More Security, More Legitimacy?

Effective Governance as a Source of State Legitimacy in Liberia

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Abstract

Although previous work has thoroughly examined the sources of legitimacy in areas of limited statehood, we know relatively little about the relationship between security perceptions and state legitimacy in post-conflict settings. Drawing on data from an original survey fielded with 2,000 respondents from Liberia, we show that whether locals feel safe explains a state's legitimacy at the national and the sub-national level. We also demonstrate that explicit attribution of security to specific institutions is key for linking more effective security governance with more legitimacy. Our findings have significant implications for the design of security institutions and statebuilding in post-conflict settings.

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Introduction

Under what conditions can a state develop legitimacy after conflict? The question of what leads citizens to accept a state's right to rule — i.e., consider it legitimate (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018) — is central to the study of governance in areas of limited statehood. Although previous work has emphasized general public goods provision, free and fair elections, and just institutions as key to state legitimacy, we know comparatively little about the relationship between security and state legitimacy. This omission is particularly problematic given the importance of legitimacy to statebuilding in post-conflict settings that can be unsafe for large segments of the population (Goldstone 2008). Our research addresses this gap by investigating the answers to two questions. First, to what extent do perceptions of security affect state legitimacy? Second, do security perceptions affect state legitimacy to the same degree at different levels of governance?

We argue that security perceptions are a critical source of a state's legitimacy at both national and sub-national levels of governance. This study suggests that a secure environment is an indispensable part of a healthy social contract between a state and its citizens, especially in post-conflict settings. As such, security is an essential component of effective governance and a key output or performance by which citizens judge the legitimacy of their state institutions (Call and Wyeth 2008; Rotberg 2004). However, we show that citizens' *subjective* evaluation of their country's security situation rather than any given *objective* metric of security determines this judgment.

We test our argument using an original, nationwide survey of 2,000 residents of Liberia covering all 15 counties, with urban and rural respondents. Liberia is a weakly institutionalized post-conflict setting where areas of limited statehood with competing governance authorities abound, presenting a challenging case for our argument.

Nonetheless, we uncover a substantive and statistically significant positive relationship between perceptions of national security and state legitimacy at both the community and higher levels of governance. Individual perceptions of security are positively associated with perceptions of state legitimacy, though only for individuals who explicitly attribute their personal security to state security actors. Likewise, our results document a positive relationship between citizen contact with state institutions and the legitimacy of state institutions, though this association is limited to community levels of governance.

The challenge for states with limited capacities is that they must gain legitimacy in order to generate compliance and cooperation of the population so that they can govern effectively, often during or after conflict.¹ However, by definition, weak central state institutions lack the administrative capacity to make and implement rules and/or have only incomplete monopoly of force (Risse 2011). States with weak capacities generally lack other mechanisms such as coercion to achieve policy objectives and governance outcomes. In any case, coercion is much more costly and resource-intensive for achieving compliance and cooperation than legitimacy (Levi and Sacks 2009; Tyler 1990). Therefore, legitimacy provides a key tool, often the only one, for states containing significant areas of limited statehood to induce lasting peaceful cooperation and ensure effective governance.

Our analysis offers a theoretical and empirical roadmap for understanding the role of security perceptions in establishing the legitimacy of states. Our framework builds on output-based theories of legitimacy. Such theories argue that effective governance results in higher legitimacy for governance actors, particularly for the state (Scharpf 1999; Fisk

¹ This article uses the terms statehood and state capacity interchangeably throughout this article.

and Cherney 2017). We apply this logic to settings where effective governance means security: if the state makes citizens feel secure, citizens reward the state with more legitimacy. Security may be particularly important where large parts of the population have suffered from insecurity or violence, as is the case in many areas of limited statehood. Yet, existing research argues that a state may gain legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens in ways unrelated to security (Fisk and Cherney 2017; Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009). Therefore, understanding the *relative* role of perceptions of security in establishing the legitimacy of states is especially critical to political science scholars and policy-makers alike.

This article contributes to scholarship on institutional design in post-conflict settings and areas of limited statehood. We show that citizens' perceptions of their country as safe and secure is a critical and foundational first step for state legitimacy even in the most challenging of circumstances. Our analysis suggests that security perceptions matter more than the mere absence of violent events or the holding of elections for building state legitimacy. This finding complements existing arguments that emphasize the importance of the design of electoral institutions, power-sharing agreements, and elite pacts for governance in post-conflict settings (Durant and Weintraub 2014; Matanock 2017; Matanock and Garbiras-Díaz 2018). In line with more recent work (De Bruin 2020; Arriola et al. 2021), we demonstrate that variation in the institutional design of state security institutions in particular can have important consequences for the stability of fragile settings.

Furthermore, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on micro-level processes of development and statebuilding (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2015; Blair 2019; Blair, Karim, and Morse 2019). We take seriously the need to disentangle the micro-level dynamics of governance from more general, macro-level processes of conflict. We show

that effective security governance does not have identical relevance for the legitimacy of community-level state institutions as it does for higher levels of governance. This points to the relevance of distinguishing sources of state legitimacy at different levels of governance in areas of limited statehood more broadly.

