-making processes (Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2014; Mercer, 2010). Indeed, many of the key features of prominent cognitive models such as prospect theory – including loss aversion and reference dependence – are at least partly emotional in nature, and such emotional state and executive control thereof have been found to be major determinants of risk-taking behavior (Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Heilman et al., 2010). Crucially, the effects of particular emotional states have been found to depend not only on their valence (positive or negative), but also on the degree of arousal involved, such that anger or fear might increase impulsive decision making, while sadness tends to engender a more rational approach (Baillon, Koellinger, & Treffers, 2016).

3 Behavioral Consequences of Irredentist Narratives

In order to understand how salient narratives of territorial loss translate into observable behaviour, three basic questions need to be addressed: first, what constitutes “lost territory”; second, why do people value territory at all; and third, how do these values influence behavior when loss is made salient in a given decision context? I now turn to each of these in turn.

Although the concept of territory is often treated as relatively unproblematic – from a measurement standpoint, after all, it is generally straightforward to identify the geographical delimitations of formal political units – there are a number of subtle, yet important, barriers to conceptualizing “control over territory” in a manner that permits valid comparison. A single territory, in the sense of an area of land with arbitrarily drawn boundaries, may be interpreted in many ways by different groups and actors, resulting in multiple subjective constructions of the same physical space. The issue of *which* territory is appropriate to consider is also a complex one, as the boundaries drawn by different visions of “homeland” or even “region” do not generally overlap, nor are borders in reality often as clear-cut as those drawn on maps (Knight, 1982; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Fall, 2017). In the case of Armenia, for instance territories that are viewed by most Armenians as lost have ill-defined borders that based on land only briefly controlled by ancient kings (Suny, 1993), while the very same land in Nagorno-Karabakh that Armenians view as recently lost is seen by Azeris as regained following a long period of loss. Moreover, the state-centric frame of ‘territorial control’ is often inadequate: states may not have *de facto* control over land that is formally part of their sovereign territory due to the presence of local non-state actors, and imperial powers often exercise significant control outside of their official boundaries (Agnew, 1994, 2017).

From a purely theoretical perspective, the appropriate solution is to resolve these ambiguities by adopting a purely subjective definition of territory that does not privilege the state and allows both boundaries and the fact of control to vary at the individual level. Thus, for instance, the territory of Karabakh need neither necessarily coincide with the administrative boundaries of the Soviet Autonomous Oblast nor with the land currently controlled by the Republic of Artsakh. The answer to these questions depends on the “mental geography” (Knight, 1982) of each person. Geographers, it should be noted, have long recognized the centrality of appeals to history in constructing these mental maps (Murphy, 1990; O’Loughlin & Talbot, 2005), but the political processes by which this occurs – the focus of this dissertation – have gone largely unexamined.

While these views are clearly the result of ongoing processes of social construction, they

nonetheless exist at the level of individual perceptions, and any attempt to aggregate them to a “generally accepted” view would be potentially misleading. I therefore adopt the more conservative approach of allowing each person to define their own national geography, operationalized through open-ended survey questions with the aid of a map.

In addition to variation in these mental geographies of loss, individuals attach differing importance to particular territories. For those who have a direct personal connection to the lost territory – most notably refugees and IDPs – it is hardly surprising that it holds value. Besides the obvious emotional pain associated with being forced to leave one’s home, anyone with direct experience of the territory is clearly more likely to view it as holding intrinsic value, both economically and non-materially. In most cases, however, this applies only to a relatively small minority: most people have neither any material interests in the territory in question nor any particular personal connection to it. In cases such as the provinces of medieval Greater Armenia, moreover, the loss occurred sufficiently long ago that no living people even have any personal memory of a time when the territory was part of their country. What requires explanation, therefore, is why these people place value on territory.

It has been well established by work in the social identity theory tradition that people value group status directly as a source of self-esteem³. This implies in turn that any decline in the status of one’s group is experienced as a personal loss via its effect on self-esteem. The strength of the effect, however, is moderated by the degree of identity salience and group identification, which vary across individuals and contexts. In practice, this is likely to be the product of a combination of politics and geography: salience and group identification can be manipulated by political actors, but both the baseline level and their capacity to do so are largely determined by local conditions (Hopkins, 2010). In the Armenian case, I argue, the relevant local conditions are primarily the presence of powerful symbolic reminders of particular losses: either the former occupants of lost territory, such as IDPs from Karabakh, or physical reminders of older losses,

³While the phrase “self-esteem” may imply a second-order concern, that is not the case: the drive to view oneself positively is a fundamental motivation, and the inability to do so can be a source of considerable pain, potentially even resulting in acts of extreme violence.

such as monuments⁴ or, in this case, Mount Ararat.

Given that people value lost territory because of its connection to valued identities, then, it follows that reminders of painful losses trigger powerful negative emotions, placing those who experience them in a domain of losses *with respect to national status*. That is, by setting the reference point as a (possibly mythologized) period in the past when the nation was whole, such narratives present all future choices as between outcomes that are *no better than* how things were in the past. Moreover, by tying territorial wholeness to the spiritual wholeness of the nation, dominant narratives of territorial loss provoke considerable anxiety with regard to the future in a context of uncertainty over whether regaining territory is possible at all⁵ Drawing on prospect theory, I therefore argue that emphasizing the loss of territory induces a heightened degree of risk acceptance when people are faced with alternatives that they view as having the potential to increase national pride – but not necessarily in other domains.

