

Election violence prevention during democratic transitions: A field experiment with youth and police in Liberia

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Abstract

During highly uncertain, post-conflict elections, police officers and youth-wing party activists often engage in low-intensity electoral violence, which cannot be readily explained by national-level, institutional, elite-level strategic incentives for violence. Responding to calls to examine ‘non-strategic’ election violence, this article examines both the key actors most likely to perpetrate violence on-the-ground, and the micro-level perceptions underlying their decisions. In post-conflict contexts, police and youth-wing party activists operate within uncertain, information-poor and weakly institutionalized settings. Consequently, their pre-existing attitudes towards the use of violence, democracy, electoral institutions and towards other political actors influence how and when they engage in electoral violence. We proposed two different paths for reducing this uncertainty and improving attitudes: a) civic engagement programs and b) experience with ‘crucial’ elections, which we defined as the first post-conflict election following the withdrawal of external guarantors of electoral security. We employed a unique, locally led field experiment and panel data collected during the 2017 Liberian election to demonstrate how a ‘crucial election’ improved attitudes of both police and youth activists, while civic engagement programming did not. The findings suggested that elections following major structural reforms may reinforce democratization by improving the attitudes of the actors most likely to participate in violence.

Keywords

democratization, election violence, field experiment, Liberia, police reform, youth parties

Introduction

In many post-conflict democracies, elections risk instability, often through economic, gendered, local and symbolic violence (Birch et al., 2020; Bjarnegård, 2018). Police and youth-wing party activists conduct this violence alongside basic electoral activities including campaigning, governance, security, oversight and protest. Operating in highly uncertain contexts, they respond quickly to challenges, including handling misplaced ballot boxes, processing complaints or managing frustrated

crowds. Recognizing the critical importance of youth-wing party activists and police in violence, we examined how to improve their attitudes towards democracy, electoral institutions, the use of violence and towards each other. To do so, we drew on evidence from a field experiment in Liberia and compared the effect of information

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provision through a civic engagement program and through ‘crucial elections’ on attitudes.

Uncertainty is common within weakly institutionalized, post-conflict settings, and it feeds into cycles of contestation, violence and distrust, ultimately undermining democratization (Beaulieu, 2014; Matanock, 2017). Subsequently, many civic engagement programs aiming to influence citizen attitudes towards violence and democracy draw from the belief that information yields attitudinal change, which then enables behavioral shifts (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018; Birch et al., 2020; Finkel, 2014). However, there has been limited assessment of the effects of violence-prevention programs on the attitudes of the actors who are most frequently involved in election violence: police and youth-wing party activists.

Of course, civic education programs cannot always be analyzed separately from structural contexts. Our program was implemented after years of externally led state-building, and before a ‘crucial election’, which we define as the first post-conflict election without direct oversight and management by external actors. In Liberia, 2017 marked the first election after the exit of UN peacekeepers, who bolstered Liberia’s institutional capacity. It was the first true and independent test of Liberian democracy following the civil war. Therefore, we also explored the potential effect of ‘crucial elections’ on police and youth attitudes.

The results of the field experiment suggested the civic education program did not significantly affect attitudes. Instead, experience with the 2017 election positively influenced the attitudes of both police and youth activists. On the one hand, these findings suggest that even targeted, locally led and relevant civic engagement programs may struggle to alter the attitudes of key actors. More hopefully, our analysis suggested that information gleaned through direct experiences with crucial elections can have a positive effect. In this case, a well-managed, successful election without third-party assistance, and a peaceful transfer of power uplifted the attitudes of police and youth beyond what was gained through short-term civic programming.

This study makes several contributions to the literature on post-conflict democratization, election violence and policing. First, we build on scholarship on democratic transitions in post-conflict contexts (Birch et al., 2020; Paris, 2004) by exploring the role of uncertainty in the post-conflict period, and examining the ability of both programmatic and structural channels to overcome uncertainty through information provision. This study also confirms scholarship on the productive

effects of post-conflict elections (Cheibub and Hays, 2017; Flores and Nooruddin, 2016) following capacity-building and structural reforms (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018; Brancati and Snyder, 2013). Our article builds on this literature by drawing on the concept of crucial elections, which occur after external actors withdraw. To our knowledge, existing work does not differentiate between early post-conflict elections with and without external parties guaranteeing security.¹

Second, we advance the study of election violence in three ways. In a special issue on election violence, Birch et al. (2020, 7) suggest several recommendations for future research, including unpacking the micro-dynamics that shape perceptions (including trust and threat perception), exploring how agents of the state and youth groups perpetrate violence, and using a disaggregated approach – one that is experimental and uses panel data in a single case. Our study addresses all three recommendations. Our theory explores the micro-dynamics of perceptions that lead to election violence. We study how changes in the information environment drive different actors (state agents and youth) to perceive threats, and how the information environment increases trust in institutions, election processes and electoral actors. As such, we expand on scholarship that conceptualizes election violence as strategic, elite-driven and instrumental, to incorporate non-strategic, non-elite-driven election violence. We also orient our study around actors who are most likely to engage in violence: police officers and youth-wing party activists (Birch et al., 2020; Bob-Milliar, 2014; Owusu Kyei and Berckmoes, 2020). In doing so, we diverge from most experimental interventions on election violence, which tend to analyze the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary citizens and their willingness to support, report or sanction violence (Blattman, Hartman and Blair, 2014; Fafchamps and Vicente, 2013; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2020; Mvukiyehé and Samii, 2017; Scacco and Warren, 2018). Finally, we use experimental methods and panel data within the case of Liberia. As Birch et al. (2020: 7) suggest, this approach allows us to be ‘innovative’, to describe changes over time and explore sources of violence at the individual level.

Third, literature on police violence does not currently explore how the police contribute to election violence (Eck et al., 2021). By focusing on police as autonomous actors (González, 2020; Lake, 2022), we show the individual effect anti-election violence programs and crucial elections have on individual officers, thereby combining the policing literature (Eck et al., 2021) with literature on election violence (Birch et al., 2020).

