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How United Nations peace operations can help overcome perils to post-conflict elections 1

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Abstract

Agreeing to elections is generally seen as a key way to settle armed conflict and prevent recurrent violence. However, the transition from violent conflict to nonviolent electoral competition can be wrought with many challenges. Stable electoral competition requires trust in institutions, but trust often takes a long time to develop and is often lacking in post-conflict elections. We argue that UN peacebuilding operations can play an indispensable role in the development of stable electoral institutions through three interrelated ways: reducing political and electoral violence, supporting democratic attitudes and norms of peaceful coexistence, and reinforcing institutional capacity and the rule of law. Using a new measure of the expected quality of elections in post-conflict countries between 1946 and 2012, we show that UN peace missions are associated with better elections and a greater likelihood of successful transitions to electoral competition compared to post-conflict countries without UN involvement. We also find larger differences when the UN is involved in establishing electoral institutions, especially when there is no or limited prior electoral competition, indicating that the UN is effective at assisting the democratization processes in difficult contexts.

Keywords: conflict resolution, UN peacekeeping, peace missions, civil war, democratization, elections

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Introduction

The Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (2000:4), known as the Brahimi Report after its chairman, Lakhdar Brahimi, argued that elections should be held at ripe moments, following a period of deliberation and national reconciliation. However, committing to elections early on remains a common strategy. In some cases, holding elections quickly becomes unavoidable following peace agreements. In other cases, external actors may impose elections, especially when elections are linked with plans to phase out United Nations (UN) peace operations.[1] But calling elections does not by itself ensure a successful transition to democracy. Elections can mark a break from the past, but increased competition in post-conflict settings can endanger peace and stability (Autessere, 2010; Brancati and Snyder, 2011; DeRouen and Chowdhury, 2018; Reilly, 2002). Political institutions are often new and weakly established in post-conflict countries, and social institutions are fragile. Low confidence in the ability of elections to regulate political competition exacerbates a volatile environment.

Renewed violent conflict has often followed peace agreements that mandate elections, for example, Angola in 1992 (Brancati and Snyder, 2013; DeRouen et al., 2010; Matanock, 2017). Nevertheless, there are also cases where post-conflict elections are successful and renewed conflict does not followas in Sierra Leone where the presidential and parliamentary elections of May 2002 were not followed by renewed violence. The *United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone* (UNAMSIL) enabled these elections by providing logistical support and security (Bah, 2012).

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[1] We use the term peace operations to denote both traditional peacekeeping missions and special political missions, in line with UN conventions.

We argue that UN peacebuilding operations can help the long-term development of stable electoral institutions and support democratic norms of peaceful competition and coexistence. Democratization provides a potential remedy to the risk of violent conflict recurrence, but the path toward a stable democracy involves a *series* of consecutive elections. A single electoral cycle is hardly enough for democracy to hold roots and flourish; temporal linkages between preceding and succeeding elections are interwoven at the very fabric of democracy. As Przeworski (2005) highlights, democracy is consolidated when losers accept election outcomes and concede peacefully when they see the process as fair and perceive that they have reasonable prospects to win in subsequent elections. Przeworski (1991: 4) denotes this procedural quality of democracy as institutionalized uncertainty.

Recent studies suggest that UN operations impact political participation, civic culture, and the rule of law and can support democracy promotion given appropriate mission mandates and composition (Blair, 2021; Blair et al., 2023; Fjelde and Smidt, 2022; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017; Mvukiyehe, 2018; Smidt, 2020a; 2020b; Smidt, 2021). We contribute to this emerging line of research by focusing primarily on long-term election quality. We study how UN peace missions can support established electoral procedures in the long term by improving the quality of first elections in post-conflict countries. Even if trust in institutions is often low in the first post-conflict elections, UN missions can foster democratic norms and practices, better capacity, and improved security, helping to produce better-established institutionalized uncertainty.

We explore the effects of UN involvement on the quality of elections in an analysis of electoral competitions in 80 post-civil war countries from 1946 to 2012. We operationalise the concept of institutionalised uncertainty in a novel measure of the latent quality of elections in post-conflict countries by drawing on information from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). Our index captures six dimensions pertinent to the quality and competitiveness of elections, including fairness, electoral victory uncertainty, opposition presence, media bias, poll outcome, and prior information. Our latent measurement helps overcome the challenges of capturing interconnected yet unobservable dimensions of electoral quality.

We find that post-conflict countries with UN missions are more likely to have higher-quality elections and more successful transitions to electoral competition. Our findings are robust to different model specifications, alternative strategies to instrument for UN peace missions and a series of plausible counterfactual scenarios. We also find larger differences when the UN is involved in establishing electoral institutions, especially when there is no or limited prior electoral competition. These findings are consistent with our claim that the UN can help support democratization by increasing the quality of elections.

Elections and democratization in the aftermath of civil war

Promoting democracy in the aftermath of civil war has been the preferred policy of international organizations since the end of the Cold War (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). It remains contentious whether democratic institutions are achievable after a civil war. Huang (2016: 1) recognizes that speaking of 'democratization in the face of civil strife does seem far-fetched, if not outright naïve' because civil wars tend to destroy the very properties essential for democratic institutions, such as civic norms, civil society, independent mass media, rule of law, and state provision of security and justice. Efforts to examine the effectiveness of UN peace missions in promoting democratic institutions have produced contradictory results (Walter et al., 2021). One strand suggests a positive impact under specific conditions (Blair et al., 2023; Doyle and

Sambanis, 2000; 2006; Joshi 2013; Steinert and Grimm, 2015). Multidimensional UN missions that champion inclusive institutions can promote both peace and democratization (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000; 2006), especially if missions have mandates promoting democracy (Steinert and Grimm, 2015). Joshi (2013) shows that UN peace operations expedite the democratic process in post-civil war states and that democratic processes sustain peace.

Yet, other studies suggest no relationship or even a negative impact (Fortna, 2008b; Fortna and Huang, 2012; Gurses and Mason, 2008) or even a negative impact (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, 2006). Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2006) argue that countries with UN are less democratic than expected and that external democracy imposition hinders homegrown development, contradicting the very logic of democratization (Diamond, 2006; Fortna, 2008b; Russell and Sambanis, 2022). Some critics argue that UN efforts not only impede autonomous recovery but unintentionally enable autocratic incumbents when trying to restore governmental authority (von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019).