Why Legitimacy Matters

Defining Legitimacy

This article examines the beliefs and attitudes of the governed regarding the state's right to rule, which we term state legitimacy (Gilley 2009; Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009). We concentrate on the *empirical* legitimacy the state enjoys among local populations, defined as the social acceptance of the state among local populations (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). Empirical legitimacy is distinct from *normative* legitimacy and *legal* legitimacy, and they may conflict (Schmelzle 2015). While the former focuses on whether a governor (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010) is legitimate according to predefined normative criteria, the latter reveals whether a governor is legitimate according to official legal frameworks. For example, Somaliland's government has empirical legitimacy due to widespread acceptance and support from its inhabitants (Pegg and Kolstø 2015). However, it lacks legal legitimacy within international law as it is not officially recognized as a state (Pegg and Kolstø 2015). From a normative perspective focusing on human rights and democracy, Somaliland's government also lacks legitimacy as human rights violations persist and has minimal democracy (Walls and Kibble 2010).

Empirical legitimacy (henceforth, "legitimacy") provides governance actors with a "reservoir of cooperation" (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018) upon which they can draw even in the absence of statehood. Legitimacy leads to less costly compliance and cooperation than coercive forms of social coordination (Levi 1988; Tyler 1990). Moreover, if citizens

view a state as legitimate, they will continue to cooperate and comply with the state's rule even if they do not agree with every decision and every policy. As long as state behavior remains within the boundaries of what its citizens consider acceptable, they will continue to cooperate. This sets legitimacy apart from other reasons for compliance or cooperation such as substantial self-interest, sanctions, or substantial moral convictions (Schmelzle 2015; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018). However, repeated long-term abuse of the legitimacy populations bestow upon a state by state institutions themselves and failure to meet citizens' governance expectations will erode the legitimacy of state institutions.

The Importance of Legitimacy in Areas of Limited Statehood

We focus on areas of limited statehood, which we understand as areas where the state lacks administrative capacities to make and implement rules and/or the ability to uphold the monopoly on force (Risse 2011). Limited statehood can exist with regard to territorial, social, or policy areas. Many, if not most, areas of limited statehood around the globe have experienced conflicts in their recent past.

While we concentrate on the state as the governance actor of interest in this study, we fully acknowledge that external and non-state actors can also possess statehood and provide governance in areas where state capacity is weak. Examples include the Taliban or warlords in Afghanistan or the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Such actors control the means of violence in a given territory and implement their rules, making them the de facto governors possessing some degree of statehood (Mac Ginty 2010; Pollard, Poplack, and Casey 2017).

Legitimacy is of particular importance to the state in areas of limited statehood because of the state's defining lack of capacity. Lacking coercive means of enforcement and significant ability to reward compliance, they must rely on legitimacy to ensure

compliance and cooperation of its citizens. Some scholars even argue that no persistent social order can exist without a certain level of legitimacy (Easton 1975; Weber 1978). By endowing states with the ability to induce cooperation, legitimacy creates, in Weber's words, a "disposition to obey" (Weber 1994) governance actors. In areas of limited statehood, large segments of the population may hold grievances against state institutions due to insufficient governance, making this disposition more important. Legitimacy implies that an individual need not necessarily agree with the edicts of a government to obey them. Legitimacy should be of particular relevance for governance actors in areas of limited statehood to acquire compliance and cooperation. Therefore, legitimacy is one of the few, often possibly the only, mechanism to ensure compliance and cooperation in areas of limited statehood.

Moreover, state legitimacy can set in motion a virtuous circle of governance in areas of limited statehood. In such a circle, effective and legitimate governance become mutually reinforcing, ensuring stable and effective governance (Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018). According to the argument, effective governance helps to build legitimacy for a state, and increased legitimacy allows states to provide more effective governance such as greater security.

Effective Security Governance as a Source of State Legitimacy

This article rests on output-based theories of legitimacy, which hold that the state derives legitimacy from its ability to provide public goods and services, security being one such good (Scharpf 1999; Stollenwerk 2018; Fisk and Cherney 2017). Output-based theories of legitimacy have been prominent in the social sciences for decades, but much of this work focuses on Western consolidated statehood (Dahrendorf 1980; Lipset 1959; Rothschild 1977). Empirical studies on the sources of legitimacy in areas of limited

statehood remain rare and have presented mixed findings; some find support for the central claims of output-based theories of legitimacy (e.g. Gilley 2009; Levi and Sacks 2009), others find only mixed support (e.g. Fisk and Cherney 2017; Mazepus 2017). Hence, the extent to which states in areas of limited statehood derive legitimacy from public goods provision, as these theories would predict, is unclear.

Effective governance entails providing security to a population. We consider governance to be the various institutionalized modes of social coordination to make and implement collectively binding rules and/or to provide collective goods (Risse 2011). With respect to security, relevant actors include the police and army for providing the collective good. Citizens' perceptions of governance are an essential part of its effectiveness (Stollenwerk 2018; Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009). Therefore, we consider security governance as effective if citizens perceive it as such i.e., feel secure. If citizens feel secure, they might be more inclined to perceive of the state as legitimate. In other words, if citizens are satisfied with the security provision output of the state, they are more likely to consider it legitimate. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: Individual perceptions of security are positively associated with the likelihood that citizens perceive county-level state institutions as legitimate.

