

Does the Procedural Act of Electing Leaders Enhance Cooperation in Divided Societies? Experimental Evidence from Lebanon.

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Abstract: Studies suggest that the procedural act of participating in an election in homogenous communities enhances social cooperation and compliance with policies proposed by the elected leader by making the leader more legitimate. In this study, we implement a lab-in-the-field experiment among Shia and Sunni Muslims in Lebanon to test whether participating in the procedural act of electing a leader increases cross-group cooperation also in ethnically heterogeneous communities. We find that participation in leader election fails to increase inter-group cooperation in a heterogeneous setting. In contrast, an appeal to a common ingroup identity successfully increases cooperation. When appeal to a supraordinate identity is combined with leader elections, cooperation increases only when out-group leaders are elected and among voters who value democratic procedure. Our findings suggest that in ethnically divided societies elections can lead to cooperation only if the dominant social norms are consistent with democracy and supraordinate group identity is salient.

Keywords: post-conflict reconciliation, elections, common ingroup identity, Lebanon, lab in the field experiment

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1. Introduction

Democratic theorists hold that the act of selecting leaders by election makes voters more compliant with government policies (Pateman 1970; Lind and Tyler 1988). This is because leaders who are elected are considered to be more legitimate than those who come to power undemocratically or are selected at random. According to this logic, the act of voting consists of two components: expression of one's preference for a specific candidate based on information about that person and participation in a ritual of leader legitimation. In mature democracies, social scientists tend to think of elections more as a culmination of informed deliberations than legitimation rituals. Yet, even in mature democracies some voters default to cognitive shortcuts, for instance about candidates' race or gender, and do not make the effort to seek out information about candidates' policies. In young democracies, obtaining detailed information about candidates' policy platforms is often difficult given weak party brands and limited experience with political contestation.

Empirical researchers in the social sciences have found support for the hypothesis that elections as procedural acts of legitimation have an independent effect on policy compliance among voters. Dal Bó, Foster, and Putterman (2010) have shown in a series of behavioral games how the same policy engenders greater cooperation when it is selected via a democratic procedure rather than imposed by edict. In another experiment, Grossman and Baldassarri (2012) demonstrated how election of a leader with sanctioning powers, in contrast to having one selected by lot, increases cooperation in behavioral games. Similarly, Schories (2022) has argued that there is greater compliance with policies, even among those who have initially opposed them, when these are introduced by democratically chosen leaders rather than ones who are appointed through random selection.

Democratic selection of leaders has been claimed to be of particular significance in the context of divided societies where elections are hypothesized to facilitate inter-group cooperation (Diamond 1999; Walter 2002; Wantchekon 2004). And yet, the existing empirical literature tends to overlook this hypothesis because most studies of the cooperation-enhancing effect of elections take place in relatively homogeneous settings (cf. Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009).

In this paper, we test whether participation in a procedural act of electing a leader – executed in a laboratory setting and therefore separate from the substantive dimension of voting – is effective in bringing about cooperation among opposing groups in the aftermath of conflict. We compare the impact of leader election on inter-group cooperation to a more conventional catalyst of cooperation in divided societies, an appeal to a common ingroup identity. The common ingroup identity hypothesis, which is a variant of inter-group contact theory, holds that appeals to a common identity that exists above the cleavages that are at the source of conflict can effectively overcome social divisions and bring about cooperation (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000).