Elections in post-conflict settings bring risks since political and social institutions remain fragile and competition can reignite political violence (Brancati and Snyder, 2013; Flores and Nooruddin, 2012; Paris, 2004). Mistrust and commitment problems are rife among former belligerents and state capacity is limited. Political entrepreneurs can try to capitalize on latent hostility and resort to incendiary rhetoric for political gains during election campaigns. Limited capacity to prevent electoral fraud and guarantee fair outcomes can further contribute to recurrent violence. This suggests a trade-off, where peace operations may prioritize security and stability over democratization (Blair et al., 2022; Diamond, 2006; Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). In short, peacekeeping has an ambiguous and complex relationship with democratization (Gurses and Mason, 2008; Fortna and Howard, 2008; Fortna and Huang, 2012).

If democratization entails transforming political contestation from bullets to ballots, elections must be the primary mechanism for regulating political contestation after conflict (Matanock, 2017, Joshi et al., 2017; Joshi, 2013). Yet, a single free and fair is not sufficient for democratization. Incumbents can gain power democratically but turn into autocrats. But

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even initial elections that fall short of democratic standards can set off incremental democratization and eventual transition with stronger institutions and democratic practices (Knutsen et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2006; Hadenius and Teorell, 2007; Miller, 2015; Edgell et al., 2018). In the next section, we turn to how UN activities can transform *ex-ante uncertainty* in post-conflict elections into *institutionalized uncertainty* and self-sustained electoral competition.

**UN peace operations and institutionalizing uncertainty**

Democratization occurs when the outcome of elections is ex-ante uncertain, ex-post irreversible, and accepted by both winners and losers (Przeworski et al., 2000). Przeworski (1991) distinguishes *institutionalized uncertainty* as a specific feature of electoral competition in democracies. Actors do not know the specific outcome before the elections, but they know the possible set of outcomes and that subsequent electoral cycles will follow the current one. Winners cannot put an end to the electoral process, and losers know that they can compete in another round in the future. Under institutionalized uncertainty, all political outcomes are possible iterations of an electoral cycle revealing changes in support for political actors (Przeworski et al., 2000). A democratic polity is sustained through the respect of the rules that emerge from the process (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1993).

Uncertainty is not immediately *institutionalized* after conflict, and losers may perceive a high risk that winners may concentrate power and manipulate future elections to favor incumbents. Without institutionalization, the first post-conflict election becomes a one-shot game, where losers have fewer incentives to accept electoral defeat. If expectations of future fair elections help establish democracy, UN efforts to support electoral processes can have an enduring influence. Conceptualizing a series of elections as a process allows us to study the long-term impact of UN peace missions on democratization. Post-conflict elections are turning points that can help institutionalize non-violent competition and democratization (Reilly, 2008). The UN contributes to this transition by reinforcing political and social institutions that

institutionalize electoral competition in three interconnected ways: (i) reducing political and electoral violence; (ii) supporting democratic attitudes and civic norms of peaceful coexistence; (iii) developing organizational infrastructure and the rule of law to conduct elections with integrity. Figure 1 summarizes our argument and the relationships between UN actions and the outcomes that contribute to institutionalized uncertainty.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.
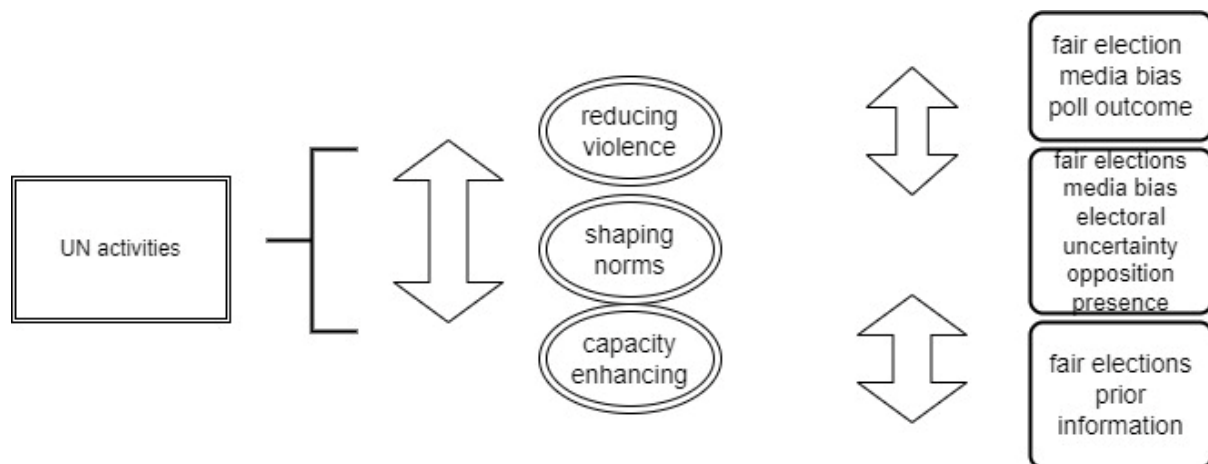
Reducing political and electoral violence

UN missions help limit political violence post-conflict, as shown by studies of combatant killings and violence against civilians, civil war termination, and decreased conflict recurrence (Ari and Gizelis, 2020; Beardsley and Gleditsch, 2015; Fortna, 2008a; Hultman et al., 2013; 2014; Kathman and Wood, 2016; Kathman and Benson, 2019; Hegre et al., 2019; Ruggeri et al., 2017). Rampant violence and insecurity undermined the development of electoral institutions for fair elections (Diamond, 2006). Without robust institutions, as is common post-conflict, political competition is volatile. Violence during elections risks drifting away from institutionalizing elections and norms of nonviolent competition. Studies suggested that informed voters are often targeted by electoral violence in Africa because they cannot be persuaded, and misinformation can promote violence against opponents (Birch et al., 2020; Von Borzyskowski and Kuhn, 2020). Still, studies suggest that UN peace operations reduce

electoral violence (Smidt, 2020a; 2021; Fjelde and Smidt, 2022). UN activities can mitigate electoral violence through campaigns for civic education and efforts to alleviate fears that opponents will use violence. For example, the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia (UNMIL) set up a programme to connect 'communities to United Nations peacekeepers', which 'served as an electoral insecurity 'early warning' network' (Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017: 256). Reduced violence enhances confidence in the quality of future elections and encourages political participation, ensuring open electoral competition.