Finally, we highlight the importance of supporting and studying projects initiated and led by local actors, rather than international organizations and academics based in Europe and North America (Thachil and Vaishnav, 2018). Though this program yielded null results, it is illustrative of many overlooked and under-resourced locally led projects (Autesserre, 2017) that offer creative, careful and context-specific solutions to important challenges.

Uncertainty, street-level actors, and election violence

Post-conflict contexts are characterized by high levels of uncertainty. Uncertain, low information environments exist when rules, regulations and norms for appropriate behavior are not evident to actors on-the-ground. In such contexts, high mistrust is worsened by rumors and disinformation (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017; Lake, 2022). High-stakes elections exacerbate these uncertainties – whoever wins the vote controls the government (Brancati and Snyder, 2013) – which means people may resort to violence, especially if wartime norms remain pervasive.

While low information environments affect all citizens, we focus on two actors – the police and youth-wing party activists – who play important ‘street-level’ roles in interpreting and managing formal policies and elite directives during elections (similar to Lipsky (1980)). Police and youth activists work within acutely uncertain and information-poor contexts, and must simultaneously navigate political, structural, post-conflict, economic and institutional transitions (Beek and Göpfert, 2013). As such, they are the most likely actors to be involved in election violence (Baker, 2005; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021; Rasmussen, 2018).

Within uncertain contexts, both actors have some autonomy in how, when and whether they choose to engage in violence. For example, they may join in shouting matches at a polling station, rather than properly reporting irregularities. A police officer may condone threatening behavior at the polls or may respond to aggravated protesters with brutality. The same is true of youth party activists, who may interpret technological hiccups, delays or unexpected losses as signs of a rigged election. They can respond to perceived irregularities by reporting anomalies or choosing to directly confront other groups they suspect were involved. These choices are not necessarily a product of elite-driven directives to use violence, but may arise as immediate responses based on individual beliefs.

Police officers help manage basic electoral tasks, and help oversee operations in democratic institutions, all within contexts of high uncertainty. Formal tasks include maintaining the rule of law, providing security and overseeing polling stations and protests. Police conduct these tasks within a ‘twilight zone’ of contradictory and overlapping written rules, social norms, direct orders and personal incentives (Diphhoorn, 2017). Further, highly decentralized police organizations are often marked by split loyalties and multiple, competing power centers. Uncertainty across rules, norms and institutional design allows for shirk and shrift between elite directives and police action (Lake, 2022). Thus, while existing scholarship overwhelmingly explains election violence as result from elite strategies (Birch et al., 2020; della Porta, 1998), when the police engage in violence this also reflects bottom-up processes (Berenschot, 2020; Gonzalez, 2020).

Moreover, police leadership often prefer to avoid violence so as to uphold the agency’s legitimacy. However, ethnographic research describes discrepancies between elite preferences, institutional guidelines and the choices of individual officers (Beek and Göpfert, 2013). These discrepancies suggest officers have some autonomy in responding to challenges, and that violence is not always inevitable. They may choose not to repress protesters, or they may choose to shoot at protesters despite prohibitions on the illegal use of force. In short, the police are not passive agents of the state.

Youth-wing activists also operate as party foot-soldiers within highly uncertain contexts, and face similar challenges. Youth activists are a common type of grassroots actor, whose views, attitudes and behaviors may not reflect young people generally. In many young democracies, they play undervalued roles in elections (Owusu Kyei and Berckmoes, 2020). They provide oversight at polls, turn-out voters, and assist with campaigning. However, many view low-intensity violence as acceptable (Bob-Milliar, 2014). In some cases, they follow clear directives to carry out violence, intimidate voters and maintain patronage networks (Agbiboa, 2018). Even so, youth activists maintain a degree of agency. They act in accordance with their own interests amidst the uncertainty created by the hazy boundaries between positive political engagement, party directives, rumors, suspicion, criminal activity and frustration (Rasmussen, 2018).

In many post-conflict states, the term ‘youth activist’ takes on additional implications beyond age. It may denote social status, marginalization and political contestation (Christensen and Utas, 2008). In Liberia, generations who were young during the war maintained

'youth' status for years, due to delays in reaching family, career or educational milestones. 'Youth activists' includes ex-combatants, heightening the importance of considering them within studies on post-conflict democratic transitions (Bjarnesen, 2018; Söderström, 2013).

Given police and youth activists' autonomy within fraught environments, their individual attitudes and choices help determine how they respond to setbacks during elections. These beliefs and actions are not necessarily derived from elite-led political strategies. Rather, police and youth activists have some agency in how they respond to electoral conditions. Their choices are borne out of individual priors about the appropriateness of violence, the viability of democracy, knowledge about institutions, rules and regulations, and their perceptions of other groups.

Programmatic and structural avenues to address uncertainty

Both police and youth-wing party activists make decisions about the day-to-day management of elections within highly uncertain, information-poor contexts, and their individual choices contribute to bottom-up processes of election violence. To address these uncertainties, we examined two channels for providing information that could affect their beliefs: one programmatic and one structural. These are, first, civic engagement programs, and, second, direct experience with 'crucial' elections.

Civic engagement programs

Civic engagement programs are a common tool for reducing uncertainty during political transitions and preventing election violence (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018). Experimental findings highlight their potential impact on civic participation, knowledge and tolerance among civilians (Collier and Vicente, 2014; Finkel, 2014; Finkel and Lim, 2020; Finkel et al., 2012; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017). Many randomized control trials examine the effects of information provided through large-scale programs on outcomes such as higher voter turnout, the spread of non-violent norms (Fafchamps and Vicente, 2013; Collier and Vicente, 2014) or increased cooperation and dispute resolution (Blattman et al., 2014; Finkel and Smith, 2011; Scacco and Warren, 2018). Others aim to increase information on democracy, governance institutions and election processes (Finkel and Lim, 2020; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013; Grácio and Vicente, 2021).

While some randomized control trials have yielded positive results (Collier and Vicente, 2014; Finkel, 2014; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017), they have a mixed record on preventing

election violence and changing belief systems, especially in conflict-prone environments (Finkel and Smith, 2011). Even programs that are viewed as successful (e.g. Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017; Scacco and Warren, 2018) have either mixed outcomes regarding attitudinal change or yield small effects. Finkel et al. (2012) provide evidence civic engagement programs affected civic competence, but not deep-seated democratic values or inter-ethnic cooperation. Birch and Muchlinski (2018: 389) suggest 'despite [their] theoretically compelling logic, the measurable impact of citizen or community-oriented instruments [...] remains small or unclear'.

