

# TRADITIONAL LEADERS FACILITATE STATEBUILDING: Evidence from a Liberian panel survey.

Patrick Hunnicutt\*  
Kou Gbaintor-Johnson†

## Abstract

When the state is weak, traditional leaders who govern by custom rather than by statute regularly shape citizens' interactions with the government. Yet existing research does not systematically evaluate whether traditional leaders support efforts to restore government capacity and legitimacy, or statebuilding. We develop a theory wherein traditional leaders facilitate statebuilding as brokers who mitigate the risk that government failures, like public service shortages, spark protest. Our theory contrasts the conventional wisdom that traditional leaders inhibit statebuilding. Household panel data collected over six months of fieldwork in Liberia support our argument. Citizens experiencing public service shortages appear less willing to protest, to shirk on tax payments, and to claim the government is corrupt when they believe traditional leaders are effective brokers. Interviews with traditional leaders in Liberia's capital city clarify their broader contributions to statebuilding, including preventing extrajudicial violence and eliciting government reform on citizens' behalf.

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\*Ph.D. Candidate, Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, University of California, Santa Barbara. 2400 Bren Hall, University of California, Santa Barbara, 93106, [patrickhunnicuttt@ucsb.edu](mailto:patrickhunnicuttt@ucsb.edu). Corresponding author. **PH** conceptualized research, oversaw data collection, conducted data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Thank you to Mark Buntaine, Matto Mildenerger, William Nomikos, Neil Narang, Geoff Henderson and other EPW seminar participants at UCSB, Darin Christensen and other seminar participants at UCLA, and conference participants at the 2019 Environmental Politics and Governance workshop for invaluable feedback. Edwin K. Johnson, Elton B. Gbaintor, James Vululleh, Mercy, Varney K. Tokpah, Winifred Kapel, and other staff at the Center for Action Research and Training, Liberia provided irreplaceable research assistance.

†Center for Action Research and Training, Liberia, [gbaintormeapehkou@gmail.com](mailto:gbaintormeapehkou@gmail.com). **KJ** implemented data collection and consulted on the manuscript.

Countries emerging from conflict face significant governance problems that increase the risk of renewed violence. For example, public service shortages remain widespread, risk eroding the social contract binding citizens and the state (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg and Dunn 2012; Nomikos 2020), and can catalyze potentially destabilizing protest. In response to these challenges, international actors have committed extensive resources to the enterprise of statebuilding to restore the capacity and the legitimacy of post-conflict governments (Sisk 2013; Lake 2016; Karim 2020). Despite significant effort, though, statebuilding rarely succeeds (Richmond 2014).

While existing explanations of statebuilding overwhelmingly focus on revitalizing formal political institutions via international intervention (Matanock 2017; Blair, Karim and Morse 2019; Blair 2020b; Karim 2020), some argue statebuilding would be more effective if it flowed through the networks of informal governance citizens organize to endure civil war and state collapse (Autesserre 2010; Richmond 2014; Richmond and Pogodda 2016). However, almost no research to date systematically tests whether informal governance can support statebuilding, despite encouraging evidence that it improves government accountability (Tsai 2007), catalyzes development (Díaz-Cayeros, Magaloni and Ruiz-Euler 2014; Magaloni, Díaz-Cayeros and Ruiz Euler 2019), and otherwise complements the state in developing democracies (van der Windt et al. 2019; Henn 2020). In part, this gap reflects the conventional wisdom that informal governance is exploitative, violent, and necessarily competes with the state for political control (Weber 1947; Migdal 1988; Mamdani 1996; Reno 1998).