H1b: Individual perceptions of security are positively associated with the likelihood that citizens perceive community-level state institutions as legitimate.

We use “county” to denote the largest sub-national administrative district (administrative level 1) and we use “community” to denote local administrative districts.

Our hypotheses differentiate this level because trust and legitimacy of each level may differ significantly. The level of frequent and direct contact citizens have with community-level institutions may raise their legitimacy at the expense of county-level institutions. Moreover, if citizens attribute their security to community-level state institutions like local police forces, then they will be more likely to attribute legitimacy to those state institutions compared to more distant state institutions.

Moreover, we posit that when civilians feel more secure, they perceive state institutions as more legitimate, if they explicitly attribute their security to these institutions. Stollenwerk (2018) has tested this argument in Afghanistan, finding that this type of explicit attribution is a key condition to link improved security perceptions with higher legitimacy of governance actors. In his study, Afghans who felt more secure and explicitly attributed this security to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were also more likely to view ISAF as legitimate (McLoughlin 2015). Thus, we test for the conditional aspects of this argument by testing two additional hypotheses:

H2a: Individuals who explicitly attribute their security to state institutions are more likely than those who do not to perceive county-level state institutions as legitimate.

H2b: Individuals who explicitly attribute their security to state institutions are more likely than those who do not to perceive community-level state institutions as legitimate.

Explicit attribution may be lacking in our test case for two reasons. First, the state frequently displays predatory behavior towards its own citizens in areas of limited statehood and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular (Reno 2015; Baker 2010, 2015). Under

such circumstances, citizens may attribute insecurity to the state resulting in a decline of state legitimacy. Second, traditional leaders and UN troops are often relevant governors. Citizens may attribute their physical security to these non-state or external actors, but not to the state. This underlines the need to analyze the extent to which explicit attribution of (in-)security matters for the state's legitimacy.

Case selection: State Legitimacy in Liberia

The Liberian government has struggled to provide security and to gain legitimacy in the areas of limited statehood that pervade the country. Hence, we consider Liberia to be a useful test case for our arguments that also indicates their relevance for areas of limited statehood more broadly. If we find that security provision is a source of state legitimacy in Liberia, then this is an indication that our arguments may apply to areas of limited statehood more generally. Specifically, we chose Liberia for five reasons.

First, state institutions cannot be seen as a source of security by default. Liberia experienced two civil wars between 1989 and 2003 producing an environment where Liberians often reported feeling unsafe long after the fighting had officially ended (de Carvalho and Nagelhus Schia 2011). Although the security situation has improved after the end of the civil wars, Liberians are frequently exposed to crime and violence. Moreover, state institutions like the police or the army continue to be underfunded and ill-equipped to tackle violence and crime effectively (Blair, Blattman, and Hartman 2017; Bøås and Stig 2010) .

Second, the Liberian state has for long suffered from a legitimacy deficit. The conflicts of the past three decades reflect the existence of severe fractures between the state and its citizens (Hegre, Østby, and Raleigh 2009). State actors and institutions were involved in large scale fighting activities during the wars, which has caused significant

mistrust and skepticism towards the state. Conflict between various governance actors, state and non-state alike, likewise has generated mistrust. This mistrust is so severe that in the beginning stages of the Ebola epidemic, many Liberians refused to comply with public health protocols because they believed that the disease was a fabrication of the government, designed to collect more foreign aid (Blair, Morse, and Tsai 2017; Tsai, Morse, and Blair Forthcoming, 2020). At the community level, Liberian citizens report that they perceive traditional leaders as more powerful and trustworthy than local government (Hartman, Huntington, and Cantrell 2016). If and how the Liberian state can (re-)build its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens may depend to a large extent on the security Liberians experience.

Third, non-state actors play an important role in Liberian governance, especially in the security sector (Bøås and Stig 2010). Traditional chiefs and secret societies are historically considered the primary source of local security, and past research shows this undermines the effectiveness of the Liberian state in security provision in measurable ways (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2015; Blair, Karim, and Morse 2019). Liberia has not, like some African states, worked in tandem with traditional leaders to target public goods provision to local communities, which might lessen the perceived divide between traditional leaders and the state (Baldwin 2015, Mustasilta 2021). In addition, many former combatants formed extralegal groups that maintained order and stability in Liberia after the end of the civil wars (Cheng 2018). These non-state actors all provide security to Liberian communities, often in conflict with each other or the state (Blair, Karim, and Morse 2019).

Fourth, external actors are key in the Liberian security sector. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was the longest multidimensional peacekeeping operation in the UN's history. At the time of the research in 2018, UNMIL was underway and had been

since 2003 (UNMIL ended on March 30, 2018). While its mission was to aid the Liberian state in acquiring legitimacy and to establish an enduringly peaceful environment, its presence may have effectively diverted credit for security (Blair 2019; Mvukiyehe 2017). Therefore, since it is not clear whether citizens attribute improvements in governance to the state or to external and non-state actors, security perceptions are unlikely to be a straightforward source of legitimacy for the state.