We expand on the literature on civic engagement programs in several ways. First, prior studies target ordinary civilians through antiviolence programming (Blattman et al., 2014; Collier and Vicente, 2014), rather than the individuals most likely to engage in violence. Instead, we took the difficult step of engaging with police and youth activists. Both groups are likely to hold more violent, less trustful and less flexible attitudes than ordinary citizens, due to selection effects (Owusu Kyei and Berckmoes, 2020), past political engagement and socialization that condones and rewards violence (Bob-Milliar, 2014; González, 2020). Second, our goal was to change beliefs, rather than boost voter turnout. Altering beliefs is more difficult than changing either behavior or knowledge (Scacco and Warren, 2018). Third, our program was locally owned rather than nationally or internationally conceived. This had the advantage of incorporating localized means of addressing problems into interventions, but it also means there were fewer resources to scale-up the project (Auteserre, 2017). The intervention was a realistic example of local peace-building efforts regarding scope and size. These differences suggest our intervention was a 'hard test' for civic engagement programming. This hard test was necessary because it represents the type of under-studied programming that occurs in many post-conflict countries. By looking at under-studied programs, we learn more about what civic engagement programs can or cannot do. If we are able to detect an effect in a hard case, this gives hope for civic engagement programs that aim to do less. If we find null effects from hard tests, then we learn that future programs need to be designed differently, and gain information on what those changes ought to be.

Crucial elections

We argue experiences with crucial elections provide information that may reduce uncertainty, and thus improve beliefs and attitudes. We define crucial elections as the first post-conflict election after the withdrawal of

external actors who were previously engaged in managing and/or overseeing elections. While post-conflict elections threaten instability, these risks can be mitigated by peacekeeping, third-party enforcement and structural reforms (Fjelde and Smidt, 2021; Flores and Nooruddin, 2016; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2021; Smidt, 2020).

After a few years of delicate peace, once institutions have been rebuilt, reforms have been implemented and peacekeepers have gone home, emerging post-conflict democracies face an important hurdle: their first independent elections. Although there may be international election monitors, these elections do not occur with the guarantors of third-party peacekeepers (e.g. UN, AU forces). Crucial elections test the capacity of domestic electoral institutions and the security sector to manage the election process. Crucial post-conflict elections may be considered successful when the government is able to manage the election (and any transfer of power) through existing institutions without a major breakdown in security. These crucial elections reveal new information about institutional capacity, democratic processes, and the intentions and behavior of various political actors (Lindberg, 2008). If successful, they clarify the viability of democracy, including possibilities for a transfer of power.

Importantly, experiencing successful, crucial elections may overwhelm any short-term civic engagement program's ability to shift attitudes. Information provided through lived experiences is more powerful than what is gleaned in workshops. Elections demonstrate what successful democracy can look like, allowing for the internalization and re-evaluation of existing perceptions and of information gained in civic education programs (Rustow, 1970).

Liberia is not the only case of a 'crucial election'. At least eight countries in Fjelde and Smidt's (2021) data on peacekeeping in Africa identify where elections were held soon after peacekeeper's withdrew: Angola (1999), Burundi (2006), the Central African Republic (2010), Chad (2010), Cote D'Ivoire (2004 and 2017), Mozambique (1994), Sierra Leone (2005) and Sudan (2011). Seven regularly planned elections occurred within four years of the withdrawal of peacekeepers: Burundi (2010), Central African Republic (2011), Chad (2011), Cote D'Ivoire (2020), Mozambique (1994), Sierra Leone (2006) and Sudan (2015).

How civic engagement programs and crucial elections provide information and address uncertainties

The uncertainty in post-conflict political transitions makes it more likely street-level actors will interpret

challenges in negative and violence-producing ways (Paris, 2004). We, therefore, hypothesized how four types of uncertainty might be resolved with information provided by civic engagement programs and crucial elections. They provide information that 1) alters views towards the acceptability of violence, 2) provides knowledge on institutions of conflict resolution, 3) increases understanding of democratic processes, and 4) improves trust between competing groups.

Addressing uncertainty about the appropriate use of violence

During conflict, violence becomes a routine method of governance. These patterns may transition into shared post-war behavioral norms, including the acceptance of election violence, which is linked to past experience with conflict (Collier and Vicente, 2014; Wood, 2008). People who have been targeted often find future election violence more acceptable (Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020). Through normalized communal violence, individuals demonstrate status, masculine honor, tough reputations, and seek material rewards through their ability to '[get] things done' (Bjarnegård et al., 2019).

In some studies, civic education programs provide information on the nature of electoral violence, thereby altering individual assessments of the utility of violence (Collier and Vicente, 2014; Smidt, 2020). They may challenge notions of the acceptability of violent behavior and highlight how pervasive economic, gendered and often invisible forms of violence impact the community (Bjarnegård et al., 2019). Birch and Muchlinski (2018: 388) summarize the goal of these programs: 'to alter perceptions of the utility and viability of violence as an election strategy', through activities in youth programs, peace-messaging, making pacts, roundtables and other activities aimed at '[building] trust and [providing] dispute-resolution tools'.

Attitudes towards violence shape how individuals understand their ability to productively interpret and respond to crises, often with little direct oversight. For example, if police fail to recognize verbal or physical altercations as voter suppression, they may condone this behavior. Before they can utilize formal, nonviolent dispute mechanisms, they must recognize the problem. In their study, Birch and Muchlinski (2018) found that programs challenging attitudes towards violence were most effective with state actors (e.g. police), while civil society actors (e.g. youth-wing activists) were less responsive.

Hypothesis 1a: Civic education programs reduce beliefs that violence is an appropriate electoral strategy.