We test the effectiveness of leader election and appeals to a supraordinate identity in increasing cross-group cooperation in the context of a civil conflict in Lebanon, where we focus specifically

on Shia-Sunni sectarian strife.¹ Lebanon has been a site of a violent civil war (1975-90), and to this day politics there is plagued by sectarian confrontation. Sunni and Shia each make up about 30% of Lebanon's population, and each sect has a quota of reserved seats in parliament and positions in government (Salloukh et al. 2015). The two communities are compactly settled, and basic services are often provided along sectarian lines (Cammett and Isaar 2010; Corstange 2016). The Shia-Sunni tension affects much of the Middle East and is at the heart of simmering conflicts in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the broader regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

To test the hypotheses we implement a lab-in-the-field experiment among 240 adults residing in Beirut, Lebanon's capital (120 Shia and 120 Sunni). Participants interact in small teams that contain representatives from both sects. Some of the teams are randomly assigned to elect a leader, whereas in others the leader is selected at random. Other teams receive an appeal to coordinate as Lebanese citizens and to look beyond their sectarian identities. As a result, we compare cooperation levels among those who only elected a leader or only received the supraordinate group appeal against groups of those who were subject to both the appeal and participated in leader selection and, separately, participants who neither elected a leader nor received the common ingroup appeal. Cooperation is measured by observing individual contributions across five rounds of an incentivized public goods game. Higher contributions signal greater compliance with authority.

Contrary to established findings in homogeneous settings, in the context of a divided society we find that the procedural act of electing a leader does not improve cooperation, whereas the appeal to a supraordinate identity on its own is effective. The interaction between the two does not enhance cooperation, because elections in our sample tend to suppress contributions in the public goods game, and the effectiveness of the supraordinate appeal is insufficient to overcome this downward effect. Additional analyses suggest that the legitimating effect of an electoral procedure is absent among those who have low respect for democratic practices. Specifically, in the context of Lebanon we find that even under the supraordinate identity appeal, participants who believe that democracy is incompatible with Islam are especially unlikely to be moved to cooperate with the outgroup after an election.

These findings contribute to the literature on cooperation-enhancing effects of elections (Dal Bó, Foster, and Putterman 2010; Grossman and Baldassarri 2012; Schories 2022). Our findings that elections in a society with a history of conflict fail to increase inter-group cooperation are consistent with established literature cautioning that democracy in divided societies might be less effective in securing cooperation and peace (Conn 1973; Lijphart 1977). In an innovative turn in this literature, we show how a powerful appeal to a common identity above conflict cleavages can be used as an alternative to the legitimating procedural effect of elections when it comes to inter-group cooperation. In this way this study contributes to a growing literature on the effectiveness of overarching identity appeals in encouraging inter-group cooperation (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh 2015; Levendusky 2018; Chang and Peisakhin 2019).

¹ Christians are the largest community in Lebanon at a little under 40% of the population and were one of the sides to the civil war. Christians are excluded from this study because the Shia-Sunni cleavage generalizes more broadly, and, more practically, because due to financial constraints we could not include an additional group.

2. Hypotheses

A well-established literature argues that democracy helps to overcome distributional and other conflict by providing a public platform for the airing of grievances and a mechanism for citizens to influence the direction of policy change (Eckstein and Gurr 1975; Diamond 1999). Some democratic theorists further claim that participation in selecting a leader enhances her perceived legitimacy and thereby increases compliance with her policies (Pateman 1970). This view is in line with the procedural justice theory that argues that individuals perceive an outcome to be legitimate when it is determined by a procedure in which they have a say (Thibaut and Walker 1975; Lind and Tyler 1988).

Several empirical studies bear out the expectations of the procedural justice theory. For instance, in the context of post-civil war Liberia, Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009) find that the act of electing members to local committees charged with deciding on community development goals increases the level of cooperation among ordinary individuals in the affected settlements. In a lab-in-the-field experiment in Uganda, Grossman and Baldassarri (2012) show how electing a leader with sanctioning powers enhances cooperation in a public goods game. These insights lead us to hypothesize that participation in the leader selection procedure will increase intergroup cooperation even in a divided society relative to an untreated control group (Hypothesis 1).

