

Binding Ties, Broken Ties and Paradoxes of Liberal Democracy Promotion in War-torn Societies: Evidence From a Field Experiment in Rural Liberia *

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January 06, 2013

Abstract

I argue that pre-existing social arrangements (PSAs) play a key role in moderating the effects of peacebuilding interventions on liberal political participation in postwar societies. When PSAs are strongly valued by locals, strategies seeking to transform aspects of the status quo order (e.g., liberal norms promotion) will tend to be ineffective, as they may elicit perceptions of cultural threats and trigger local resistance, whereas less intrusive strategies (e.g., peacekeeping) will tend to have positive effects through more subtle channels (e.g., elite socialization). In contrast, when PSAs are weakly valued, neither strategy will likely elicit cultural threats perceptions, but only the former will have a strong likelihood to positively influence democratic outcomes by reducing information asymmetries pervasive in such settings. I test these claims using a unique, 10-month field experiment in postwar Liberia, which entailed security and curriculum treatments. Empirical evidence provides strong support for theoretical expectations. They reveal that while neither treatment has independent (nor joint) effects on means outcomes averaged across a wide range of democratic participation indicators, they both have substantial, but differential effects on liberal political participation in local settings that have and do not have strong PSAs. Theoretical and policy implications of these results are discussed.

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