Additionally, experience with crucial elections provides information on the utility and acceptability of violence. Direct experience with election violence clearly reduces trust in democracy (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2020), and may increase acceptance of violence as normal, acceptable or unavoidable (Collier and Vicente, 2014; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020). However, these negative relationships may also work in reverse (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016; Matanock, 2017). If widespread violence does not occur during a crucial election, both police and youth activists will have directly witnessed and participated in elections that did not lead to widespread violence, perhaps for the first time. By witnessing a peaceful election, they gained information about the ability to campaign, vote, win and lose, without relying on inappropriate force. The knowledge provided within these early, high-stakes elections may, therefore, positively alter their attitudes (Rustow, 1970).

Hypothesis 1b: [Successful] crucial elections reduce beliefs that violence is an appropriate electoral strategy.²

Overcoming uncertainty about institutions and legal processes

Street-level political actors such as police and youth party activists may not clearly understand the procedures regulating elections, and harbor doubts about their proper function and viability. Within post-conflict settings, electoral commissions, security forces and courts lack capacity, appear biased and have poorly articulated roles (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016). Many countries host redundant institutions with untested and competing spheres of influence, authority, salience and resources. Even if key actors understand the institutions guiding the elections, they may not trust them to function according to their mandates. More insidiously, rival candidates may spread disinformation, muddling the information environment (Smidt, 2020). In such situations, unilateral, violent action outside the purview of weak institutions may seem expedient and judicious (Bjarnegård et al., 2019). A lack of knowledge about rules, guidelines and procedures may halt the resolution of otherwise solvable disagreements. Therefore, raising awareness of electoral processes and institutions could build confidence and help resolve potential crises (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018).

Civic education programs provide information on the use of legal and institutional routes for conflict resolution

and other technical insights, thus filling information gaps about rules and regulations. This type of information provision has proven useful with non-state and civil society actors (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018), because it provides the tools that allow them to work through formal processes. This is important for police or youth who may prefer nonviolent recourse – as in *Hypothesis 1* – but lack the necessary procedural knowledge about proper legal channels (Finkel et al., 2012; Smidt, 2020).

Hypothesis 2a: Civic education programs increase knowledge on the proper use of legal channels to resolve conflict.

Additionally, people learn about electoral institutions through direct exposure, particularly when those institutions are new, interest is high and attitudes remain flexible (Rustow, 1970). During high-stakes elections, there is more media attention and public discussion. If institutions including electoral commissions, courts and various other agencies perform their duties professionally and according to the law – under high public scrutiny – then individuals may develop and retain knowledge and appreciation of these institutions (Lindberg, 2008, 2009).

Hypothesis 2b: [Successful] crucial elections increase knowledge on the proper use of legal channels to resolve conflict.

Overcoming uncertainty on democratic norms

Civic education programs aim to broadly educate participants about the democratic process. While democracy is widely accepted and preferred, many voters retain instrumental views of democracy (Bleck and van de Walle, 2018). If people doubt the ability of electoral institutions to deliver accurate results or lead to change, they may be more likely to undermine them. Thus, these programs explain the viability and meaning of democratic processes and help the police and youth appreciate their own role within that process (della Porta, 1998).

Previous studies have shown that civic engagement can successfully increase political knowledge (Birch and Muchlinski, 2018). However, deep-seated beliefs change more slowly (Finkel, 2014).

Hypothesis 3a: Civic education programs improve people's perceptions of democracy as a viable system of government.

Elections themselves also have the ability to teach people about the legitimacy of democracy. When people vote, they gain direct experience with democratic processes –

such as electoral monitoring and grievance procedures – which were only hypothetical before votes were cast. Citizens who closely observe the electoral process gain not only an improved understanding of specific institutions and procedures, but may also develop more overall positive views of democracy (Atkeson and Saunders, 2006; Berman et al., 2019). However, these views are likely to be contingent on the ability to see democratic elections foster change (Bleck and van de Walle, 2018).

Hypothesis 3b: [Successful] crucial elections improve people's perceptions of democracy as a viable system of government.

Overcoming uncertainty about the actions of opposing groups

When rival groups have minimal positive contact, they can become mistrustful and less able to resolve conflict. Lack of communication and poor information about group intentions sharpens hostility as people draw from assumptions rather than facts. Most citizens receive information from limited social networks (Fafchamps and Vicente, 2013) and these networks can harden and polarize beliefs (Campus et al., 2008). Polarization is acute following past violence, increasing the willingness to believe disinformation (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017).

Civic education programs draw on contact theory (Hewstone et al., 2014) to improve intergroup attitudes by providing space for opponents to interact in neutral or positive ways. Here, we used direct contact, which can ameliorate intergroup prejudice (Gu et al., 2019), while most programs use imagined or indirect contact (Arriola et al., 2022). Direct contact programs enable face-to-face information exchange and communication about goals, strategies and intentions. Following violence, mistrust is difficult to change without sustained, positive engagement (Scacco and Warren, 2018). When these programs succeed, it is through repeated interaction and by addressing information problems. In this program, police and youth activists were given the opportunity to re-evaluate their beliefs and generate new ties, thus enabling positive engagement over several months. Improving these relationships and opening lines of communication should enable the police and youth activists to deescalate small-scale incidents.

Hypothesis 4a: Civic education programs help participants view their potential opponents in a more positive light.

Crucial elections also provide an opportunity for the police and youth to observe each other's behavior and

reduce their mutual uncertainty and skepticism. Police and partisan actors may suspect a particular group will engage in malpractice or use violence. However, if both sides act peacefully and follow the rules, perceptions may change as groups learn to observe mutual willingness to engage fairly.

Hypothesis 4b: [Successful] crucial elections help participants view their potential opponents in a more positive light.

Election violence in Liberia

Following two civil wars from 1989 to 2003, Liberian elections have been characterized by low-intensity violence, high uncertainty and weak institutions (Moran, 2006). The 2017 presidential election marked a pivotal moment of institutional reform, and a clear test for Liberia's nascent democracy.

Since the final ceasefire, there have been three presidential elections, including in 2017. Initially, a democratic turn began under the watchful eye of 15,000 UN peacekeepers, who guaranteed some level of security. In 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and the Unity Party (UP) began a pattern of contested elections against the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC), led by soccer star George Weah. In 2011, the CDC complained of rigged elections. The Liberian National Police (LNP) were unable to successfully manage the protests, killing at least two people. This election violence was not elite-driven, but developed through bottom-up, institutional processes.