Literature in psychology suggests that a different way to strengthen cooperation in a heterogeneous setting is through an appeal to a supraordinate identity that supersedes pre-existing cleavages. According to social identity theory, individuals tend to favor ingroup members because interactions with the ingroup enhance the positive sense of the self (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Common ingroup identity model points out that successful activation of a higher order overarching identity enlarges ingroup boundaries and facilitates cooperation among individuals who might otherwise think of themselves as belonging to a different community (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). In the field, Miguel (2004) demonstrated how a policy emphasizing a common national identity resulted in higher cooperation among communities in Tanzania relative to Kenya where competing ethnic identities were mobilized instead. In Turkey, Lazarev and Sharma (2017) successfully elicited higher donations to Syrian refugees from Turkish respondents by activating a common Muslim identity. Levendusky (2018) showed how partisan identities can be muted when an overarching American national identity is activated in the United States. Based on these insights, we hypothesize that exposure to a supraordinate identity appeal will bring about higher cooperation across pre-existing cleavage lines (Hypothesis 2).

Another strand in the psychology literature argues that individuals are more likely to comply with a leader who is a member of the same group as them, and that compliance is lower when the leader represents the outgroup (Hogg 2001). Exposure to a supraordinate group appeal when combined with leader election is expected to persuade individuals that any leader who is voted into office is both legitimate and an in-group member, and therefore we expect that the combined effect of both treatments should be higher relative to the effect of each treatment on its own (Hypothesis 3). We also expect that the positive interaction between leader election and the appeal will be particularly salient when elected leaders are from the opposite sect, given that the

common ingroup identity message should persuade participants that the outgroup is the same as the ingroup (Hypothesis 4).

Finally, we expect individuals' views of democracy to influence the interaction between leader election and supraordinate group identity appeal. If participants do not value democracy, then they are unlikely to assign procedural legitimacy to the electoral process and therefore be swayed by it to cooperate. Translating this theoretical expectation to the study's context and given that we explore sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims and that compatibility between democracy and Islam is contentious (see Fish 2002; Hofmann 2004), we expect that the election intervention when the supraordinate group identity is activated will be effective particularly among those who consider democracy and Islam to be compatible (Hypothesis 5).

3. Research Design

To test these hypotheses, we designed a lab-in-the-field experiment in a setting of protracted intergroup conflict – that between Shia and Sunni Muslim sects in Lebanon. Participants were assigned at random to six-person teams with three Shia and three Sunni participants per team. Each team was randomly assigned to four experimental conditions. Ten teams of six participants were allotted at random to each condition. The experimental conditions are described in Table 1. Each condition is some combination of two manipulations: an appeal to a supraordinate group identity and participation in the procedure of electing a leader. In the control condition, there is no appeal, and leaders are appointed through random selection rather than elected. The composite condition brings together the appeal and leader election, whereas participants in the remaining two conditions are either exposed to a supraordinate appeal on its own (leaders are selected randomly) or only participate in the electoral procedure (no appeal).

Table 1: Experimental Conditions

		Supraordinate Group Appeal	
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Leader Election	<i>Yes</i>	Appeal + Leader Election	No Appeal + Leader Election
	<i>No</i>	Appeal + Random Selection of Leader	No Appeal + Random Selection of Leader

The appeal takes the form of a video recording of a conversation between four prominent Shia and Sunni journalists – two from each sect – where they discuss the problems associated with sectarianism and agree that the best way to overcome it is by embracing the unified Lebanese national identity. The recording is 20 minutes in duration, and the conversation is unscripted.² The format of the recording is modeled after a political talk show on television. The video was shown to participants only in the Appeal + Leader Election and Appeal + Random Selection of Leader conditions before the behavioral games; those in the remaining two conditions were not

² Transcript of the recording is in Appendix A.

shown a video.³ In the election manipulation, participants cast a vote to select a team leader, otherwise team leaders were selected by us at random.⁴

The post-treatment outcome – cooperation levels across group boundaries – was measured through a modified public goods game modeled after Grossman and Baldassarri (2012).⁵ The game entails participants interacting in teams and deciding how much money to keep for themselves and how much to donate to the common pool in the knowledge that the totality of donations to the team would be doubled and divided out equally among all participants. Higher donations to the common pool signal greater willingness to cooperate. In an environment of mistrust participants might be reluctant to contribute to the team and might choose to keep more money for themselves.