The primary hypothesis is therefore that the salience of territorial loss at the individual level leads individuals to become more accepting of risky political action such as anti-government protests in the face of potential repression. In addition, respondents are expected to shift their political support away from the incumbent party, which has shown its inability to satisfy the nation’s need to become whole, and towards opposition challengers.

Moreover, these effects should be mediated by the emotional state induced by reflection on territorial loss, specifically anger or anxiety; and moderated by the internal narrative regarding territorial loss held by the individual. Finally, I use the visibility of Mount Ararat and social exposure to refugees from Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh as instruments for the individual salience of territorial loss. While both of these factors are expected to increase salience, their effects should differ: the visibility of Ararat, a symbol of historical Greater Armenia, will raise the

⁴Symbolic references to historical territorial losses are quite ubiquitous in Armenia. For instance, foreign visitors to Yerevan are greeted by a large billboard depicting Woodrow Wilson promising to restore Greater Armenia on the highway out of the airport, and a large painted map of the historical kingdom above the exit from the platform of the Republic Square metro station.

⁵This should be contrasted with the kind of “collective effervescence” (Greene & Robertson, 2018; Greene & Robertson, 2020) that can come from *regaining* valued territory, potentially buttressing support for the *status quo*.

salience of temporally distant losses, while the exposure to IDPs will raise the salience of the recent conflict with Azerbaijan and ongoing political disputes over border recognition.

Although the presence of both of these stimuli will to increase the salience of territorial loss overall, the relative importance of these two types of losses is predicted to have differing effects. Whereas the salience of the current conflict via IDP contact may result in a greater degree of hostility towards the establishment over its poor performance, the opposite effect is expected for the salience of temporally removed losses, for which symbolic compliance is higher in the form of regular public commemoration of the Armenian genocide and associated territorial losses.

More concisely, we expect the following:

H1: Respondents with higher salience of territorial loss will be more likely to emphasize symbolic compliance when choosing candidates, as well as to be more accepting on average of uncertain options.

H1A: This relationship will also extend to political participation, including in anti-government protests.

H2: Respondents with higher salience of territorial loss will be more likely to withdraw support from the establishment.

H3: The strength and direction of the relationships in H1 and H2 will be mediated by the emotional responses experienced when reflecting on loss and also by the narrative structure of respondents' beliefs about loss.

H3A: Those who blame internal actors will tend to support the opposition and risky actions, while those who blame external actors will lean more towards the establishment and conservative actions.

H4: Independently of treatment status, the narrative content of territorial loss attitudes will be associated as above with political preferences, holding all other political beliefs constant.

H5: Respondents with higher exposure to IDP populations from Artsakh will be more likely to mention Artsakh when asked to name a historical loss, while those who can see Ararat from their residence will be more likely to name other regions of historical Greater Armenia.

4 Data and Research Design

The primary data source for the study is an original survey conducted in Armenia in June-July 2023 and implemented by a well-regarded local survey firm. The achieved sample size of 1,166 respondents was split into a target of 30 respondents in each of 38 primary sampling units, corresponding to local communities (*hamaynkner*) in four provinces (*marzer*): Ararat, Kotayk, Aragatsotn, and Armavir. All communities correspond to small-to-medium sized settlements within daily commuting distance of the capital city, Yerevan, although no respondents with permanent residence in Yerevan itself were recruited. The locations of all research sites, as well as their visibility and IDP density status, are shown in Figure 1.

The sample does not correspond to a representative sample of the entire population of Armenia and should consequently not be used to draw asymptotic inference regarding all Armenians. Notably, Yerevan itself is excluded from sampling, despite containing over a third of the country’s population, due to the dramatically different social dynamics affecting city residents’ interactions with displaced populations. The immediate scope of inference is therefore limited to the target population: individuals living in small towns in the south-central part of Armenia and within three hours’ driving distance of Yerevan. Since the size of settlements in the sample varies from a few hundred to several thousand people while the target recruitment number remains fixed at 30, sampling weights are used to ensure that individuals represent the same total population throughout. Further details on the sampling and recruitment procedure can be found in the [Online Appendix](#).

In order to ensure that variation in both the presence of IDPs and the visibility of Mount Ararat

