



Promoting Democracy in Fragile States: Field Experimental Evidence from Liberia

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Summary. — We use a cluster-randomized field experiment to study two strategies to promote free democratic expression among rural voters in Liberia's 2011 general election. The context is one of a fragile state in which destructive legacies of Liberia's 1989–2003 civil war continue to dominate people's lives. A nine-month civic education intervention administered by Liberian civil society organization partners provided training on election procedures and a forum for monthly discussion of governance issues. A nine-month security committee intervention administered in partnership with the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Liberia provided a forum for villagers and international peacekeepers to discuss security threats and develop violence early warning and reaction procedures, with the aim of improving citizens' perceptions of security during the election. We evaluate these programs' effects on actual voter behavior in addition to surveyed attitudes. We find that civic education increased enthusiasm for electoral participation, produced a coordinated shift from parochial to national candidates, and increased willingness to report on manipulation. A program combining the two interventions had similar effects. The security committees produced a modest reduction in parochial voting. The policy implications are that third-party actors can play a productive role in helping to overcome barriers to information, voter coordination, and security.
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1. INTRODUCTION

We use a field experiment in Liberia to study strategies of third-party democracy promotion in “fragile states,” which are defined by a lack of consolidated political authority and rule of law (North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). Problems in citizens' access to information, opportunities to coordinate, and vulnerability to intimidation by political factions interfere with free democratic expression and participation in these contexts.

Citizen-oriented democracy promotion is a major component of external aid to fragile states like Liberia (OECD, 2011). Since 2007 the United States has spent about \$13 billion per year in official development assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states, with about 10% of this going to citizen-oriented governance and democracy promotion programs.¹ Based on OECD accounting, about 12% of the \$127 billion dollars in 2012 development aid went to governance programming.² Such programs are based on assumptions about individuals' desire for democratic expression combined with the belief that “elections with integrity” contribute to “the ability of a society to resolve conflicts without violence” and therefore that “policies and programmes that foster political pluralism and competition [may] sustain stability and democracy in the long run” (Annan *et al.*, 2012, p. 9).

Democracy-promotion is at the heart of international peace operations designed to end civil wars. As Jarstad and Sisk (2008) write: “Introducing democracy in the wake of war has become a standard practice: since the 1990s, democratization is an integral part of international peacebuilding missions in the wake of civil war” (1). As a result, civilian activities such as organizing elections, conducting civic education campaigns, or monitoring human rights abuses are at the heart of the mandate of contemporary United Nations (UN) peace operations and such activities are now considered to be “one of the most important aspects of any such operations” (United Nations, 2003, p. 48).³

Yet establishing democracy in war-torn countries is challenging (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2015). Violence, institutional dysfunction, and underdevelopment give reason to question the wisdom of democracy promotion in fragile states (Paris, 2004). On the one hand, recent cross-national statistical studies find that external democracy assistance lowers the association between democratization and violence (Savun & Tirone, 2011) and is associated with improvement in measures of democracy (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Scott & Steele, 2011). On the other hand, a number of cross-national empirical studies have found no evidence of positive effects of international democracy-promotion efforts (Bueno de Mesquita & Downs, 2006; Fortna & Huang, 2012). For instance, Fortna (2008b) finds that UN peace operations have “neither a clear positive nor a negative effect on democratization.” Rather, she argues, “positive and negative effects appear to cancel each other out” (in Jarstad and Sisk 2008, p. 39). Furthermore, decades of cynical assistance to dictatorial regimes means that democracy assistance from Western powers is often met with skepticism in recipient countries (Hennemeyer, 2011, pp. 54–55). In-

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depth research by [Bush \(2015\)](#) finds that such skepticism may be warranted, given the compromised position of international organizations that run democracy promotion programs. Even if one thinks that democracy promotion is worthwhile, it is not clear that the strategies currently pursued are effective for improving governance ([Carothers, 1999, pp. 15–17](#)).

This paper contributes to the literature by providing rigorous evidence on the effects of two common democracy promotion strategies: one based on civic education and town halls, and another based on a community electoral insecurity “early warning” system. The analysis is motivated by a theoretical framework which considers what kinds of democracy-promotion interventions could be effective in fragile states and why. The framework builds on the observation that fragile states are marked by political fragmentation and local patron-client systems ([North et al., 2009](#)). As a result, elections may fail as mechanisms for conveying the policy preferences of voters. Third-party actors could intervene to remove two key barriers to political expression: (i) lack of citizen access to coordinating information due to a poor media environment and patrons’ incentives to withhold information and (ii) local insecurity faced by voters.