The modification came from the presence of team leaders, whether elected or selected by us at random. Leaders did not make any contributions themselves; their only role was to announce sanctioning levels at the end of every round after individual contributions by the remaining five team members were revealed anonymously. Players falling below the minimally acceptable contribution level set by the leader were fined four tokens from their earnings in that round. This modification is designed to determine whether average contribution levels change when team leaders are elected by participants in contrast to being selected at random by the research team.

The modified public goods game was played over five rounds following three practice rounds to help participants understand the structure of incentives. Participants were freshly endowed with 10 tokens (equivalent to 5USD) at the beginning of every new round. Instructions for the public goods game were read out before the practice rounds; these instructions can be consulted in Appendix C. To calculate the end-of-game payouts one round of five was selected at random, and that is also when sanctions for that round were implemented by organizers. On average, participants earned 48USD, which was equivalent to half a day's wage in Beirut. Consent was obtained from all participants, and they were free to discontinue their participation at any point during the study while retaining a show-up fee.

4. Results

The total number of participants was 240: 120 Shia and 120 Sunni Muslims. An equal number of men and women from each sect participated in the study.⁶ An average participant was 38 years of age, with a technical diploma, somewhat religious, and with a household income of a little

³ We considered including a placebo video in conditions with no common ingroup identity appeals. However, given the pervasiveness of sectarianism in political life in Lebanon it was difficult to design a placebo clip with political content and we were worried that a placebo non-political clip might affect cooperation in an unpredictable fashion. We therefore followed other experimental studies that do not include a placebo treatment in the baseline (Bail et al. 2018; Dale and Strauss 2009; and Gerber et al. 2013).

⁴ When votes were split, we selected the winner at random from among the runners up. Participants were not informed about the fact that the vote had been split, and in this way the sense of procedural justice was preserved.

⁵ The modified public goods game was preceded by five rounds of the standard public goods game that was used for a different study. The pattern of contributions in these initial five rounds is reported in Appendix B. In the analyses that follow, in the first round of the modified public goods game we control for contribution levels in the final round of the preceding standard version of the game.

⁶ Participants were recruited through a public opinion firm.

over 2,000USD a month.⁷ Participants are broadly representative of the Muslim population of the capital and of the country at large (see Appendix F). Across the conditions there is balance on all the demographic characteristics as shown in Appendix G. Participants found the video-recorded appeal persuasive; on average, participants gave the journalists who took part in the pre-recorded discussion a persuasiveness score of 2.3 of 3 (see Appendix H for details).

In Table 3, we report the results of regression models that test Hypotheses 1-3. Observations are pooled from modified public goods games where leaders set minimally acceptable contribution levels. ‘Leader election’ indicates that participants were assigned to elect team leaders, and its coefficients capture the effect of the procedural act of leader selection. ‘Supraordinate identity appeal’ estimates the treatment effect of being assigned to watch the expert video calling for more cooperation across sectarian lines in the interest of the Lebanese national identity. We use random-effect regression models to allow for the fact that observations were generated by an iterative process where a given participant’s contribution levels might have been affected by observing other players on the team and also the contribution thresholds chosen by team leaders in the previous rounds.⁸ In model 1, we control for participants’ and team leader’s sectarian identities and for team-level contributions in the previous round of the game. In model 2, we add controls for the minimum level of contributions set by the leader in the previous round (‘lagged minimum’) and for penalty assessed in the previous round for those who fell below the leader’s threshold (‘lagged sanctioned’).⁹ In models 3 and 4, we also include demographic controls.¹⁰ Models 1-3 test the effectiveness of the leader election and supraordinate identity interventions (H1 & H2). In model 4, we test the *joint* effectiveness of leader elections combined with a prior appeal to common ingroup identity (H3).