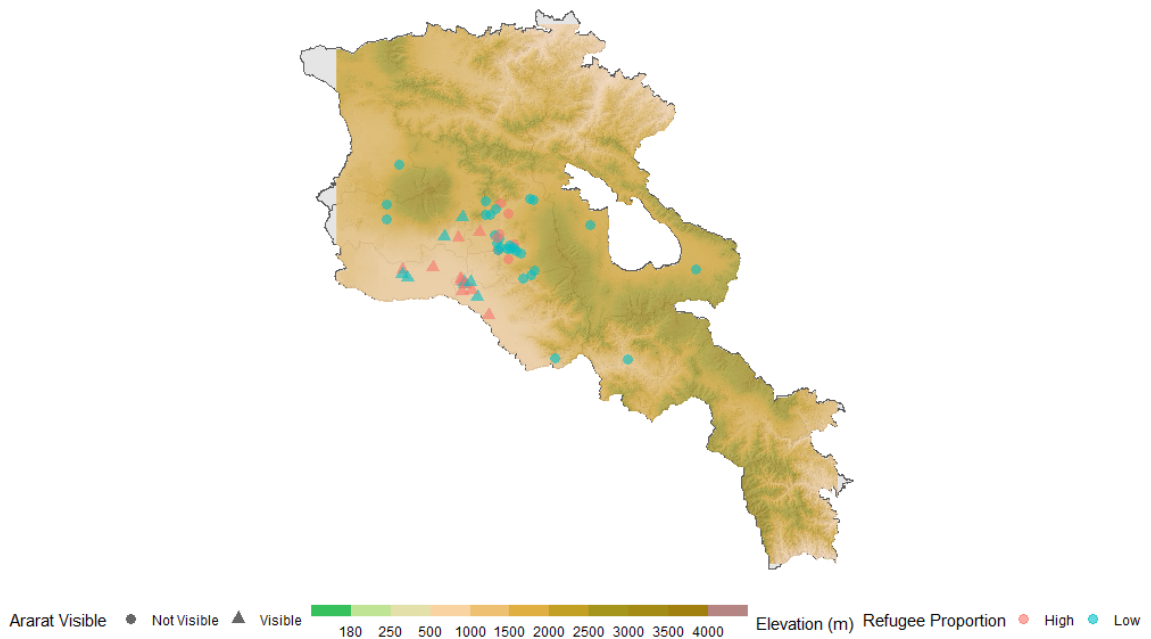


Figure 1: Location of Research Sites against Relief Map of the Republic of Armenia. Borders correspond to *marzer*, the primary administrative subdivisions in Armenia.

could not be attributed to other factors that might also influence political behavior, research sites were carefully pre-selected to ensure that this was the case. First, the set of candidate communities was restricted to those within 60km driving distance of Yerevan⁶, since 1. the overwhelming majority of resettlement occurred within this part of the country due to its comparatively high level of development and greater distance from active conflict zones and 2. the economic and political opportunities associated with proximity to the capital city make these settlements qualitatively different from other parts of the country in ways that may affect the validity of results.

The visibility of Ararat was then determined by drawing sight lines from a person standing at a two meter elevation at the centroid of each candidate settlement to the summit of Mount Ararat and determining whether they intersected with the digital elevation model (DEM) obtained from the U.S. Geological Survey (U.S. Geological Survey, 2022). Due to the arid climate in the region, obstruction by vegetation can largely be ignored⁷, while the effective visibility range of approximately 150km in clear weather ensures that most candidate settlements could, in principle, observe the mountain if not obstructed by terrain.

Obstruction by buildings is a potential concern; however, buildings taller than three storeys are rare outside of Yerevan and the local geography is such that all settlements to the north of the capital city are at a higher elevation thus have an unobstructed view *over* any tall buildings. Since high-resolution three-dimensional satellite images are unavailable for Armenia, I proxy building obstruction by the intensity of the VIIRS peak night time luminosity index (Elvidge et al., 2021), classifying sight lines as obstructed if they pass through areas of night time luminosity above the median for the study area at an altitude of less than 20 meters, or the height of a five-story building. In practice, this change affects the coding of only one settlement and has no impact on final results, however.

⁶In situations where the target sample size could not be achieved, a small number of additional interviews were completed in communities in the Gegharkunik, Vayots Dzor, and Shirak provinces. These additional settlements were selected to be as otherwise similar to the original settlement as possible on all observable dimensions, and make up only a total of 53 responses, or less than 5% of the total sample. All results are robust to their exclusion.

⁷Some settlements in the sample are located in lightly forested areas, but these are all on North-facing slopes and would have obstructed visibility regardless.

Refugee settlement patterns were determined based on data provided by the United Nations-affiliated International Organization for Migration (IOM), who collaborated with the Armenian Migration Service in conducting resettlement efforts. While, as discussed below, initial settlement patterns in late 2020 were quite chaotic, by December government funds such as housing and food allowances had been made available conditional on registration with local officials (Interview, 2022a). This fact was well-publicized and created a powerful incentive for registration, leading to highly accurate estimates of the location of all IDPs in Armenia at that moment.

By early 2021, however, government priorities shifted towards encouraging IDP return to Karabakh wherever possible, and the majority of these incentives were discontinued, meaning that registration also ceased (Interview, 2022b) and reliable data are not available for the subsequent period. Although official figures indicate that the majority of IDPs had returned by the end of 2021, fieldwork and elite interviews conducted in 2022 suggest that this is not the case, with significant numbers unable to return to their homes due to border changes and ongoing violence (Interview, 2022a). Moreover, those IDPs who remained in host settlements outside of Yerevan have shown no signs of further mobility within Armenia, with a combination of low levels of hostility from local communities and a lack of resources meaning that the overwhelming majority have remained wherever they initially fled to (International Organization for Migration, 2021a).

For this reason, I rely on the most recent data provided by IOM (International Organization for Migration, 2021b), which record the number of individuals and families registered in each community in Armenia, in order to gauge the prevalence of IDPs at the local level. While all communities in the sample hosted at least one IDP, the number varies considerably, with two communities registering only a single individual, while one registered 1,555. Since the probability of exposure to IDPs is proportional to the total population of the settlement, these raw numbers were then converted to densities by dividing by population⁸. Finally, communities with densities

⁸The Armenian statistical service does not publish population figures at levels of aggregation lower than *marz*, making it impossible to use census data to calculate local populations. Instead, the Meta population dataset (Meta, 2020), which identifies houses using satellite imagery, was used to provide up-to-date estimates of the total population within the administrative boundaries of each community.

above the 90th percentile⁹ were coded as high exposure, while the remainder were coded as low exposure.