Does informal governance support statebuilding? In this article, we argue that traditional leaders—non-state actors who govern via “their association with the customary mode of governing a place-based community”—facilitate statebuilding by mitigating the risk that government failures, like public service shortages, mobilize protest (Baldwin 2016, 21). Protest can undermine statebuilding because weak post-conflict governments are more likely to violently

repress demonstrators (Sullivan 2020), which may reignite civil war (Young 2013). Theories of mobilization stress that aggrieved citizens protest when they believe no other strategy for changing the status quo, like directly lobbying government officials, will be effective (Harris and Hern 2019). Traditional leaders can offer an alternative pathway to reform that affects this logic of mobilization. Compared to individual citizens, some traditional leaders can more easily hold government officials accountable and can mobilize community resources to fast-track reform (Stokes et al. 2013; Baldwin 2016). Therefore, traditional leaders who are effective brokers for citizens should reduce the probability that government failures spark protest.

We construct a six-month long panel dataset of 390 households in Liberia’s capital city of Monrovia to test our argument. These data allow us to estimate how perceptions of traditional leaders called “community chairpeople” moderate the relationship between public service shortages and respondents’ willingness to protest, using two-way fixed effects regressions. Community chairpeople are local leaders active throughout Liberia. They are informally elected with the approval of traditional political institutions and help communities interact with the Liberian government, even though they receive neither pay nor legal recognition from the state. Twelve interviews we conduct with acting community chairpeople in Monrovia further clarify their contributions to statebuilding.

We find that community chairpeople who are perceived as effective brokers dampen the otherwise positive association between public service shortages and protest. We take two steps to support a more causal interpretation of this result. First, data from three focus groups about protest we conducted in Monrovia help us identify, measure, and specify as covariates the most salient confounds of protest in our study’s setting. Second, we formally quantify the robustness of our main result to omitted variables using a simulation-based sensitivity analysis (Cinelli and Hazlett 2020). The results from this sensitivity analysis suggest that an omitted variable would overturn our result only if it induced substantially

more bias than would omitting a theoretically-relevant covariate we already specify. It is unlikely that such a confound exists and is neither included in the battery of covariates we derived from our focus groups nor differenced out by our time and unit fixed-effects.

Using data from our surveys and interviews, we present additional evidence suggesting that community chairpeople facilitate statebuilding in Liberia. We find that survey respondents who have experienced service shortages but believe their chairperson is an effective broker report a lower willingness to shirk on tax payments, are less likely to perceive government officials as corrupt, and are less likely to believe that protest is an effective means to achieve reform. Moreover, chairpeople describe themselves as “informal statebuilders” who complement the government when it is absent or ineffective, rather than actors who use government failures to supplant the state. Chairpeople discourage extrajudicial violence in favor of cooperating with police investigations and encourage aggrieved community members to peacefully engage with the government instead of protesting.

Liberia offers a compelling test for our theory because it satisfies two conditions under which conventional wisdom predicts traditional leaders should undermine statebuilding. The Liberian government is extremely weak, following two bouts of civil war between 1989 and 2003 and recent crises like the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic. Liberian citizens report higher levels of trust in traditional leaders than in government officials ([Afrobarometer 2015](#)). Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom, our study demonstrates that community chairpeople help underpin the state locally.

Our theory and results generalize under three scope conditions. The state must have some capacity for repression; and traditional leaders must be capable of holding government officials accountable and have some incentive to contribute to statebuilding. These conditions characterize many developing democracies in the Global South, where traditional leaders mobilize votes for government officials, personally benefit from coordinating with the state, and offer citizens a strategy for achieving reform that avoids the risk of violent repression

([Baldwin 2016](#); [Baldwin and Holzinger 2019](#); [Henn 2020](#)).

This article makes two contributions. First, we evaluate the effect of informal governance on a specific statebuilding mechanism. The decision to oppose the state reflects variation in citizens' exposure to government failures and access to different strategies for achieving reform. To precisely capture this process, we use mobile phones to rapidly re-survey respondents on their exposure to public service shortages and perceptions of formal and informal governance for six consecutive months. Our mixed methods design allows us to interrogate the internal validity of our results and provides additional face validity for our argument.