Fifth, areas of limited statehood pervade Liberian territory even 17 years after the civil war officially ended (Clapham 1998; Bøås 2001; Reisinger 2009; Cheng 2018). Liberians in these areas may have no or little contact to the state, and thus they might be less likely to perceive the state as a security provider and consequentially attribute little legitimacy to it. Limited state capacity and little state reach may deteriorate citizens' legitimacy beliefs towards the state.

Research Design

Survey

We test our hypotheses with an analysis of data from an original SMS survey fielded with 2,000 respondents using random digit dialing (RDD).

Figure 1: Number of Respondents Sampled, by County

Note: darker shade indicates greater number of respondents.

We collaborated with the survey firm Orange Door Research, which used a large sample of Liberian phone numbers to conduct the surveys. The survey is nationally representative for Liberians 18 years and older owning a mobile phone. About 75% of the population has access to mobile phones in Liberia. We randomly sampled respondents from GeoPoll's subscriber database according to the geographic specification we provided to obtain representation from all 15 counties. We use county-specific questions in the survey itself to validate the location of each respondent. The survey was opt-in, meaning respondents needed to explicitly give consent to start it. Upon successful completion of

the survey, each respondent received the local equivalent of \$0.50 in airtime top-up credit as an incentive.

Using mobile phone surveys potentially introduces biases in the data that need to be kept in mind. Although mobile phone use in Liberia is common and widespread the sampled population is likely to reflect some specific socio-economic features. Our use of SMS services to conduct the survey implies respondents are likely to be literate and need to possess sufficient economic resources in order to own a mobile phone. Moreover, given the content of the survey, respondents may skew towards those with more education and greater interest in political issues. However, we still chose the phone survey to answer our research question because it allowed us to reach areas of Liberia that might have been impossible to cover through face-to-face surveys. Additionally, In-person interviews would have been more visible and easier to track, potentially endangering survey participants if they were candid about their views on sensitive issues like security and state legitimacy.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of our respondents across Liberia. As the figure shows, our sample is geographically diverse. Although 663 out of 2000 respondents (33.15%) are from Monrovia or the surrounding county, Montserrado, the vast majority of our respondents are from counties far from the capital. A comparison of our sample to Round 6 of the Afrobarometer, which is “a representative cross-section of all citizens of voting age in a given country” (Afrobarometer 2019) and is generally considered the gold standard for large scale survey data in Sub-Saharan Africa, underlines the representativeness and quality of our data. Round 6 of the Afrobarometer was conducted in 2015 in Liberia and generated 1,199 respondents. In Figure 2a, we compare the proportion of respondents sampled in each county by the Afrobarometer and by our procedure. There is no substantively or statistically significant difference in sampling proportion in any of the 15 counties between the two sets of data.

Figure 2: Comparison of Authors' Sample (2018) with Afrobarometer Round 6 (2015)

(a) Respondents Proportion by County

(b) Respondent Age Density

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Dependent Variables					
Trust in County Government	0.50	0.50	0	1	2000
Trust in Community Government	0.49	0.50	0	1	2000
Main Independent Variables					
Security perception (self)	3.22	1.01	1	4	2000
Security from lack of attack	3.40	0.84	1	4	2000
Security perception (Liberia)	2.46	0.87	1	4	2000
Attribution of Security					
Police	0.80	0.40	0	1	2000
Informal conflict resolution	0.05	0.21	0	1	2000
Individual-Level Controls					
Male	0.59	0.49	0	1	2000
Age	28.84	6.89	18	87	2000
Procedural Justice	2.52	0.92	1	4	2000
Free and fair elections	2.32	0.94	1	4	2000
Corruption	3.76	0.68	1	4	2000
State contact	2.62	0.92	1	4	2000
County-Level Controls					
Total conflict incidents	75.37	89.44	0	202	2000
Average number of peacekeepers	274.21	213.05	2	569	2000

Table 1 reports summary statistics from the survey. The average age of each respondents is almost 29 years old and 59% of our respondents were male. As Figure 2b shows, our sample skews a little younger than the Afrobarometer, though the substantive differences in density are minor—both studies primarily survey individuals aged 20 to 40.. Although we do not anticipate that these differences in the makeup of our sample would systematically bias our findings, we do adjust for age and gender in our empirical models since research has shown that these are the most salient demographic cleavages in Liberian society (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2015).

Statistical Modeling

In order to include individual as well as county-level covariates, we employ multilevel models in our regression. Multilevel models adjust for relevant covariates at *both* the micro- and macro-level. Since we expect county-level variables as well as individual-level variables to be associated with the degree of legitimacy citizens attribute to the state, we take these variables into account to minimize omitted variable bias (Wenzelburger, Jäckle, and König 2014). Multilevel modeling makes more robust inferences than standard regression techniques when taking macro- and micro-level variables into account simultaneously (Hox 2010; Snijders and Bosker 2012; Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Whereas standard regression techniques assume that units of analysis are independent and identically distributed, multilevel models allow us to identify a second-order unit (e.g., a county) according to which individual units cluster and share certain characteristics. We relied on random intercept models in our analysis as they are stable and reliable given the low number of second level units. Such models assume that the second-level units (i.e., counties) start from different intercept values but that explanatory variables have the same coefficient magnitude across counties (Hox 2010).