In order to select research sites for inclusion, one-to-many propensity score matching¹⁰ was then used to create a set of viable control cases for each high-exposure community in the full list of 593 communities. The same procedure was then repeated separately for Ararat visibility, yielding two lists of balanced candidates based on both variables, before dropping any cases that did not appear in both lists. Finally, as an additional check on the validity of the design, I visited all 83 communities in 2022, before manually selecting¹¹ 40 final cases, with the goal of including ten in each cell of the visibility \times IDP exposure matrix¹².

The actual exposure of each respondent to IDPs is measured in the survey instrument using a battery of “aggregate relational data” items of the form “how many people do you know¹³ with attribute X” (Breza et al., 2020), with the relevant attribute in this case being *born in the Republic of Artsakh*. By comparing the frequency of social contacts based on characteristics for which the population frequency is known, such as the number of people with the name David, the position of individuals in the underlying social network, as well as associated network-dependent parameters such as degree and centrality, can then be estimated with high accuracy¹⁴.

In previous work (Carter & Pop-Eleches, 2023), I measured concern for territorial loss using a standard 100-point “feeling thermometer” scale. This approach has two major drawbacks, however: first, *concern* may be interpreted in varying ways by different respondents, leading to

⁹While inevitably somewhat arbitrary, this threshold was selected on the basis of initial interviews to correspond with settlements that actually experienced visible migration.

¹⁰Propensity scores were calculated using logistic regression with population, distance to Yerevan, *marz*, and average local development, proxied by VIIRS peak nighttime luminosity (Elvidge et al., 2021) as predictors. A caliper of 0.01 was then used to conduct matching.

¹¹This additional step was taken in order to sure that sites were as balanced and comparable as possible on unmeasurable dimensions, as well as those for which reliable data is unavailable, such as .

¹²Due to difficulties reaching the required sample size in some small communities in the low-exposure/non-visible category, there are 22 sites with these values, above the intended ten.

¹³Since the criteria for what counts as *knowing* someone are somewhat subjective, enumerators are required to specify that only those whom the respondent would greet informally by their given name if met on the street should be included. Given cultural norms in rural Armenia, this imposes quite a high standard for knowing someone, and ensures that the measure captures only those with whom the respondent has engaged in meaningful conversation, and not merely casual acquaintances.

¹⁴See Breza et al. (2020) for details on the estimation procedure.

potentially biased inference if this variation correlates with outcomes. Second, an overwhelming majority of respondents choose the maximum value regardless of the scale, with fully 95% of Armenian respondents in an early pilot reporting a concern of 100, and similar results in related work in Georgia. While this should be taken as reflecting the extremely high overall salience of the issue and strong associated social norms regulating public speech about it, it also masks real variation in the extent to which respondents prioritize the problem of lost territories relative to other issues in their own lives or political outlooks. For this reason, I introduce an alternative measure for the present study, with respondents asked what fraction of their monthly income they would be willing to sacrifice to live in a country with their preferred borders. Analogously to studies of national or ethnic identity, the introduction of such a forced, albeit hypothetical, trade off reduces the tendency to always choose the maximum value, more accurately capturing the relative weight placed on competing identities and values (Abdelal, 2009). Results are also replicated in the appendix using the difference between the original feeling thermometer and the average of two analogous items asking about corruption and inflation, the two otherwise most important domestic political issues in Armenia.

Four main outcome measures are used, all measured at the end of the survey but prior to social network or historical victimization items: reported voting for Civil Contract, the current governing party, in the 2021 parliamentary elections; reported *intention* to vote for Civil Contract in the upcoming elections; willingness to participate in protests on any issue despite risk of repression¹⁵; and a ranking task for which respondents selected a number of qualities they viewed as most important in a politician. For this last task, the options include military background and respect for traditional Armenian values, which are interpreted as symbolic compliance, and willingness to help an individual's family, which is interpreted as a preference for clientelism¹⁶.

¹⁵Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate on a printed vertical scale of increasing likelihood of being subjected to violent repression at what point they would no longer be willing to attend a protest. Lower results correspond to greater *acceptance of risk*.

¹⁶Armenia recently transitioned to a proportional party list electoral system so that voters no longer elect candidates directly. Despite this change, politics remain highly personalized with many small parties that maintain direct personal ties with voters, and expectations over candidate behavior are consequently still extremely significant in deciding both local and national elections.

Following Marcus et al. (2006), emotion is measured using a lengthy battery of common Armenian emotion words prior to the outcome measures, with respondents directed to answer based on their momentary affect. Principal Component Analysis was then applied to the full matrix of responses (see Appendix for details), with approximately half of the variance explained by the first component. This component corresponds closely to the theoretical constructs of aversion and anxiety, with high loadings on worry, anger, fear, and hatefulness. I therefore use this component as an indicator for aversive emotional states in the main analysis.

The survey instrument also contains an embedded question order randomization experiment for an item in which respondents are presented with a map showing the historical provinces of Greater Armenia (see Figure 2) and asked to point out one that has been lost, as well as to provide a narrative description of how and why the loss occurred, which was recorded verbatim in Armenian by enumerators. These narratives are hence available for all respondents who agreed to answer the question, but for half of the respondents it was presented after the outcome measures, while for the remaining half it was presented before. Analogous to “racial priming” experiments in research on race in American politics (Mendelberg, 2017), this is thus a minimal treatment, intended not to persuade respondents, but simply to *prime* the issue of territorial loss by asking them to actively recall a specific example and experience the associated emotions. It should thus be expected not to make respondents significantly *more concerned* about loss of territory or to change entrenched political orientations, but rather to increase the salience of pre-existing attitudes with respect to other choices.