We combine a large-scale field experiment with rich outcome measurements based on real-world behavior, rather than relying on survey attitudes or a single dimension of behavior such as turnout. The experiment randomly assigned combinations of a monthly civic education and town hall program and a security committee program over the course of nine months prior to the October 2011 elections. As is typical in field experiments with real-world programs such as these, the interventions are somewhat “bundled” in that they combine various elements of information provision, public deliberation, and third-party assurances. Without the ability to implement fine-grained variations of the treatments, our strategy relies primarily on rich measurement to try to tease apart mechanisms. Outcomes were measured using polling place data on votes, a voter survey, and a set of novel behavioral measures.

The civic education and town hall program substantially increased enthusiasm for civic participation and generated a “coordinated shift” toward national versus parochial candidates. The civic education program also increased sensitivity to voter intimidation. The security committee program only produced a modest increase in the diversity of vote choice and a shift away from parochial candidates. Relating these results to our analytical framework, we conclude that third-party actors can indeed play a productive role for elections in fragile states, helping to overcome barriers to information, enhance voter coordination and security, and potentially improve individuals’ sense of free choice.

This study goes beyond existing research in a few ways. Substantively, the study was explicitly designed to test the efficacy of democracy promotion strategies in the context of a peacebuilding operation. Democracy promotion has become a popular tool for the international community in trying to resolve civil wars ([Jarstad & Sisk, 2008](#)). Past researchers have suggested that peacebuilding operations are not amenable to experimental research, due to challenges in disentangling different components and the volatility of the post-war setting ([Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007, 2009](#)). This study shows that this is not necessarily true. Indeed, it is the first field experiment (to our knowledge) to be carried out in the context of an ongoing UN peacebuilding operation. Moreover, it compares two different democracy promotion strategies, which is rare. While the kind of evidence this study generates does not prove or disprove the overall effectiveness of the democratic peacebuilding, it sheds light on the relative efficacy of

specific components of the strategy and their potential interactions, thereby providing more actionable evidence for policy guidance. Finally, this study provides more nuanced evidence on how democracy promotion strategies can enhance the prospect of democratic change at the grassroots level. This is important because “democracy at the local level provides a critical building block for state reconstruction” ([Risley & Sisk, 2005](#)). While peacebuilding interventions aim to transform war-torn countries into liberal democratic states ([Paris, 2004](#)), the foundations of such change are presumed to be at the grassroots level, in the political attitudes and behaviors of ordinary citizens ([Stedman, Rothchild, & Cousens, 2002, p. 20](#)). Thus it is critical to ascertain the micro political effects of such interventions, which is what this study does.

Methodologically, our field experimental approach improves upon the existing observational studies. Conventional observational studies rely on surveys and comparisons between samples of program participants and non-participants, with no clear source of exogenous variation in program exposure. For example, [Bratton, Alderfer, Bowser, and Temba \(1999\)](#), [Finkel and Smith \(2011\)](#), and [Finkel, Horowitz, and Rojo-Mendoza \(2012\)](#) have found strongly positive effects of civic education programs on civic knowledge, preferences for reform, political participation, and even inter-ethnic tolerance. However, such research designs are problematic in two important ways that our study overcomes. The first issue is selection bias. Those who take up the program may have special motivation to do so on the basis of higher levels of engagement and a more pro-democratic orientation. Moreover, conventional observational studies fail to account for rates at which people decline opportunities to participate, which is important for drawing policy implications ([Manski, 1995, pp. 54–58](#)). From a policy perspective, the concern is that conventional observational studies overestimate policy impact by focusing on a small, self-selected subset of the population. Our study uses a prospective field experimental design to side-step these inferential threats. The second issue is measurement bias. By focusing on individual survey responses, such studies are vulnerable to program participants’ dressing up the truth and modeling their reported attitudes and behaviors in ways that conform to values of the program. Moreover, improvements in attitudes and turnout provide only a limited glimpse of political change. Our study overcomes these problems by combining survey data with structured activities and administrative data on voting behavior.

Our study complements existing field experiments on elections in poor countries. While [Fujiwara and Wantchekon \(2013\)](#) also study voter behavior in a developing country (Benin), our study focuses on questions relevant for foreign assistance—namely, by studying two low-cost third-party interventions, rather than campaign restrictions, which may be difficult to for third-party actors to introduce. By examining potential synergies between civic education, town hall discussions, and security enhancements, our study complements the study by [Collier and Vicente \(2014\)](#) on the effects of campaigns against electoral violence in Nigeria.

We start below with a description of the interventions. We follow with a discussion of a theoretical framework that we use to motivate our analysis of effects. This is followed by a discussion of the context, followed by our experimental design, how we operationalize outcomes, and our estimation methods. We then present our main results, followed by an exploration of reasons for some of the unexpected findings. A conclusion draws out the implications of the work.

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