

The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction

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Elections are the centerpiece of efforts to rehabilitate countries devastated by civil conflict, and they are held increasingly often and early. We argue that the inability of postconflict politicians to commit credibly to respect peace and democracy implies that elections will inflame tensions unless countries have previous democratic experience or elections are delayed to allow for institution building. We test this theoretical framework with a statistical model of economic recovery and conflict recurrence. We show that early elections, particularly in new democracies, hasten recurrence; delaying elections two years in new democracies or one year in more established democracies can help forestall renewed violence.

Since the end of World War II, violent civil conflicts have brought tragedy to every corner of the world, killing 913 people per day (World Bank 2006b), displacing and impoverishing civilians, and spreading disease. Sadly, distress does not end with the shooting; on the contrary, both economic and health outcomes worsen (Collier et al. 2003; Ghobarah, Huth, and Russett 2003). These continued hardships threaten the peace; unless poverty is rapidly alleviated, the risk of renewed violence is dangerously high, as societies are caught in a “conflict trap.” These dangers have prompted a formidable response from international actors, who have become, in the words of Gregory Fox, “supervisors of all aspects of post-war transitions” (2003, 179). A common thread in the international response has been the central role of political democracy, a steadfast commitment that Marina Ottaway (2003) calls “democratic reconstructionism” (Malloch Brown 2003). The consequence has been the rapid growth of a “democracy promotion” industry.¹

In practical terms, postwar democracy promotion has resulted in the holding of increasingly early postconflict elections. Elections offer the advantages

of establishing a legitimate postconflict government and reducing the need for long, costly, and politically unpalatable international missions. Aside from democratization’s undeniably strong *normative* appeal, however, its ultimate appeal lies in part in the *empirical* claim that postconflict elections can soothe political tensions. In short, democracy promotion implicitly claims that elections *work* to make peace. Yet this is disputed ground, with recent research, following Huntington (1968), suggesting that inchoate political institutions cannot effectively manage the inevitable tensions accompanying early postconflict elections.² In fragile postconflict societies, elections may thus serve as flash points for further conflict, rather than instruments of conflict resolution.

In this article, we follow previous scholars in arguing that former enemies will find it difficult to commit to the postconflict peace. Elections exacerbate this dilemma, since election winners can break their commitments to respect peace and democratic norms and instead use their newfound power to punish their enemies. This continuing mistrust raises the specter of renewed violence and slows economic reconstruction.

¹An online appendix with supplementary material for this article is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=JOP>. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results will be made available at <http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/nooruddi/indexpersonal.htm> upon publication. All errors are our own. This literature is vast. For recent overviews, see, Chesterman (2004); Collier (2009); Coyne (2008); de Zeeuw and Kumar (2006); Diamond (2006); Jarstad and Sisk (2008); Lyons (2004); Newman and Rich (2004); Noel (2005); USAID (2005).

²See Collier (2009); Flores and Nooruddin (2009a); Paris (2004); Reilly (2003, 2004, 2008).

More mature democratic institutions, however, ameliorate this problem by constraining election winners. In turn, we expect that previous democratic experience will strengthen postconflict democratic institutions, as will delaying elections to allow for a period of institution building. Our statistical analysis supports this argument. We find that, holding timing constant, elections in new democracies are more dangerous than those held in more established democracies. Election timing does matter, though that effect itself depends on previous democratic experience; in new democracies at least two years are needed for elections to be beneficial, while in more established democracies only one is needed.

We proceed in four steps. First, we describe the major trends in postconflict elections since 1960. Second, we describe our theoretical approach. Third, we estimate a duration model on an original data set of postconflict elections and postconflict recovery. To our knowledge, this is the first and most comprehensive analysis of postconflict elections. Fourth, we conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

Postconflict Elections, 1960–2002

How frequent are postconflict elections, and have they benefited postconflict countries? To answer these questions, first, we identify the universe of countries emerging from civil conflict using the Uppsala Conflict Data Project's (UCDP) data on domestic armed conflicts, which record instances of organized armed opposition to the state in which at least 25 combatant deaths occurred (Gleditsch et al. 2002).³ In cases where a country simultaneously experienced multiple civil conflicts, we consider the period a single "conflict episode," which begins with the start date of the first conflict and ends with the end date of the last remaining conflict. At the end of a conflict episode, we define a country as entering a "recovery episode." Second, we identify elections held during recovery episodes (Hyde and Marinov 2010).

Identifying elections held during recovery episodes, as well as judging their effectiveness, requires clear demarcations of when recovery episodes end and whether or not that ending can be judged a success. We follow Collier et al. (2003) and conceptualize recovery

episodes as ending either in successful economic recovery or conflict recurrence. We code a recovery episode as ending successfully if GDP per capita returns to the highest level achieved in the five-year period before the onset of the conflict episode.⁴ Alternatively, a recovery episode ends unsuccessfully if conflict returns before recovery. We thus code the number of years until either conflict recurrence or economic recovery occurs. While these measures certainly ignore longer-term goals of peace building (e.g., social reconciliation), such goals likely depend on the achievement of these short-term objectives. Many countries sadly do not reach even these minimal goals. We code recovery episodes that reach the end of our time series without experiencing either event as right-censored. Our coding yields 119 recovery episodes, which collectively spend 425 years in recovery; 58 of these cases (49%) witnessed elections during their recovery episodes.⁵