A second random treatment was also included prior to the items described above and is detailed in the pre-analysis plan (PAP), whereby respondents were asked either to provide an autobiographical recollection regarding something that made them feel proud or accomplished, or to describe a non-political television show that they had recently watched. The intention of this treatment was to “inoculate” subjects against the negative emotions and loss of self-esteem associated with the status threat of national loss by focusing on self-affirming memories in their own lives (Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020). A substantial majority of respondents in the

autobiographical condition, however, related stories involving either their own or family members' participation in military operations, assistance offered to IDPs, or other events related to national identity or territorial conflict. Among those who described a television program, moreover, many indicated that they only watch political talk shows or recounted an episode from Russian state television, which is widely available in Armenia. Both conditions therefore involved significant incidental priming of both politics in general and the Karabakh conflict in particular. For this reason, the main hypotheses listed in the PAP in relation to this randomization are not tested, and it is included only where specifically relevant. A secondary implication of this aspect of the study is that all estimates of the effect of the loss prime are likely to be quite conservative, since approximately half of the respondents in the control condition were also incidentally primed with territorial losses through either their autobiographical recollections or viewing habits¹⁷.

In order to estimate the effect of the importance placed on territorial loss on these outcomes, we seek to estimate the local average treatment effect (LATE) of individual i 's loss concern D_i on potential outcome Y_i given (binary) instrument Z_i :

$$LATE_i^{Loss} = \frac{\mathbb{E}[Y_i|Z_i = 1] - \mathbb{E}[Y_i|Z_i = 0]}{\mathbb{E}[D_i|Z_i = 1] - \mathbb{E}[D_i|Z_i = 0]}$$

Theoretically, I expect social contact with IDPs to result in higher levels of concern. However, this cannot be used directly as an instrument, since social contacts are partly a product of individual choice and therefore endogenous. Instead, the *predicted* exposure to IDPs conditional on their density in settlement j is used as the instrument, calculated using a simple quadratic model to avoid over-fitting¹⁸. An analogous procedure is used for the effect of narrative content, in this case using the visibility of Ararat. After obtaining estimates, I employ the Double Machine Learning approach of Chernozhukov et al. (2018) to estimate the LATE, since the more common 2SLS is

¹⁷In several instances, respondents even saw the map among the printed materials held by the interviewer and asked to skip ahead to speaking about territory as they found the topic more compelling.

¹⁸This initial step introduces additional estimation uncertainty into the model that would not otherwise be accounted for by standard errors. To address this, the entire estimation procedure, including this step, is bootstrapped to produce consistent standard errors.

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Figure 2: Map presented to respondents as part of the territorial loss priming condition.

not consistent for the LATE when covariates are included without strong additional linearity assumptions (Blandhol et al., 2022).

While the validity of these instruments is demonstrated in the following section, this identification strategy nevertheless relies on the usual exclusion restriction assumption, which cannot be tested empirically. In this case, this means that the estimated conditional expectation of refugee exposure Z_{ij} given density W_j , $\hat{\mathbb{E}}[Z_{ij}|W_j]$ must be independent the potential outcome given treatment status and covariates $Y_i(D_i, X_i)$ ¹⁹. This would be violated if, for instance, refugee density were higher in communities with higher social capital, or if the influx of significant numbers of refugees had adverse impacts on local economies that affected behavior.

To rule out these possibilities, I conducted two months of fieldwork in 2022 in the target settlements, including interviews with both government and NGO representatives responsible for the IDP settlement and subsequent repatriation process, a review of confidential internal documents detailing the process housed in Yerevan, and physical inspection of sites identified as housing high or low numbers of IDPs²⁰. Due to the suddenness of the war, the government was essentially unprepared for the large population movements that occurred rapidly following frontline losses, and the initial process proceeded in a largely uncontrolled fashion, with displaced families simply getting on the first transport available to them (Interview, 2022a). While exceptionally high concentrations of IDPs were rapidly housed in hotels and repurposed government buildings in certain districts of Yerevan (Interview, 2022b), motivating their exclusion from the study, the final destinations of the majority of IDPs in other communities was essentially determined by the availability of vacant housing that could be located at short notice, particularly unused summer houses, incomplete housing developments left over from a short-lived housing boom in the early 2000s, and disused public infrastructure such as schools (Interview, 2022a).

Crucially, all interviewees concurred that the opportunity for either elected officials or clientelist

¹⁹The same assumption must be made with regard to visibility. However, this is significantly less problematic, since, as can be seen in Figure 1, the visibility of Mount Ararat is mainly determined by the presence of small foothills around Yerevan that block view for communities on the North side, but do not otherwise dramatically impact climate or economic or political activity.

²⁰Further details are provided in the Online Appendix

networks to influence the process was entirely non-existent due to both the extreme haste with which it was conducted and the high degree of international scrutiny.

There is also no evidence that the presence of IDPs had any dramatic adverse impacts on local communities that might have altered behavior other than through raising the salience of losses incurred in Karabakh (International Organization for Migration, 2021a). Not only was the stay of most IDPs quite short-lived, with the overwhelming majority returning to Karabakh within a year, but internal studies conducted by IOM (International Organization for Migration, 2021a) indicate that no IDPs outside of Yerevan experienced any hostility from local populations. This is supported by the data in the present study, with *all* respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that “the presence of people forced to flee their homes in Artsakh has had only neutral or positive effects on my town”.