Supporting democratic attitudes and civic norms of peaceful coexistence

UN operations facilitate communication, cooperation, and trust between rivals, supporting norms of peaceful coexistence (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Howard, 2008; Fortna, 2008a). UN interventions assist parties in reaching and implementing a peace agreement (Kathman and Benson, 2019; Maekawa et al., 2019). Electoral institutions are more likely to develop successfully when they are part of a negotiated settlement and backed by external actors (Matanock, 2017). Third-party interventions and enforcement can promote trust between rivals and create conditions favorable to constructive engagement and peace (Mironova and Whitt, 2017). Compliance with a peace process supports the development of democratic practices and nonviolent avenues to address conflict.

Information plays a pivotal role in democratic norms and attitudes. Examples such as Cambodia show how the UN, supporting independent media and establishing channels that allow accurate information, helps counter disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric and inspire nonviolent political participation (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Howard, 2008; Mvukiyehe, 2018). The empowerment of the public as an actor can provide a 'democratic counterweight to the power-brokers, economic exploiters and warlords who tend to predominate in conflict-ridden weak or failed states, and may even capture the electoral processes' (Pouligny, 2005: 496).

The UN crafts campaigns to help the electorate realize its potential as a democratic counterweight. Such campaigns promote norms and attitudes of democratic competition and inspire political participation (Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017). Mvukiyehe (2018) shows how UNMIL encouraged political participation in Liberia, while Smidt (2020a, b) demonstrates how UN electoral education in Ivory Coast was effective in countering disinformation and preventing electoral violence. Even if actors may compete in elections without any long-term commitment to democratic ideals, UN involvement can help ensure participation in iterative electoral cycles that become self-enforcing. In short, peace operations support social interactions and processes that 'help transform disenfranchised people from spectators of public affairs to actively engaged citizens', thereby 'providing the necessary micro-foundations for stable and self-sustaining peace in the aftermath of civil war' (Mvukiyehe, 2018: 1687–1688).

Developing organizational infrastructure and the rule of law

Post-conflict countries often lack the infrastructure and capacity to coordinate and execute elections. Organizing competitive elections has many requirements, including reliable voter registration, codification and implementation of rules, drawing district boundaries, setting up accessible voting stations, and the ability to count and verify ballots without disruption and delays. These are challenging tasks, but external engagement and assistance can help. UN facilitates and sometimes runs elections in post-conflict countries, including Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, East Timor, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, and Sierra Leone (Russett and Oneal, 2001; Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Fortna, 2008a; Howard, 2008; Koops et al., 2015; Matanock, 2017; Mvukiyehe, 2018; Smidt, 2020a).

The impact of the UN's multi-faceted electoral assistance can be summarized under three headings. First, the UN provides technical support to address practical obstacles in conducting elections, including building vital infrastructure, strengthening capability, and

supporting administrative bodies for essential functions such as voter registration or electoral commissions.[2] Such activities improve trust in election fairness and integrity.

Second, the UN enhances election credibility through supervision and monitoring in ways that increase the probability that noncompliance is detected and deters electoral fraud and manipulation (Daxecker, 2012). Reinforcing confidence in electoral as free and fair incentivizes political competition and peaceful political participation. Finally, the UN can support the formation of political parties and organizations contesting elections and developing institutionalized uncertainty. The UN enables belligerents to transform 'into political organizations capable of competing at the ballot box' and help 'parties learn how to run a political campaign' (Fortna, 2008a: 101).

UN electoral assistance is interlinked with reducing political violence and supporting democratic attitudes. Under institutionalized uncertainty, the specific outcome of an election is unknown ex-ante, but the principle of holding periodic elections is institutionalized so that losers can compete freely in the future. We can infer institutionalized uncertainty as a latent trait based on the observable competitiveness of elections and parties' uncertainty about outcomes. Without free and fair electoral processes, the outcome is certain: the opposition cannot win, and the incumbent will prevail. An essential pillar of democratic contestation that prevents incumbents from turning elections into an uncontested formality is the presence of free media (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). Reliable polls that reflect public sentiment strengthen the competitiveness of an electoral cycle because 'the most straightforward electoral threat to the incumbent is revealed by reliable polls that indicate that the incumbent is unpopular' (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). The UN's ability to shape the framework of elections and encourage participation 'may push the local state into fulfilling its responsibility for implementing the rule of law' (Pouligny, 2005: 496).

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[2] As put by Russett and Oneal (2001: 210), 'Without voter registration, an electorate fails to emerge'.

Based on the above discussion we formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1*: UN presence is associated with higher quality of elections.*

We posit that democratic consolidation requires *iterations* of electoral cycles, disclosing changes in long-term support for political actors (Przeworski et al., 2000). We also argue that the impact of UN interventions on electoral quality depends on the legacy and history of institutions and elections.

In post-conflict countries without repeated prior elections, parties will be less willing to submit to electoral competition, given the lack of institutions and matured electoral rules. Incumbents enjoy advantages and risk-averse individuals may try to avoid uncertainty (Eckles et al., 2014). Thus, a lack of robust electoral history is a major obstacle to democracy. Lack of prior experience with electoral processes can also undermine the capacity to hold elections and the attitudes toward political competition. In such circumstances, UN missions can make a substantive difference. We argue that UN involvement has a larger impact on the quality of elections when the host country has no or limited experience in electoral competition.

Hypothesis 2*: The UN effect on election quality is higher when countries hosting PKOS have limited experience with elections.*

Research design

We examine the impact of UN peace operations on the quality of post-civil conflict elections. We identify post-conflict periods using the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (hereafter ACD; see Gleditsch et al., 2002; Pettersson and Öberg, 2020). We look at episodes after conflict, ignoring lulls in fighting less than three years. We use ten years as the upper limit for a post-conflict period. Our unit of analysis is the election-year in a post-conflict country, based on the NELDA Dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). Our corresponding sample covers 628

elections in 80 post-conflict countries between 1946 and 2012.[3] Our sample is up to 2012 due to available information on our dependent variable, which we discuss in the next section. 27 of these countries had UN interventions.

