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Desk study on aid and democracy

Liberia

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This study is part of a series of country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project The state and statebuilding in the Global South. They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of Liberia, with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: foreign aid, democratization, Liberia, statebuilding, development

Note: The datasets and codebook used and drawn upon are listed after the reference list at the end of the study.

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1   Regime type and timeline

Liberia represents an emblematic case of regime transition. Although it had been an autocratic regime, particularly throughout the duration of its civil war, Liberia transitioned to democracy in 2006 and has remained democratic ever since. Figure 1 demonstrates that Liberia's single democratic regime transition (1) occurred in 2006, which has thus far been a permanent one; the country has not experienced a reversion into autocracy since this transition point. Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) data demonstrate that the country was an autocracy (0) from the end of the Cold War all the way until 2005, right before its transition to a democracy (1) the following year. Regimes of the World (RoW) clarifies that Liberia has been an electoral democracy (2) since 2006. RoW data also identify fluctuations in Liberia's autocracy classifications, categorizing it as a closed autocracy (0) for the period 1991–96 and for one year in 2004, and as an electoral autocracy (1) during 1989–90, 1996–2003, and for one year in 2005.

Figure 1: Liberia's regime types
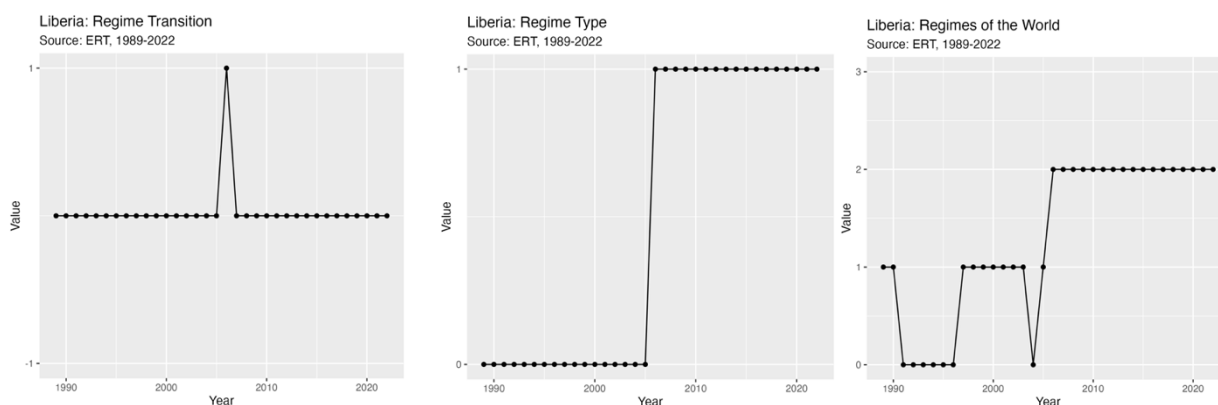
Source: author's construction based on Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) data.

Liberia's electoral and liberal democracy scores reflect its stable regime transition. Both measures sharply increase during 2005–06, accounting for the country's transition to democracy. Polyarchy scores closely correspond to RoW typologies. The polyarchy index saw modest increases in Liberia after 1996, the same year RoW identifies its shift from a closed to an electoral autocracy; 2004 also witnessed a dip in polyarchy scores, coinciding with its brief backtrack into a closed autocracy, according to RoW. Liberia's upturn along the index in 2006 also corresponds with the onset of Liberian democracy that year. In 1990, Liberia's polyarchy score was 0.168, a number which would drop to 0.153 in 1996. From 1998–2003, its polyarchy scores averaged 0.34, a modest increase. By 2006, Liberia's polyarchy scores would reach 0.65—eventually attaining a height of 0.672 in 2010—and would remain around this level thereafter.

Liberia's liberal democracy scores follow a somewhat similar pattern (Figure 2). Liberal democracy scores also rose in 2006 with the initiation of democracy, but they remained quite low until then. In fact, unlike polyarchy scores, Liberia's liberal democracy index experienced a sustained drop after 1993 essentially until its transition. Liberal democracy was at its lowest in Liberia in 1990 at 0.063. In 2003, this variable measured 0.151, a figure which would climb over the next two years to reach 0.511 in 2006. Peak liberal democracy scores in Liberia occurred from 2007 to 2009 at 0.52, and although this figure has since somewhat declined, Liberia maintains a liberal democracy index score of 0.461 in 2022.

Figure 2: Liberia's electoral and liberal democracy index scores
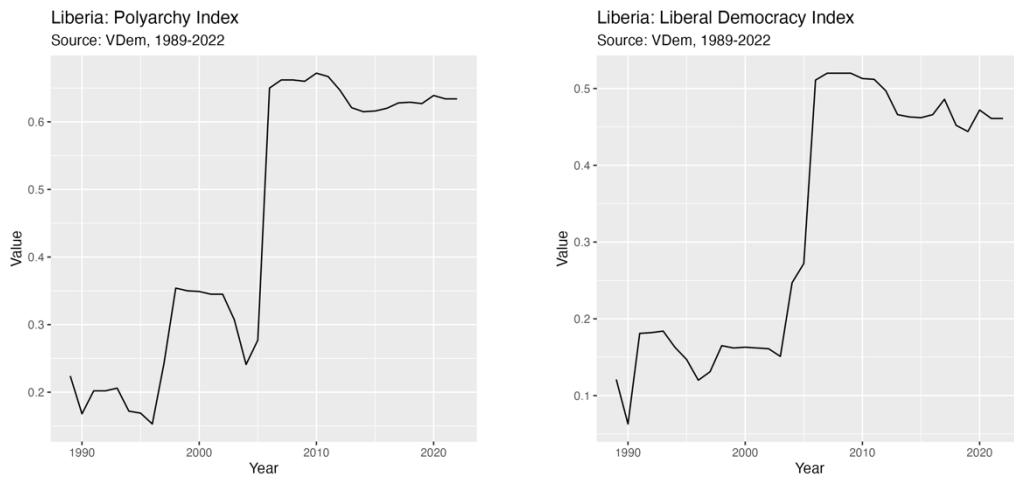
Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

