

VOTING FOR PEACE: DO POST-CONFLICT ELECTIONS HELP OR HINDER RECOVERY?

IRFAN NOORUDDIN*

(From a larger project co-authored with Thomas Flores)

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Abstract

Countries seeking to re-build their polities and economies after violent conflict turn to international donors for much needed aid, support, and expertise. These donors, whether nation-state governments or multilateral organizations, increasingly make democratization a central tenet of the post-conflict reconstruction plan. Holding early elections is thought to signal a move to peace, and to provide an avenue for former combatants to enter peaceful discussions with each other about the future of their countries. While normatively appealing, recent research casts doubts on the efficacy of this emphasis on rapid democratization in post-conflict societies. This paper seeks to understand better the relationship between international actors and domestic elites in post-conflict societies, and to identify when and why first elections after conflict can undermine the peace as opposed to bolstering it. To do so, I utilize quantitative analysis of an original dataset on post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Theoretically, the analysis contributes to our understanding of the difficulties faced by democratizers, especially in the recent past (the fourth wave), and of how domestic elites negotiate both with international donors and domestic opponents over institutional rules and political control. On the policy front, the paper offers insights about how best to structure efforts to foster democracy and facilitate recovery in post-conflict societies.

*Department of Political Science, Ohio State University, 2140 Derby Hall, 154 North Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210-1373, nooruddin.3@osu.edu, <http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/nooruddi>

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Introduction

War between states is politics by other means. Clausewitz’s insight is nowhere more applicable than in thinking about civil war in which groups within a given society turn to violent means to settle disputes and seek power. Unlike in peaceful situations, where issues of distribution and control are settled by institutionalized mechanisms — whether democratic or autocratic — civil war represents a breakdown of normal politics. As such, a primary task in the aftermath of violent conflict is facilitating a return to ‘normal’ politics in which previously warring parties agree to use other means to conduct the work of ‘politics’. And since civil war represents a failure of the state to maintain its authority, reestablishing its legitimate monopoly over the use of violence is critical too. Such analysis underpins the emphasis on demilitarization, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) with respect to former soldiers, and on the establishment of institutional structures of power.

Starting in the early 1990s, as the problem of civil conflict grew around the world, scholars and practitioners faced the question of how best to build peaceful working states in the aftermath of civil war and near state failure. If the root of the problem lay in the inability of the state to command compliance and project authority due to its lack of legitimacy in the eyes of some of its citizens, the dominant mode of thinking emphasized the importance of state legitimacy in the post-conflict transition as a solution. Coupled with the fall of the Soviet Union and the ideological triumph of ‘Western democratic capitalism’, this led to a call for elections soon after the conflict had ended. Early elections had two clear advantages: they allowed power to be vested in those who could claim to be representatives of the people, and they divested international actors from sole responsibility for facilitating the process of reconstruction (López-Pintor 2005). Rather than be branded as occupiers or biased mediators, international organizations and third-party interveners could now truthfully claim to be assisting a democratically-elected government. At least one scholar refers to this as the ‘democratic reconstructionism’ paradigm (Ottaway 2003), the consequence of which has been the rapid growth of a ‘democracy promotion’ industry with the iconic image of a line of people outside a polling station or a first-time voter with ink-stained finger as its brand.

In this paper, I argue that this unconditional emphasis on holding elections in countries recovering from violent domestic conflict is naïve and potentially counterproductive. Political competitors in post-conflict situations face a credible commitment problem in that neither actor can convince the other that, if put in charge, it will not use its power to exact retribution on its erstwhile enemies (Walter 2002). In this context, elections are risky endeavors; not only does one run a real chance of losing, but the victor gains legitimacy in the international arena and control over the state’s resources thereby placing the loser at a greater disadvantage. Of course, this concern is true in all states where elections are held, but consolidated democracies are characterized by the acceptance of all parties of the democratic rules-of-the-game, the most fundamental of which is that one will lose power from time-to-time and live to fight another election in the future. In brand-new democracies, however, especially those in which the electoral opponents were until only recently trying to kill each other, this idea is harder to accept. In such settings, elections are more likely to be destabilizing if held while memories of violence are yet fresh, as the key parties find it hard to relinquish a chance at power. This argument is consistent with recent voices arguing against rushing to hold elections too quickly (Paris 2004; Newman and Rich 2004; Reilly 2003, 2004).

The paper thus contributes to two important literatures in political science. First, by identifying when holding elections can complement the peacebuilding exercise and when it can undermine it, this research deepens our understanding of the dynamics of recovery in post-conflict countries. It also helps us explain why conflict recidivism is so common if it is correct that elections might undermine the peace. Second, since most new democracies in recent years are the product of domestic civil conflict, this paper helps explain the prospects for successful democratization in some states relative to others.

I organize the paper in four sections. First, I describe briefly existing literature on the politics of post-conflict transitions, emphasizing the role of democratization and elections. Then, I present my argument which suggests that whether post-conflict elections help or hinder economic recovery and peacebuilding depends on a country's previous experience with democracy. Third, I discuss the empirical record of post-conflict elections over the past forty years based on an original dataset, and identify factors associated with the holding of early elections. In this section, I use event history models to test the hypothesis that post-conflict elections should help prevent conflict recurrence and promote economic recovery, as well as three additional hypotheses that the timing of elections matters as does the country's prior experience with democracy. I discuss the results and their implications for post-conflict transitions in the final section.

The Role of Elections in Peacebuilding

Over the past decade there has been a proliferation of work assessing lessons learned from helping countries recover from civil conflict and the administration of elections in these states. The methodology of such research is detailed case-studies of particular countries' experiences from which more generalizable lessons are induced. As such, a quick survey of existing writings on post-conflict elections find a lot of essays on the experiences of a handful of countries that have had high-profile post-conflict transitions in recent years in which the international community was quite involved. The most comprehensive of such reviews — based on 14 countries — was commissioned by the USAID and completed by Professor Rafael López-Pintor in May 2005.¹ What lessons did this review identify?