Table 2: Effect of participation in the procedure of leader selection and supraordinate identity appeal on intergroup cooperation

Model	1	2	3	4
Hypothesis	H1&H2	H1&H2	H1&H2	H3
Leader Election	-0.140 (0.337)	-0.127 (0.240)	-0.190 (0.253)	-0.736 (0.444)
Supraordinate Identity Appeal	0.613* (0.311)	0.594** (0.226)	0.690** (0.253)	0.210 (0.280)
Leader Election × Supraordinate Identity Appeal				1.047* (0.513)
Shia	0.607*	0.570	0.592*	0.591*

⁷ For more detailed information about the participants see Appendix D. Survey question wording is in Appendix E.

⁸ The level of average contributions by experimental condition across five rounds is described in Appendix I.

⁹ For more information on the minimum level of acceptable contributions set by the team leader and the proportion of sanctioned participants, see Appendices K and L, respectively.

¹⁰ Because controls for leader’s policy and penalties are introduced only after round 1 we lose 200 observations in models 2-4. Further twenty observations are lost because confederates failed to record leader’s policy in several rounds. Eighty observations are lost in models 3 and 4 because a few respondents did not answer the survey question regarding household income.

	(0.309)	(0.291)	(0.257)	(0.258)
Leader from the same sect	0.190 (0.303)	0.127 (0.294)	0.150 (0.240)	0.136 (0.243)
Lagged team contribution	0.077** (0.018)	0.115** (0.014)	0.115** (0.015)	0.111** (0.014)
Lagged minimum		0.088 (0.050)	0.081 (0.055)	0.084 (0.054)
Lagged sanctioned		-0.216 (0.274)	-0.126 (0.288)	-0.147 (0.288)
Female			0.427 (0.234)	0.440 (0.232)
Age			0.008 (0.014)	0.007 (0.014)
Education			0.243* (0.122)	0.234 (0.120)
Income			0.200 (0.115)	0.208 (0.112)
Religiosity			0.015 (0.228)	-0.042 (0.231)
Understanding of instructions			0.535 (0.347)	0.594 (0.347)
Constant	3.155** (0.849)	1.903* (0.757)	-1.137 (1.303)	-0.821 (1.227)
Num. of observations	1000	780	700	700
Num. of participants	200	195	175	175
Num. of teams	40	39	39	39
R ²	0.388	0.529	0.558	0.561

*Note: All models use random-effects linear regressions with team moderator indicators; standard errors, clustered at the team level, are in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.*

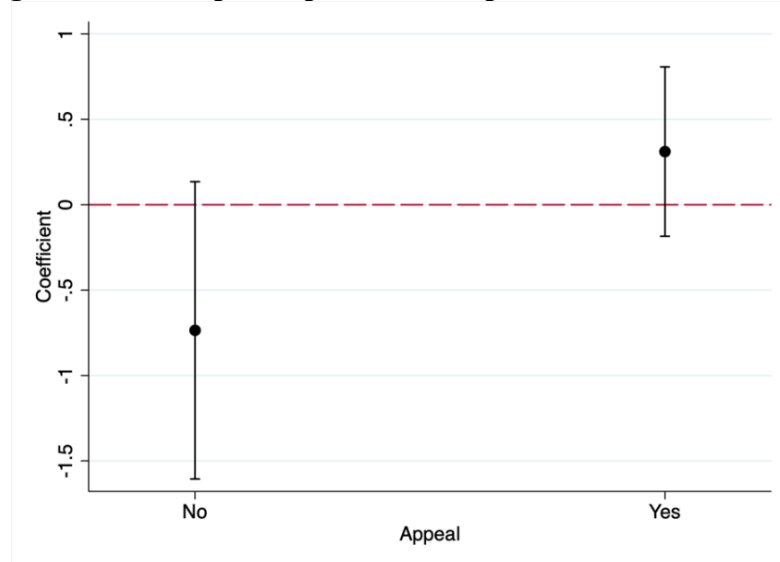
The results from Models 1 to 3 consistently show that participants who elect their team leader do not contribute more to the common pool. In fact, the effect of leader elections on contributions is consistently negatively signed, although the coefficients do not reach statistical significance. This invalidates hypothesis 1 about the positive effect of participation in leader selection on cooperation and suggests that in divided and highly heterogeneous societies the mere fact that leaders are elected is not sufficient to enhance compliance and cooperation. This finding only speaks to the effect of the procedural act of leader selection and not to the broader effect of fully-fledged campaigns where policy platforms and candidate personalities might play an important role. The procedural act of leader selection is all that some voters have recourse to in fledgling democracies where access to political information is limited. The procedural dimension of elections has been separated out by theorists as a distinctive component of the reason that voting matters, and just going through the motions of leader selection, stripped clean of the policy aspects of election campaigns, has been shown to increase voter cooperation with leader policies in homogenous groups.