Figure 1 divides recovery episodes and elections by decade; the last two years of our data (2001–2002) are plotted on their own. Several important trends emerge. First, the number of countries emerging from civil conflicts exploded in the 1990s and the first two years of the 2000s. Second, the number of postconflict elections more than doubled between the 1980s and 1990s. Nearly as many were held in 2001–02 as in the entire 1990s. Third, an increasing percentage of postconflict countries held elections during recovery episodes. As early as the 1980s, approximately 69% of recovery episodes saw elections, as opposed to only 18% in the 1970s, and the high rate has persisted. Finally, these elections are held increasingly early. Elections held within the first year of a recovery episode doubled to 14 in the 1990s. Similarly, elections held in the first six months of a recovery episode increased from four in the 1980s to 10 in the 1990s.

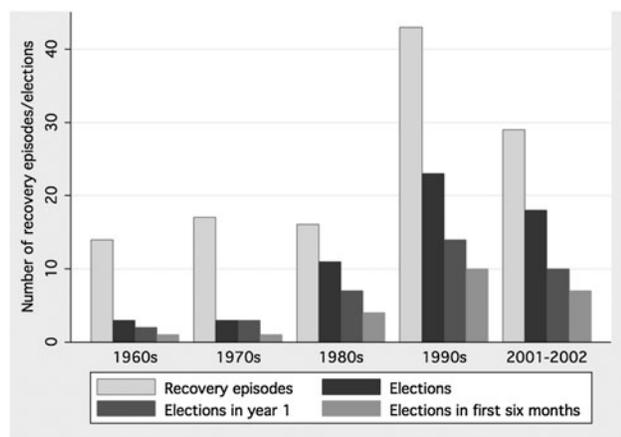
Are postconflict elections successful in facilitating economic recovery and preventing further conflict? Table 1 describes the results of recovery episodes by the presence of postconflict elections, revealing a mixed record. When elections are held, the risks of conflict recidivism decrease slightly from 31% to 26%, a normatively desirable result. However, they also lower the probability of economic recovery from

⁴This approach ignores the opportunity costs of violence, since the economy might have grown if a conflict episode had not occurred. Doing so, however, avoids the even thornier problem of speculating about the country's counterfactual growth rate, given high levels of growth-rate volatility in our sample.

⁵Our coding understates the proportion of postconflict countries holding elections, since we exclude elections that occur after economic recovery is achieved.

³The UCDP classifies conflict by the level of violence, distinguishing between minor conflicts and war. We include all conflicts that exceed the minimum threshold of 25 battle deaths per year in our data set.

FIGURE 1 Postconflict Elections are Held Early and Increasingly Often



57% to 48%. This mixed record of postconflict elections also applies to the duration of recovery episodes. The 58 recovery episodes with elections spent about 4 years and 11 months in recovery on average, as opposed to about 2 years and 3 months years in the 61 recovery episodes without elections. This indicates that recovery episodes are generally longer when elections are held, which we will discuss in further detail later. As a result, cases are more likely to be censored when elections are held versus when they are not.

In summary, postconflict elections are held increasingly often and early after civil conflicts end, yet have a mixed record of promoting short-term peace and economic recovery. This article seeks to explain this second empirical fact.

A Theory of Postconflict Elections

We begin by following previous scholars in claiming that anarchy—as opposed to hierarchy—is the defining political condition in conflict-prone countries

TABLE 1 Recovery Episode Results by Holding of Elections

Result of Recovery Episode				
Election held?	Recurrence	Censored	Recovery	Total
Yes	15 (26%)	15 (26%)	28 (48%)	58 (100%)
No	19 (31%)	7 (11%)	35 (57%)	61 (100%)
Total	34 (29%)	22 (18%)	63 (53%)	119 (100%)

(Posen 1993). Anarchy does not necessarily imply state collapse, but rather the absence of an authority capable of enforcing agreements between an armed opposition group (or groups) and the state. As Walter (1997) argues, anarchy creates a credible commitment problem that complicates the resolution of civil conflict in resolving civil conflicts; even when a government and combatant groups can identify mutually agreeable terms to end conflicts, the lack of enforcement prevents them from concluding peace agreements. Walter (1999) also posits a second stage of the credible commitment problem. Since a new government may use its newfound power to exact revenge on former enemies, combatant groups will be slow to disarm, raising the probability of conflict recurrence. Scholars have linked this credible commitment problem to slowed economic recovery (Coyne and Boettke 2009; Flores and Nooruddin 2009a, 2009b; Keefer 2008).

Do elections ameliorate or worsen the credible commitment problem?⁶ In postconflict elections, former combatant groups or representatives of their constituents contest elections, at least nominally renouncing the armed struggle. Each candidate offers a package of policies, which we presume to be centered on the short-term goals of peace and economic reconstruction. We might imagine two types of packages. First, a candidate may promise to respect minority rights, provide public goods, enact important reforms, and respect democratic norms whether or not she wins. Second, a candidate may promise to guarantee stability through political repression of her former enemies and renewed violence if she loses. Citizens respond to these policy packages by voting for their preferred candidates and choosing how to invest their economic resources of time, labor, and capital.