Youth were also central to low-level violence in the 2011 election and during the civil wars (Bjarnesen, 2018). Youth activists – many of whom are ex-combatants – often view state institutions, including the police, as untrustworthy and they feel abandoned by the government (Söderström, 2013). Widespread disillusionment make youth vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups, who offer promises of change or monetary rewards in exchange for loyalty (Bob-Milliar, 2014).

The 'crucial' 2017 election

The 2017 Liberian election was a crucial – and successful – election because it was the country's first experience with a peaceful transition of power, and the first post-war election without UN peacekeepers serving as safeguards. It was the first time since the civil wars that the LNP had handled its own electoral security.

The 2017 election spotlighted police reforms,³ the function of judicial institutions, and established parties

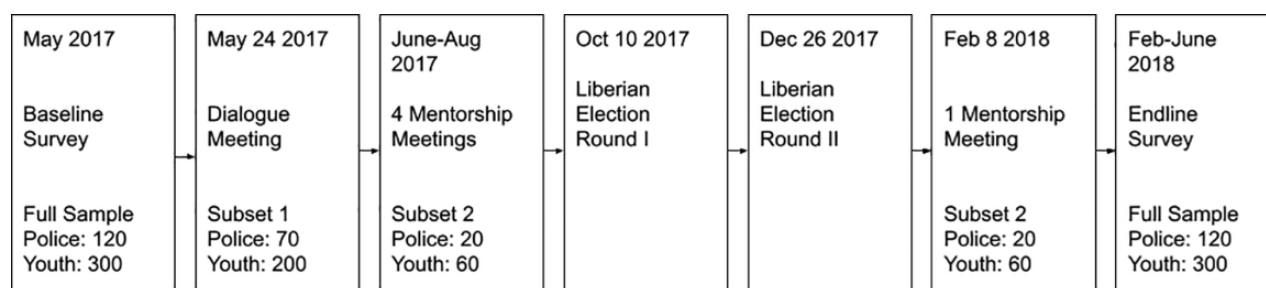


Figure 1. Program timeline during the 2017 election

in important ways. First, partisan complaints of electoral abnormalities and mounting protests raised the specter of violence. Second, because Johnson-Sirleaf retired, there was no incumbent. This amplified competition in an open political arena. Third, challenges to the election's first round highlighted the court system's ability to handle important cases under public scrutiny, and tested the willingness of parties to adhere to the court's decision.

Following a multiparty first round, the two parties with the greatest support competed in a runoff. As before, the runoff included Weah's opposition CDC, and the incumbent UP led by the former vice-president. After the first round, the third-place Liberty Party challenged the results in court, claiming 'massive systematic irregularities and fraud' (BBC, 2017). The Supreme Court and the National Electoral Commission dismissed the case, leading to a month-long delay. This was the country's first post-conflict use of institutional channels to address election grievances. Ultimately, the CDC won the runoff with over 60% of the vote, heralding Liberia's first peaceful, interparty transition of power.

Research design and program

In early 2016, a former police officer in the LNP spearheaded a local program he believed would address pressing problems for electoral security. He aimed to improve police relationships with youth activists through a series of community dialogues and mentorship programs. The mentorship brought randomly assigned groups of youth party activists and police together for a series of six meetings to develop greater certainty in communication and coordination within their respective roles in the upcoming election. The program's objective was to communicate LNP responsibilities, increase youth awareness of alternatives to violence, teach conflict resolution tactics and allow youth to raise issues with the LNP. The program designers believed this would reduce

the likelihood of violence, though the study focused on attitudes rather than behavior.

A local non-governmental organization (NGO) implemented the program to ensure participation was voluntary. While many interventions utilize large townhalls (Fafchamps and Vicente, 2013; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017), our intervention involved repeated, smaller group meetings (see Online appendix, Section 2). The first meeting allowed youth and police to engage in open conversation and develop personal connections. Subsequent mentorship meetings allowed for deeper, more personal discussion. Topics included a review of the Liberian Constitution, election laws, voter responsibilities, police duties, conflict resolution and procedures for redress. These topics specifically related to the four stated hypotheses by providing comprehensive information on violence, highlighting legal procedures for dispute resolution, improving understanding of Liberia's democracy, and providing opportunities to interact in safe, neutral spaces. To minimize interparty competition, political parties met separately with police officers. Figure 1 outlines the program's timing, alongside the election and panel survey. It also outlines the number of youth and police in each treatment arm (those in the mentorship program were a subset of those in the dialogue meeting).

The first survey occurred before the programming and elections in May 2017. Following this, the sample was split into treatment and control groups. The treatment group participated in the initial dialogue meeting in late May. Mentorship meetings occurred from June to August before the election, which ran late due to the court challenge and runoff. We held a final mentorship meeting in February 2018. The same individuals were resurveyed in early 2018. Analytically, it would have been ideal to conduct the final survey before the election. However, we believe the participants would have realized they were a part of a program evaluation, which would

have led to response bias. Moreover, by holding the last mentorship meeting post-election, we allowed space to discuss grievances, were the election to go poorly. Conducting the final survey before the election would have been premature.⁴

Participant recruitment

Within Monrovia, we drew samples of (LNP) and youth party members from all political parties registered with the National Elections Commission.⁵ The partnering NGO provided the list of youth activists. We used the LNP roster for the police sample. We randomly selected 120 LNP officers from the police roster and worked through the NGO to select 300 members of youth party wings from their list. From the 300 youth, 200 were randomly selected to participate in the program; and 70 police were selected for treatment from the 120 sampled officers.

Our records show that 78 youth fully complied with the assigned control status. Among the 120 youth in the treatment group, 112 attended the mentorship program. Non-compliance – those assigned to the control group who attended the program and ‘treated’ individuals who did not – rose from ethical concerns set as preconditions for the experiment. We did not compel anyone to attend because we did not want the youth to feel coerced by the police. Further, we instructed the NGO not to turn away anyone wishing to attend, in keeping with our goal of using local programs to increase knowledge and decrease violence. Those who self-selected into the program could hold more positive views about peace and democracy, leading to upward bias among the control group. To account for non-compliance and non-attendance, we include a complier average causal effect (CACE) analysis in the Online appendix, Section 6.4. This did not yield substantively different results.