First, the international community is intimately connected with the holding of elections in post-conflict situations. Leaders of warring parties are more likely to move towards elections when the international community encourages it, and is willing to provide material aid and technical expertise for the conduct of the elections. The appropriate level of participation, however, is still being determined. While early attempts focused mainly on the holding of elections, such efforts have grown more sophisticated in recent years as practitioners have realized that peacebuilding is multidimensional and requires successful economic reconstruction, revitalized civil society, building strong state institutions, providing international monitors to bolster the results' credibility, and building local expertise in local administration so that the reforms are sustainable. It has also become clearer that the success of elections is intrinsically linked to the security surrounding the elections, and therefore

¹The review surveyed the experience of 14 elections in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and West Bank-Gaza.

involve the cooperation of those involved in democracy assistance as well as in peacekeeping. Without the latter, the elections rarely go off smoothly.

Second, peace accords increasingly specify deadlines by which elections must be held, even though very few elections actually occur as originally scheduled. Further, the focus of these elections tends to be national-level elections (presidential, legislative, or both) rather than local elections. The major motivation behind holding these elections for the international community is to reduce its presence, and to produce an indigenous leadership to spearhead societal reconstruction. Political considerations are particularly pertinent as international actors fear that “*not* advocating early elections might be perceived as a lack of enthusiasm on their part in pushing democratization forward” and “as a sign of support for the incumbent government, which may be composed of autocrats unable to proclaim themselves victorious on the battlefield” (López-Pintor 2005: ix). Much better to have the imprimatur of legitimacy granted by working with a democratically-elected government.

Has this policy of holding elections as soon as feasible worked? On the whole, the USAID report suggests that its benefits have outweighed the costs:

Overall, the role of the international community, and of USAID in particular, in democracy assistance has been moderately positive. In the specific field of elections, one can identify consistent but circumscribed positive effects. These effects are particularly visible in the institutionalization of elections in countries moving forward in democracy. Postconflict elections also contributed to the broader goals of peace, reconciliation, state building, and democracy — though only slightly. As for longer-term effects on democracy consolidation, it is, in most cases, too early to tell.

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Experience indicates that the elections did not blur deep-rotted ethnocultural cleavages. They did, however, help former combatants cope with them in a civilized, democratic manner.

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In a sense, postconflict elections have proved a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for moving toward genuine democracy with basic rights guaranteed, the rule of law working effectively, and a government that delivers. (López-Pintor 2005: ix-x)

The positive conclusions of the USAID report are not accepted by all. Increasingly other observers of the post-conflict transition process are suggesting that the holding of early elections has more to do with the preferences of international actors than with the requirements of sustainable peace on the ground and that, in fact, premature elections might backfire. Edward Newman, who co-edited a volume about the United Nations’s role in promoting democracy, argues that “ill-timed or poorly designed elections in volatile situations can be dangerous...They can exacerbate existing tensions, result in support for extremists or encourage patterns of voting that reflect wartime allegiances. An election will not of itself resolve deep-seated problems, particularly in a society deeply traumatized by conflict” (2004).

This set of ‘critical’ comments is most well-developed in the work of Benjamin Reilly.

Reilly confirms the claim that early elections are strongly preferred by international actors like the United Nations. Holding elections is a starkly symbolic act of handing the reins of power to local actors and bringing to an end the international community's involvement. Thus, the promise of early elections, Reilly argues, makes it easier to garner commitments from major powers for peacekeeping and funds for post-conflict reconstruction since these states do not wish to get embroiled in never-ending nation-building exercises that might become increasingly illegitimate the longer they drag on without indigenous leadership. Yet, the rush to hold elections before the host country has the capacity to carry them out can unravel months and years of careful work to bring about the peace. Post-conflict elections can foment tensions as electoral competition congeals around the cleavages formed and hardened by years of violent conflict. This is especially likely when the elections are held in the immediate aftermath of the conflict rather than allowing some time for tensions to be forgotten or, more realistically, subdued. In the context of the domestic 'security dilemma', electoral competition can also lead to a process of 'outbidding' as politicians ratchet up their rhetoric against their opponents to win votes — insecure voters, mobilized along ethnic lines, can get riled up against their former enemies, making the possibility of losing an election that much less palatable. Thus, competition in the electoral arena can spill into violence, and return the country to a state of conflict. None of this discussion should suggest that scholars like Newman and Reilly are against helping countries move towards democracy in the aftermath of civil conflict; rather theirs is an argument about rushing too quickly.

To summarize this admittedly brief review, the major debate is not over whether or not to hold elections in post-conflict situations. To the extent that the international community has a say, that is a settled question: elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy, and democracy promotion is a core component of the new paradigm of peacebuilding. Rather the debate focuses on the timing of elections: should elections be held early so that the process of societal reconstruction can begin legitimately, or should they be delayed till the country is capable of absorbing divisive campaign rhetoric without returning to violence.

These are vitally crucial questions, with profound policy and normative implications. Yet we have little by way of systematic research on these questions to guide our answers. Put bluntly, we do not actually have answers to the two main questions: 1) do post-conflict elections prevent conflict recurrence? 2) does the timing of elections really matter? To this, I would add a third question worth asking that might clarify these debates: 3) can we identify circumstances under which post-conflict elections are more or less beneficial?

Insecure Democrats: A Theory of Post-Conflict Elections

Elections are formalized mechanisms for deciding who governs. In consolidated democracies, all actors accept the rules-of-the-game, especially the notion that elections create winners and losers. The winners must commit not to using their power to undermine the democratic institutions and to subjecting their rule to public approval within some pre-determined time limited by running for reëlection. Losers must commit to accepting the verdict of the electorate and to behaving responsibly in opposition. This entails not questioning the legitimacy

of the core institutions of the state, and not encouraging violent tactics by supporters who might be unhappy with the results of the election.