Of course, a candidate may attempt to win political power by promising inclusive policies, but break those promises once she has taken office. Such campaign promises appeal not only to domestic needs, but also to international democracy promoters, who shower aid on election winners. However, having taken office, a leader might use aid as a means to enriching supporters in her party, region, or identity group. Similarly, she might manipulate the levers of power to cement her

⁶The following exposition considers a hypothetical election, but we recognize the heterogeneous conditions in postconflict countries. Guatemala's elections in 1966, for instance, followed a short military coup in 1963, while Mozambique's elections in 1994 followed 17 years of civil war and two years of UN intervention. Nevertheless, the basic theoretical mechanism we propose below—in which two actors cannot trust each other's promises to respect the peace and democratic rules—is likely to hold in these diverse circumstances.

and/or her group's hold on political power, suppressing minority rights.

This time-consistency problem has three related effects for voters, politicians, and investors. First, voters find it difficult to identify and support politicians sincerely committed to democracy, reconciliation, and good economic governance (Coyne and Boettke 2009). They may support an insincere candidate or fail to support a sincere one. These choices may result not simply from a mistaken sense of a candidate, but in fact a deliberate choice of the "pseudo-democrat" (to use Hyde's 2011 label), if they sense such a politician would reinitiate violence if she lost. Liberia's 1997 election exemplifies this dynamic. After the signing of the 1996 Abuja peace agreement, Liberians chose Charles Taylor as their president in a landslide. During the campaign, Taylor assured the Liberian people of his peaceful intent. During this final campaign speech, he promised, "To those of you who are worried about violence—you have nothing to fear from me" (McNeil, Jr. 1997). Yet security remained a major factor for voters (Tanner 1998). Terrence Lyons (1999, 59) persuasively argues that Liberian voters feared that Taylor would not accept an electoral loss; a vote for Taylor thus ironically represented a vote for peace and stability. This case suggests that voters will rationally vote for an insincere politician for fear that, if that candidate loses, he will resort to arms to overturn the results.

Second, politicians fear the consequences of losing elections. If electoral winners respect the peace and democratic norms, election losers can look forward to some measure of power while in opposition and future rounds of elections that might end more favorably. Yet the credible commitment problem means that election losers may very well also lose all political rights, including the opportunity to participate in fair elections. In Mozambique, for example, the 1992 General Peace Agreement (GPA) between the government controlled by Joaquim Chissano's Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Afonso Dhlakama's Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) guaranteed multiparty elections. After years of warfare between the two sides, distrust remained high and Dhlakama—citing fraud—threatened to withdraw from the election only hours before voting was scheduled to begin in October 1994. Then, after losing the election to Chissano, Dhlakama threatened to contest the results, though he also promised not to reinitiate violence (Synge 1997). Subsequent elections in 1999 and 2004 became increasingly fraudulent, drawing overt criticism from the European Union (2004). Such protests offer little consolation to Dhlakama, for

whom an electoral defeat 17 years ago meant not a temporary spell in the opposition, but a permanent loss of political viability.

Finally, investors face an economic dilemma. On one hand, postconflict countries can present economic opportunities, since the costs of conflict likely include the destruction of productive physical capital (e.g., farms, factories), the rebuilding of which promise high returns to investment. Yet investors, like politicians and voters, recognize the danger of the credible commitment problem; if they invest in new economic activity, they risk losing everything to renewed violence. They therefore will likely forego investing until they are assured that a sincere candidate has been elected or that the constraints on a successful candidate are strong enough to prevent predation. This logic, we argue, applies especially well to international investors, who might otherwise find attractive investment opportunities in the postconflict context. This fear of renewed violence and predation—which is felt across a broad spectrum of people in their economic lives—is the primary obstacle to recovery in postconflict economies (Bates 2001).

Implicit in this rather bleak account is the weakness of democratic institutions that constrain politicians, what Collier (2009) calls the "essential infrastructure" of democracy. We assume that election losers may easily revert to armed force to change elections' results and election winners easily can subvert constraints on their power to make permanent their hold on power. Yet elections are held in a diverse range of institutional contexts, as we have already discussed; although civil conflict by its very nature weakens state authority, postconflict political institutions range from a state of collapse—as in Liberia's 1997 elections, which followed the long decay of democratic institutions—to relative perseverance—as in Guatemala's 1995 elections, which were preceded by two previous rounds of relatively free elections.

We argue that this institutional heterogeneity explains the mixed record of postconflict elections because stronger institutions diminish the severity of the credible commitment problem. When democratic institutions are well established, politicians find it harder to cheat during elections, renew violence when they lose, and subvert democratic norms when they win. Their promises are consequently more credible, assuaging (though not eliminating) the fears of other politicians, voters, and investors. This claim is in keeping with well-established research in international relations and political economy that provides evidence of the power of democratic institutions to bolster the credibility of politicians' policy promises.

While scholars have suggested that mature democratic institutions (e.g., constraints on the executive) strengthen the credibility of democratic leaders' promises to other leaders in international crises (Schultz 1998) and to international investors (Jensen 2008; Nooruddin 2011), they also have been well aware of the dangers of weak and new democratic institutions (Clague et al. 1996; Mansfield and Snyder 1995, 2002; Savun and Tirone 2011).