In contrast, there is support in the data for the hypothesis that exposure to a supraordinate group appeal increases cooperation (H2). Participants who watched the video describing the problems of sectarianism and highlighting the importance of unity around the Lebanese national identity contribute to the common pool at least 0.6 of a token more (relative to an average contribution of around 8 tokens) by comparison to those who did not see the video. The effect of the supraordinate appeal is statistically significant across all three models and is robust to the inclusion of multiple controls.

Hypothesis 3 maintained that exposure to a supranational identity appeal would enhance the positive effect of leader election on cooperation on the grounds that the leader could be considered to represent the common supraordinate group. At first glance, this hypothesis is borne out because the interaction term between leader election and video appeal in model four is large at a little over one token and statistically significant. Thus, taken on its own, exposure to a supraordinate identity appeal enhances cooperation for those who elect their leaders.

However, to fully contextualize this effect we ought to consider it alongside the fact that leader election tends to dampen the effect of participation, as the leader election coefficient is negative. To delve into these dynamics deeper we plot the marginal effects of exposure to the supraordinate appeal on participation in Figure 1. From this we can see that the dampening effect of leader election on contributions is so large (-0.7 of a token) that it renders the positive effect of supraordinate appeals (1 token) statistically indistinguishable from 0 ($1 - 0.7 = 0.3$). Overall then, we conclude that there is insufficient evidence to validate hypothesis 3 and, therefore, that even a combination of the procedural act of leader election and appeals to a supraordinate identity do not substantively enhance cooperation in a post-conflict setting.

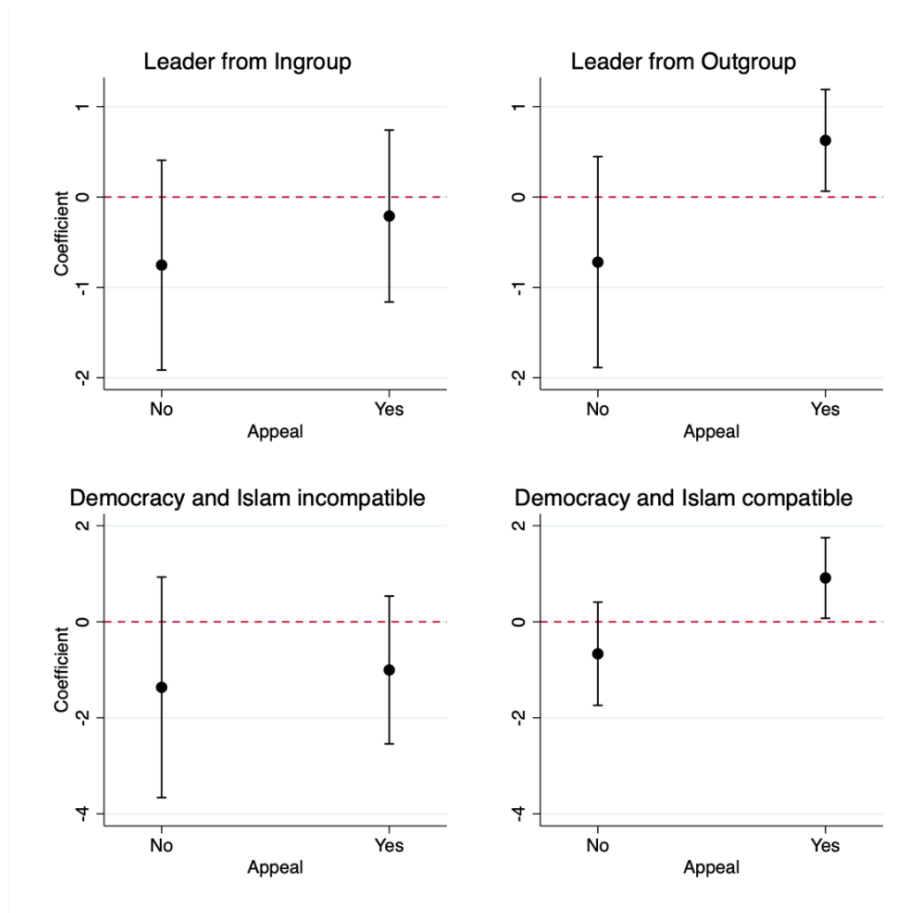
Figure 1: Marginal effects of participation in the procedure of leader selection