The path to successful democratization thus involves a second election. But to get there the verdict of the first election must be respected by both sides, and then the hard work of governance must be undertaken. Should either side be incapable of credibly committing to this bargain, electoral results will be rejected by the loser and the legitimacy of the winner's claim to power will be impugned. This can lead to increased conflict between both sides outside the electoral arena.

The unraveling of the democratic process thus described is more likely to occur in new democracies. The credibility of leaders' commitments hinges on the existence of formal (e.g., legislative checks on the executive) and informal (e.g., responsiveness to public opinion) institutions that check leaders's arbitrary use of power. Yet, as Huntington (1968) argued forty years ago, the coherent, flexible, adaptable, and cohesive institutions that are taken for granted in well-institutionalized democracies are a rarity in those states making an initial transition to democracy. Rather in these aspiring democracies institutions are weak and poorly connected to society. As a result, rising aspirations in anticipation of the political transition lead to increased mobilization and participation of citizens, which can lead to increased frustration as citizens find existing institutions incapable of responding to their concerns.

This logic implies that the newly-elected leaders of fledgling democracies may not have the luxury of long-established institutions that check their behavior and enable them to make credible commitments to political opponents. Leaders cannot point to independent judiciaries as guarantors of promises to respect the rule of law and protect property rights of former enemies, nor can they rely on an independent watch-dog media and civil society or professionalized police forces to assuage concerns that they will use their power to take revenge against their opponents. Most immediately, the lack of experience in the conduct of elections can lead to claims of fraud in the electoral process thereby raising questions about their claim to power. All these institutions that make democracy work have to be created from whole cloth.

These difficulties facing new democracies are well-documented in existing scholarship. Claue et al (1996) argue that in a new democracy, a political leader more likely oversteps formal commitments to protect property rights because her time horizons are far shorter than in more established democracies. In turn, newly established *de jure* checks on the executive more often will fail to constrain the latter's attempts because they require a lengthy maturation process to fulfill that function effectively. Economic actors will thus doubt whether new democratic leaders will comply with their commitments. Similarly, peace scholars have noted the relative institutional weakness of new democracies and its consequences for making credible commitments to peace in the international arena. Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 2002) focus on the inability of still developing formal institutions to constrain democratic executives from making credible commitments to refrain from attacking other countries. They contend that during democratization, embryonic political institutions (e.g., political parties, free media) will fail to constrain political leaders from engaging in nationalist rhetoric, making the initiation of interstate war far more likely than in more mature democracies. They conclude, "the practices of many newly democratizing states are only loose approximations of those that characterize mature democracies" (2002: 301).

If new democratic political institutions generally encounter obstacles in publicly and credibly committing to peace, then countries that rapidly democratize at the conclusion of civil conflicts — when the baseline probability of reverting to violent political competition is especially high — are caught in an especially difficult conundrum. A growing number of scholars have recognized this possibility (Ball 1996; Walter 1997, 1999; Paris 2004). These authors do support the eventual implementation of democratic reforms in post-conflict countries, for both normative and instrumental reasons. However, the authors differentiate the benefits of mature democracy from the dangers of immature democracy in the immediate post-conflict period. Paris (2004) reasons that rapid post-conflict democratization involves two closely related risks. First, echoing Clague, et al (1996), the new democracy will inevitably lack the institutional strength to limit political competition to peaceful means. Elections likely exacerbate societal conflict, opening a window for potential autocrats to hijack the electoral process (161-166). Second, these countries will largely lack the kind of civil society that restrains citizens and leaders alike from resorting to arms to pursue political goals (160-161). Echoing Mansfield and Snyder's (1995, 2002) approach to international peace commitments, leaders will be tempted to engage in bellicose rhetoric against their former enemies because the press and public opinion more generally will not constrain them from doing so.

In research on the success of negotiated settlements of civil conflicts, both Walter (1999) and Ball (1996) stress that democratic political institutions cannot provide a basis for a credible peace in the short-term, though they favor the long-term implementation of democracy. In the short-term, Walter (1999) argues that new democratic political institutions are too frail to guarantee former combatants that the government will respect the peace. Similarly, Ball (1996) reasons that countries emerging from civil conflict too often lack any experience with democratic political processes, so that elections often exacerbate rather than soften political antagonisms, making a return to violence more likely (Ball 1996: 31-32). Together, these scholars suggest that the constraints on democratic leaders placed by veto actors and the electorate are far weaker in new democracies. If correct, this discussion implies that the stress placed on new democratic systems and the lack of credible constraints on newly elected leaders will hinder economic reconstruction and make conflict recidivism more likely (Flores and Nooruddin 2007).

If correct, this discussion of the inherent difficulties facing new democracies has concrete implications for the conduct of post-conflict elections. Specifically, it suggests that post-conflict elections in new democracies — states that were not democracies prior to the start of the conflict episode — are likely to be more destabilizing than post-conflict elections in states that have prior experience with democracies. In the latter, I argue, the basic institutional structures of democracy are more likely to be present, and political actors are more likely to understand how democracy works. This argument comes with an obvious caveat: if the democratic institutions had worked well in the first place, civil conflict would not have occurred to begin with. So these are not well-established democracies that I'm discussing. Rather the distinction being made is between those states that have some prior experience with democracy and those that have none.

The existing literature on post-conflict elections, and the argument offered above, suggest four testable hypotheses:

H1: Post-conflict elections will increase the likelihood of successful recovery and reduce

the likelihood of conflict recidivism.

H2: Early elections in post-conflict situations are less likely to aid recovery and prevent conflict recidivism.