Figure 3: Indicators of individual rights
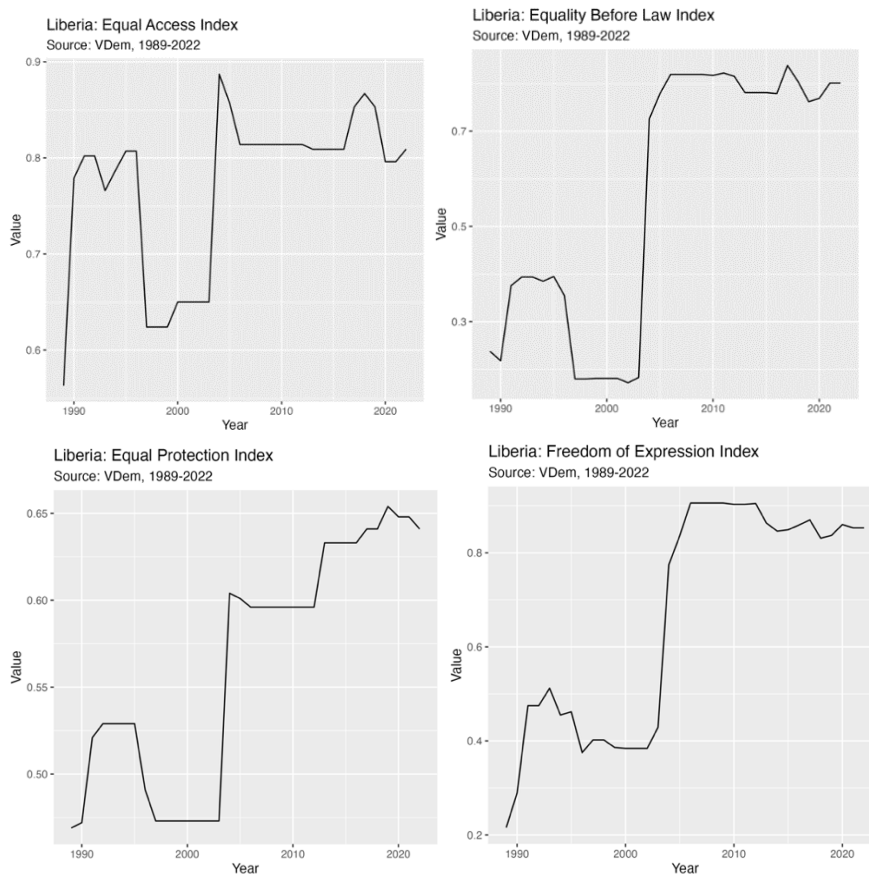
Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

What these two quantitative measures do not fully illustrate is the intensity of Liberia's autocratic regime, particularly under Charles Taylor's rule from 1997 to 2003. Polyarchy scores show some gains in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which bumped up Liberia's regime classification to an electoral democracy. Ironically, this period coincides with the presidency of former warlord and eventual war criminal Charles Taylor. This rise along the polyarchy index from 1998 to 2003 reflects the multiparty democratic elections that brought Taylor and other government officials to power. However, what the polyarchy measure masks is how repressive the regime was under President Taylor. Liberal democracy scores

indicate some of the regime's repressiveness during this time, but that restrictive environment is even more pronounced when assessing measures more directly related to individual political liberties.

Around the same timeframe, 1997–2003, there are equivalent drops along several regime variables measuring individual political rights (Figure 3). Indices quantifying individual access to power, equality before the law, equal protection, and freedom of expression all experience noticeable declines during these same set of years. Therefore, while the regime was improving somewhat along the polyarchy index, it was simultaneously narrowing the space for individual freedoms. Classifying Liberia as an electoral autocracy during this period does not do justice to understanding the full dynamics of this regime.

Another arena where Liberia stands out from a regime perspective is with regard to civil society. Liberia has sustained a relatively robust civil society, even during its autocratic rule. Civil society participation was restricted during its years under autocracy, particularly during the Taylor presidency, although it was never fully constrained. As Figure 4 illustrates, since its transition to democracy, Liberia's civil society participation index has sustained scores above 0.9, on a scale of 0–1. This quantitative index corroborates empirical evidence that Liberia does have a vibrant and active civil society and indicates that civil society is a central part of the country's democracy.

Figure 4: Liberia's civil society participation index
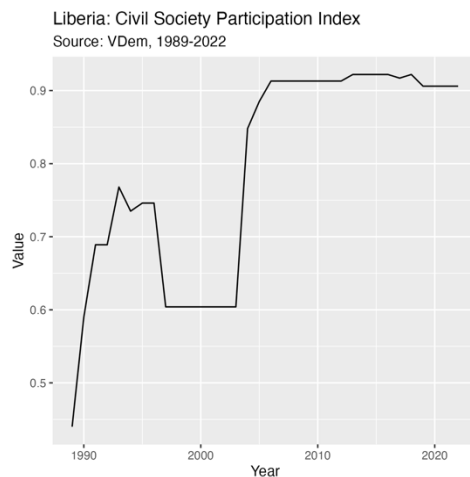
Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

According to ERT data, Liberia has experienced two episodes of democratization, one from 1997 to 1998 and one from 2005 to 2010 (Figure 5). This first episode corresponds to the end of the First Liberian Civil War in 1996 and the first post-conflict election carried out in the country the following year in 1997. For this brief period, from 1997 to 1998, there was potential for democracy to take hold, as a series of peace agreements had been signed[1] and democratic elections were successfully implemented in 1997. However, optimism was short lived as it became quickly apparent that the newly elected president, Charles Taylor, was not prepared to abandon his militant approach to governance. Within two years of his election in 1999 the Second Civil War erupted, largely in opposition to Taylor and as a continuation of the First Civil War. Ultimately, this episode resulted in reverted liberalization (4) and, tragically, a resurgence of civil conflict.