We argue that the postconflict credible commitment problem is ameliorated—and postconflict elections are more likely to be successful in promoting peace and recovery—when democratic institutions are relatively stronger. Furthermore, our focus on credible commitments helps identify the kinds of institutions that are especially important when holding postconflict elections. First, security institutions—including civilian control over the military and police—help lower the probability that politicians can resort to violence before, during, or after elections and thus lend credibility to their promises to respect the peace. Second, a well-designed electoral infrastructure—honest electoral commissions, for example—can help convince politicians and voters that the electoral process will be free and fair. Third, constraints on the executive—such as an independent judiciary and strong legislature—reduce election winners' ability to repress election losers and those they represent.

If stronger democratic institutions are critical to resolving the credible commitment problem surrounding elections, then what factors affect such institutional strength? First, we contend that countries with a history of democratic governance before the conflict will tend to be equipped with a deeper institutional stock. Such countries likely have more experience with constraints on executives, electoral commissions, and multiple political parties. Even if that experience has largely been negative, their mere existence means that they may have to be reformed, but not built from scratch. An element of "trial and error" may also exist, since once-failed institutions will be modified and hence function better. New postconflict democracies, in contrast, face a far more daunting task, since they must build democracy on a far shakier foundation.

Second, we argue that allowing more time before elections facilitates the strengthening of the country's institutional stock. In postconflict countries, democratic institutions are weakened and, in new democracies, must be created from whole cloth. That process might involve such difficult steps as designing a new electoral system and creating a national electoral commission. Rushing this process likely bequeaths institutions that are, all else equal, weaker

than if more time were allowed. Designing new security institutions may require disarming armed groups and reconstituting the army and police. Similarly, electoral institutions include creating new voter rolls, registering political parties, and building an electoral commission that has legitimacy in the eyes of politicians—all of these steps require more than a few months to do well. Taking a longer view, the process of democratization is best measured in decades and generations, rather than years. Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of civil conflicts—when democratic institutions are at best in flux and at worst nonexistent—allowing extra time before the election gives countries a fighting chance to develop institutions strong enough to mitigate the credible commitment problem.

Based on the logic of the theoretical framework and illustrative cases, we offer two hypotheses:

H1. *Ceteris paribus*, post-conflict elections are more politically destabilizing when held in new democracies.

H2. *Ceteris paribus*, elections are more politically destabilizing the earlier they are held.

Empirical Analysis: Do Elections Hurt or Help?

We have seen thus far that countries recovering from civil conflicts increasingly hold elections as part of their recovery; that such elections tend to occur quite soon after the conflict ceases; and that postconflict elections have a mixed record at fostering peace and economic reconstruction. The prior section offers a theoretical explanation for the last of these patterns. Here, we test that explanation. We define our dependent variable as the short-term consequences of a recovery episode, which we code as the number of years until either economic recovery or conflict recurrence, whichever occurs first. These two indicators of postconflict success are broadly acknowledged to be closely linked and are the most commonly studied outcomes in postconflict reconstruction (Collier et al. 2003; Flores and Nooruddin 2009a; Quinn, Mason, and Gurses 2007).

In the language of event history analysis, postconflict countries face a multistate competing risks problem, since one of two events (economic recovery or conflict recurrence) can end the recovery episode. As such, a competing risks analysis is suitable because it allows an analysis of alternative,

or “competing,” conclusions to the time at risk. The baseline hazard suggests the use of the log-normal distribution for the duration portion of the model.⁷ The coefficients on our covariates indicate their effect on the timing of each event. In a log-normal parameterization, positive coefficients indicate that increases in the independent variable *increase* the time to the event. Therefore, we prefer smaller coefficients in the recovery model and larger ones in the recurrence model.

Baseline Model of the Effect of Postconflict Elections

We begin our analysis by estimating a baseline model of recovery and recurrence as a function of whether or not a country held an *election during the recovery episode*. Our election variable is a dichotomous indicator coded from election data provided by the NELDA project at Yale University (Hyde and Marinov 2010).⁸

Previous studies of civil conflict have suggested a number of alternative explanations of conflict recidivism, so we include control variables to test whether our focus on elections holds empirical water even when considering other plausible causal mechanisms. Including statistical controls also allows us to account meaningfully for the heterogeneity characterizing these countries; as we have seen, civil conflicts include short coups, long-running minor insurgencies, and devastating civil wars. First, we control for the country's *preconflict GDP per capita* (World Bank 2006a); we expect that richer countries should be able to recover faster and avoid recurrence. Second, we include variables describing the nature of the conflict episode and its termination. We use a dummy variable for whether the conflict was a *secessionist conflict*, with such conflicts coded 1 and 0 otherwise. We also control for the *duration* of the preceding conflict episode. The extent of economic *damage* caused by the preceding conflict 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; larger values indicate greater economic damage. The nature of conflict termination is taken from Kreutz and Mack (2005), coded with dichotomous indicators for out-

right *military victory* and formal *peace agreements*, with a reference category of informal cease-fires or cessations of violence without any explicit termination. Previous scholarship strongly suggests that peace agreements are less stable than military victories (Licklider 1995; Walter 1997, 1999). Third, we incorporate other aspects of the postconflict environment. The natural log of the size of the *UN peacekeeping force* is based on data from Kang and Meernik (2004). We also include two measures of outside financial help; *official development assistance* (ODA) is based on data from the OECD and measured as the natural log of per capita inflows and a dummy variable for whether a *World Bank project* is based on data from Flores and Nooruddin (2009b). We insert a counter for the *recovery number* of the present recovery episode to account for past experience with civil conflict and possible stratification.