For the effect of territorial loss priming, the estimand is simply the average treatment effect, or ATE, and can be estimated by taking a difference of means. That is, letting $Y_i^j(1)$ be the potential outcome for unit i in settlement j when the territorial loss prime precedes the outcomes, while $Y_i^j(0)$ is the analogue in “control” conditions where it does not, the estimand is

$$ATE_i^{Experimental} = \mathbb{E}[Y_i^j(1) - Y_i^j(0)]$$

which can be estimated by taking the difference of observed outcomes between the control and treatment conditions since randomization guarantees ignorability (see Appendix for balance tables). Given the possibility of interference from the esteem treatment, it is also included as an OLS control in the main specification.

5 Results

As expected, respondents in settlements with high refugee density know significantly more IDPs, with an average increase of four close contacts in high-density settlements ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, respondents in settlements from which Mount Ararat is visible are approximately 7 percentage points more likely to name provinces of historical Armenia, rather than the current conflict in Karabakh ($p < 0.05$). These differences are also borne out by the open-ended narratives of loss provided in response to the experimental prime: for instance, respondent 619, a resident of a high IDP density settlement from which Ararat is not visible, laments that *"[i]t's a pity that the lost territories are not ours now, because [the people who live there] are Armenians, they should do everything to bring them back, and those who are Armenians should be in Armenia, it is our responsibility to do it"*. Conversely, respondent 1112, who lives on the Ararat plain and does not know anyone from Karabakh, instead blamed both the government and the nation as a whole for past losses, exclaiming that *"[i]t's a pity, the president and the prime minister are so important... the common people, of course, and the leaders are both responsible. The Turks always want the snow on the mountain [Ararat], but we need it"*. The emotional power of Ararat as a symbol is further evidenced by responses to an item asking respondents if they experience strong emotions when seeing national symbols such as the mountain, with which 88% either agreed or strongly agreed.

As Figure 3 shows²¹, the estimated causal effect (LATE) of loss concern on all of the main outcomes is strongly in line with expectations. Respondents who attach higher importance to territorial losses are more willing to accept risk in order to participate in anti-government protests, less likely to support the incumbent Civil Contract party, even if they voted for it and participated in the protests that brought it to power in the past, and more likely to emphasize symbolic compliance over clientelist features when evaluating candidates.

The experimental effects of the loss prime, shown in Figure 4 are similar, although the effects on

²¹See Online Appendix for details of the DML specification.

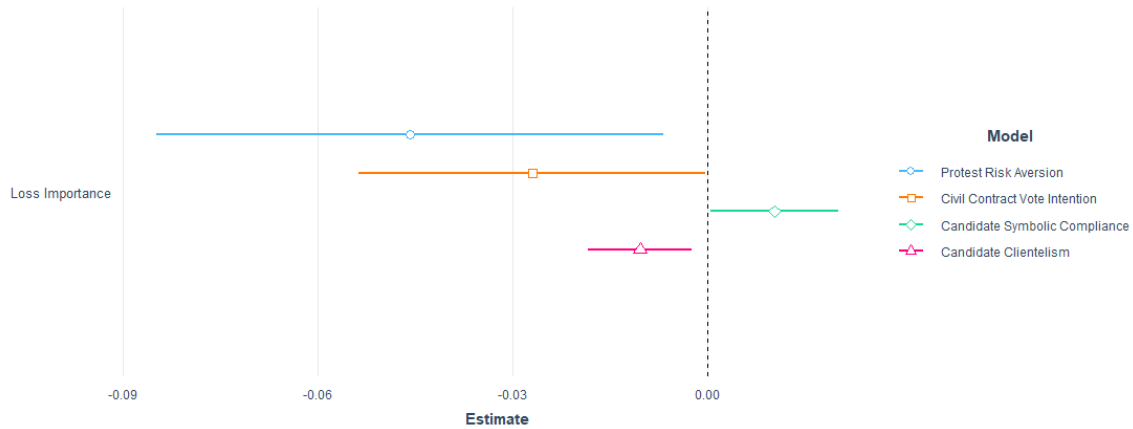


Figure 3: LATE estimates of effect of loss importance on main outcomes

vote intention and preference over clientelism are non-significant. This is unsurprising given the relative stickiness of political alignments, especially in a highly politicized environment such as Armenia where, despite weak partisanship, positive or negative evaluations of the government are unlikely to shift rapidly. Notably, however, simply establishing past territorial losses as a frame of reference is sufficient to generate a significant, albeit slight, increase in willingness to ignore risk of physical harm to participate even in unrelated protest actions.

Theoretical expectations suggest that this tendency to increase willingness to engage in risky actions should be mediated by the prime’s ability to elicit aversive and anxious emotions. Table 1 shows the result of conducting mediation analysis (Tingley et al., 2014) on the prime’s effects via the first principal component of emotional responses, which corresponds to anger and anxiety responses. Results are decomposed by treatment status under the self-esteem condition, since it both influences emotional states by increasing positive emotions and secondarily primes military conflict, as discussed above. Under the assumption of sequential ignorability²² (Imai, Keele, & Tingley, 2010), this approach makes it possible to decompose the average treatment effect into the Average Causally Mediated Effect (ACME) and Average Direct Effect (ADE), which refer to the part that acts through the specified mediating variable (i.e. emotion) and through all other

²²In this case, this implies that respondents’ emotional state must be ignorable conditional on treatment status and other covariates.