The second democratizing episode is the one that resulted in democratic transition (1). In 2003, Charles Taylor was charged formally with crimes against humanity for his involvement in the war in Sierra Leone. Subsequently, a series of international military and peacekeeping interventions arrived in the country,

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[1] The Cotonou Peace Agreement was signed in 1993 and the Akosombo Peace Agreement, which amended the Cotonou Agreement, was signed in 1994. The Abuja Peace Accords were signed in 1996, which brought about a cessation of fighting.

accelerating President Taylor's departure from office. With Taylor gone, the Accra Peace Agreement was signed in August 2003, ending the Second Liberian Civil War, and initiating a transitional government to lead the country back toward peace and democracy. In 2005, Liberia held a democratic multiparty presidential election and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was successfully elected to office. Her election ushered in democratic government restructuring and a return to civil peace. This democratizing episode also overlaps with the initiation and conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which existed from 2005 to 2010 in Liberia. While this Commission faced some criticism in not fully accounting for certain elected officials' role in the civil war, it brought a realistic and symbolic end to Liberia's civil conflict and marked its successful transition to democracy.

Figure 5: Liberia: democratization
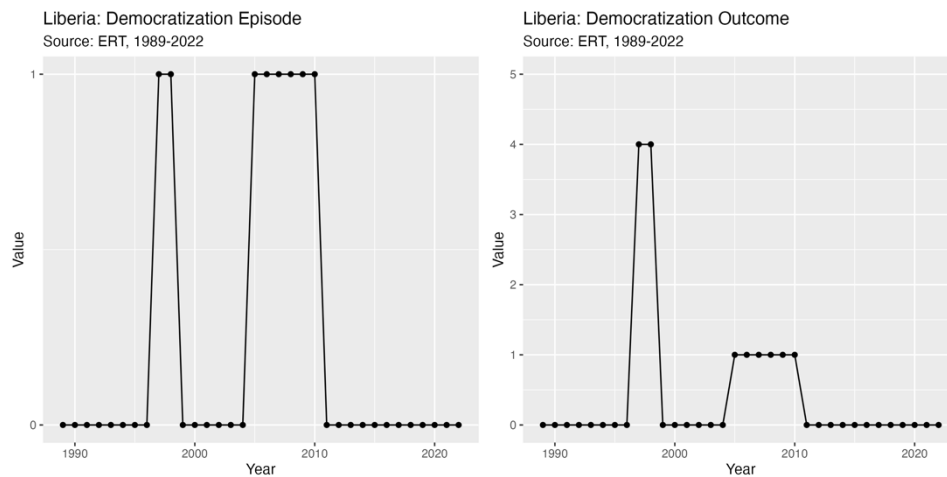
Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

Figure 6: Liberia: autocratization

Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

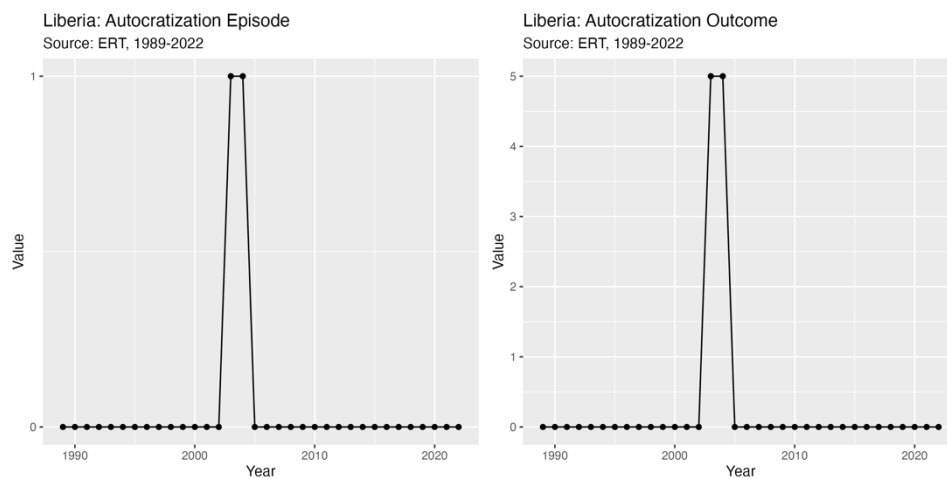The ERT also identifies one episode of autocratization from 2003 to 2004 (Figure 6). This episode, which according to the dataset resulted in regressed autocracy (5), occurred just before Liberia's transition to democracy. In terms of corresponding events to account for this episode, there does not appear to be a specific instance that perpetuated or deepened Liberia's autocracy in 2003; in fact, by the end of 2003 President Taylor had fled the country and the transitional government was in power. During this interim period certainly the quality of Liberia's regime declined, as it was in political flux, but these years do not seem to empirically correspond to an intensification of autocracy. However, because regime episodes in the dataset are linked with polyarchy scores, these years are categorized as

autocratizing. The polyarchy index briefly declined in Liberia in 2004 as multiparty elections were temporarily abandoned for the sake of installing the interim government. As a result, the ERT codes this period as resulting in regressed autocratization; however, the following year the country would fully transition to democracy, calling into question the relevance of this episode.

Ultimately, Liberia's regime has gone from an entrenched autocracy—sandwiched around two bloody and nearly contiguous civil wars—to a steady democracy characterized by peace and the end of hostilities that prompted the civil conflict. Its democratic transition has been relatively smooth and thus far ultimately successful, making Liberia a key focus in much of the literature as a model of democracy-building within post-conflict settings.

2   Findings from the literature on democracy/democratization

Liberia has suffered through significant amounts of violence and conflict leading up to its transition to democracy (Spatz and Thaler 2018). Despite this bloody background, Liberia underwent significant democratization and was able to emerge as a stable and solid democracy in its post-war years. How Liberia managed to enact this transition and how it has maintained its democracy since have both been the focus of recent research.