The first two columns of Table 2 report the results of our baseline models of recovery and recurrence. Before we focus on the election-impact result, a brief discussion of the control variables suggests that the model supports previous findings about postconflict transitions. Conflicts that end in outright military victory take much longer to relapse into violence, but also are slower to recover economically. This is true also when we compare military victories to peace agreements.⁹ A larger UN peacekeeping force also makes conflict recurrence less likely; this finding provides further evidence in favor of the credible commitment framework, as it suggests that outside interveners make it easier for erstwhile enemies to commit to the peace, or, alternatively, harder to renege on it (Fortna 2008; Mattes and Savun 2009). The greater the economic damage caused by the conflict, the longer it takes to recover, as might be expected (Kang and Meernik 2005).

Turning to our central question, do elections help or hurt? As suggested by Table 1, the results are conflicting. The positive coefficients on the election variables indicate 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 postconflict elections might hurt the economy, which is consistent with Paris (2004). Conversely, holding elections in the recovery episode also delays conflict

⁷The log-normal distribution generates the lowest Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) scores, suggesting it fits the data best. Regardless, all our results hold if we use the Cox model instead. These are available upon request.

⁸The NELDA data are checked against information from Binghamton University's IAEP project to ensure accuracy. See <http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/institutions-and-elections-project.html>.

⁹Statistically speaking, a Wald test comparing the size of the two coefficients in the recurrence equation confirms that peace agreements relapse faster ($p = 0.01$), but do not take longer to recover ($p = 0.89$) than military victories.

TABLE 2 Postconflict Elections Work Differently in New Democracies

	Baseline Model				Full Model			
	Recovery		Recurrence		Recovery		Recurrence	
Pre-conflict GDP per capita (high)	-0.00	(0.13)	0.15	(0.14)	-0.00	(0.14)	0.08	(0.13)
Official development assistance (log)	-0.13	(0.10)	-0.07	(0.10)	-0.16	(0.10)	-0.12	(0.10)
Secessionist conflict	0.36	(0.23)	-0.18	(0.27)	0.27	(0.22)	-0.24	(0.27)
Conflict duration	-0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Damage	0.02***	(0.01)	0.01	(0.00)	0.02**	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Termination: victory	0.39*	(0.22)	1.06***	(0.32)	0.32	(0.22)	1.15***	(0.34)
Termination: peace agreement	0.43	(0.33)	0.13	(0.37)	0.21	(0.38)	0.20	(0.38)
Recovery number	0.18	(0.19)	0.28**	(0.12)	0.35*	(0.19)	0.23*	(0.12)
UN Peacekeeping Forces (Log)	0.01	(0.06)	0.96***	(0.16)	0.12*	(0.07)	0.83***	(0.16)
World Bank project	-0.26	(0.21)	0.04	(0.25)	-0.30	(0.21)	-0.01	(0.28)
Election during recovery episode	0.72***	(0.22)	0.76**	(0.30)				
Established democracy					-0.54**	(0.21)	0.29	(0.42)
New Democracy					-1.96***	(0.54)	3.36***	(0.73)
Election in first year					0.34	(0.31)	0.68**	(0.31)
Election in second year					0.73*	(0.42)	0.80**	(0.40)
Election in third year or later					1.32***	(0.39)	0.62	(0.40)
First year X established democracy					-0.58	(0.47)	-0.92	(0.77)
Second year X established democracy					5.18***	(0.74)	3.41***	(0.92)
Third year X established democracy					3.98***	(0.75)	4.33***	(0.86)
First Year X New Democracy					1.73**	(0.72)	-4.17***	(0.88)
Second Year X New Democracy					6.42***	(1.03)	-4.13***	(1.48)
Third Year + X New Democracy					1.46	(0.96)	1.59*	(0.87)
Constant	1.21	(1.05)	-0.30	(1.02)	1.27	(1.16)	0.52	(0.99)
No. of Cases	364		364		362		362	
AIC	243.52		169.13		240.87		182.26	
BIC	294.18		219.80		330.38		271.77	

Note: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. 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.

recurrence, which is excellent news for a society recovering from the trauma of civil conflict. Taken together, these results state that postconflict elections lengthen the recovery period. Put differently, countries holding postconflict elections tend to enter a protracted period of vulnerability during which recovery and recurrence both remain possibilities.

Election Timing and New Democracies

Our theoretical framework anticipates these findings; because the baseline model pools both early and late elections in both new and old democracies, we *should* expect statistically insignificant results. Directly testing that framework demands that we interact our election measure used in the baseline model with measures of democratic experience and election timing. We do so in three steps. First, we first create a series of mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators

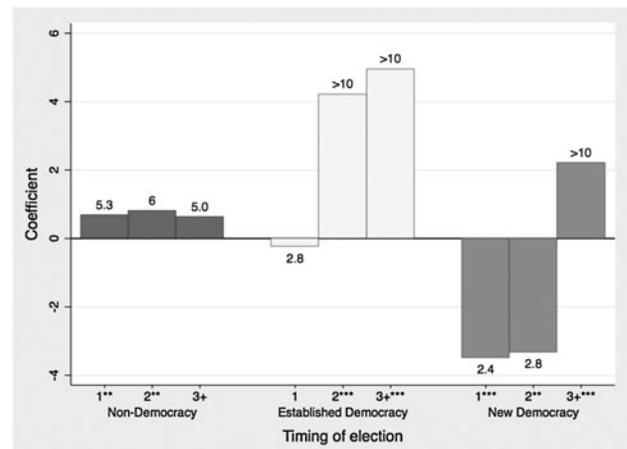
of the timing of elections. The indicators are for whether the election was held in the *first year* after the conflict ended, the *second year*, or the *third year or later*. The reference category is thus composed of countries in which no elections were held during the postconflict recovery period. Second, we create two more mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators; one for whether the country is a *new democracy* and another for whether it is an *established democracy*. We define a new democracy 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. An established democracy, by contrast, also scored greater than 7 before the conflict episode began. Now, the reference category is postconflict nondemocracies. Third, we interact the two sets of indicators with each other, which allows us to compare the effect of timing in different regime types.

The results shown in Columns 3 and 4 of Table 2 therefore contain nine election-related variables, which allow us to compare the effect of elections based on their timing (first, second, or third year and later) and the political institutions under which they are held (in a nondemocracy, established democracy, or new democracy). The interpretation of the model is as follows. First, the coefficients for the noninteracted established democracy and new democracy variables show the effect of that regime type if no election is held during the recovery period. Second, the three noninteracted election timing variables are the effect of elections in nondemocratic countries. Third, the effect of elections in democracies can be calculated by adding the appropriate coefficient for election timing variable with its corresponding interaction term (either with the established or new democracy indicator variable). A positive interaction term indicates that holding elections in that political institutional circumstance and time frame adds more time till recovery or recurrence as compared to the same election in a nondemocratic country. With these notes in hand, we can now examine our results. They are striking. New democracies recover faster and take longer to relapse into conflict *except* when they had elections during the recovery period. However, since only 12% of new democracies delay elections until the recovery period is over, this finding is of little comfort. Thus far, our results reinforce an earlier pattern; elections are uniformly bad for economic reconstruction.

The recurrence results are even more supportive of our theoretical framework. Since interpreting these results depends on evaluating the interactive effects, we simplify the presentation by displaying them graphically in Figure 2, which displays the effect of holding elections by timing and regime type. Three patterns in the results are noteworthy. First, elections have a statistically significant effect in seven of the nine categories; in other words, regardless of transition type or timing, holding an election alters the timing of conflict recurrence.

Second, elections have a more positive effect in established democracies than in new democracies, providing support for H1. We can see this by comparing the height of the second and third sets of bars. In more established democracies, elections have a negative and statistically insignificant effect when held in the first year, but a positive and statistically significant effect in in year 2, 3, or later. In new democracies, however, elections have a negative and statistically significant effect when held in either years 1 or 2; elections held in year 3 or after have a positive and statistically significant effect, but one that is less beneficial than in more

FIGURE 2 The Effect of Election Timing Depends on Previous Experience with Democracy



Note: Bars represent the effect of elections by regime type and timing, calculated by the appropriate combination of election timing and interactions of election timing and regime type. Starred columns denote the statistical significance of the effect, which we calculate by estimating a Wald test of the null hypothesis that the effect is 0. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Labels are predicted years until conflict recurrence, calculated by exponentiating the predicted value of the linear model (i.e., $e^{\beta X}$) for the nine interactive categories of election timing. Continuous control variables are set to their means. Indicator variables are set as follows: a first conflict fought over control of center, ended by a peace agreement, and under assistance from the World Bank.

established democracies. Comparing the effect of elections held in the same year in new versus more established democracies confirms the more stabilizing effects of elections in established democracies; even in the first year, when the effect of such elections is negative, it is still less negative than first-year elections in new democracies. Wald tests confirm this pattern.¹⁰

To conduct an even stricter test of H1, we compare the effect of *later* elections in new democracies to *earlier* elections in more established democracies. In effect, we ask how long elections must be delayed in new democracies to be as effective in preventing recurrence as those in more established democracies. These Wald tests indicate that elections in new democracies are always more destabilizing than those in more established democracies unless elections are held in the third year or later; such

¹⁰More specifically, we estimated two-tailed Wald tests of the null hypothesis that, for example, $\text{Election}_{2\text{ndYr}} \times \text{Est.Democracy} = \text{Election}_{2\text{ndYr}} \times \text{NewDemocracy}$ for all three possible timings. The tests show that the effect is more beneficial in established democracies in the first ($p = 0.01$), second ($p < 0.00$), and third years and beyond ($p = 0.01$).

elections are more stabilizing than those held in established democracies in the first year, though they are still not as beneficial as elections held in the second year in established democracies.¹¹

Guatemala's experience with civil conflict and democracy nicely illustrates our statistical analysis of this point. Guatemala experienced a long civil war lasting from 1960 until 1996. In 1995, the country held elections that coincided with the conclusion of its civil war and its normal electoral calendar. These elections followed a 12 year process of democratization. A 1983 military coup commenced a return to electoral democracy that included the writing of a new constitution by a constituent assembly in 1985, elections in 1986, the creation of new checks on the executive (e.g., a human rights commission, habeas corpus), and civilian control over the military. In 1993, President Jorge Antonio Serrano Elías attempted to consolidate his power by suspending the new constitution, but was checked by the human rights commission, legislature, and courts. When elections were held at the conclusion of the country's civil war—as well as in 1999, three years after the signing of peace accords—the kinds of institutions we emphasize (e.g., constraints on the executive, security institutions) had coalesced to provide credibility to the process.