Randomization procedures led to balance between treated and non-treated populations (as shown in the Online appendix, Section 4.1). The only unbalanced pretreatment variable was Christianity among youth activists, which we controlled for in the analysis.

We implemented the final panel survey after the election (see Figure 1), hoping to gauge the program’s short-term effects. Only five participants dropped out of the final survey. This included one police officer and two youth in the control, and two treated youth. They were dropped from the analysis. In addition, we focused on short-term changes because if there is no measurable impact within the months immediately following the intervention, long-term effects are unlikely.

Research ethics

Per ethical standards, we ensured police involvement did not intimidate youth activists and participation was fully voluntary. To this end, we worked through the third-party NGO, which sent invitations and moderated meetings. The NGO helped facilitate the programming to ensure quality.⁶ Reports on the program were favorable, and no youth activists noted feeling intimidated. For enumerator safety, we outlined conditions that would warrant pausing or stopping the research, which is a best practice for conducting fieldwork.⁷

We believe this program had a strong ethical foundation because it was locally conceived and designed. While this approach had its own challenges, it helped to ensure Liberian ownership and a genuine understanding of the contextual challenges (Thachil and Vaishnav, 2018). The LNP commander planned the program with a local NGO and local university to directly address recognized threats, believing this would decrease youth involvement in violence and improve strained police–youth relations.

Dependent variables

Following our pre-registered pre-analysis plan, we hypothesized four channels for reducing uncertainty through information provision.⁸ These were 1) attitudes towards violence, 2) knowledge about institutions and regulations, 3) views of democracy and 4) intergroup police and youth attitudes. To this end, we developed questions, including realistic scenarios, with input from the LNP officer. This meant the survey questions matched the program’s discussions and educational material, and ensured all scenarios would make sense to participants and correspond to local contexts.

For each hypothesis, we created indices using a standardized average effect of dichotomized variables. Questions included a mix of open-ended responses, and categorical and dichotomous response options. We outline all utilized questions and coding decisions in the Online appendix, Section 3. We also disaggregated indices and analyzed questions independently.

Model

Using the panel surveys, we applied a standard difference-in-difference design. We present the average effect size (AES), which measures across all questions in each cluster, following the procedure proposed in Kling, Liebman and Katz (2007). The AES across J related dependent variables is given by $\tau = \sum_{j=1}^J \frac{\pi_j}{\sigma_j}$, where π_j is the average treatment effect on each dependent

variable and σ_j is the standard deviation of dependent variable j in the control group. To test the null hypothesis, the effects π_j are jointly estimated using a seemingly unrelated regression. The J dependent variables are stacked to compute a variance-covariance matrix to test the statistical significance of τ , the AES. Coefficients are interpreted as standard deviations from the control group mean.

Within the regressions, we split the difference-in-difference estimator into its component interaction terms and reported as follows: the *Treatment effect* is the difference-in-difference estimator, the *Change after the election* is the difference among all groups after the election and the *Difference at baseline* is the difference between the treatment and control.

Results: civic education programs

We present the results for *Hypotheses 1–4* in Figures 2 and 3. For clarity, all graphs are coded so a positive increase implies support for the hypotheses. Each graph shows point estimates and a 95% confidence interval. For reasons of space, full regression tables are presented in Section 1 of the Online appendix.

The results showed no evidence that participation in the civic engagement program altered attitudes along any hypothesized channel. Due to small effect sizes and large standard errors, there was no consistent pattern to the insignificant results. Program participation did not change youth or police attitudes towards violence, increase knowledge of legal pathways, improve support for democracy or alter police–youth attitudes.

The results were robust to various tests, in addition to the disaggregation of individual survey questions and the CACE analysis for non-compliance (Online appendix, Section 6.4). We also specified the models using continuous rather than binary variables and discussed one-sided tests. The results remained consistent after these robustness checks.

Because post-conflict democracies host many civic education programs, we explored how participation in multiple programs altered attitudes. Among respondents, treated police attended 0.53 more programs than the control group, while treated youth went to 0.21 more programs than the control group. After controlling for these differences (Online appendix, Section 6.3), we found no evidence that participation in multiple programs affected our findings or altered the results.

Another possibility is that initially high positive attitudes could have created a ceiling effect. For example, from the outset, 86% of youth believed the police made the country

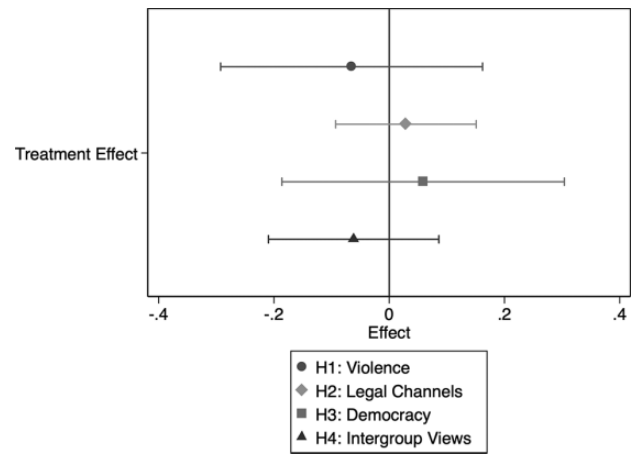


Figure 2. Youth

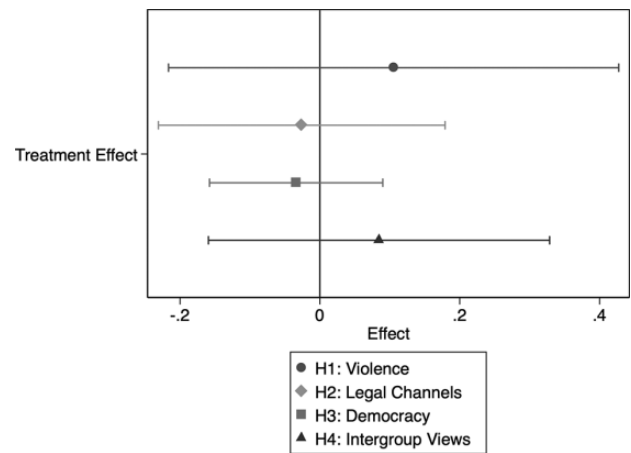


Figure 3. Police

safer, while 90% of police knew they had the right to arrest people during the election. This leaves little room for improvement on several survey questions – though not all. In Online appendix, Section 4.2, we include a measure of each variable in the panel surveys, which showed only 40% to 70% of respondents held highly positive views. There were several questions where ceiling effects were not a concern, even considering the positive effect of the election. Primarily the final shift in attitudes between the two panel surveys indicated there was room for improvement based on the program. When combined with the general increase in attitudes after the election, ceiling effects could only partly explain the null results.