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variables are measured by two questions that asked respondents to say how much trust they have in state institutions at different levels (county-level and community-level). We asked respondents “How much trust do you have in government at the county level?” and “How much trust do you have in government at the community level?”. We use the term “government” instead of “state institutions” or related terms after the pre-test and discussions about the questionnaire and the right wording with Liberians and local partners. “Government” is a common synonym for state institutions understood by Liberians generally. Thus using it ensured that we captured respondents’ perceptions

about the state's legitimacy more broadly and on different levels of governance. From these questions, we created a binary indicator for whether respondents said they had much/very much trust (1) or no/little trust (0) in the corresponding state authority. About half said they had much or very much trust in either their county or community government. Although legitimacy is notoriously difficult to measure (Blair 2018; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018; Weatherford 1992; Gilley 2009), questions about trust in state institutions provide useful proxy measures of state legitimacy (Gilley 2009; von Haldenwang 2016). Moreover, comparing the sources of state legitimacy at the county and the community level was an ancillary goal of our study. Thus, we needed proxies that were comparable on different levels of government. Therefore, using trust-based questions to measure state legitimacy is an ideal approach for our purposes.

Independent Variables

We generate two key independent variables to operationalize perception of security provision at the individual level using our survey data: (1) *Security perception* captures whether respondents say that they or their family members have felt unsafe in their neighborhood in the past 12 months. This measure captures the respondents' security perception at a personal level. (2) *Liberia security* measures respondents' perception of the security situation in Liberia as a whole.

We also use two binary indicators, *Police attribution* and *Informal attribution*, to measure whether respondents attribute security to a state institution (the police) or to informal non-state sources of conflict resolution. Through this we are able to assess whether citizens explicitly attribute their (in-)security to the state (H2a and H2b). In our main analysis, we focus on the police since this is the primary state actor responsible for providing personal security to citizens on a day-to-day basis.

Control Variables

In our multilevel models, we account for factors that scholars suggest may shape perceptions of legitimacy and, along the way, perceptions of security as well. We generated the variable *Free and fair elections* from our survey to capture the extent to which Liberians perceive elections as free and fair. We include a *procedural justice* variable reflecting whether respondents say that their tribal group is being treated fairly in Liberia. In addition, we adjust for the degree of perceived corruption. Since corruption affects state legitimacy negatively because citizens expect the state and its institutions to function in an uncorrupt, fair, and objective way, we include *corruption* as an indicator for how corrupt respondents believe Liberian state institutions to be.

We include a variable called *state contact* that indicates citizens' contact with state institutions. We also adjust for the number of UN peacekeeping personnel deployed, on average, in the county over the course of UNMIL's deployment (Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020). To control for *de facto security*, we create a variable, *physically attacked*, that captures whether respondents say that they or anyone in their family have been exposed to violence in the past 12 months. We also include a county-level variable that captures recent violent incidents using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) dataset (Raleigh et al. 2010).

Additionally, the models control for age and gender in order to adjust for the distribution of our sample and to minimize confounding due to respondents' demographic characteristics.

Main Results

Our study investigates whether individual perceptions of security are associated with beliefs about the legitimacy of state institutions at different levels. To assess this, we look at the relationship between beliefs about the legitimacy of community- and county-level state institutions in Liberia, our two dependent variables, and perceptions of national security and individual security, our primary independent variables. The map in the upper left panel of Figure 3 shows the proportion of Liberians by county evaluating the security situation in the country in general as positive, i.e. security governance as effective. The upper right panel shows the proportion of Liberians by county evaluating the security situation in their neighborhood as positive, i.e. security governance as effective. The map in the lower left panel shows the proportion of people who perceive community-level state institutions as legitimate. The final map in the lower right panel displays the proportion of people viewing county level state institutions as legitimate. For all maps darker colors signal higher security/higher state legitimacy. As the maps in Figure 3 demonstrate, the relationship between perceptions of security and state legitimacy is far from clear in Liberia.

For example, though a large proportion of citizens (0.70) in Grand Kru county in southern Liberia perceive their personal security to be good or very good, the proportion of citizens who view county- or community-level state institutions as legitimate in the same county is quite low, 0.35 and 0.40 respectively.² In counties like Gbarpolu in northwest Liberia, few evaluate the national security situation as good or very good (0.30) but most perceive county- or community-level state institutions as legitimate, 0.50 and 0.55

² See Figure 1 for full county names. See also Sabrina Karim's work (Karim 2020; Karim 2017) in this area for in-depth exploration of the mechanisms of security-sector reform.

respectively. These examples stress that the association between perceptions of effective security governance and state legitimacy is not straightforward, necessitating a micro-level investigation of how the two factors relate.

Figure 3: Panel comparing perceptions of security and legitimacy in Liberian counties.

Security Perceptions as a Source of County-Level State Legitimacy

Table 2 reports the results of our regressions of perceptions of state legitimacy at the county level on our independent variables of interest. Model 1 includes only our proxy for respondents' perceptions of individual security. In Model 2, we include our set of individual-level controls. Model 3 adds the county-level variable controls. In Model 4, we include the binary indicator for whether respondents attribute security to police as well as the interaction term between the indicator and perception of individual security. In Model 5, we also add the binary indicator for whether respondents attribute security to informal non-state conflict resolution institutions as well as the interaction between this indicator and perception of individual security.