Dependent variable

Operationalization of observables: The institutionalized uncertainty or quality of elections is not directly observable but inferred from observable features relevant to the concept. We use six binary indicators from the NELDA Dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). *Fairness* (NELDA 11) is a binary indicator of significant concerns that elections will not be free and fair. Following Hafner-Burton et al. (2014), we use the question 'Was the incumbent or ruling party confident of victory before elections?' and generate a dichotomous *Electoral victory uncertainty* (NELDA 12) measure, if an incumbent is deemed not to be fully confident before the election. *Opposition presence* (NELDA 13) measures whether the opposition was prevented from running. *Media bias* (NELDA 16) captures whether the incumbent secured an unfair advantage during the electoral campaign in media outlets. *Poll outcome* (NELDA 24) measures whether the incumbent lost the election, capturing cases where elections must have been competitive and meaningful (Diamond 2002). *Prior information* (NELDA 25) flags if there were reliable polls during the electoral process. We consider both executive and legislative elections.

Measuring latent institutionalized uncertainty: Using these six dimensions, we build a Bayesian IRT model and an index to capture the latent institutionalized uncertainty of elections. IRT models are useful when dimensions are interconnected, which is the case for post-conflict elections because electoral integrity arises in multiple dimensions (Norris and Grömping, 2019). If peace operations affect institutionalized uncertainty through our suggested mechanisms, we should focus on overall election quality rather than any single indicator. For instance, we argued that peace operations improve capacity building, which

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[3] We also consider as an alternative source for elections the information available in the Varieties of Democracy Dataset (hereafter V-Dem; Coppedge et al., 2020; Pemstein et al., 2020). For detailed information on how the sample is constructed, including a list of all countries in the sample, see Online Appendix.

impacts electoral fairness.Yet capacity building is a multidimensional concept. Our Bayesian IRT yields a general measure of election quality based on the conjunction of indicators of the dimension's election quality (Hanson and Sigman, 2021).

IRT models are often used in educational tests to relate latent traits (e.g., intelligence or knowledge) to observable manifestations (e.g., performance on test items). These models seek to score observations on the latent construct using the available indicators of the six dimensions discussed above. The model is implemented by using MCMCpack (Martin et al., 2011). Online Appendix 3A provides details for priors, iterations, and missing values. We use the posterior mean as the institutionalized uncertainty index. Furthermore, we create a normalized version of the variable.[4] This allows us to interpret the estimated institutionalized uncertainty from a relative perspective.[5] To give one example, the institutionalized uncertainty index of Guatemala is 0.731 in 1996 and 0.989 in 1999. By our measurements, the latter is 0.26 higher. Online Appendix 3B Figure B shows the correlation plot for the institutionalized uncertainty index and other indicators.

Descriptive statistics: Figure 2 shows the distribution of our outcome variable. Figure 3 demonstrates our key variables of interest for Liberia and El Salvador. The left-hand y-axis is institutionalized uncertainty that captures the quality of elections, and the right-hand axis is levels of democracy measured using the Polity2 score, represented by the solid line. In Liberia, electoral quality increased after the intervention. In El Salvador, electoral quality was high before the UN intervention but remained at high levels. We deal with the trend before intervention below using a counterfactual treatment strategy.

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[4] We used min max feature scaling: $Institutionalized\ uncertainty\ index_i = (x_i - \min(x))/(\max(x) - \min(x))$.

[5] Note that the highest value does not indicate the perfect score of the institutionalized uncertainty index, but it indicates that the score is the highest in the sample.
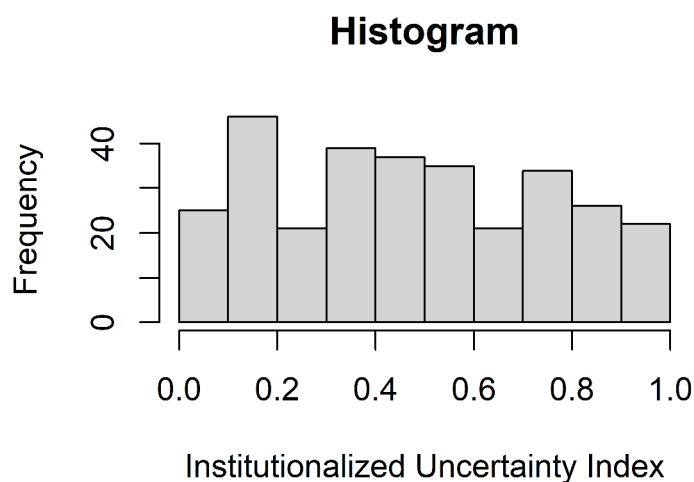
Histogram
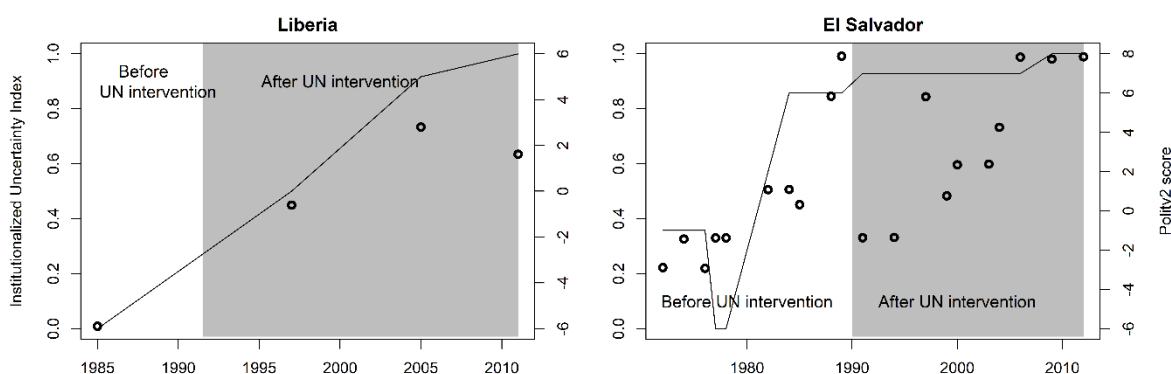

Figure 2: Histogram (Dependent variable).