Second, this article presents a new, micro-level theory of statebuilding. We position traditional leaders as brokers who can bolster political stability as governments struggle to implement reform, taking cues from cutting-edge comparative research on informal governance ([Baldwin and Holzinger 2019](#); [Baldwin and Raffler 2019](#)). Our theory and results sharply contrast the conventional wisdom that informal authority necessarily undermines peace, development, and good governance after war ends. Despite receiving neither government pay nor legal recognition, community chairpeople help safeguard the fragile social contract binding citizens and the state in Liberia.

## Informal Governance and Statebuilding

Governance refers to the “ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services” ([Fukuyama 2013](#), 350). Network of informal governance consist of the political elites and institutions mimicking these functions without rational-legal authority ([Helmke and Levitsky 2004](#)).

How informal governance affects statebuilding, or efforts to restore the capacity and legitimacy of post-conflict governments ([Sisk 2013](#)), remains an important question because informal governance can generate durable political order during the periods of political instability that coincide with state collapse. For example, village leaders and councils in rural

Afghanistan have enforced informal mechanisms of dispute resolution through multiple bouts of civil war (Murtazashvili 2016). Citizens can also hold strong preferences for informal governance (Winters and Conroy-kruz 2021) that affect their perceptions of and deference to the state when it is weak (van der Windt et al. 2019).

Conventional wisdom positions rational-legal and customary authority as substitutes (Weber 1947; Migdal 1988), implying that informal governance necessarily inhibits statebuilding. Non-state actors who provide public goods and services may undermine citizens' willingness to confer legitimacy on the state (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg and Dunn 2012; Dagher 2018). Indeed, foundational narratives of fragmented statehood stress this logic of substitution (Herbst 2000), sometimes suggesting that informal governance produces "warlords," "despots," and "predatory elites" who actively undermine political stability (Levi 1988; Olson 1993; Mamdani 1996; Reno 1998). As a result, existing statebuilding research predominantly focuses on reforming formal political processes via international intervention, like monitoring elections (Matanock 2017, 2020) and training national police forces (Blair, Karim and Morse 2019; Blair 2020*b*; Karim 2020).

By contrast, others claim that informal governance can strengthen statebuilding efforts. Critical analyses attribute contemporary statebuilding failures to the local legitimacy problems statebuilders face (Autesserre 2010; Richmond and Pogodda 2016).<sup>1</sup> Statebuilding is based on Western and neoliberal norms of governance, rather than a social consensus about what it means to govern and be governed in a specific context. Formal governance reshapes or replaces informal governance, as the latter is assumed to be incompatible with the liberal reform statebuilding pursues. As a result, external intervention often produces a government that is "all but meaningless to its citizens" (Richmond 2014, 100). Post-conflict governments lack the capacity to provide public goods and services and, by design, are disconnected from

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<sup>1</sup>The need to locally legitimate state institutions similarly motivates "relational" statebuilding (Karim 2020).

the leaders and institutions citizens historically have relied on for governance.

Channeling statebuilding efforts through networks of informal governance could help close this legitimacy gap. Indeed, formal and informal governance symbiotically interact in many developing democracies. Informal solidary groups in China (Tsai 2007) improve government accountability and public goods provision, as do other customary organizations (Díaz-Cayeros, Magaloni and Ruiz-Euler 2014; Magaloni, Díaz-Cayeros and Ruiz Euler 2019) and leaders (Baldwin 2016). Informal institutions can strengthen citizens' external efficacy and encourage participation in formal political processes like voting (Stokes 2006; McClendon and Riedl 2015; McClendon and Riedl 2019). Theory similarly linking informal governance to specific statebuilding mechanisms remains scant, despite this encouraging evidence.<sup>2</sup>