Table 2: Multilevel model logit regression results (county-level).

	State Legitimacy (County-Level)				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Security perception (self)	0.188*** (0.045)	0.074 (0.051)	0.072 (0.051)	-0.123 (0.104)	-0.248** (0.120)
Security perception (Liberia)		0.452*** (0.059)	0.451*** (0.059)	0.451*** (0.059)	0.449*** (0.059)
Security from lack of attack		0.016 (0.062)	0.019 (0.062)	0.023 (0.062)	0.019 (0.063)
Police attribution				-0.898** (0.380)	-1.320*** (0.429)
Sec. Per. x Police Attr.				0.250** (0.115)	0.377*** (0.130)
Informal attribution					-1.718** (0.800)
Sec. Per. x Informal					0.513** (0.242)
Procedural Justice		0.364*** (0.054)	0.369*** (0.054)	0.371*** (0.054)	0.376*** (0.054)
Free and fair elections		0.180*** (0.054)	0.180*** (0.054)	0.179*** (0.054)	0.179*** (0.054)
Corruption		-0.073 (0.071)	-0.065 (0.071)	-0.061 (0.072)	-0.057 (0.072)
State contact		0.076 (0.054)	0.076 (0.054)	0.073 (0.054)	0.072 (0.054)
Age		0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)
Gender		0.009 (0.099)	0.013 (0.099)	0.018 (0.099)	0.024 (0.099)
Violent Incidents (2014-2018)			-0.004 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)
Peacekeepers			0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
N	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
AIC	2,760.782	2,590.132	2,590.851	2,589.195	2,588.355

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

We find robust empirical support for Hypothesis 1a. The positive and statistically significant coefficients associated with *Security perception* in the models suggest that respondents who felt more secure personally were also more likely to view the state as legitimate. At the same time, we observe that perception of Liberia as safe and secure is more robustly associated with state legitimacy than individual security perceptions. The top panel of Figure 4 graphs the predicted probability of perceiving the state as legitimate as a function of the perceived security of the Liberian state using estimates derived from Model 5, which includes the relevant controls. Only 32% of respondents who said that the Liberian security situation was “very bad” perceived the state as legitimate. However, 64% of respondents who say that Liberian security is “very good” perceive the state as legitimate. Although we hesitate to derive a strong causal interpretation given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these results imply that citizens’ assessment of the national security situation is quite relevant for their views of the state. Citizens satisfied with the national security situation are twice as likely as those who are dissatisfied to perceive the state as legitimate.

Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities of Perceiving State as Legitimate as Function of Beliefs about Liberian Security, by Level of Analysis

Note: Predicted probabilities derived from Model 5 (county-level) and Model 10 (community-level). Discrete variables held at median, categorical variables at mode, and continuous variables at mean. 95% confidence intervals drawn.

However, as we predict in Hypothesis 2a, the association between security perceptions and state legitimacy is at least in part conditional upon respondents attributing their security explicitly to the state. For ease of interpretation, we use the Model 5 estimates to derive the predicted probability that an individual perceives state institutions at the county level as legitimate as a function of how safe they believe they are. We graph these probabilities in the top panel of Figure 5 for two groups—individuals who attribute security to the police and those who do not. We focus on the police because an overwhelming majority of respondents (80%) attribute their personal security to the police (see Table 1).

For respondents who attribute security to the police, security perceptions are *positively* associated with perceptions of legitimacy. By contrast, for respondents who do not attribute security to the police, security perceptions are *negatively* associated with perceptions of legitimacy. Among respondents who attribute security to the police, 44% of those who say they feel unsafe “many times” perceive the state as legitimate. Among respondents who do not attribute security to the police, 67% of those who say they feel unsafe “many times” perceive the state as legitimate. However, there is no statistically distinguishable difference in perception of state legitimacy for respondents who never feel unsafe (i.e., they feel safe). These results provide evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2a, which stated that individuals who explicitly attribute their security to state institutions are more likely than those who do not to perceive county-level state institutions as legitimate. Explicit attribution is key in linking more security with more state legitimacy.

Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities of Perceiving State as Legitimate as Function of Security Perception, by whether Respondents Attribute Security to Police and Level of Analysis

Note: Predicted probabilities derived from Model 5 at each level of analysis. Discrete variables held at median, categorical variables at mode, and continuous variables at mean. 95% confidence intervals drawn.

Security Perceptions as a Source of Community-Level State Legitimacy

We ran the same models using the legitimacy of community-state institutions, rather than county-level state institutions, as the dependent variable. Table 3 reports the results of these regressions.

Table 3: Multilevel model logit regression results (community-level).

