



Establishing Local Government in Fragile States: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan

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Summary. — International and domestic policy makers often promote elections to establish village government in fragile states. However, two additional options are available in such countries: formalization of self-governing village councils and formalization of community development councils (CDCs). We designed a survey experiment in Afghanistan that compares the consequences of elections to establish village councils to each alternative. We find that elections, and to a lesser extent formalization of CDCs, improve support for democracy, while formalization of customary councils improves support for reconciliation with the Taliban. Moreover, the consequences of transplanting elections are contingent on social norms and institutions supportive of democracy.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Post-conflict reconstruction of fragile states routinely includes efforts to establish democracy.¹ Part of the reason is the perceived relationship between democracy at the national level and political order (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Carbone & Memoli, 2015; North, Weingast, & Wallis, 2009). Yet others argue that elections at the local rather than national level are fundamental to political order (De Figueiredo & Weingast, 1997; Myerson, 2006, 2014; Weingast, 1997). For example, Myerson (2006, 2013, 2014) argues that elections for local councils strengthens the state and instills trust in the government.

Despite the seemingly obvious appeal of elections to establish local government, the literature on the “transplant effect” cautions that new institutions may not work as intended in new contexts.² Rather, the consequences of new institutions are likely to depend on their fit with local norms and local capacity to implement new rules (Berkowitz, Pistor, & Richard, 2003, 2001; Boettke, Coyne, & Leeson, 2008). The transplant effect suggests that the consequences of institutional reform are likely to be contextually contingent, and therefore quite challenging to anticipate.

Besides the transplant effect, a challenge in most fragile states is that elections are not the only way to establish local councils. Another possibility is to formalize self-governing councils. A large literature recognizes that such self-governing institutions are often quite effective in providing public goods locally (Leeson & Coyne, 2012; Leeson, 2013, 2006; Ostrom, 1990, 2005). For example, traditional systems of governance led by chiefs may promote economic development, provided informal institutions constrain them (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2003; Acemoglu, Reed, & Robinson, 2014). In some situations, there may even be benefits from the formalization of customary councils (Baldwin, 2013; Díaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, & Euler, 2014). However, others find that customary forms of governance are often inconsistent with the demands of a modern state (Migdal, 2001; Scott, 1992), tied to patronage networks that undermine democracy (Joireman, 2008; Tripp, 2004), or that customary

and traditional power brokers undermine local representation of groups during efforts to mobilize communities (Sheely, 2015). Moreover, informal institutions may reinforce underlying structural inequality (Gomes, 2015). Thus, while the formalization of customary councils is an important option to consider, the consequences are far from obvious.

The choice confronting fragile states seeking to establish local government is further complicated by the presence of community-level development councils created to facilitate both political representation and economic development. The donor-sponsored community-driven development (CDD) movement has led to a profusion of new development organizations (King & Samii, 2014; Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Formalization of local councils established as part of CDD projects, known in Afghanistan as Community Development Councils (CDCs), are yet another option in fragile states where such programs are active.

We use an experiment embedded in a nationally representative survey of more than 8,000 Afghan households to consider the consequences of each of these ways of establishing village government. The constitution ratified in 2004 called for the establishment of village councils as the foundation of village government, but did not specify how these councils should be

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selected. Despite holding several national-level elections, village elections have not been held and thus, village government has not yet been implemented. One option is to hold elections for local councils using the same method that is already in place to select members of provincial councils and the National Assembly. The formalization of customary councils, with members selected according to traditional norms, is an alternative to formal elections to establish village government. These customary village councils, known as *shuras*, *jirgas*, or simply “elders,” are often perceived as legitimate and effective at governing even though participation in these councils is determined by community standing rather than elections (Barfield, 2010; Murtazashvili, 2016; Roy, 1990). Another possibility is to formalize CDCs, as proposed by some factions within the Afghan government (National Solidarity Program, 2012).

The survey experiment randomizes the method of formalizing village councils in a fictitious electoral setting in order to identify the causal consequences of different methods of establishing local government on voter perceptions of a range of outcomes related to democracy and security. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the selection methods and then told how their village council would be established (either through a formal election, the formalization of the customary council, or the formalization of a CDC). Respondents were then asked several questions, including how satisfied they were with the given method of selecting local representatives; how much importance they attached to holding elections to establish a formal village council; how likely it was that village council members would deliver on promises made; the extent to which those who were selected would represent the interests of the community to higher levels of government; and whether they would support reconciliation with the Taliban.