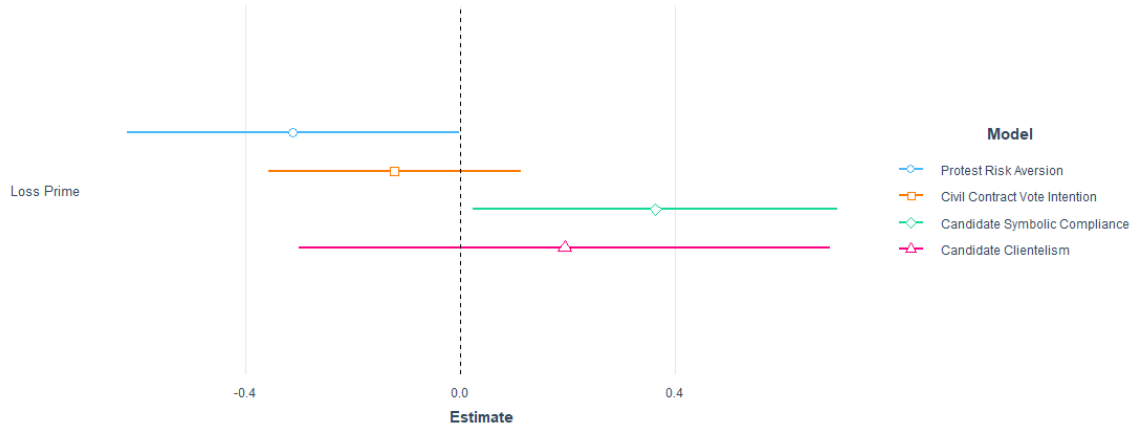


Figure 4: ATE estimates of effect of loss prime on main outcomes

channels. While this is generally a strong assumption, the location of the emotion items immediately after one or both treatments combined with clear instructions to answer based on momentary emotional state is designed to ensure that it holds. As an additional check, enumerators were asked to record the extent to which respondents were perceived to be answering based on their current state at the time of administration, and to note any identifiable emotional agitation at the beginning of the survey. Any respondents for which both of these conditions did not hold (a total of 87) were therefore dropped from the main analysis.

Table 1: Emotional Mediation Effects: Aversion

	Avoid Risky Protests			Prefer Symbolic Compliance		
	Average	Esteem Condition	Placebo Condition	Average	Esteem Condition	Placebo Condition
ACME	-0.0897***	-0.1073***	-0.0731***	0.0228***	0.0266***	0.019***
	[-0.1476,-0.04]	[-0.1805,-0.05]	[-0.1241,-0.03]	[0.01,0.04]	[0.01,0.05]	[0.01,0.03]
ADE	-0.1472	-0.0602	-0.2351	-0.023	-0.114***	0.07*
	[-0.3662,0.08]	[-0.3749,0.25]	[-0.5402,0.09]	[-0.078,0.03]	[-0.01,0.15]	[-0.1241,-0.03]
Total Effect	-0.2369**	-0.1675	-0.3082**	-0.0004	-0.0869**	0.085**
	[-0.4549,-0.02]	[-0.4756, 0.14]	[-0.6120,0.01]	[-0.056,0.06]	[-0.1605,-0.01]	[0.012,0.17]
Proportion Mediated	0.3647**	0.6408	0.24**	-0.0897	-0.3064**	0.223**
	[0.0956,2.03]	[-4.7458,6.34]	[0.0519,1.36]	[-0.17,15]	[-1.7111,-0.08]	[0.057,1.06]
N	1056	1056	1056	1056	1056	1056

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01, 95% confidence intervals calculated using percentile bootstrap with 1000 simulations.

Consistent with the hypothesis, the results consistently show significant mediation through the emotional channel, with a direct effect that is significantly different from 0 found only for the effects on preference over symbolic candidate compliance. Notably, the effects of the loss prime on

the latter are opposite in the esteem and placebo conditions. While the aversive emotions triggered by reflecting on loss always tend to result in greater emphasis placed on candidates from military backgrounds or with strong commitment to traditional Armenian values and culture, the direct effect of the treatment is negative following an autobiographical recollection and positive after describing a TV programme, in contrast to the positive effect in Figure 4. These findings are consistent with the pre-registered hypotheses regarding this prime, which suggest that raising individual self-esteem should “neutralize” the painful effects of collective loss, leading to a total effect that is slightly negative or close to zero when both primes are present. However, due to the cross-contamination described above, it is also impossible to rule out an alternative explanation: since most respondents derive self-esteem from their association with national culture and/or the Army, following a reflection on this topics with a reminder of recent failures may provoke dissatisfaction with establishment politicians, leading to a greater dislike for those from a military or nationalist background.

Finally, while these results show the overall effect of the importance placed on *any* loss, as noted above, respondents both have different events in mind and may tell themselves diametrically opposed stories about why they happened. Each narrative was hand-coded based on three separate but overlapping dimensions: whether a recent loss related to Karabakh was named or one related to historical Greater Armenia, and whether the narrative assigned blame to foreign actors, such as Turks or Soviet officials or to domestic actors, including current or former politicians and the Armenian people itself.

Many responses contain several of these elements, and are frequently neither internally consistent nor factually accurate. For instance, respondents frequently blame Stalin for the 1921 Treaty of Kars, despite his minimal involvement and later efforts to recover territory from Turkey.

Narratives also frequently blur the present and past, conflating the actions of current governments with those a century ago or assigning equal responsibility to both the current government and its predecessor, which now represents the main opposition.