A key element in the success of Liberia's democratic transition can be attributed to executive leadership. Weak leadership in Liberia's first transitional government from 1990 to 1997 helped set the stage for President Charles Taylor and his autocratic regime to come to power. Effective interim regimes can be especially good at 'demilitarizing politics' in post-conflict settings, but this first interim regime in Liberia was weak, beholden to international and domestic political demands, and unable to shepherd elections in 1997 toward post-conflict resolution (Lyons 2004). The interim government in the 1990s struggled to mediate the ongoing civil conflict, and rebel groups had effectively taken control of much of the countryside during this period. Once elections were implemented in 1997, the country and political setting was still highly militarized, which detracted from and, to an extent, undermined the democratic nature of these elections (Lyons 2004). This first transitional government thus provided the context in 1997 for electoral legitimacy to be conferred upon a militarized and coercive government, instead of a fully civilian and democratic one.

In comparison, Liberia's eventual transition to democracy was the product of effective executive rule. By contrast, the brief transitional government, 2003–05, helped facilitate democratic multiparty elections in 2005. The Accra Peace Agreement signed in 2003 prevented members of the interim government from running in the national election. These elections, held under UN auspices, were also generally competitive with multiple party candidates playing on a relatively even electoral field. Additionally, the leadership abilities of President Sirleaf, who was victorious in the 2005 elections, was also instrumental in shaping Liberian democracy, especially in reincorporating democratic inclusiveness amongst Liberia's population (McBrien 2020).

In fact, the nature of the 2005 election is in itself a particularly important factor in explaining Liberia's successful democratic transition (Harris 2006). In 1997, Charles Taylor already had a reputational and media advantage going into the polls. In 2005, all candidates were civilians and none had been members of the interim government, which left the electoral field devoid of a military bias or incumbent advantage. This more competitive and balanced platform in 2005 resulted in citizens voting for more varied political parties and candidates, more in line with democratic practice (Blair, Karim, and Morse 2019; Harris 2006). The new political players and arrangements that emerged in the 2005 election have been critical factors in initiating and strengthening democracy in Liberia (Sawyer 2008).

Liberia is also a focus in the literature for the relative success of its enduring democratization. Even after its transition, Liberia has remained democratic. Broad analysis of Liberia's post-conflict democratization often attributes its success to good governance and democratic institutions. The onset of Liberia's civil wars has been understood as a result of a crisis of governance (Gariba 2011), implying

that re-establishing good governance practices was a major explanatory factor in sustaining its emergent democracy and post-conflict peace. The new constitutional arrangements and governing institutions that were subsequently established in 2005 also represent a decided break with the country's past governing apparatus (Sawyer 2005a), which helped reinforce Liberia's commitment to its own democratization.

Civil society also appears to play a key role in sustaining Liberian democracy. The civil society sector in Liberia is relatively small and notoriously lacking in financial, infrastructural, technological, and human resources, particularly in rural areas outside the capital city (Krawczyk 2021). However, it is vibrant and maintains high marks on V-Dem regime indicators. While the relationship of civil society to democracy building in Liberia is not necessarily as straightforward as it is in democratic theory[2] or in other country contexts, the robustness of Liberian civil society does produce several outcomes conducive to democratization.

Civil society plays a principal role in Liberia's post-conflict environment. Civil society has generally assisted in strengthening democracy in Liberia, although its scope is limited (Krawczyk 2021). The numerous logistic disadvantages it faces inhibit its potential to more significantly induce certain democratic behaviours and forms of participation (Krawczyk 2021). Additionally, several civil society organizations in Liberia are focused on non-political issue areas and there remains limited involvement from wider sectors of the population, who do not have extra expendable time or resources to get involved. Nonetheless, the role of civil society has been associated with producing greater political participation in certain areas, particularly elections, in Liberia, even amongst individuals not directly involved in civil society activities (Mvukiyehe and Samii 2017). In this regard, Liberia's civil society sector plays a vital role in sustaining ongoing efforts for democratization.

Local community structures are also crucial factors contributing to Liberian democratization. Informal institutions, community authorities, and local political and social organizations sustained Liberian society during the civil war and were critical in rebuilding the state once the civil conflict had ended (Sawyer 2005b). Post-conflict development initiatives often overlook traditional socio-political arrangements. But these informal groups, which endured the civil conflict, are robust foundations upon which formal political institutions were built in the post-conflict era. In fact, community-driven development and community-driven reconstruction have proven to be especially effective routes of democratization in Liberia (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2015), indicating the importance of local infrastructures in its democracy building. These micro-organizations that are conducive to social cooperation and cohesion perhaps offer some explanation as to the durability of democracy in Liberia.

Nonetheless, there is some concern that Liberian democracy, while stable, has not been fully consolidated and that the state remains fragile. One the one hand, vertical accountability mechanisms, like elections, remain fairly strong in the post-conflict era (Signé and Korha 2016). Liberia has carried out routinized and relatively high-quality democratic elections[3] since 2005, and the political system has not coalesced into a majoritarian or centralized party system. Successes on these vertical accountability fronts have been major factors in why Liberian democracy is considered an overall success. However, horizontal accountability amongst and between political institutions and branches of government is still lacking (Signé and Korha 2016). Political decision-making continues to be dominated by the executive branch and reliable political checks and balances remain underdeveloped. This gap in horizontal government quality and accountability has prevented Liberia's democracy from complete consolidating.

The legacy of violence and conflict may also be a drawback in Liberia's democratization. Well after the cessation of civil war, Liberia is still susceptible to localized outbreaks of violence. These instances

2 Within democratic theory, civil society participation leads to increases in other forms of individual political participation and political awareness, thus serving as a vital mechanism for democratic consolidation.

3 Although there is still electoral violence and election results are often contested, elections remain multiparty, inclusive, and relatively free and fair.

appear to be contingent upon only a handful of factors (Blair, Hartman, and Blattman 2014), meaning that Liberian society is still quite fragile in the post-conflict era. To some extent, the legacy of war has also prevented adherence to certain democratic norms and preferences. For instance, freedom of speech is recognized and upheld by Liberian democracy, but there is still a general hesitancy to express open criticism of the government (Söderström 2011). This tendency toward restraint reflects the country's previous experience with war and autocracy. Overcoming this legacy and rebuilding democratic social norms within society will take time.