	State Legitimacy (Community-Level)				
	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Security perception (self)	0.133*** (0.045)	0.051 (0.051)	0.050 (0.051)	0.040 (0.052)	-0.114 (0.119)
Security perception (Liberia)		0.387*** (0.059)	0.387*** (0.059)	0.387*** (0.059)	0.384*** (0.059)
Security from lack of attack		-0.076 (0.062)	-0.075 (0.062)	-0.080 (0.063)	-0.081 (0.063)
Police attribution				-0.035 (0.132)	-0.620 (0.423)
Sec. Per. x Police Attr.					0.187 (0.129)
Informal attribution				-1.065 (0.746)	-1.547* (0.816)
Sec. Per. x Informal				0.231 (0.221)	0.386 (0.245)
Procedural Justice		0.360*** (0.054)	0.362*** (0.054)	0.364*** (0.054)	0.366*** (0.054)
Free and fair elections		0.245*** (0.054)	0.245*** (0.054)	0.245*** (0.054)	0.244*** (0.054)
Corruption		-0.091 (0.071)	-0.089 (0.072)	-0.087 (0.072)	-0.087 (0.072)
State contact		0.189*** (0.054)	0.189*** (0.054)	0.192*** (0.054)	0.190*** (0.054)
Age		0.005 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)
Gender		-0.029 (0.099)	-0.028 (0.099)	-0.023 (0.099)	-0.021 (0.099)
Violent Incidents (2014-2018)			-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Peacekeepers			0.0003 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)	0.0002 (0.001)
N	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
AIC	2,768.797	2,588.431	2,592.192	2,595.157	2,595.049

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

We find strong support for Hypothesis 1b. The positive and statistically significant coefficients associated with *Security perception* in the first three models suggest that respondents who felt more secure were also more likely to view the state as legitimate at the community level. As with the county level, the security perceptions at the national level matter much more for citizens' legitimacy beliefs than security perceptions at the personal level.

We graph the predicted probability of perceiving the state as legitimate as a function of the perceived security of the Liberian state using estimates derived from Model 10 in the bottom panel of Figure 4. The predicted probabilities are similar to those derived from the county-level models: whereas 31% of respondents who said that the Liberian security situation was "very bad" perceived the state as legitimate, 59% of respondents who said it was "very good" perceived the state as legitimate. These findings support Hypothesis 1b and the interpretation that citizens' view of the broader security situation affects whether or not to attribute legitimacy to the state more than their own personal conditions.

However, relevant factors for state legitimacy at the county level differ from state legitimacy at the community level. This becomes particularly obvious in Models 5 and 10, which include our police attribution variable and the interaction term between security attribution and security perception. To illustrate these differences clearly, we graph the coefficient estimates from the models in Figure 6 below. The left panel (Figure 5a) is a coefficient plot of Model 5; the right panel is a coefficient plot of Model 10. The points in black indicate coefficient estimates that are statistically significant at the 95% level. Points in grey are not statistically significant.

Figure 6: Estimated Multilevel Logistic Regression Coefficients (Likelihood of Perceiving State as Legitimate), by Level of Analysis

Note: 95% confidence intervals drawn. Black color indicates $p < 0.05$ for a given coefficient, grey indicates $p > 0.05$.

In contrast to the perceptions of county-level legitimacy, we find no evidence of a relationship between perceptions of security and perceptions of state legitimacy at the community level that is conditional on police attribution (Hypothesis 2b). There is a positive relationship between the interaction term of police attribution and perception of state legitimacy but, contrary to state legitimacy on the county level, this coefficient is not statistically significant for state legitimacy at the community level. We graph the predicted probabilities of perceiving the state as legitimate as a function of security perception by whether respondents attribute security to the police or not in the bottom panel of Figure 5. Regardless of whether respondents say they feel safe or unsafe, there is no statistically and substantively significant difference in their perceptions of community state institutions as legitimate.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that when Liberians perceive of their country as safe, they are also more likely to perceive the Liberian state as legitimate at both the county and community levels. However, effective governance is not the only source of a state's legitimacy and alternative explanations for perceiving the state as legitimate are relevant. For instance, de facto security may be driving both perceptions of security and perception of the state as legitimate. To account for this potential source of legitimacy, we adjust for de facto security in the our multilevel models.

Table 4: Multilevel model logit regression results, de facto security.

	State Legitimacy (County)		State Legitimacy (Community)	
Security from lack of attack	0.165*** (0.054)	0.006 (0.060)	0.057 (0.054)	-0.090 (0.060)
Violent Incidents (2014-2018)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.0005 (0.001)	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)
Security perception (Liberia)		0.564*** (0.057)		0.521*** (0.056)
Security perception (self)		0.083* (0.050)		0.063 (0.050)
N	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
AIC	2,769.143	2,657.382	2,778.108	2,684.097

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

As an additional check, Table 4 reports the results of a multilevel logistic regression with only the two measures of de facto security. We find that feeling safe because of a lack of a physical attack is positively associated with perceptions of the state as legitimate at the county level. However, when we include the two variables measuring security perception, the estimated association is statistically indistinguishable from zero, suggesting that perceived security drove the association between de facto security and legitimacy, rather than the actual occurrence of violent events. In other words, even in areas of limited statehood where violent incidents occur, individuals who perceive the national security situation as positive are still likely to perceive the state as legitimate.

We explicitly adjust for two sources of state legitimacy apart from perceptions of security that are prominent in the existing literature. First, we measure whether citizens perceive elections as free and fair, a prominent source of legitimacy according to input-based theories of legitimacy. Second, we measure whether citizens believe that their tribal group is treated fairly, based on throughput-based theories of legitimacy. Nevertheless, in all of our analyses, perceptions of Liberian security remains substantively and statistically

significant. This pattern suggests that the different sources of state legitimacy are complements, not substitutes.