H3: Post-conflict elections in new democracies are less likely to aid recovery and prevent conflict recidivism than in countries with prior experience with democracy.

H3: Early elections in new democracies are less likely to aid recovery and prevent conflict recidivism than in countries with prior experience with democracy.

In the next section, I offer an empirical test of these three hypotheses.

Empirical Analysis: Do Elections Help or Hurt?

Existing research on post-conflict elections relies almost exclusively on detailed case-studies of the experience of elections in a particular country. The sole exception is a working paper by Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom (2006) that finds that post-conflict elections have no effect on the likelihood of conflict recurrence. I have collected data on election timing during recovery episodes from civil conflict that allows me to provide a general test of the hypotheses specified above. I rely on the universe of recovery episodes identified in Flores and Nooruddin (2007: Table 5). Operationally, a ‘recovery episode’ begins once the conflict ends, either due to an explicit peace agreement or because the violence falls below a particular threshold. I use the conflict termination database assembled by the Uppsala Conflict Database Project to get at the timing of end of the conflict. Election data come from Susan Hyde and the Binghamton University ‘Institutions and Elections Project’. Therefore, I can calculate an estimate in terms of days of the time elapsed between the end of the conflict episode and the first post-conflict election.

Factors Explaining the Holding of Post-Conflict Elections

Figure 1 plots the frequency of elections by month of the recovery episode for all countries that experienced civil conflict between 1960 and 2002. Most first elections occurred in the first year after the conflict episode ended, though a sizable portion were held in the second year after the conflict ended, and a few were held in the third year or after. The modal timing is three months after the conflict episode ended.

Figure 2 shows that early post-conflict elections have become increasingly more common in recent years, which corroborates Ottaway’s (2003) argument that the ‘democratic reconstructionism’ paradigm became accepted widely in the early 1990s. As many elections were held in the first year and even first six months after the conflict ended in the 1990s as were held in the previous three decades. And that trend appears to be continuing. In just the first two years of this decade the count of elections in the first six months or first year is already approaching that of the entire 1990s, and has already exceeded the count of each of the previous three decades.

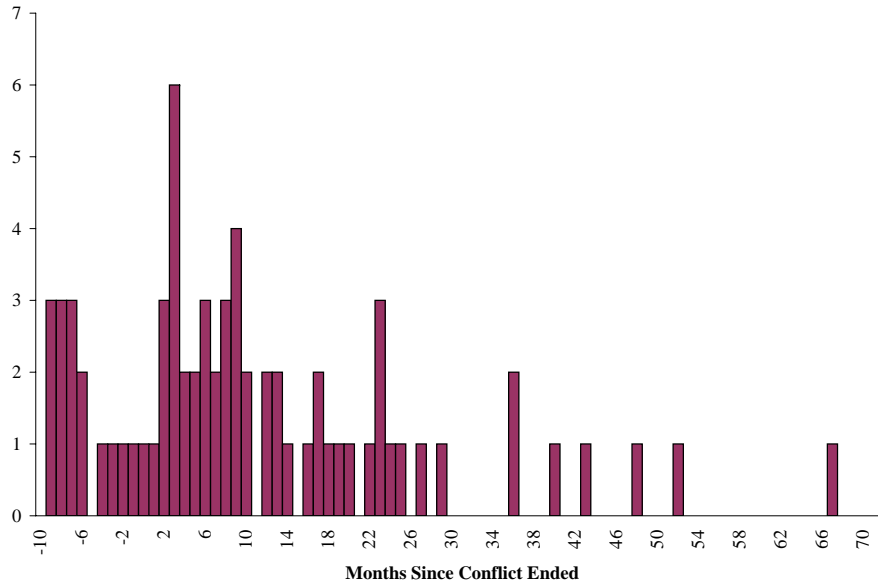


Figure 1: Most Elections Occur Soon After the Conflict Ends

What sort of factors are associated with the holding of early elections? Figure 4 plots the incidence of post-conflict elections across ten different factors. The y-axis of these graphs is the percentage of elections in a given period (either during the entire recovery period, in the first year of the recovery period, or in the first six months) that occurred when the factor on the x-axis was present.

The top panel in figure 4 considers three international factors. Of the three situations in these data where UN peacekeepers were present (Indonesia in the early 1970s, Morocco in the 1980s, and Lebanon in the early 1990s), only Lebanon held elections during the recovery period, and these occurred almost a full two years after the cessation of violence.² The World Bank, on the other hand, is strongly associated with the holding of elections. Over seventy percent of post-conflict elections have occurred in countries with post-conflict assistance programs from the World Bank.³ Finally, slightly less than half of post-conflict elections are observed by credible international monitors like the EU, OSCE, and United Nations.⁴

The second panel focuses on characteristics of the conflict from which the country is attempting to recover. Specifically, does the manner in which the conflict ended affect the likelihood of holding elections, and does the issue motivating the conflict matter as well? Starting with termination type, there's only slight evidence that countries whose conflicts

²UN peacekeeping data come from Kang and Meernik (2005).

³World Bank post-conflict assistance program data are from Nooruddin and Flores (2008).

⁴Election observation data come from Hyde (2006).