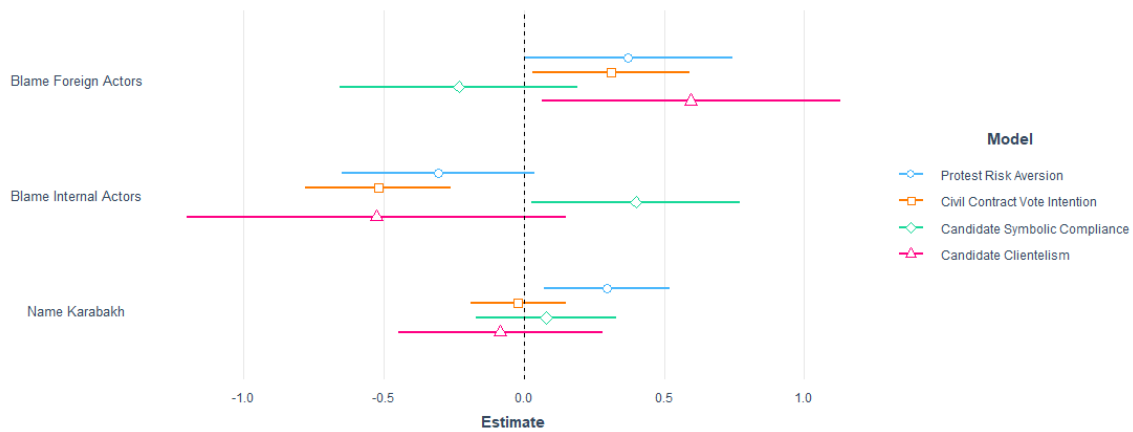


Figure 5: Coefficient point estimates for narrative content of territorial loss responses

As can be seen in Figure 5, which shows the estimated differences on each of the main outcome measures among respondents whose narratives do and do not include each of these dimensions, these variations in internal narratives may also have important consequences for behavior²³. Consistent with expectations, respondents who name recent losses or blame losses on foreign actors (principally, Turks and Azeris) are more likely to prefer the *status quo*, displaying less willingness to engage in risky protests. Similarly, those who place more blame on outside actors are more likely to continue to support the current government and emphasize clientelist qualities in candidates, while the opposite pattern holds true for those whose narratives emphasize domestic actors' responsibility.

Notably, while it is impossible to rule out the possibility of reverse causality with regard to blame assignment, partisanship is extremely rare, with only 12% of respondents naming *any* party that they feel close to, and all three dimensions of narrative content are uncorrelated with respondents' preferred information sources (see Online Appendix). While respondents who identify Civil Contract as the party they feel close to are unsurprisingly less likely to blame the current government for past losses, this represents only 9% of the sample, and all results are robust to their exclusion. Thus, while it is possible that respondents simply seek to harmonize the stories

²³Importantly, a valid instrument is available only for the tendency to name Karabakh, so the remaining findings are purely observational.

they tell themselves and others about history with their existing political worldview, there is little evidence to suggest that they are merely following elite cues in doing so.

6 Conclusion

This article investigates the relationship between historical territorial losses, individual attitudes, and political behavior in the context of the Republic of Armenia. On the basis of an original survey design leveraging exogenous variation in the likelihood of individual exposure to displaced populations and physical reminders of historical losses, I analyze the causal effect of the importance individuals place on lost territory on partisan preferences and patterns of political participation. The results shed light on the potential for mass irredentist attitudes in generating political behavior beyond the context of interstate conflict usually considered. In addition, it builds on recent research on emotion in politics, highlighting the role of emotional responses to historical losses, and providing insights into the role of historical narratives in shaping the impact of nationalism.

The results suggest that individuals who attach greater importance to historical territorial losses are more likely to display behaviors such as supporting populist outsider parties, participating in risky anti-government protests, and emphasizing programmatic rather than clientelist features in candidate evaluation. These effects are mediated by aversive emotions such as anger, pain, and anxiety. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the narratives individuals construct about these losses, including who they blame and how they interpret the events, can also shape their political preferences and behaviors. This has important implications for post-conflict reconciliation policy, clearly demonstrating the need to take the stories people tell each other about past losses – and especially to whom they attribute blame – seriously.

These findings contribute to our understanding of the complex interplay between historical grievances, individual emotions, and political behavior, particularly in contexts where national

identity and territorial disputes are deeply intertwined. The results of the present study are also likely to travel beyond Armenia, since they depend on the unique experiences of as-if random displacement and powerful physical symbols only for identification. While the Armenian may appear quite extreme due to the presence of an ongoing militarized dispute, I show in other work (Carter & Pop-Eleches, 2023) that similarly high salience and emotional attachment to loss can be found even in countries that make no claims on their neighbors. Notably, Carter and Pop-Eleches (2023) find that the distribution of irredentist attitudes in Russia – a country now actively fighting a war of territorial aggression – does not significantly differ from those in Romania, Hungary, or Turkey. The presence of potential irredentisms is also hardly limited to a few cases: there are fewer countries that have not lost territory to a neighbor or colonizing power than those that have (Siroky & Hale, 2017), and even losses that occurred hundreds or thousands of years ago are capable of exerting influence on politics in the present, as this paper shows.

It should therefore be expected that other parliamentary democracies with emotionally resonant legacies of historical loss will display similar patterns. Relatively weak partisanship presents an important scope condition, since the power of political parties to shape mass narratives is limited in this context, but this is a common feature of new or weakly institutionalized democracies. While the emotional resonance of territory in particular gives it special power over individual judgements, moreover, the findings here may also apply to other forms of contested historical losses, such as the legacies of past regimes.

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