Figure 3: Quality of electoral competition and UN interventions (Descriptive Statistics). Solid line shows the respective Polity2 scores from Polity IV Dataset. Points show institutionalized uncertainty in an election year.[6]

Validation of measurement and comparison to alternatives:

Recent efforts to develop indices of electoral integrity provide alternative measures of confidence in elections (Norris et al., 2013; Norris and Grömping, 2019). The concept of

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[6] The lower number of points in Liberia indicates a smaller number of elections in Liberia than El Salvador.

institutionalized uncertainty is broader than current elections and pertains to confidence in future electoral rules of political competition. We validate our index against three alternatives– Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (Norris and Grömping, 2019), Election Free and Fair (V-Dem Dataset), and Polity2 (Marshall and Jaggers, 2020).[7] Divergences between our measurement and the alternative are possible. For example, our index yields a relatively low score for Ghana in 2012, while the alternatives –namely, PEI, V-Dem, and Polity2– all have relatively high scores. This may reflect fears of fraud in advance of the elections, backed up by subsequent anecdotal evidence (Krawczyk, 2019). Another example is Venezuela in 2012, which is relatively high on our index but low on PEI, possibly reflecting how the PEI is based on expert perceptions while our measurement incorporates a larger number of indicators reflecting the high support for Chavez, backed up by polls before the elections (Weisbrot, 2012). V-Dem also scores this election as free and fair. Finally, the PEI has been available only since 2012 and thus covers only a small number of elections with UN missions.

Our measure is correlated with indicators of democracy, as implied by the theory. We compare our index with V-Dem free and fair and Polity2 in Online Appendix 3D. Our index captures additional heterogeneity across civil war-affected countries compared to the alternatives, especially since 2000 when UN peace operations incorporated more extensive mandates directly related to peacebuilding. Countries experiencing civil wars have different trajectories regarding their election quality. The two alternative measurements do not correlate with the time since the last election (Table D), a proxy for regularized electoral contestations. Our institutionalized uncertainty index increases as competitive elections occur regularly. In sum, this analysis demonstrated the added value of our proposed index over alternatives for capturing institutionalized uncertainty and the potential impact of UN operations (see Online Appendix 3F).

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[7] See Online Appendix 3C for a detailed discussion.

Main independent variables

We use two measures of UN involvement. First, we consider if a *UNPKO (UN Peacekeeping Operations)* has been previously deployed in the country before the respective election-year. Second, we also consider whether a UNPKO or a UN political mission (UNPM) has been previously deployed in the country. UNPMs are political missions with mandates similar to UNPKOs and are usually established after civil wars. A notable example is the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNOGBIS), which was established in 1999 to facilitate a general election and the implementation of the Abuja Accord. Considering only UNPKOs may thus underestimate the effect of UN involvement on the quality of elections. Information on UNPMs is taken from the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. We expect a potentially lower impact of UNPMs because they may not be able to mitigate violence as they lack military components.

Control variables

We consider control variables for diverse countries and conflict characteristics plausibly associated with the outcome and the dependent variable. The quality of elections is likely to be influenced by the preceding level of electoral democracy, and we consider *Polyarchy* (lagged by one year), fromV-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2020).[8] *Democratic transfer of power* captures the history of a second-order democratic transition in a country. We expect that this variable is positively correlated with the latent quality of election as it renders the political environment amenable to electoral competition. Our measure flags cases where a government ever gained power through an electoral process from a democratically elected predecessor. This variable is coded by using information from the Archigos Dataset (Goemans et al., 2009) and other sources on democracy (Cheibub et al., 2010; Coppedge et al., 2020; Przeworski et al,. 2000).

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[8] As the information on Mozambique in 1994 was missing, we used the information on the last non-missing polyarchy score for this country-year.

Economic growth may have a positive impact on democratization (Lipset, 1959), and we control for Ln *GDP per capita (ln),* from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2020; Inklaar et al., 2018).[9] Power-sharing institutions may shield conflict parties from the electoral competition and lower the stakes. The diminishing influence of elections on political outcomes may also affect the quality of elections because incentives to monitor –or carry out– cheating also diminish. As a proxy of power-sharing in the executive and legislature, we use the *Divided party control* variable (from V-Dem). We take the absolute value of the variable so that the lower the value, the closer the government is to a single multi-party coalition. Higher values suggest more concentration of governmental power in a single party, or different parties control the executive or the legislature.

Governments may have more deterring capacity against potential spoilers with sizeable military personnel (Stedman, 1997) and UN operations are less likely when incumbent governments have larger armies (Fortna, 2004). Thus, we control for the *Number of Military Personnel (ln)* from the National Material Capacities (v5.0) Dataset of the Correlates of War Project (Singer et al., 1972; Singer, 1987).[10] Regular electoral cycles may help political stability (Wilson and Lindberg, 2016). Repeatedly conducting elections may enhance their quality. Thus, we control for *Election history* that counts how many national-level elections have been conducted since 1945. As formulated in Hypothesis 2, we expect that the effect of the UN on the quality of elections is greater when there is limited experience with elections. Therefore, we include an interaction between *Election history* and the main independent variable. Finally, we control for the log of *time since the last civil war* and *time since the last election*.

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[9] For two countries where there was no information, Suriname and Papua New Guinea, we used information on GDP per capita from a different dataset (Gleditsch, 2002).

[10] In the cases of countries that did not have established military forces for a number of years, we interpolated missing data with the latest non-missing values. These countries include Liberia, Haiti, Madagascar, Libya, and Comoros.

Besides country-level factors, we control for the interests of the permanent five (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council. Interests of P5 members influence whether UNPKOs are deployed (Oudraat, 1996; Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012). Since the interests of P5 members, such as economic interests (Stojek and Tir, 2015), also influence other forms of individual assistance to the target country, affecting the quality of elections, we control for *P5 trade max (ln)*. To capture the trade relationship between P5 and the target state, we take the maximum dyadic trade value between each P5 member and the target state in a given year. The information on the dyadic trade values is taken from the Correlates of War Project Trade Dataset (Barbieri et al., 2009). Finally, as the Cold War might have affected the deployment of UN missions as well as the mission mandate of the UN, we control for the *Cold War*, capturing years before and after 1989.

We ran a multicollinearity test to check correlations between control variables and all of the variables scored below 3.1 VIF score. Online Appendix Figure L provides a correlation matrix for the control variables.