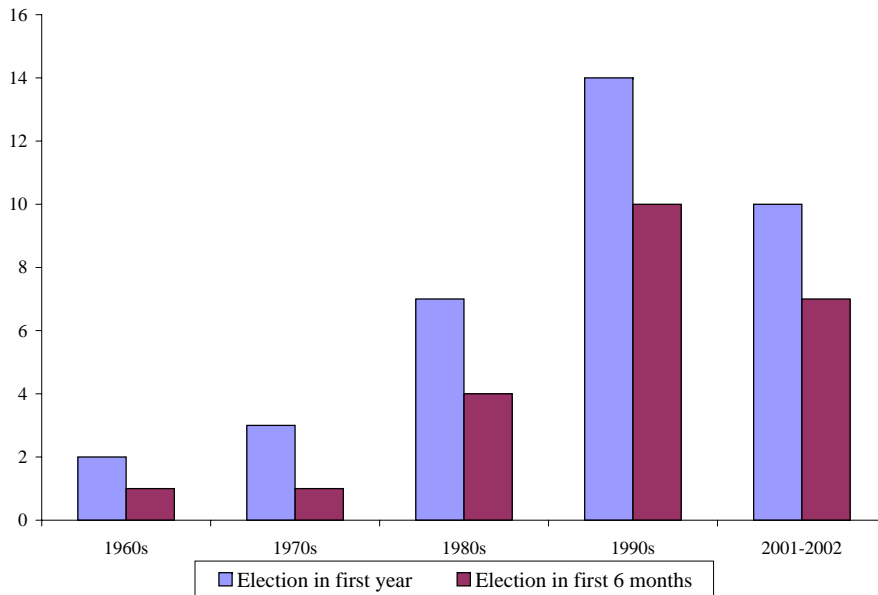


Figure 2: Early Elections Have Become Increasingly Common

ended in outright military victory or negotiated peace agreements are more likely to hold elections and to do so sooner than later than when conflicts end in ceasefires or just peter out.⁵ What is clear though is that elections are considerably more likely (over eighty percent) when the underlying issue in the preceding conflict was a challenge to the control of the central government as opposed to a secessionist movement. Having had the legitimacy of the national government brought into question, the pressure to reassert authority increases and international and domestic actors move quickly to hold elections.⁶

Finally, the third panel considers three indicators of experience with democracy, and the results here are worrying. First, most post-conflict elections do not occur in countries that were democracies prior to the conflict. In fact, fewer than one-fourth of post-conflict elections and just about one-fifth of ‘early’ elections are held in countries that were democracies prior to the conflict.⁷ Second, even if we consider ‘deeper’ roots of democracy, such as colonial heritage, the situation does not improve. Only a third of post-conflict elections were held by countries that were once colonized by Britain or France. Taken together this suggests that elections are most likely to be held where there’s little recent or historical experience with

⁵Conflict termination data are from Kreutz and Mack (2005).

⁶Data on whether the conflict was about control for the central government or over territory are from Gleditsch et al (2002).

⁷A country is coded as having been a democracy if it scored 7 or higher on the -10 to 10 combined Polity scale.

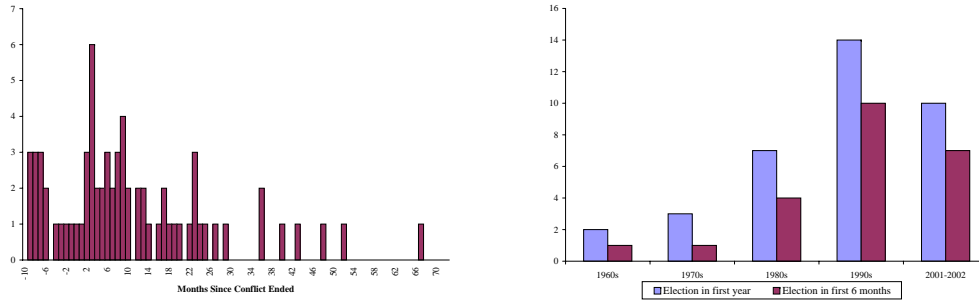


Figure 3: Frequency of early elections across different predictor variables

democratic institutions, which, given the argument above, bodes poorly for the likelihood that these elections will bolster the fragile peace.

Baseline Model of the Effect of Post-Conflict Elections

To assess whether elections help or hurt, I estimate an event history model of the likelihood of two different indicators of successful reconstruction efforts: economic recovery and conflict recurrence. These two indicators are broadly acknowledged to be closely linked (Collier et al 2003 and Quinn, Mason, and Gurses 2007 argue persuasively that economic recovery is an important determinant of post-conflict peace) and are the most commonly studied outcomes in post-conflict reconstruction (Collier et al 2003; Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom 2006; Flores and Nooruddin 2006; Kang and Meernik 2005; Koubi 2005; Nooruddin and Flores 2008; Quinn, Mason, and Gurses 2007). I define the pre-conflict level of GDP per capita as the highest attained in the five-year period before the conflict, which avoids the problems of an overly low bar for recovery and the fact that the road to conflict might have been accompanied by an economic downturn.⁸ Conflict recurrence is the commencement of another civil conflict in that country.⁹

International interventions in post-conflict societies seek to revive damaged economies and bolster the peace. Countries in a post-conflict environment thus face a multi-state competing risks problem.¹⁰ Any given recovery episode ends with either successful recovery or recurrence of conflict. States experiencing neither outcome are right-censored. As such, a competing risks analysis is suitable because it matches the dilemma facing post-conflict countries. The

⁸A potential critique of this approach is that it ignores the “opportunity costs” of conflict. That is, in the absence of conflict, if the country had maintained its normal growth rate, its GDP per capita would have increased as well, which suggests that some counter-factual level should be the threshold for recovery. While I recognize this critique’s validity, my definition’s advantages outweigh its potential disadvantages. Most importantly, it does not require me to speculate about the country’s counter-factual growth rate, which is particularly important because high levels of growth-rate volatility in the developing world make speculations about future growth paths tenuous at best (Pritchett 2000).

⁹Flores and Nooruddin (2006) offer a fuller discussion of these coding choices.

¹⁰See Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004 for an excellent treatment of event history models in political science.