Social desirability could also have impacted or biased survey results. Respondents may have remembered questions from the previous round and adjusted their responses accordingly. We accounted for this in several ways. First, several questions included real-world scenarios without

obvious correct responses, but where the ‘correct’ response were discussed in the dialogue and mentorship activities. In additional analyses we controlled for respondent attitudes, but negative emotions did not alter the results. The enumerators confirmed that the respondents did not have strong recollections of the initial survey, and were unlikely to have recalled their previous answers. Further, many of the indicators in both surveys were lower than expected, had social desirability driven responses. If social desirability bias had systematically influenced survey responses, there would have been more consistent positive responses to these questions.

Finally, our smaller sample size may not have enabled the statistical power to detect small effect sizes (especially in the context of ceiling effects). We were unable to secure sufficient funding to expand the program, which limited the program’s scope. This challenge is a reality for most locally organized initiatives, which are rarely scaled up to the same degree as internationally led efforts due to funding deficits. These null effects are representative of the potential impact of local projects when they are not adequately supported. Given these limitations, our results should not necessarily dissuade NGOs and other actors from supporting similar civic engagement programs. Our evaluation showed there was no observable risk to implementing this type of program. Further, the broader literature shows civic education programs can have very positive effects in situations of violence and uncertainty (Finkel, 2014). Rather, our study points out an important, necessary condition for the success of locally led civic education: to truly assess their potential influence on police and youth attitudes, researchers and agencies need to boost grassroots initiatives and help ensure local leaders receive sufficient funding to achieve their goals (Autesserre, 2017). Ideally, this support should preserve and amplify – but not compromise – the ingenuity and contextual awareness of local efforts, by pairing it with adequate resources.

Results: Crucial elections

In contrast to proposed programmatic solutions to uncertainty, we found evidence that police and youth experiences with successful crucial elections improved attitudes. After the election, respondents espoused more positive views and held better opinions of each other, regardless of participation in the program. We found support for H1b, H2b and H4b.

Among the sampled youth, the average effect for the *Change after the election* variable (shown in Figures 4 and 5) was consistently positive and often significant.

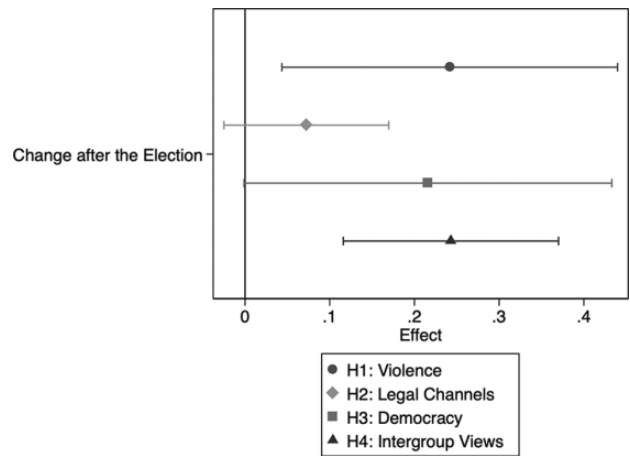


Figure 4. Youth

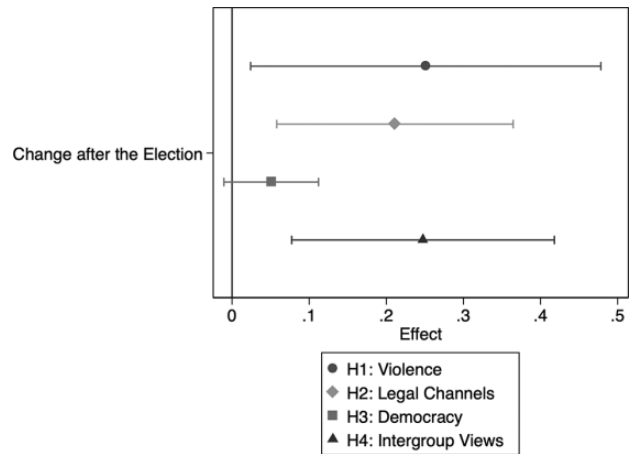


Figure 5. Police

After the election, youth viewed violence as less acceptable and were more likely to see the police in a positive light by a factor of 0.24 (on a 0–1 scale). Coefficients on awareness of legal channels were positive but insignificant. We disaggregated these effects by question in the Online appendix (Section 6.1).

Similarly, the police were more knowledgeable of legal channels and saw youth more positively after the election. The police were also more likely to see violence as unacceptable. In contrast, there was no post-election effect for police views of democracy. This is suggestive evidence that Liberia’s crucial and successful 2017 election pushed both the police and youth to improve opinions of each other and view violence as a less appropriate electoral strategy. There is also suggestive evidence that the police were more supportive of legal channels as a means for conflict resolution. This implies crucial

Table I. Summary of findings

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Police</i>
<i>H1a</i> : Treatment, violence	Null	Null
<i>H1b</i> : Election, violence	+	+
<i>H2a</i> : Treatment, legal channels	Null	Null
<i>H2b</i> : Election, legal channels	Null	+
<i>H3a</i> : Treatment, democracy	Null	Null
<i>H3b</i> : Election, democracy	+	Null
<i>H4a</i> : Treatment, intergroup	Null	Null
<i>H4b</i> : Election, intergroup	+	+

elections with successful transfers of power and limited violence may decrease uncertainty in emerging, post-conflict democracies.⁹

To triangulate this claim, we examined descriptive data on perceptions of electoral integrity. Our post-election survey showed youth and police believed the 2017 election was fair compared to 2011's vote. While many youth expressed doubt about the credibility of the 2011 elections, only a few harbored doubts about the 2017 election, including the runoff.¹⁰ Negativity among the youth stemmed disproportionately from members of the losing parties. The police were more positive than the youth regarding previous elections, but they also saw an improvement in electoral integrity in 2017. Overall, most respondents agreed with the court's postponement of the runoff and trusted the final results, indicating increased trust in electoral institutions.