Third, the effect of elections in postconflict countries is highly dependent on timing, but *how* it is dependent depends on previous experience with democracy. Recall that, though, H2 states that later elections more likely forestall recurrence and encourage recovery, our framework is agnostic as to whether elections must be delayed *longer* in new democracies. Our results, however, unequivocally answer that question in the affirmative. Here, we compare the height of the three bars within each set, starting with established democracies. As we have already seen, the pattern is clear for both new and established democracies. To examine these results in greater depth, we again estimate Wald tests comparing the effect of election timing. Those tests confirm our impressions from Figure 2. Elections have a far more beneficial effect when delayed from the first until the second year ($p < 0.00$) or from the first until the third year ($p < 0.00$). Yet elections are not more beneficial if

delayed from the second to the third year ($p = 0.29$). But what of new democracies? A brief examination of the last set of three bars in Figure 2 again provides a portrait of the benefits of delaying elections, but one that is different than that for more established democracies; while there is no difference in the effect of holding elections in the first two years—both are equally bad, elections held in third year or later have a dramatically more beneficial effect. Again, Wald tests confirm this impression. The impact of elections does not improve if delayed from the first until the second year ($p = 0.90$), but delaying from the second to the third year is highly beneficial ($p < 0.00$). In summary, election timing matters for both new and established democracies, but more time is needed to conduct a peace-making election in new postconflict democracies.

These three main findings are substantively, as well as statistically, important. Consider the predicted number of years until recurrence for each combination of election timing and regime type (see the bar labels in Figure 2). In established democracies, elections are dangerous when held in the first year, with recurrence predicted within three years; when elections are delayed one year, the return of violence is dramatically delayed. In contrast, elections held in new democracies are dangerous in both the first and second years; in either case, violence is predicted within three years. When elections are delayed until the third year or later, however, the probability of further violence declines. Our findings could not be clearer: unless elections are delayed at least two years in new democracies and one year in more established democracies, renewed violence is likely within a relatively short time.

Again, we turn to case evidence to provide context to these findings. What steps can be taken to bolster the commitments of postconflict politicians? We briefly compare the experiences of Angola and Mozambique in the early 1990s. The comparison is especially apt, since both countries were former Portuguese colonies ruled after interdependence by one-party states that adopted Marxist policies and battled resistance movements supported by South Africa (Synge 1997, 5). In Angola, the Bicesse Accords of 1991 established a timetable for elections to be held in late September 1992, 16 months later. Although the agreement called for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of troops and formation of a new national army, Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) did not comply with the program and was able to regroup after elections showed Savimbi had lost the presidential election. In Mozambique, the 1992 GPA between the FRELIMO government and RENAMO resistance established a

¹¹Wald tests show that elections held in new democracies in the second year are more dangerous than elections held in the first year in established democracies ($p = 0.06$). They also show that elections held in new democracies in the third year and beyond are still more destabilizing than elections held in the second year in established democracies ($p = 0.08$), but less destabilizing than elections held in the first year in established democracies ($p = 0.03$).

timeframe for elections that was later modified to allow more time for the DDR process to work; the elections were eventually held nearly 25 months after the GPA came into effect. When Afonso Dhlakama, RENAMO's leader, lost the 1994 election, he could not as easily head back to the bush; instead, he took his place in the opposition. The time between the signing of a peace agreement was only eight to nine months longer in Mozambique, but those months played a key difference in reforming security institutions.

Figure 2 provides one more supportive piece of evidence about election timing. As we have seen, the effect of holding elections in nondemocratic countries is generally positive and statistically significant. In other words, when "pseudo-democrats" hold postconflict elections, they enjoy a longer peace; the average time until recurrence is between five and six years when elections are held. In contrast, nondemocratic countries that refrain from holding elections are predicted to have violence recur within three years. The timing of elections, however, does not significantly change the time till recurrence, as we can see from the very slight difference between the first three bars in Figure 2 and only slight change in the predicted years until recurrence.¹² While our theoretical framework is silent on the issue of elections in nondemocratic countries, this empirical pattern nonetheless provides favorable circumstantial evidence. Nondemocratic elections demand far less of the state, institutionally speaking; more time is not needed to bolster democratic institutions that guarantee free political competition, place the military under civilian control, and constrain the executive, since it is a foregone conclusion that the autocrat will win. In line with our framework, our results therefore suggest that electoral timing matters *only* in democratic countries—and, as we have seen, most of all in new democracies. When democratic institutions are not being built, timing matters not at all.

Robustness and Non-Random Selection

An important concern for our empirical analysis is that our results may be biased against elections since they are nonrandomly assigned. If elections—especially early ones and/or those held in new democracies—are held only in the most dangerous postconflict countries, then our statistical models will

wrongly find that early elections are dangerous for recovery and recurrence. In contrast, our results understate the negative consequences of early elections if democracy promoters press for elections in otherwise more stable postconflict countries, perhaps as a means to demonstrating the virtues of elections. In a cross-national, observational study such as ours, the two statistical weapons best suited to accounting for selection bias are especially difficult to use. Instrumental variables regression relies on finding predictors of election timing that do not also predict the probability of postconflict recovery or recurrence—an unlikely scenario. Matching techniques, on the other hand, only correct for selection driven *solely* by observable factors. In such cases, properly specifying control variables, as we do in each of the models estimated, should engender results that are broadly similar to matching techniques.