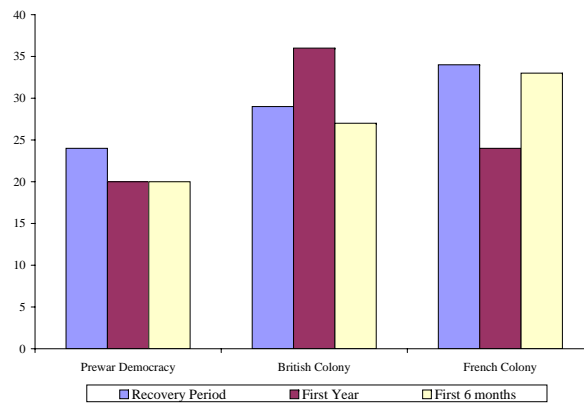
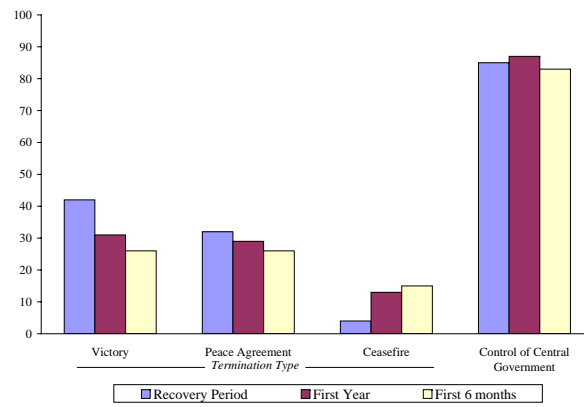
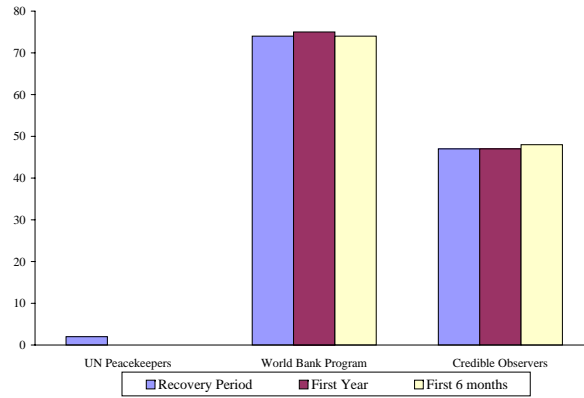


Figure 4: Frequency of early elections across different predictor variables

baseline hazard suggests the use of the log-normal distribution for the duration portion of the model.¹¹ Since the models use a log-normal parameterization, positive coefficients indicate that increases in the independent variable *increase* the time to the event. Therefore, in the recovery model, since the goal is to facilitate the quickest possible recovery, the smaller the coefficient value the better. In models of conflict recurrence, we normatively prefer a long and stable peace and thus larger coefficients.

The statistical models control for the country’s pre-conflict level of democracy (Polity score), its pre-conflict levels of GDP per capita, whether the conflict had secessionist roots,¹² the duration of the preceding conflict episode, international aid,¹³ the extent of economic damage caused by the preceding conflict,¹⁴ the nature of conflict termination,¹⁵ the size of the UN peacekeeping force, whether a World Bank program was in place, and a counter for the number of previous recoveries to account for possible stratification (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). Table 1 provides summary statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

Before I focus on the election-impact result, a brief discussion of the control variables suggests that the model is working properly as it confirms established wisdom about post-conflict transitions. The greater the economic damage caused by the conflict, the longer it takes to recover. Conflicts that end in outright military victory take longer to recover from, but this negative effect of outright victories is compensated for by the fact that conflicts that end in outright victories take much longer to relapse into violence. Countries that have had multiple civil conflicts are less likely to relapse once they’ve experienced several conflicts, and a large UN peacekeeping force also makes conflict recurrence less likely. Finally, in some alternative specifications, official aid hastens economic recovery while secessionist conflicts prove harder to recover from, though these results are not very robust.

So, do elections help or hurt? The results in Table 2 are encouraging, though conflicting. The positive coefficients in both columns suggest that holding elections during the recovery period increases the time till economic recovery and conflict recurrence. Clearly economic recovery is desirable, and so this suggests that post-conflict elections might hurt the economy, which is consistent with Paris (2004) and Flores and Nooruddin (2006). But, on the flip side, holding elections in the recovery episode also delays conflict recurrence, which is excellent news for a society recovering from the trauma of civil conflict.

¹¹The hazard rate peaks slightly after 4 years from the end of the conflict, and then falls away steadily, which suggests that most successful economic recoveries occur within 4 years. Statistically, the non-monotonic shape of the hazard function suggests the use of the log-normal distribution for the duration portion of our model, since the alternative exponential and Weibull models assume constant and monotonic hazards respectively (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). Following Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004), I also estimated Cox non-parametric equations for each of the models presented in this text. The log-normal distribution generates the lowest Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) scores. And the results hold with the Cox model instead. These are available upon request.

¹²The PRIO/Uppsala data set includes a variable for whether the conflict had its roots in a territorial or secessionist issue or if it was for the control of the center. The variable is coded ‘1’ if it had a territorial basis and ‘0’ otherwise.

¹³We control for all bilateral official development assistance (ODA) flowing into the country. The data are drawn from the OECD and are measured on a per capita basis.

¹⁴This is measured as the difference between the country’s GDP per capita in the year the conflict episode ends and the year the conflict began.

¹⁵I include dichotomous indicators for ‘outright military victories and formal peace agreements, with a reference category of informal cease-fires or cessations of violence without any explicit termination.