The evidence suggests both the youth activists and police viewed the election in a relatively positive light. Both groups witnessed government bodies appropriately handling accusations of fraud without widespread violence or instability. Moreover, the LNP provided security in a relatively even-handed manner, perhaps explaining why the youth expressed more positive views of police, despite reservations about the LNP. Across party lines, the lived experience with functioning institutions fostered more trust and knowledge of these processes than any short-term program might have. These changes signal the hopeful possibility that successful elections at crucial moments may have a self-reinforcing effect on how the police and youth will perceive or respond to fraught elections in the future.

Table I summarizes our results. We did not find support for H1a, H2a, H3a or H4a. However we did find support for H1b, H2b and H4b. Individual experiences with successful, crucial elections did more to change beliefs about nonviolence, democracy and cooperation than civic engagement programs. Despite the null results, program participants described many

benefits of participation, including friendships between the police and youth. During the election, at least one participant called a police officer they met through the program.¹¹ This suggests the program may have improved behavioral outcomes we did not measure, such as increased reporting. Regardless, our study suggests direct experience with successful elections helped improve views about nonviolence, democracy and intergroup attitudes.

Conclusion

Elections in post-conflict societies are rife with uncertainty. Within such conditions, police and youth activists may act on negative attitudes towards democracy, electoral institutions, violence and towards each other. This perpetuates and catalyzes low-intensity electoral violence and undermines democratization (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2020).

This article draws on results from a unique field experiment on two channels for addressing the uncertainty surrounding post-conflict elections – one programmatic and one structural. First, we examined whether civic engagement programs reduced uncertainty and improved the attitudes of key actors. Second, we examined the potential effect of crucial elections, in which citizens of post-conflict countries experience the first independent elections following the exit of external peacekeepers and security guarantors. While we did not find evidence this civic education program improved the attitudes of the police or youth activists, their attitudes did improve following a successful, crucial election.

This study pertains primarily to contexts in which the police and youth activists struggle to overcome widespread uncertainty and poor information, rather than situations when elites direct violence. This type of low-intensity, pervasive violence is apparent in countries with weak, uneven institutional capacity, though these challenges are alarmingly common across the world (Beaulieu, 2014). Researchers should further examine how uncertainty shapes election violence, and how to address these bottom-up processes.

The findings in this article suggest a robust relationship between successful, crucial elections and improved attitudes among the police and youth activists. Though not causally identified, the findings aligned with other work on the reinforcing influence of direct experiences with democratic elections (Lindberg, 2008; Rustow, 1970). Successful, timely elections following visible reforms may produce positive change in public attitudes towards peace, electoral institutions and intergroup

cooperation. The positive influence of elections may only occur under certain conditions, such as those found in Liberia. However, we identified at least nine other cases of crucial elections in Africa, which means researchers should conduct more in-depth analysis on the conditions under which crucial elections affect election violence. Broadly, if emerging democracies can capitalize on high expectations following major reforms and third-party withdrawals, they may improve the attitudes and views of the police and youth party activists.

Our results on crucial elections also support work on the importance of building capacity before post-conflict elections Birch and Muchlinski (2018). If third-parties shore up democratic and security institutions, and these reforms enable successful elections at pivotal moments – after international actors withdraw – they may also reinforce democratization by improving attitudes, even after their exit. Therefore, future research should examine the effect of technical assistance on crucial post-conflict elections, and their potential to improve perceptions on peace, democracy and cooperation.

Finally, our study adds to the growing literature on civic engagement in randomized control trials. While other studies focused on large-scale, internationally led programs addressing voter behavior (Fafchamps and Vicente, 2013; Finkel and Smith, 2011; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013), our study examined a locally owned program addressing the perceptions of pivotal street-level actors. This posed a hard test for civic engagement programs because perceptions are more difficult to change than behavior (Scacco and Warren, 2018), and because the intervention specifically targeted those people most likely to use violence. Future evaluations should collect behavioral outcomes in addition to attitudinal data. Moreover, programs like this should be scaled up to enable detection of smaller effects. Another lesson learned from this study is that a stronger treatment (program) may be necessary when there are democratic transitions happening. Ultimately, there is merit in evaluating locally led initiatives, which offer creative, careful and context-specific solutions to important challenges.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article and in the Online appendix can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.

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Notes

1. See review in Birch et al. (2020, 7).
2. This hypothesis, as well as H2b, H3b and H4b were not pre-registered.
3. Major reforms and improvements within the LNP included the removal of ex-combatants, gender balancing programs and a focus on ethnic diversity (Karim, 2017; Karim et al., 2018). Leading up to the election, the LNP established national presence, demilitarized and developed new guidelines. This offered the police a rare opportunity to alter public opinion and inform Liberians of their newly forged capacity (Blair et al., 2019).
4. We also followed the timing outlined by Collier and Vicente (2014).
5. We prioritized Monrovia because it had heightened potential for unrest.
6. We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the corresponding author's university (Protocol Number ID: 1703007021). We did not obtain local IRB approval because there was no reliable avenue for approval at the time. We worked directly with members of the University of Liberia on the program design and implementation.
7. These included the breakout of disease (e.g. Ebola), security threats and natural disasters. Additionally, because

police can be resistant to being surveyed despite official approval, we provided guidelines for approaching police respondents (e.g. having the phone numbers of police leaders and permission letters).

8. We dropped a pre-registered fifth hypotheses on police–youth contact because of coding inconsistencies.
9. These results were consistent across all models.
10. See Online appendix, Section 7. Many youth believed that the first round was flawed, but that this did not compromise the election. Further, the party breakdown of results revealed consistently null effects.
11. This is inferred from informal conversations between the participants and researchers, who shared a WhatsApp group. These messages cannot be quoted because they were not included in the IRB.

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