A proper consideration of this issue would involve a full theoretical and empirical account of election timing, which might clarify whether or not early elections tend to be held in the most difficult cases. Such an effort is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.¹³ We do, however, consider three pieces of evidence that suggest that our results are *not* driven by nonrandom assignment of elections and their timing.¹⁴ First, we consider whether countries that hold early elections are inherently poorer or less likely to recover economically. We find little support for this proposition. Postconflict countries that hold early elections in their first year actually tend to receive more foreign aid than countries that do not and also receive more aid than countries holding elections in the second year; each of these differences is statistically significant. Nor do early-election countries have lower levels of contract-intensive money (a measure of economic institutional quality) or foreign-direct investment. Second, we return to a point we considered above—are early elections more likely held after peace agreements, which are inherently less stable? Examining data provided by Hartzell and Hoddie (2007), we find that while countries *are* more likely to hold elections after conflicts ended by peace agreements, they are *not* especially likely to hold them early; roughly half were held in the second year or later. Finally, we also reestimate our models for only those conflicts ending after the end of the Cold War; since we expect more recent

¹²Wald tests fail to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in the effect for the first versus second years ($p = 0.79$); first versus third year ($p = 0.88$); or the second versus third year or later ($p = 0.68$).

¹³But, see Brancati and Snyder (2011).

¹⁴All of the statistical tests discussed in this section are in the web appendix.

attempts at “democratic reconstructionism” to be more successful, these models should yield more sanguine estimates of the impact of early elections. In fact, our results hold. That they do so even during a period in which postconflict politicians have had a reduced scope for choice in whether to hold an election suggests that our results are not an artifact of selection bias.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of civil violence, countries have increasingly turned to elections as a means to ushering in democracy and ending armed conflict. The democracy promotion industry encourages this practice as it assists elections in countries as dissimilar as Cambodia, El Salvador, and Sierra Leone. Replacing ballots with bullets is undeniably a captivating goal. Yet both practitioners and researchers have questioned the wisdom of holding elections in fragile postconflict societies. Though we recognize the normative issues inherent in this field, we concentrate here on *empirical* questions regarding the impact of postconflict elections. Theoretically, we follow previous scholars in arguing that postconflict politicians will find it difficult to credibly commit to peace and democracy. Elections tend to worsen this problem unless accompanied by democratic institutions that ensure just electoral competition, constrain election winners, and remove the military from politics. Such institutions bolster commitments to peace and make elections more successful. In turn, we point to two factors contribute to such strong institutions—previous democratic experience and an extended period of institution building before the first election.

We test this framework with a statistical of economic recovery and conflict recurrence. Our results support both of our core propositions. Elections are far more beneficial in countries with previous democratic experience, holding timing constant. Timing does matter, but how it matters depends on previous democratic experience. In countries with previous democratic experience—where we expect democratic institutions to be more robust—only one year of preparation is needed before elections have a largely positive effect on reducing recurrence. In contrast, at least two years of preparation are needed in new democracies—and even then, the effect of elections is not nearly as positive as it is in established democracies.

Our research has important implications for the study of peacebuilding and democratization. First, we move past the question of, “Are postconflict elections helpful?” to the more nuanced question of, “When,

where, and why are postconflict elections most helpful?” In doing so, we help to resolve conflicting findings on postconflict democratization, ranging from cautious optimism (USAID 2005) to despair (Paris 2004). Second, this article is the first to bring statistical techniques to bear on these questions. Finally, our study also contributes to our understanding of democratization. The “fourth wave” of democracy has been dominated by countries emerging from civil conflict; studying their special dangers deepens our understanding of democratization. These lessons motivate our priorities for future research. Other factors (e.g., tensions between identity groups) certainly affect the success of democracy promotion. This study also does not directly test precisely *which* democratic institutions are most critical. Future research might also broaden our conceptualization of the dependent variable, examining the creation of state capacity, for example. Lastly, these dependent variables might also be studied over a longer time horizon.

We conclude with a consideration of the political implications of this research. Sound theory and research should certainly guide the practice of peace building and democracy promotion. Yet we caution against overinterpreting our research. Our findings justify neither authoritarian leadership in postconflict countries nor the automatic postponement of postconflict elections. Delaying elections is an inherently political question and in many cases might itself cause further violence. Instead, we encourage practitioners to extend their time horizons and temper their instincts always to recommend either early or late elections. “Aid amnesia”—in which donors rush foreign aid to countries in the wake of a humanitarian disaster, but rapidly withdraw it as time passes—is a serious issue recognized in the foreign aid community (Ball 1996). Analogously, outside actors too often insist on early elections as a means to escaping costly entanglements. We instead suggest they regard elections as only one step in a lengthy process of democracy assistance. More broadly still, our research strongly suggest that practitioners abandon a “one-size-fits-all” approach to democracy promotion and instead recall that elections must correspond to the needs of the society in which they are held.

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