Table 1: Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Length of Recovery Episode (in years)	5.46	5.67	1	31	427
Recovery number	1.55	0.86	1	5	424
Pre-conflict GDP per capita (high)	6.81	1.09	4.74	9.57	424
Official development assistance (log)	5.22	1.17	0.77	7.89	416
Secessionist conflict	0.15	0.36	0	1	424
Conflict duration	3.48	5.4	1	31	424
Termination Type					
Victory	0.63	0.48	0	1	418
Peace agreement	0.2	0.4	0	1	418
International Factors					
UN Peacekeeping Forces (Log)	0.19	1.15	0	8.84	410
World Bank Project	0.59	0.49	0	1	424
Credible Observers	0.39	0.49	0	1	428
Prewar-Polity Score	-1.99	5.9	-10	10	353
New Democracy	0.07	0.26	0	1	428
Election during ...					
Recovery period	0.68	0.47	0	1	425
First 3 months	0.08	0.27	0	1	428
Second 3 months	0.08	0.27	0	1	428
Second 6 months	0.14	0.35	0	1	428
First year	0.32	0.47	0	1	428
Second year	0.17	0.37	0	1	428
Third year or after	0.2	0.4	0	1	428

Table 2: Do Elections Help or Hurt?

	<i>Recovery</i>	<i>Recurrence</i>
	1	2
Pre-conflict gdp per capita (high)	-0.00 (0.13)	0.15 (0.14)
Official development assistance (log)	-0.13 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.10)
Secessionist conflict	0.36 (0.23)	-0.18 (0.27)
Conflict duration	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Damage	0.02*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)
Termination: victory	0.39* (0.22)	1.06*** (0.32)
Termination: peace agreement	0.43 (0.33)	0.13 (0.37)
Recovery number	0.18 (0.19)	0.28** (0.12)
UN Peacekeeping Forces (Log)	0.01 (0.06)	0.96*** (0.16)
World Bank project	-0.26 (0.21)	0.04 (0.25)
Election during recovery period	0.72*** (0.22)	0.76** (0.30)
Constant	1.21 (1.05)	-0.30 (1.02)
No. of Cases	364	364
AIC	243.52	169.13
BIC	294.18	219.80

Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering by country are in parentheses. Coefficients are from a competing-risks event history model with log-normal parameterization. Therefore, larger coefficients indicate a longer time until the event-of-interest occurs (*i.e.*, economic recovery or conflict recurrence).

The Timing of Elections Matters Too

The second hypothesis tested is that, while elections might be good overall, early elections can be dangerous. That is, the positive effect of elections on conflict recidivism does not distinguish between elections held immediately after the conflict ended and those held a couple of years later. Does timing make a difference? To answer this question, I create a series of mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators to capture the timing of the election. The indicators are for whether the election was held in the first year after the conflict ended, the second year, or the third year or later.¹⁶ The reference category therefore are countries in which no post-conflict elections were held. Positive coefficients for these timing of election variables indicate therefore that having an election in that timespan lengthens the time till economic recovery or conflict recurrence as appropriate.

The results of the timing analysis are presented in Table 3. The results for the control variables do not change and so I focus my discussion on the timing results. The evidence suggests clearly that timing does matter. And, once again, the results suggest that post-conflict elections are forces for good where conflict recurrence is concerned though they slow the process of economic recovery. All the timing variables have positive coefficients which means they lengthen the time till the event of interest and they are statistically significant as a set. Additionally four of the six timing variables across Models 3 and 4 and table 3 are statistically significant, bolstering confidence in the conclusion that post-conflict elections have distinct effects depending on when they are held.

Do Elections Work Differently in New Democracies?

The results thus far have consistently found in favor of holding post-conflict elections. On the face of it, this appears to contradict previous research by Paris (2004) and Flores and Nooruddin (2006) that post-conflict democratization hinders economic recovery. How do we reconcile these two findings? The answer lies in the third and fourth hypotheses that the effect of post-conflict elections should have different effects in countries that have had prior experience with democracy than in countries that are making a dual transition — towards democracy and away from conflict — simultaneously. In particular, early elections should be more destabilizing in new democracies. If true, this would both confirm the existing literature’s pessimism about rapid post-conflict democratization and yield an important policy insight about the conditional effect of holding post-conflict elections.

To test hypotheses 3 and 4, I create a dichotomous indicator for whether the country is a new democracy. A new democracy is defined as one that scored less than 7 on the 20-point combined Polity scale which ranges from -10 to 10 before the conflict episode began, but greater than 7 in the first year after the conflict ended. I then interact this new democracy indicator with the election variable (Models 5 and 6) and with the timing of election variables (Models 7 and 8) in Table 4. This allows me to assess whether post-conflict elections have different effects in new democracies, as well as whether early elections are more dangerous in new democracies.

¹⁶In analyses not shown here, I distinguish between timing within the first year itself with indicators for whether the election was held in the first three months after the conflict ended, the second three months, the second half of the first year. The results do not change.

Table 3: The Timing of Elections Matters

	<i>Recovery</i>	<i>Recurrence</i>
	3	4
Pre-conflict GDP per capita (high)	-0.00 (0.13)	0.12 (0.13)
Official development assistance (log)	-0.16* (0.10)	-0.10 (0.10)
Secessionist conflict	0.22 (0.22)	-0.24 (0.27)
Conflict duration	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Damage	0.02*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Termination: victory	0.23 (0.23)	1.04*** (0.31)
Termination: peace agreement	0.35 (0.34)	0.18 (0.35)
Recovery number	0.15 (0.16)	0.22* (0.12)
UN Peacekeeping Forces (Log)	-0.00 (0.06)	0.94*** (0.16)
World Bank project	-0.16 (0.19)	0.05 (0.25)
<i>Timing of Election</i>		
Election in First Year	0.25 (0.27)	0.54* (0.30)
Election in Second Year	0.93** (0.39)	0.63 (0.55)
Election in Third Year or later	1.41*** (0.40)	0.97** (0.38)
Constant	1.51 (1.10)	0.18 (1.02)
No. of Cases	366	366
AIC	245.83	174.16
BIC	304.37	232.70

Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering by country are in parentheses.