Finally, Liberia's democracy-building has been susceptible to chronic corruption, which is often organized directly within state structures (Reno 2008; Vorrath 2014). Some of Liberia's systemic corruption has its roots in the country's history of patronage politics, but it can also be attributed to weak statehood in Liberia's post conflict setting. Criminal activities and corruption are often embedded directly within state institutions (Vorrath 2014). As a result, the function of the state itself has been weakened, as it is often viewed primarily as a pathway toward wealth accumulation (Spatz and Thaler 2018). The limited horizontal accountability and minimal checks and balances within Liberia's government further fuel corruption in the public sector. Because those who are involved in systemic corruption have access to resources and decision-making power, they may also be potential sources for systemic change (Reno 2008). Nonetheless, ongoing corruption has weakened Liberia's state capacity and institutional strength and is a contributing factor to its economic underdevelopment.

Despite limitations in Liberia's democratization, the country has sustained a relatively high-functioning democracy—which is impressive, especially when considering that the country has dealt with substantial violence and politically instability in the past. Within Liberia, there is continued preference for political pluralism and support for institutional and constitutional procedure (Spatz and Thaler 2018). Liberia has also been able to sustain its successful transition to democracy—largely because of its institutions, leadership, and social structures—while simultaneously sustaining civil peace. In practice democracy-building and peacekeeping objectives are often conflated in Liberia (Lappin 2019), but the country's ultimate success in democratic regime stability may actually be a product of tackling these goals concurrently. Democracy, development, and peacebuilding objectives often work in tandem and complement one another, especially when bolstered by international support.

2.1 Findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization

External influence has played an essential role in Liberia's democratization. Liberian domestic institutions have been able to withstand political pressures and demands around electoral cycles primarily thanks to international support (Spatz and Thaler 2018). External support has also greatly benefited the country's progress toward democratic governance, even while it has not led to much economic development (Keijzer, Klingebiel, and Scholtes 2020). Donor-funded development projects have proven to be more effective in democratizing the country than domestically funded ones (Fisher et al. 2016). An international presence has also been instrumental in bringing about a ceasefire and preventing civil conflict from re-emerging. Ultimately, foreign assistance and influence have been instrumental in shaping socio-political post-war dynamics in Liberia.

Development in Liberia involves a series of key external actors focused upon a series of key developmental initiatives. International organizations, governments, and NGOs have all been instrumental in supporting the overlapping objectives of peacebuilding, conflict prevention, economic growth, and democratization in Liberia (Sayle et al. 2009). In Liberia, democracy aid in particular has been highly influential in producing both democratization and demilitarization (Lappin 2019; Mross 2022). Such aid has been effective in bolstering democratic outcomes in a peaceful manner, via both 'cooperative democratization' and 'controlled competition' (Mross 2022). Democracy assistance has facilitated greater opportunities for cooperation and generated institutional constraints and contexts conducive to democratic competition. In doing so, external democracy support has worked to ameliorate violence and redirect deliberation and decision making into institutional channels.

Similarly, peacekeeping missions have also simultaneously fostered demilitarization and democratization in Liberia. The many peacekeeping missions and joint forces deployed to Liberia to impose and sustain peace—from the UN, ECOWAS, and the US—were critical in implementing and enforcing a durable ceasefire. These forces also appear to have had downstream effects upon democracy building initiatives. Peacebuilding interventions helped remove structural barriers and created a stable social and political environment in which to build democracy (Mvukiyehe 2018). Exposure to the activities of UNMIL, the UN peacekeeping mission, has also been identified as increasing political participation amongst citizens (Mvukiyehe 2018). Exposure to both security and non-security UNMIL activities is associated with producing greater institutional trust and reliance upon state institutions and authorities for dispute resolution[4] (Blair 2019). It appears the mere presence of international peacekeeping forces imparted a positive impact upon democratic attitudes and preferences, meaning that these types of interventions, while not specifically focused on governance, may have simultaneously contributed to democracy-building within Liberian society.

The agendas of external peacekeepers and monitoring groups are important in shaping subsequent democratic outcomes in Liberia. These actors played a role in explaining why Liberia's first attempt at building democracy in 1997 was not so successful. Early external interventions in Liberia—including the ECOWAS monitoring group deployed in 1990—focused upon peacebuilding objectives, but not upon democratic restructuring (Sayle et al. 2009). Even some of the early aid flows to Liberia—especially from the US—were distributed with the intent solely to demobilize the country, but not necessarily to build up its democratic institutions (Sayle et al. 2009). Ultimately, these early aid flows were not especially effective in producing either democratization or demilitarization.

In Liberia, combining assistance focused upon both peacebuilding and democracy-building has proven to be more effective and sustainable. This nexus approach has not been without flaw, as pursuing peacebuilding, development, and democracy together may have contributed to fragmented local elites and uneven development across the country (Souza and Mendes 2020). The approach also often overlooks local context and pre-existing local infrastructures. However, combining these objectives together and providing international aid to support them seems to have been an effective strategy in maintaining both peace and democracy in post-war Liberia.

Foreign aid has assisted in Liberia's transition to democracy and has helped sustain its democratic progress. Ultimately, foreign actors—international organizations, regional organizations, and foreign governments—were instrumental in bringing about the end of the Taylor regime and in providing structural support for Liberian democracy to emerge. Outside actors provided significant resources in drafting the Accra Peace Agreement and in implementing the governance provisions outlined in that document. First and foremost, foreign aid, especially from the UN and international NGOs, was instrumental in coordinating national presidential and legislative elections in 2005 (Mvukiyehe 2018). The UN has also been especially focused upon providing support for institution-building and institutional reforms, especially in the realms of human rights, rule of law, and public administration (Souza and Mendes 2020). External assistance thus proved invaluable in facilitating Liberia's transition to democracy in 2006.