Finally, we conduct three additional checks to ensure the robustness of our empirical findings, which we report in full in the Online Appendix. Public goods provision is a plausible confounder since the state is better able to provide goods in areas that are more stable and where residents feel more secure. We find no evidence that the omission of other types of public goods provision from our empirical analysis might have biased our main results. An additional concern may be that we have not properly accounted for the role of foreign aid specifically (Weintraub 2015; Haass 2019). Yet the magnitude, direction, and precision of the main coefficients remained robust to the inclusion of measures of foreign aid, regardless of model specification. Lastly, it might be that our results are a function of the way in which we coded our dependent variables. However, our results are robust to a conservative recoding of the dependent variables, the use of a probit model, or the use of an ordered logit model if we chose to retain the ordinal nature of the dependent variables. While we hesitate to interpret these results further, they do make us more confident in the robustness of the associations presented in the main analysis.

Conclusion

Our study put output-based theories for explaining state legitimacy in areas of limited statehood to the test. We derived a set of hypotheses for an in-depth test of Liberia as a country displaying multiple areas of limited statehood. We analyzed data from an original survey of 2,000 respondents fielded in all 15 counties of Liberia and present the results of two sets of multilevel models.

We find that citizens' security perceptions are a highly relevant source of state legitimacy in areas of limited statehood. As such, effective security governance constitutes

a key source of legitimacy for the state, which supports output-based theories of legitimacy (Scharpf 1999; Fisk and Cherney 2017).³ We find robust evidence in favor of our main hypothesis that perceptions of security are positively associated with state legitimacy, especially at the county level. We also find support for our secondary hypothesis that perception of security as a source of state legitimacy is conditional on explicit attribution of that security to a state actor. However, we only find evidence for this at the county level, not the community level. This underlines the findings for our main hypotheses and stresses the importance of explicit attribution to link more effective governance with more legitimacy. The link between effective governance and increased legitimacy for the state does not work automatically and often requires that citizens explicitly attribute effective governance to the state. The results further suggests that community-level state institutions are not providing security to citizens in the same way as county-level institutions do.

However, we do not argue that perceptions of security are the only source for state legitimacy. Rather, we hold that we need to incorporate citizens' subjective security perceptions into our understanding of the different sources of state legitimacy. Still, citizens expect more from the state than mere effectiveness. Our findings underline the relevance of free and fair elections as well as of fair treatment of citizens by state institutions for state legitimacy. This underlines that arguments of output-based legitimacy ought to be complemented by arguments of input-based and throughput-based legitimacy. A single source of legitimacy is unlikely to succeed in explaining and establishing strong

³ See e.g. (Scharpf 1999; Fisk and Cherney 2017).

state legitimacy. In order to build strong and long-lasting legitimacy in areas of limited statehood a state must provide effective as well as fair and inclusive governance.

Our findings have important implications for policymakers concerned with the legitimacy of state institutions and the security of citizens in areas of limited statehood. External actors trying to strengthen the legitimacy of domestic state institutions in areas of limited statehood should dedicate resources to making citizens feel like their country is safe and secure. This also implies that external actors should refrain from strengthening state institutions that use predatory means against their own citizens and are a source of insecurity themselves. Additionally, policymakers ought to tailor interventions to the level of governance. Our findings suggest that the sources of legitimacy for state institutions at the local levels of governance do not always mirror the ones at higher levels of governance.

Given the limitations of our research, we suggest three areas of further exploration. First, this study offers valuable insight on the extent to which effective governance is as a source of legitimacy for domestic state institutions on different levels. However, such studies should extend beyond the state. What are the sources of legitimacy for external and non-state actors in areas of limited statehood? Knowing how not only state institutions, but also external actors and local non-state actors can build their legitimacy would not only be of great analytical value, but also of tremendous political relevance as it would help policy makers to ensure the legitimacy of various governance actors and thereby long lasting and peaceful cooperation between governors and governed.

Second, we build our results on original cross sectional survey data. Still, future studies ought to aim for long-term panel data that helps to capture changes in the relevant variables over time to increase causal inference. As we rely on cross-sectional data, we refrain from making any strong causal claims, but rather read our findings in correlational

terms. Through long-term panel data it will be possible to further substantiate our findings and to clarify the causal arguments that build the backbone of output-based theories of legitimacy included in this study. Our findings indicate a possible virtuous circle of governance between effective and legitimate governance. As effective governance seems to be a strong source of legitimacy, increased legitimacy may in turn also allow for more effective governance creating such a virtuous circle (see also Levi and Sacks 2009; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018). However, to test this assumption and to tackle the problem of reversed causality, additional data are necessary.

Third, we used Liberia as a first test case for our theoretical arguments. Hence, we suggest carrying out comparable studies in further empirical environments. These may focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, but areas of limited statehood in Latin America or Southeast Asia would also offer fruitful possibilities for comparison. This would help determine whether our findings apply to areas of limited statehood more broadly or whether they are region or even country specific.

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