Table 4: Post-conflict Elections Work Differently in New Democracies

	Election?		Election Timing	
	<i>Recovery</i>	<i>Recurrence</i>	<i>Recovery</i>	<i>Recurrence</i>
	5	6	7	8
Pre-conflict GDP per capita (high)	-0.01 (0.14)	0.16 (0.14)	0.01 (0.13)	0.09 (0.13)
Official development assistance (log)	-0.13 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.10)	-0.15 (0.10)	-0.12 (0.10)
Secessionist conflict	0.43* (0.23)	-0.17 (0.27)	0.25 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.27)
Conflict duration	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Damage	0.02*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Termination: victory	0.40* (0.21)	1.07*** (0.33)	0.27 (0.22)	1.08*** (0.32)
Termination: peace agreement	0.39 (0.34)	0.16 (0.41)	0.49 (0.38)	0.12 (0.35)
Recovery number	0.26 (0.20)	0.26** (0.12)	0.22 (0.18)	0.18 (0.11)
UN Peacekeeping Forces (Log)	0.01 (0.06)	0.95*** (0.16)	0.00 (0.05)	0.93*** (0.16)
World Bank project	-0.31 (0.22)	0.03 (0.27)	-0.23 (0.21)	0.01 (0.27)
New Democracy	-1.76*** (0.56)	3.79*** (0.69)	-1.52*** (0.53)	3.83*** (0.71)
Election during recovery episode	0.68*** (0.23)	0.80*** (0.27)		
Election X New Democracy	2.03*** (0.78)	-4.06*** (1.09)		
Election in first year			0.21 (0.27)	0.62** (0.29)
Election in second year			0.74* (0.40)	0.90** (0.40)
Election in third year or later			1.50*** (0.40)	0.80** (0.37)
First Year X New Democracy			1.17 (0.71)	-4.54*** (0.89)
Second Year X New Democracy			6.19*** (0.97)	-4.71*** (1.47)
Third Year + X New Democracy			0.75 (1.06)	1.46* (0.84)
Constant	1.22 (1.08)	-0.36 (1.10)	1.27 (1.11)	0.54 (1.01)
No. of Cases	364	364	366	366
AIC	242.59	172.64	248.80	177.38
BIC	297.15	231.10	322.95	251.53

Notes: * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering by country are in parentheses.

The results are striking. New democracies recover faster and take longer to relapse into conflict *except* when they had elections during the recovery period. And since 88% of new democracies held post-conflict elections during the recovery episode, the finding that new democracies recover faster in the absence of elections is really a statistical artifact. The dominant finding is that new democracies hold elections after conflicts have ended, and that this lengthens the process of economic recovery and makes conflict recurrence occur sooner. The result thus confirms previous research on the dangers of rapid democratization and contradicts those who argue that holding elections can aid the reconstruction process.

If we turn to the question of whether election timing is more likely to be dangerous in new democracies, the results again offer reason for real pessimism. In countries with some experience with democracy, elections in the first second or third year lengthens the time till conflict recurrence (as evidenced by the positive coefficients in Model 8). But elections held in the first year in new democracies drastically shortens the time till conflict relapse, as do elections held in the second year. Only when new democracies wait till the third year or later of the recovery period to hold their first post-conflict election do these elections help delay relapse into civil conflict.

Conclusions

International actors have emphasized the importance of holding early elections in countries recovering from civil conflict. These elections are thought to bolster the legitimacy of reconstruction efforts by turning power over to local leaders. However, academic research suggests that post-conflict elections can be destabilizing and hurt the recovery effort if held before the security situation is fully under control and the traumas of the preceding conflict are less fresh. In this paper, I offer the first comprehensive assessment of the impact of elections on prospects for economic recovery and conflict recurrence in post-conflict societies. My results indicate that while elections during the recovery period can help countries prolong the peace period, the positive effects of such elections depend primarily on whether the country had prior experience with democracy. In countries that had been democracies prior to the conflict, elections in the recovery period make conflict recurrence less likely, but the effect is the opposite in new democracies where elections rapidly increase the hazard of conflict relapse. Elections in both types of states prolong the time till economic recovery, but this effect is over three times as large in new democracies. Further, my analysis makes clear that early elections are especially dangerous in new democracies. In these states, elections held in the first two years after the cessation of violence actually increase the probability of conflict recidivism. It is only when countries are patient enough to hold their first post-conflict election three years or more beyond the end of the conflict episode that elections begin to have a positive effect and delay the onset of future violence.

The results reported here have important theoretical and policy implications. Theoretically, this research speaks to the difficulties faced by new democratizers in the developing world. Elections can be polarizing events, and all concerned must be able to commit credibly to abiding peacefully by the rules-of-the-game and the outcomes of the elections. In societies wracked by violence, elections more often reinforce the cleavages along which the violence had been fought. Poor results in elections therefore are likely to be met with protests and

violence, which can easily spiral out of control and return the country into a period of civil conflict. The fields of democracy promotion and electoral assistance increasingly find themselves having to operate in post-conflict environments, and this research underscores the importance of connecting questions of post-conflict elections with theoretical insights from years of studying the dangers of democratization and difficulties of democratic transition.

From a policy perspective, the main implication of this paper is to urge international donors to be patient. Other scholars have documented the phenomenon of aid amnesia wherein donors rush to give money and help in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or conflict, but lose interest as the years wear on even though the recipient country's need continues to be great (Ball 1996; Collier and Hoeffler 2000). A similar phenomenon is now witnessed with respect to post-conflict elections as international donors move to hold early elections so that they have a clear deadline by which to reduce their role in the country and place full responsibility in the hands of local leaders. The experience of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to exacerbate this problem as donors worry about being caught in never-ending nation-building exercises in which they are villified as 'outside occupiers'. These are real problems, and the virtues of having democratically-elected indigenous leadership are not to be under-estimated. But neither are the difficulties of bringing democracy to societies with no experience with voting and elections.

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