Aid donors were also critical in helping Liberia maintain its democracy and in continuing to democratize throughout its post-war years. The effectiveness of external support has been particularly evident in aid to the country's security and civil society sectors. Re-establishing authority and respect for security organizations—in particular the police force and justice system—is often very difficult to achieve within a post-conflict environment. In Liberia, the international community has been essential in rebuilding its security structures. External donors have provided extensive technical training and resources aimed at creating a more comprehensive and accountable police force (Blair et al. 2019; Caparini 2014; Karim

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[4] This effect occurs, despite recorded negligence, bias, and abuses by UNMIL, indicating that the presence of international forces is particularly effective in re-establishing institutional trust.

et al. 2018). International donor support for policing structures has not necessarily improved trust in the state's security sectors, but it has produced a positive impact upon governance and generated greater knowledge and awareness of the law and security issues amongst the population (Blair et al. 2019).

International aid to Liberia's security sectors has also indirectly contributed to democracy-building. Joint UN-Liberian government police-support programmes have helped raise levels of security and levels of public perceptions of security, especially in outlying and rural regions of the country (Caparini 2014). Perceptions of safety are strong proxies for state legitimacy in Liberia's post-conflict context (Nomikos and Stollenwerk 2021), indicating that this external support for police structures has also contributed to bolstering democratic state legitimacy. These security programmes are also critical in building up institutional subcultures that may detract away from previously salient ethnic or civil cleavages (Blair et al. 2019). Therefore, by supporting institutional police forces the UN and other international donors have also helped ensure better security governance and assisted in building up state legitimacy for Liberia's democratic government.

Donor support has also been effective in the realm of civil society. Civil society in Liberia tends to be under-resourced, meaning donor aid can have a generally large impact on improving civil society activities. Additionally, international aid interventions targeted at civil society have helped build up enthusiasm for political engagement and expression, and have helped consolidate political participation around more formalized, rather than parochial, political channels (Mvukiyehe and Samii 2017). External support toward civil society helps overcome informational and resource barriers that otherwise inhibit citizen participation in democratic politics (Mvukiyehe and Samii 2017). Donor-supported civil society programmes may also have the indirect benefits of helping decrease violent disputes, increase respect for property rights, and instil a preference for non-violent political norms[5] (Hartman, Blair, and Blattman 2021). Support for civil society initiatives have been invaluable in building up democratic preferences and institutional norms.

In addition to the direct and targeted impacts of international aid upon certain sectors, external assistance also appears to be instrumental in building democracy from the ground up. Community-based interventions supported by international donors and focused upon cultivating cooperation and mobilization capacity have been uniquely effective in Liberia (Fearon et al. 2015). This type of community-driven development, focused at a micro level within the country, has helped improve democratic accountability, increase trust in local leadership, and enhance social cohesion (Fearon et al. 2015). A key characteristic of international aid in Liberia is that it has been able to support democratization both at the national and at the most local of levels.

The positive effect of external assistance also appears to have downstream impact. For instance, both the UN's peacekeeping mission and UN-led assistance programmes have sustained democratic attitudes amongst the population even several years after the intervention (Blair 2019; Hartman et al. 2021). The involvement of external actors in building up Liberian democracy therefore has the potential to generate long-term positive impact upon institutional capacity and democratic strength. International actors and foreign support are not substitutes for strong national-level institutions, but aid that continues to support institution-building and public trust can bolster state authority, public coordination, and adherence to government policy, particularly during times of crisis (Blair, Morse, and Tsai 2017). In this regard, international donors are critical to sustained democracy in Liberia.

3   Aid flows and sources

Aid flows to Liberia increased substantially in the post-war era, although since the end of the Cold War, they have been erratic. Liberia received very little foreign aid during the height of its civil war, but as

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[5] However, these impacts appear to uniquely benefit privileged groups, while disadvantaged populations are less likely to experience these positive effects.

Figure 7 illustrates the onset of democracy brought with it larger disbursements of official development assistance (ODA). Aid flows have most recently been fairly consistent, but right after its transition the country experienced a sharp increase in international support. In 2006, ODA increased five-fold from just four years previously, a figure which tripled the year after in 2007 (Fairbank 2014). During 2001–07, developmental foreign aid flows increased by nearly 1000% (Keijzer et al. 2020). It is conceivable that these sharp and temporary spikes in aid to Liberia immediately following its transition have contributed to its democratic stability, although close analysis of the impact of aid specifically from these years is still needed.

Figure 7: Total official development assistance
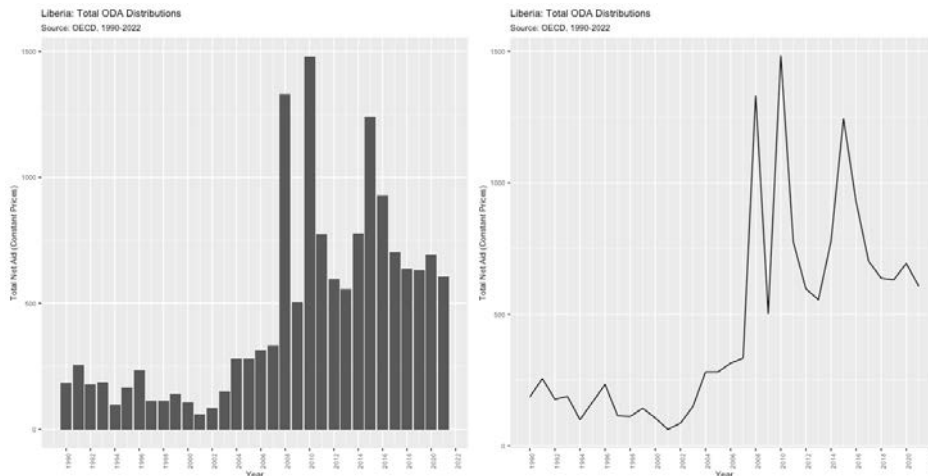
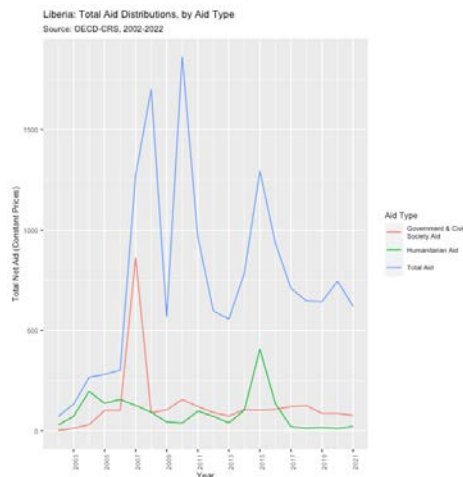Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Overall reported levels of ODA also may not present a comprehensive narrative of foreign assistance in Liberia. There is some indication that the country has also received substantial amounts of unofficial aid since its transition to democracy that is not accounted for in ODA records (Fairbank 2014). Furthermore, whereas humanitarian aid flows declined after democratic transition[6] in favour of developmental aid (Figure 8), the country's economic development remains underwhelming (Keijzer et al. 2020). Liberia's slow post-war economic development is partially attributable to the external shock of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, but it also reflects the type of aid flows Liberia receives and to which sectors aid is mostly targeted at.