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the estimates from country fixed effects regression for the institutionalized uncertainty index. Since unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity can impact the quality of elections – e.g., pre-existing institutional capacity before conflict onset can influence the quality of elections - we use fixed effects models.[11] Models 1 and 2 use our primary measurement of the latent quality of elections, *Institutionalized uncertainty*, as the dependent variable. Model 1 uses *UNPKO* as the main explanatory variable, while Model 2 uses *UNPKO & UNPM*.

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[11] The Hausman test indicates that fixed-effects is more appropriate than random effects (p-value < 0.01).

Models 1 and 2 (Table 1) show that both *UNPKO* and *UNPKO & UNPM* are positively associated with the latent quality of elections. To further unpack the differences between UNPKO and UNPM, Appendix Section 13 Table 1-a created three different variables – UNPKO only, UNPKO & UNPM, and UNPM only. Figure 4 shows the changes in the expected value of the institutionalized uncertainty score for UNPKO, UNPKO & UNPM, and UNPM.[12] The left side of Figure 4 shows that the deployment of UNPKO only increases the institutionalized uncertainty by 0.184 on average, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.030, 0.399]. The deployment of UNPKO and UNPMs together increases the institutionalized uncertainty index by 0.634 on average, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.194, 1.074] (Figure 4). The deployment of UNPM only increases institutionalized uncertainty by 0.126 on average, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.389, 0.641]. The finding suggests that the positive effect of UNPKOs lie in cases where UNPM was deployed as its exit strategy. In Online Appendix 5, we discuss the control variables further.

Table 1. Fixed effects regression of institutionalized uncertainty.

| | DV: Institutionalized uncertainty index | | | |
	Model (1)		Model (2)	
UNPKO	0.264**	(0.101)		
UNPKO & UNPM			0.246**	(0.095)
Polyarchy (t-1)	0.331**	(0.115)	0.337**	(0.115)
Democratic transfer of power	-0.067	(0.056)	-0.065	(0.056)
Divided party control	0.097*	(0.043)	0.097*	(0.043)
GDP p.c. (ln)	0.013	(0.065)	0.014	(0.065)
Military personnel (ln)	0.023	(0.039)	0.026	(0.039)
Election history	0.028**	(0.008)	0.023**	(0.008)
Time since the last civil war (ln)	0.003	(0.024)	0.000	(0.024)
Time since the last election (ln)	-0.042†	(0.023)	-0.042†	(0.023)
P5 trade max (ln)	-0.032	(0.025)	-0.033	(0.025)

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[12] Other variables are set at mean values for interval variables and median values for dummy variables.

Cold war	0.107†	(0.061)	0.105†	(0.060)
Constant	0.009	(0.468)	-0.005	(0.470)
Sample size	289		289	
Country fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
R^2	0.315		0.315	
Adjusted R^2	0.004		0.004	

Standard errors shown in parentheses. †$p<0.1$, *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$

Average marginal effect with 95% confidence intervals
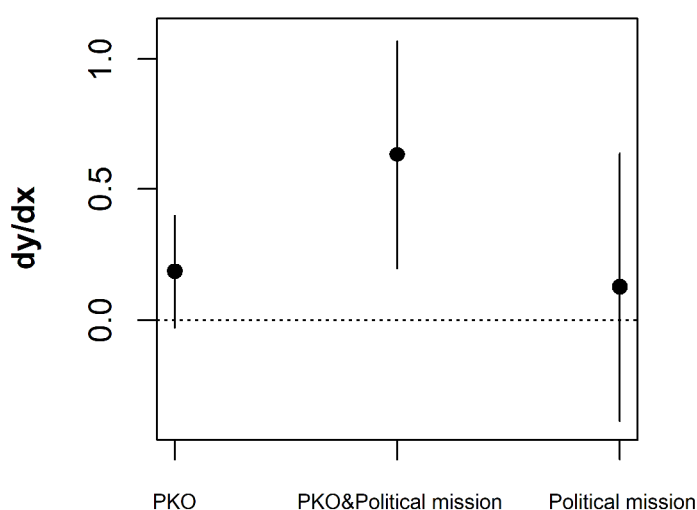
Figure 4: The average marginal effect of UN missions on institutionalized uncertainty (Models 1 and 2 in Table 1).

We conducted a series of robustness checks (Online Appendix 6 and 12). The main results were robust to using the V-Dem's *Election free and fair* measure as the dependent variable (Online Appendix Table F), a sample using at least five years of post-conflict (Online Appendix Table G and H); no upper limit for post-conflict periods (Online Appendix Table I and J); year fixed effects (Online Appendix Table K); the type of conflict incompatibility (governmental vs territorial); conflict duration (Online Appendix Table L); dropping United

Kingdom, Frace, and Spain from the sample (Online Appendix Table Z); and using division of power index as the alternative control variable of power-sharing (Online Appendix Table Zb). Our results are consistent with the hypothesis that UN interventions lead to higher levels of institutional confidence in the electoral competition and higher quality of the electoral processes, even after taking the characteristics of the country and the conflict into account.

Endogeneity and identification strategy

Endogeneity issues can arise from non-random assignment of UN missions. We address this problem using two approaches: (1) the Instrumental Variable approach and (2) the Interactive Fixed Effect Counterfactual Treatment (IFEct) model (Liu et al., 2024).

(1) *Instrumental Variable approach*: we use the economic and geopolitical interests of P5 as instruments. We use three variables: log of the mean value of trade between P5 and the target state, the mean value of P5 ideal point difference, and colonial ties[13] (see Online Appendix 7A for details, including a discussion of the exclusion and relevance assumptions). Our results indicate that there is no direct relationship between the interests of P5 members and the quality of elections (Table 1). The models with instrumental variables show that the positive relationship between UN involvement and the quality of elections is robust (Online Appendix 7A Table M). However, when we assessed the F statistic, the F statistic was 2.83 for UNPKO and 6.17 for UNPKO & UNPM, indicating a rather weak instrument.[14] Also, regarding the exclusion assumption, one criticism would be that the interests of P5 members can also affect the election quality through other

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[13] Having colonial ties in the past could influence the interests of states.

[14] Those were checked using Pooled OLS.

means such as foreign aid in the post-conflict era. Thus, we turn to a different identification strategy to address endogeneity concerns.