Note: Dots are coefficients estimates from Model 4 in Table 2; whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 relate to the heterogeneous effects of the results reported in Table 2. Hypothesis 4 holds that the interaction effect of leader election and supraordinate group appeal will vary depending on whether the elected leader is an in-group or out-group member relative to the participant. We expect the interaction effect to be especially strong when the elected leader represents the sectarian out-group. This is because the common identity appeal encourages participants to come to see representatives of the out-group as in-group members. The most direct way to test this hypothesis is via a three-way interaction between leader election, supraordinate appeal, and leader identity. The results of this regression are reported in Appendix L and represented graphically in the top panel of Figure 2. These graphs disaggregate marginal effects reported in Figure 1 by leader identity. The graphs suggest that the common identity appeal is effective in combination with leader elections in getting participants to cooperate more only when the elected leader represents the out-group. This provides support for Hypothesis 4 and helps to contextualize better the preceding set of findings from Figure 1. Put simply, the interaction of leader election and supraordinate identity appeal is positive and statistically significant only when the elected leader is an out-group member.

Figure 2: Variations in the marginal effects of participation in the procedure of leader selection as a function of leader’s identity and participants’ views on democratic values.



Note: Dots are coefficients estimates from Appendix L; whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

Hypothesis 5 maintains that individuals who have greater respect for democratic procedure are more susceptible to the joint treatments. In this context, we proxy for respect for democracy by asking respondents in the pre-treatment survey whether they believe that Islam and democracy are compatible. We assume that those who believe the two to be incompatible have low respect for democratic procedure. Replicating the three-way interaction that we used to test the previous hypothesis but now replacing leader identity with respect for democracy we plot the marginal effects of supraordinate group appeal on leader election in the bottom panel of Figure 2 (accompanying regression output is in Appendix L). Consistent with the hypothesis, we find that cooperation increases only among those participants who believe that Islam and democracy are compatible. We present this last set of results with some caution given that relatively few respondents said that Islam and democracy were in conflict. All in all, the results in Figure 2 demonstrate how the interaction term between the procedural act of participating in a leader election and being exposed to a supraordinate identity appeal is statistically significant among some subsets of participants (hypotheses 4 and 5) even if it not significant overall (hypothesis 3).