Liberia receives a considerable amount of democracy aid and ODA directed at civil society and government has been notably high (Lappin 2019). Whereas democracy aid[7] still represents a small percentage of total global aid flows, the country has uniquely been the recipient of a generally greater proportion of assistance intended for governance and democratic development (Figure 9). Governance and civil society aid flows were especially pronounced after Liberia's democratic transition occurred. In 2007, a substantial amount of democracy aid was distributed to Liberia, accounting for more than half of its total aid flows that year. Democracy aid still comprises a portion of yearly aid flows to Liberia, but this colossal spike in democracy assistance following the country's democratic transition certainly played a sizeable role in supporting Liberian democracy building and sustaining its democratization efforts.

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[6] Humanitarian aid to Liberia was in general decline from 2006-2013, although it would spike in 2015 in response to the Ebola crisis in the country.
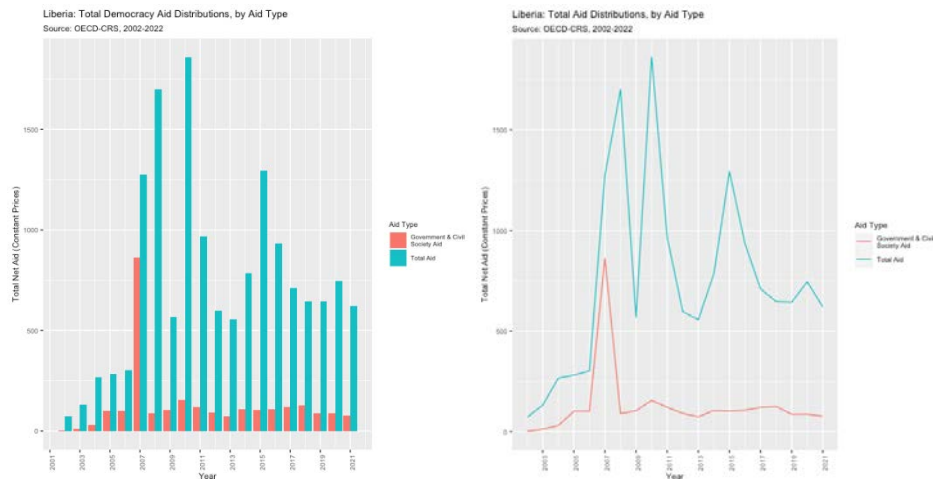
[7] In the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) data, purpose codes are selected that correspond most closely to democracy building to reflect democracy aid. Some aid flows, for instance public finance management or public sector policy, that are coded under Government and Civil Society purpose codes are excluded in this conceptualisation of democracy aid.

Figure 8: Total, humanitarian, and government-civil society aid distributions

Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.
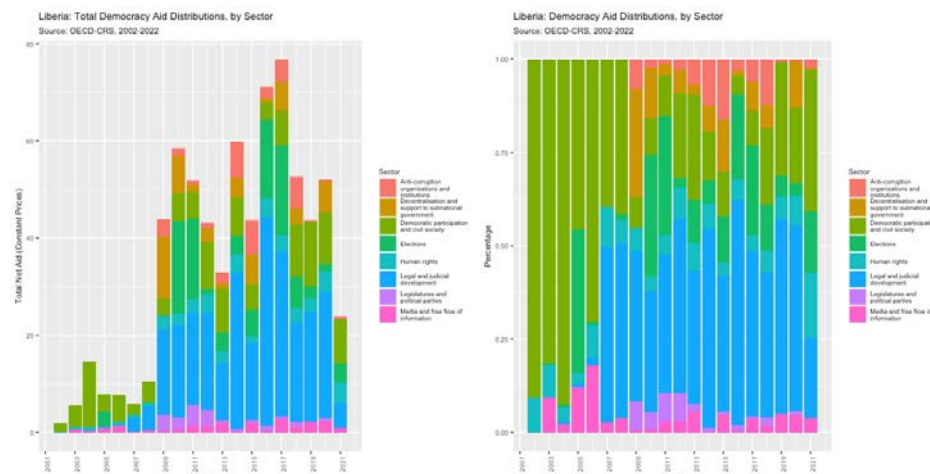
Figure 9: Total aid and democracy aid distributions

Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.

Democracy aid has also been relatively well distributed amongst different sectors (Figure 10). Since 2002, Liberia has received considerable aid directed toward legal and judicial development. It also receives regular aid flows toward civil society and democratic participation—which was a priority amongst democratic aid flows in the 2000s—and toward elections. High quantities of aid directed at Liberia's security sectors has also been distributed (Lappin 2019). Most recently, the focus of democracy aid has been on legal and judicial development and civil society and democratic participation.