## Traditional Leaders, Government Failures, and Protest

The specific focus of this article is whether the traditional leaders who steer networks of informal governance can productively contribute to statebuilding. Recent scholarship has proposed a more fluid and relational definition of traditional leaders as “rulers who have power by virtue of their association with the customary mode of governing a place-based community” in which they are socially and economically embedded (Baldwin 2016, 22). This definition consciously avoids identifying traditional leaders exclusively based on their mode of selection; e.g., non-democratically inheriting their positions based on kinship or ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it refers to a broad range of political actors who exist outside of the state, including chiefs in Zambia (Baldwin 2016), *maliks* (village representatives) in Afghanistan (Murtazashvili 2016), town chiefs in Malawi (Cammack, Kanyongolo and Neil 2009), and *usos y costumbres* (village councils) in Mexico (Magaloni, Díaz-Cayeros and Ruiz Euler

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<sup>2</sup>Two important exceptions are Murtazashvili (2016) and Balan et al. (2020), who demonstrate that traditional leaders are associated with greater support for the state and increase tax compliance, respectively.

<sup>3</sup>Some argue that definitions of traditional leaders as hereditary chiefs in whom all traditional authority is vested reflect colonial-era biases about traditional authority, rather than how multiple actors wield it in practice (Verweijen and Van Bockhaven 2020).

2019). Non-state actors who gain prominence during periods of state collapse but whose authority is not rooted in custom, like many warlords, are excluded from this definition of traditional leadership (Murtazashvili 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Our central argument is that traditional leaders who can elicit government reform on their constituents' behalf facilitate statebuilding because they mitigate the otherwise mobilizing effect of government failures on protest. While legal and often necessary to hold governments accountable, widespread protest risks frustrating statebuilding efforts in conflict-affected settings. Weak states are more likely to violently repress protesters (Sullivan 2020). This repression can spiral into more intense forms of political violence (Sullivan 2019) and is associated with the onset of civil war (Young 2013). Absent some baseline of political stability, efforts to rebuild state-society relations and revitalize the central government will struggle to take root.

Government failures, like public service shortages, can constitute the grievances underpinning citizens' willingness to protest (Gurr 1970; Little 2016; Williamson, Trump and Einstein 2018) because they fracture the social contract statebuilding seeks to strengthen (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg and Dunn 2012). Notably, government failures are widespread in post-conflict settings, where the state has limited capacity to implement reform.

Whether aggrieved citizens mobilize for protest reflects its cost relative to other strategies citizens have to change the status quo. Theories of collective action based on the notion of a "political opportunity structure" contend that the quality of state institutions affects this calculus (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). All else equal, aggrieved citizens are more likely to protest when they believe that institutionalized negotiations with the government, like directly contacting government representatives or voting, will fail to produce reform (Boulding 2010; Harris and Hern 2019; Dyrstad and Hillesund 2020). The

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<sup>4</sup>Conventional wisdom on statebuilding often conflates traditional leaders and warlords, assuming both actors have strong incentives to undermine the state (Berman 2010).

opportunity cost of mobilizing is low under these conditions, despite the risk of repression, because citizens believe protest alone can resolve their grievances.

Traditional leaders can affect the political opportunity structure in which would-be protesters are embedded. Specifically, traditional leaders who work as “development brokers” offer citizens an additional strategy to influence the policymaking process that plausibly increases the opportunity cost of protest (Baldwin 2016, 10). Government officials target reform, like better public services, to garner electoral support across a number of settings (Briggs 2012; Stokes et al. 2013). In weak states, these officials often have poor information on where additional services are needed and lack the bureaucratic capacity to unilaterally deliver services. Traditional leaders both can help government officials overcome these challenges, given their knowledge about local problems and ability to mobilize voluntary contributions to state-backed service projects, and can sanction government officials who fail to meet citizens’ demands for reform, given their ability to mobilize votes (Baldwin 2013, 2016; Baldwin and Raffler 2019).<sup>5</sup>

There can be sufficient incentives for traditional leaders to coordinate with government officials instead of using citizens’ grievances to undercut the state. Traditional leaders’ authority rests on their ability to achieve reform on behalf of their constituents.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that coordinating with the government is a more efficient strategy for traditional leaders to satisfy their constituents’ demands, particularly with respect to providing more complex public services like electricity and better roads. Additionally, traditional leaders invest in their own well-being when they work with the government to improve the quality of public goods and services (Baldwin 2013, 2016). By the same logic, traditional leaders would bear the local costs of mobilizing against the government, like violent repression or the termination

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<sup>5</sup>See Hicken (2011) for an extensive review of similar relationships between elected officials and informal brokers like local business leaders in other settings.