5. Conclusion

In this study, we set out to test whether participating in the procedural act of electing a leader helps to increase intergroup cooperation in a divided society with a history of conflict. Elections, at least in the ideal world, are much more than just procedural acts. Elections ordinarily provide voters with an opportunity to assess candidates' policy platforms and personalities. However, in fledgling democracies with no established party brands and a weak history of political contestation elections can at times devolve into just being a procedural act of leader selection. Even in developed democracies, some voters prefer to ignore much political information that is available to them. This leads democratic theorists to separate the procedural legitimacy of elections that comes from a mere act of participation from the substantive dimension of expressing preferences over policy platforms (Pateman 1970; Lind and Tyler 1988). Empirical researchers have shown how the procedural act of voting for a leader enhances compliance with leaders' preferred policies and increases cooperation in mostly homogenous societies (Dal Bó, Foster, and Putterman 2010; Grossman and Baldassarri 2012; Schories 2022). In this study, in the context of a lab-in-the-field experiment we tested the theoretical expectation that merely participating in the act of leader election can bring about greater cooperation but in the context of a divided society, specifically among Shia and Sunni Muslims in Lebanon. Alongside leader election we also examined the effectiveness of a powerful alternative hypothesis for inter-group cooperation in post-conflict context, the appeal to a supraordinate common group identity that exists above the conflict cleavages (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000).

We found that going through a procedural act of electing a leader failed to enhance intergroup cooperation in this post-conflict setting. In contrast, the appeal to a common ingroup identity increased cooperation across group lines, which is consistent with established findings (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh 2015; Lazarev and Sharma 2017; Levendusky 2018). Combining election procedure with the supraordinate identity appeal failed to increase cooperation in the sample overall because the procedural act of voting tended to suppress cooperation and thus cancel out the positive effect of the common identity treatment. While this finding is

disappointing from the perspective of post-conflict reconciliation in heterogeneous societies, it comes with a few encouraging caveats. In heterogeneity analyses we established that the combination of an appeal to a supraordinate identity and leader election increases cooperation with leaders from the out-group. As the concern in divided societies is often with regards to compliance with out-group leaders, we consider this finding to validate the value of democracy in these types of communities. Furthermore, we also found that the combination of the two treatments was more effective among those participants who considered democracy to be consistent with the dominant religious ideology (in this instance, Islam). This suggests that democratic practices, when combined with appeals to overarching national identity, can enhance cooperation between conflicting groups if members of these groups consider democracy to be compatible with local social norms.

These results have important policy implications for post-conflict settings. In such contexts elections are often considered to be an important first step in a move toward a lasting peace (Lyons 2004; Reilly 2002). Our findings suggest that elections might lack the desired effect unless they are preceded by preliminary steps. The first of these is an attempt to revive or create anew the sense of a common identity – usually, an overarching national identity – among the conflicting groups (see Miguel 2004). Another important step is to ensure that democratic procedures are not considered to be in conflict with dominant social or religious norms. Rushing into setting up democratic institutions might otherwise backfire and, in fact, reignite the flames of sectarian or ethnic conflict (Brancati and Snyder 2012).

The question of election effectiveness in harnessing cooperation in divided societies requires further attention, and this study is a contribution to the broader research agenda. First, our findings stem from a single relatively modestly powered experiment. Additional evidence from other divided societies would be necessary to confirm our conclusions. Second, our design is limited in fully capturing the legitimacy effects of elections in the sense that it focuses only the participatory aspect of elections and uses random selection of leaders as the baseline. This is problematic because other work has argued that selection of leaders by lot creates its own legitimation effects (Carson and Martin 1999), and therefore the baseline in our experiment makes it more difficult to find treatment effects for electing a leader. In addition, elections are multifaceted (Wolak 2014), whereas our study focuses on just a single procedural component of the electoral process. Third, in our study leaders have the monopoly over sanctioning powers, whereas in some post-conflict societies policies are set by coalitions of actors that share power. Finally, we appealed to common ingroup identity before leaders were elected, but such appeals often follow elections to appease losers and to integrate the competing groups and not before. All in all, there is much scope for future follow up work expanding the external validity of our findings on the effect of leader elections on cooperation in divided societies.

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