Figure 10: Democracy aid distributions, by sector

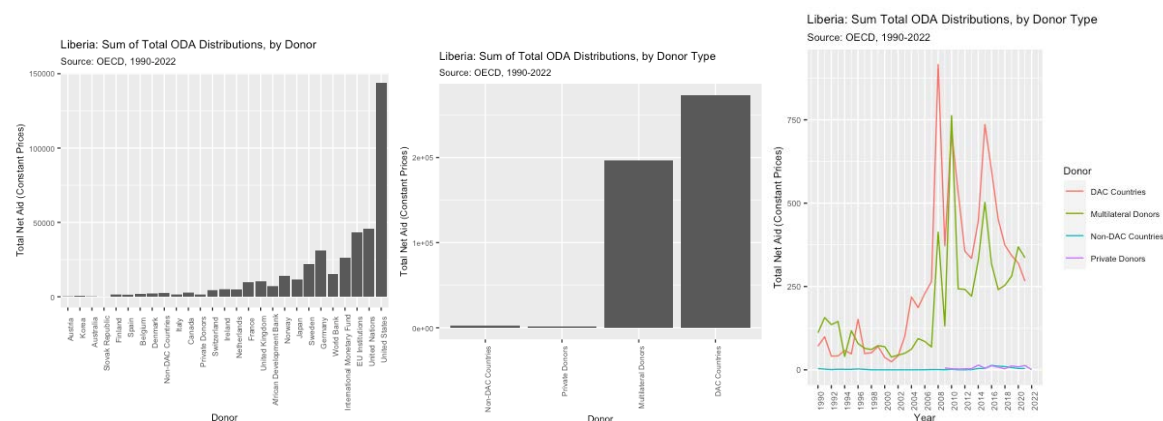Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.

Figure 11: Sum of total ODA distributions, by donor and donor type

Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Because some aid programmes and interventions have been found to impart positive effects in Liberia even years later (Blair 2019; Hartman et al. 2021), sustained flows of democracy aid likely will have a compounding effect in reinforcing democratic outcomes in the long run. Therefore, determining the exact impacts that democracy aid flows—especially toward civil society and judicial development— have had upon specific regime outcomes in Liberia is an important research agenda.

Figure 11 demonstrates that Liberia receives a larger proportion of its aid from bilateral donors, and especially from one donor in particular. The United States has by far been Liberia's largest foreign aid donor, accounting for more than triple the total aid flows distributed by the UN, Liberia's next largest supporter. This strong bilateral donor–recipient relationship between the US and Liberia may make aid flows easier to manage and sustain, although more research is needed, especially on the mechanisms that underpin this partnership. However, US aid flows may also come with certain liabilities. For instance, the US has a tendency to militarise its aid delivery and responses (Calcagno 2016). US military troops were sent in response to the Ebola humanitarian crisis in Liberia, a crisis that did not warrant military intervention, demonstrating its often heavy-handed and mismatched foreign assistance response toward Liberia. Nonetheless, Liberia receives substantial flows from the US, and also from the UN, EU, IMF, and World Bank.

Otherwise, while Liberia has been relatively successful in attracting aid partners and sustaining aid flows to the country, the channels by which aid is distributed may undermine some of this assistance's ultimate policy objectives. In practice, democracy aid often falls short of stated goals and the

instruments of aid distributions are not always effective (Lappin 2019). Cooperation between donors and Liberia on these aid projects also often remains weak. Donors have exhibited reluctance to involve Liberian officials or work through government channels in project implementation and planning (Keijzer et al. 2020). The IMF has estimated that about 80% of public investment in Liberia comes through external sources outside of the government's budget (Fisher et al. 2016). By circumventing government officials and state structures, the state's agency and ability to take ownership over development objectives may be reduced in the long run.

3.2   Specific aid examples

A large part of the literature focuses heavily upon specific assistance programmes or interventions revolving around joint democracy-building and peacebuilding initiatives. Many of these programmes have yielded positive results in both bolstering components of democratization, demilitarization, or both (Blair 2019; Fearon et al. 2015; Hartman et al. 2021; Karim et al. 2018; Mross 2022). However some of these development projects ought to take into greater consideration local context and a more community-focused approach in developing inclusive and more comprehensive democratic development (Harris 2006; Sawyer 2005b). How foreign aid projects can more effectively team up with, not just local political and community organizations, but also domestic civil society groups is an important research agenda.

Democracy aid has faced implementation and resource management challenges (Lappin 2019), but it is still a promising avenue for supporting democratization goals. Directly providing aid to democracy sectors is no doubt integral in bolstering democratic outcomes, but further exploration into the most effective modalities and channels is still needed. Existing research suggests that educational and social cooperation programmes are particularly effective in Liberia, especially when implemented by external donors with local partnerships (Fearon et al. 2015; Hartman et al. 2021; Mvukiyehe and Samii 2017). However, research on comparative aid modalities and distributions would provide greater understanding of the best ways in which to continue to support Liberia's democracy.

The scope of aid to Liberia is also wide-ranging. For instance foreign aid—both official and unofficial—has been indispensable in supporting the Liberian healthcare system (Fairbank 2014). Although not generally focused upon the healthcare sector, donor aid flows have directly helped create and support government agencies in Liberia tasked with healthcare distribution. This aid has positively impacted health performance and health equity across the state (Fairbank 2014). Thinking more broadly about where aid can best assist in Liberia's development, even outside of traditional aid sectors, may be fruitful areas of future research.

Liberia's democracy has benefited substantially from aid flows. There is still significant room for improvement—in bolstering horizontal accountability, reducing corruption, and integrating subnational institutions—but it has generally proven effective, likely because it has targeted key sectors of democracy-building. Where Liberia continues to struggle, however, is in terms of economic development. Along the nexus of peacekeeping, democracy, and economic development, it is the latter where Liberia falls short. In practice, Liberia remains economically underdeveloped, despite its general successes in governance and peace-building. As a result, the literature pays less attention to the economic impact of external aid and assistance. However, more attention is needed on the mechanisms underpinning economic development aid flows and why this type of assistance appears to be comparatively less effective than democracy aid or peacekeeping assistance, if indeed it is. Exploring aid's relationship to economic development in Liberia might consequently offer insights into the strategies and modalities best suited to supporting comprehensive development in this country.

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