In order to tie consideration of these policy options for establishing local government to theory, we characterize the literature in terms of several broad hypotheses. The first, which we call the “liberal peacebuilding” hypothesis, is that formal elections will lead to unambiguous improvements in perceptions of democracy. Second, a “self-governance” hypothesis suggests that there will be benefits from the formalization of preexisting institutions of local governance even though such institutions may not use formal elections to select members. Third, a CDD hypothesis suggests that there will be benefits from formalizing CDCs, which are the most recent example of a large-scale CDD project in Afghanistan, as the formal village government.³ Fourth, as customary councils are often used to resolve conflict between local groups, we hypothesize that the formalization of customary councils increases individuals’ confidence that their interests will be protected and served by a formalized customary council and thus improve respondents’ security perceptions. Finally, we investigate the “transplant effect” hypothesis, which views formal elections as beneficial but expects that the effectiveness of transplanted institutions will depend on their fit with local conditions, such as social norms supportive of democracy. In our experiment, the relevant transplant is local elections.⁴

Consistent with the liberal peacebuilding hypothesis, we find that formal elections for village councils improve individual perceptions of satisfaction with elections, importance of elections, and the expectation that politicians will keep promises compared to the formalization of customary councils. However, we find that individuals are more likely to believe that politicians will be able to represent interests to higher levels of government under both formalization of customary councils and formalization of CDCs compared to formal elections. In addition, the formalization of customary councils leads to substantially more support for reconciliation with the

Taliban than the alternatives, which supports the self-governance hypothesis. Finally, we find that formal elections have an even larger impact on perceptions of democracy when social norms and institutions are supportive of democracy, consistent with the transplant effect hypothesis.

Besides providing insight into a key policy question in Afghanistan, this research makes several broader contributions. One is conceptualizing of local elections in fragile states as an institutional transplant. Although there is a large literature contemplating the transplant effect, much of it focuses on efforts to establish economic institutions in new contexts. Theoretically, one expects fit with local institutions to also influence the impact on efforts to establish democratic institutions.

Second, we complement existing studies of CDD by explicitly considering the consequences of formalizing the development councils established as a component of these projects. An important theme in the literature on CDD is the challenges of elite capture and resource misallocation (Bernard, Collion, De Janvry, Rondot, & Sadoulet, 2008; Fritzen, 2007; Platteau & Gaspard, 2003). While these studies provide much insight into the politics within CDD projects, we know less about the broader political consequences of formalizing development councils.

Third, this is the first study to compare the consequences of the formalization of CDCs in Afghanistan to the formalization of customary councils. Recent impact evaluations of CDCs in Afghanistan consider the consequences of different electoral rules within a CDC (Beath, Christia, Egorov, & Enikolopov, 2014) and how the distribution of foreign aid differs when decisions about spending are made by elected CDC councils compared to when these decisions are made by a village “headman” (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013). Neither of these studies consider the consequences of formalizing customary councils even though such councils are the de facto government in the vast majority of Afghan villages.

This study is organized as follows. Section 2 describes recent constitutional reforms in Afghanistan and key features of customary councils and CDCs. Section 3 describes the experimental design and theoretical predictions. Section 4 presents the findings of the survey experiment. Section 5 concludes.

2. FROM VILLAGE GOVERNANCE TO VILLAGE GOVERNMENT

Afghanistan has a unitary, centralized system of government. This has been the case since 1923, when the first constitution of the country was adopted. Since then, all formal government officials at the subnational level have been appointed by the central government in Kabul. Furthermore, sub-national units have never had substantial budgetary authority, relying instead on directives from Kabul (Murtazashvili, 2015). Informally, there has often been power-sharing between lower levels of government, with authority dispersed between district governors and village representatives. Since these instances of power-sharing reflect informal relationships, rather than a formal delegation of authority to villages, the country can be described as an informal federation within a formally centralized constitutional system (Murtazashvili, 2014). De facto power-sharing within a heavily centralized system is not only true of contemporary politics, but was also characteristic of previous governments, such as under Zahir Shah (r. 1933–73), who allowed substantial local autonomy under a formally unitary government.

Several constitutions have promised some degree of local democratic representation within this unitary system. This is

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