(2) Interactive Fixed Effects Counterfactual Treatment (IFEct) model: Counterfactual estimators take observations under the treatment condition as missing. They use data under the control condition to build models and impute counterfactuals of treated observations based on the estimated models, enabling to correct for any biases from treatment effect heterogeneity (Liu et al., 2024: 2). In our case, the model uses untreated observations, meaning observations without UN intervention. The assumption here is that untreated observations are a function of exogenous covariates and unobserved attributes. Under this assumption, the model first obtains a predicted function of exogenous attributes as well as a predicted function of unobservable attributes. The model estimates the counterfactual outcome using those predicted functions, meaning institutionalized uncertainty without UN intervention. Utilizing the predicted counterfactual outcome, the model estimates the individualistic effects of UN intervention by subtracting the predicted counterfactual outcome from the institutionalized uncertainty for each observation accompanied by UN intervention. Finally, it takes the average of the effects of UN intervention. This method enables us to account for the heterogeneous impact of treatment, while regular two-way fixed effects assume that the unobservable attributes are a function of country and time-specific characteristics. Thus, we can relax assumptions on unobservable attributes. We use country-election-year as the unit of analysis and remove the post-conflict time restriction. We only include the covariates that seemed relevant in the base models.[15] The average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) is 0.222 with 95%

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[15] We removed Polyarchy $_{t-1}$ which was used as a proxy for our lagged dependent variable since this method rules out an arrow from Y_{t-1} to Y_t according to Liu et al., (2024). Since increasing the number of covariates increased dropped units in the case of IFEct, we used Divided party control, time since the civil war (ln), and time since the last election (ln) as covariates.

confidence intervals of [0.027, 0.416]. [16] This means that UN intervention increases normalized institutionalized uncertainty by 0.222 on average.

The main concern here is whether what we observe in ATT is attributed to the pre-trend of institutionalized uncertainty in cases receiving UN intervention, as suspected in El Salvador (see Figure 3). The standard diagnostic test is to perform a placebo test assuming that the UN intervention started before the actual intervention, then conduct the estimation again and obtain a fake ATT. If this fake ATT is close to zero ($-\theta_2 < 0 < \theta_1$, where θ_2 and θ_1 are pre-specified parameters, and $[-\theta_2, \theta_1]$ is called the equivalence range) (Liu et al., 2024), then the effect of UN intervention is not because of the pre-trend. However, when a potential time-varying confounder is cyclical, the placebo test may not be able to pick it up (Liu et al., 2024). Thus, we use a test for no pre-trend proposed by Liu et al. (2024) where we obtain an average out-of-sample prediction error for each period before the UN intervention and check whether the error is within the equivalence range. Our results show that the trend stays within the equivalence range. Equivalence holds with high confidence (p-value < 0.001), in line with the underlying assumption of no pre-trend (Online Appendix 7B Figure M).

Considering mission size

Extant research on UN peace operations' effectiveness on violence shows that the size of missions matters, and we thus include missions' size (see Online Appendix 8A for details). Online Appendix Table N shows that the size does not have a statistically significant effect on election quality. We further unpack this finding below under the section *Testing mechanisms*.

Considering mission mandates

Our theory suggests that UN peace operations enhance the quality of elections by reducing political and electoral violence; supporting democratic attitudes and norms of peaceful competition; developing infrastructure and the rule of law to conduct elections with integrity.

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[16] The confidence intervals were obtained through 1000 bootstrap.

While not all these mechanisms are related to specific mandates, some are related to mandates such as electoral assistance or peacebuilding. Some studies show that the mandates of UNPKOs matter in producing positive outcomes such as the protection of civilians (Di Salvatore et al., 2022; Lloyd. 2021), democratization (Blair et al., 2023), and inclusive peace (Campbell and Di Salvatore, 2024). Mandates affect the resources of UNPKOs (Di Salvatore et al., 2022), accompany rights and responsibilities influencing the capacity of missions (Lloyd, 2021), or ensure a credible commitment (Blair et al., 2023). Thus, we use election and peacebuilding tasks of peace operations as independent variables (see Online Appendix 8B). The information on mandates is from the Task Assigned to Missions in their Mandates (TAMM) Dataset (Lloyd, 2021). Since election and peacebuilding tasks might be endogenous to previous election quality, we follow Blair et al. (2023) and use the proportion of missions other than the country with election tasks or peacebuilding tasks as an instrumental variable. The findings suggest that UNPKOs with such mandates do not have a statistically significant effect on the quality of elections (Online Appendix Table O-Q). There are two possible explanations. First, focusing only on UNPKOs may underestimate the effect of overall UN involvement because UNPMs (missions short of peacekeeping deployment) may also have a positive impact.[17] Our measurement of UN intervention also captures successor operations without military components. Second, UNPKOs enhance the quality of elections through several interconnected ways, going beyond mandate-specific provisions.

Testing mechanisms

In this section, we investigate whether UN presence influences the three pathways towards election quality: enhancing security and reducing violence; fostering democratic attitudes and civil norms; building organizational capacity and the rule of law. While extant studies already

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[17] For instance, the mandate of UNOGBIS specified the objective '[t]o help create and enabling environment for restoring, maintaining and consolidating peace, democracy and the rule of law for the organization of free and transparent elections'. Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1233 (1999) Relative to the Situation in Guinea-Bissau S/1999/741.

present empirical evidence for each pathway, we also test the impact of UN presence using three variables: *Political violence, Civil society participation,* and *Rule of law* (Coppedge et al., 2020). [18] Online Appendix Tables R-T show that UN presence is significantly negatively correlated with political violence while it is associated with increasing civil society participation and strengthening the rule of law. To unpack why the mission size does not have a significant effect on election quality in our main models, we also explore whether it makes a difference to any of these three paths. Our results show that the size of UNPKO reduces political violence, but it does not have a significant effect on either civil society participation or the rule of law (Online Appendix Table U-W). These findings suggest that mission size matters for mitigating violence, but even missions modest in size may positively influence democratic norms and improve organizational capacity. It is also possible that changes in norms and civil society might be necessary for the long-term development of democracy and electoral institutions.

Interaction effects: Testing hypothesis 2

To further develop our understanding of the conditional effect of the UN's institutional building capacity, we turn to Hypothesis 2 and introduce an interaction term between UNPKO and election history. To interpret the interaction effects, Figure 5 presents the average marginal effect of UNPKO for different values of election history.[19] The UN has a greater impact in countries with little experience of elections. For example, when the election history takes the value one, the deployment of UNPKO increases the institutionalized uncertainty by 0.708 on average, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.252, 1.164]. When the election history takes the value of 30 (maximum value in the sample), the deployment of UNPKO increases institutionalized uncertainty by 0.060 on average, which is not statistically significant. In line with Hypothesis 2, the history of UNPKO deployment has a greater effect on increasing the

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[18] We do not control for these variables in our main models because these are post-treatment variables. See Online Appendix 9 for details.

[19] Other variables are set at mean values for interval variables and median values for all the dummy variables.

institutionalized uncertainty in countries with less experience in conducting elections than in countries where there is an established history of holding repeated elections. The finding is robust even when we control for conflict duration and governmental incompatibility (Online Appendix 10 Table X).

We also extended our analysis for Hypothesis 2 (see Online Appendix 11). We argue that long periods without elections could also influence the institutional and organizational capacity to hold elections as well as the attitudes towards political participation and electoral competition. Thus, we directly test this mechanism by including a term capturing the interaction between time since the last election and UNPKO deployment (see Online Appendix 11 Table Y). The results suggest that the effect of UNPKO on institutionalized uncertainty is greater in countries where the last election was held a long time ago, providing further support for Hypothesis 2. For instance, the 2005 parliamentary election in Burundi was the first one since 1993. Events following the 1993 election resulted in the assassination of the first democratically elected President, exacerbating ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis and igniting a civil war. The deployment of the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) in 2004 mitigated tensions within the military and between ethnic groups; facilitated elections through technical and logistical assistance to the National Independent Electoral Commission; and raised awareness and reinforced civic education. Following the conclusion of the ONUB, the UN Integrated Office in Burundi (BINUB) was established in 2006 to further improve the professionalization of media and electoral institutional capacity.

Our findings also suggest a trade-off: although holding elections soon after a peace agreement may increase the likelihood of conflict recurrence (Brancati and Snyder, 2011), withholding elections too long may also decrease the electoral quality over time. The presence of the UN may play a crucial role in critical junctures of democratization by assisting countries in navigating the trade-offs between immediate stability and long-term peacebuilding.

Table 2: Fixed effects regression of institutionalized uncertainty (interaction).

| | DV: Institutionalized uncertainty index | |
	Model (1)	
UNPKO	0.031**	(0.008)
UNPKO*Election history	-0.022*	(0.011)
Election history	0.031**	(0.008)
Time since the last election (ln)	-0.044†	(0.023)
Polyarchy (t-1)	0.325**	(0.114)
Democratic transfer of power	-0.048	(0.056)
Divided party control	0.092*	(0.042)
GDP p.c. (ln)	0.028	(0.065)
Military personnel (ln)	0.028	(0.038)
Time since the last civil war (ln)	0.001	(0.024)
P5 trade max (ln)	-0.034	(0.025)
Cold war	0.125*	(0.061)
Constant	-0.204	(0.475)
Sample size	289	
Country fixed effects	Yes	
R^2	0.330	
Adjusted R^2	0.021	

Standard errors shown in parentheses.
†p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01

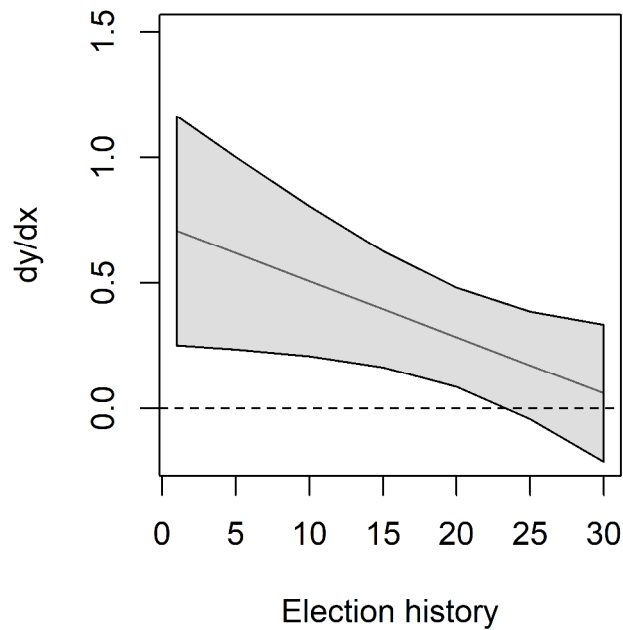## Average marginal effects of UN PKO from Model (5)

Figure 5: Electoral history and the average marginal effect of UN missions on institutionalized uncertainty (Model 1 in Table 2).

Conclusion

We examine whether the deployment of UN peacekeeping operations and political missions makes a difference in enhancing the quality of elections in the long term. Drawing on Przeworski's (1991) notion of *institutionalized uncertainty*, we develop a theoretical framework to explore the influence of UN interventions on electoral quality. While most of the extant literature focuses on the short-term impact of UN presence on electoral violence, we unpack the relationship by examining the long-term aspects of electoral competitions and the latent quality of elections in post-conflict contexts. Our study outlines plausible pathways of post-conflict democratization and presents evidence that the UN enhances institutional capacity by improving the latent quality of elections measured over time. We find that when the UN intervenes, the latent quality of elections increases. We also find that the difference that the UN makes is greater when the country has no or limited history of electoral competition. These

results indicate that the UN is effective at assisting the democratization processes in difficult contexts.

Our study yields several future research avenues. First, further research can theorize about differences across missions and what factors impact the long-term quality of elections more (or less) than the others. Second, although we focus on UN peace operations, other types of peace operations, such as interventions by the African Union, could also influence the prospect of post-conflict electoral competition. Comparing different effects among types of interventions would lead to identifying to what extent the host country's democratization is influenced by credibility, legitimacy, or practices that the interveners bring. Second, if power-sharing increases the likelihood of democratization (Gurses and Mason, 2008; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015; Joshi, 2010), and peacebuilding missions help mitigate power-sharing implementation challenges in the process (Campbell and Di Salvatore, 2024), then exploring how UNPKOs enhance the quality of elections combined with power-sharing arrangements can lead to a better understanding on how to support electoral processes in fragile environments.

Replication data: The dataset and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the online appendix, are available at https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/. All analyses were conducted using R and Stata.

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