<sup>6</sup>While many traditional leaders are not democratically elected, other checks and balances exist to ensure that traditional leaders fulfill their duties (Murtazashvili 2016).

of public services.

When individual citizens cannot hold the government accountable, traditional leaders who are effective brokers may offer an alternative pathway to reform that is less-costly than protest but equally as effective. As a result, citizens who believe traditional leaders can elicit government reform on their behalf should be less likely to mobilize for protest in response to government failures. This generates the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Conditional on perceiving traditional leaders as effective brokers, citizens will be less willing to protest after they experience government failures.

## Setting

We use six months of fieldwork in Liberia’s capital city of Monrovia to test our argument. This West African country poses a compelling test for our theory because it satisfies two conditions under which conventional wisdom predicts traditional leaders are most likely to undermine statebuilding.

First, Liberia is a weak state. The country experienced two bouts of civil war between 1989 and 2003, causing a tragic loss of life, damaging infrastructure, and eroding citizens’ trust in government. Political stability remains tenuous in Liberia. Many citizens believe the Liberian government is unresponsive and corrupt. About 70 percent of Liberians express low levels of trust in government officials, and fewer trust the Liberian National Police ([Afrobarometer 2015](#); [Karim 2020](#)). Recent protests have generated anxiety about renewed conflict, given how state repression contributed to the first Liberian civil war.

Second, traditional leaders remain politically active in Liberia and enjoy higher levels of trust than do government officials ([Afrobarometer 2015](#)). International actors have coordinated with village chiefs to reform land dispute resolution.<sup>7</sup> Other traditional leaders have

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<sup>7</sup>See [press release](#) from the Carter Center.

co-sponsored initiatives to combat sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>8</sup>

## **Community Chairpeople and Statebuilding in Liberia**

We focus specifically on “community chairpeople”: leaders working at the community-level throughout Liberia. Citizens either organize informal elections to select chairpeople or rely on other traditional political institutions to appoint them (more below). Once in power, chairpeople serve between two and four years with various term limits.

### **Background**

Community chairpeople emerged during the second Liberian civil war to coordinate public service provision. They helped deliver World Food Programme aid and liaised with UN peacekeeping personnel. As the Liberian National Police regained strength, chairpeople acted as local reporters on issues like sexual violence. Chairpeople also guided international efforts to conduct community outreach and establish local care centers during the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis.

Community chairpeople remain active in throughout Liberia today. They help settle civil disputes, broker community interests to the government, and coordinate responses to flooding during the rainy season. Citizens also rely on chairpeople to manage access to government-provided services like piped water.

These tasks are delegated to community chairpeople because citizens believe they can hold the government accountable. Chairpeople can uniquely coordinate community resources to resolve government failures. For example, chairpeople will collect small donations from wealthy community members to resolve service shortages like electricity blackouts. Chairpeople also are credible brokers because they help mobilize votes for government officials during election years.

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<sup>8</sup>See [report](#) in Front Page Africa.

Along what dimensions are chairpeople similar to other traditional leaders? Paramount, clan, and town chiefs operate alongside community chairpeople in Liberia, but are located higher in the country’s hierarchy of informal governance. These chiefs are paid as civil servants that the Liberia government formally recognizes under its 1986 constitution (see Chapter VI, Article 56), whereas community chairpeople receive neither legal recognition nor pay from the state.

However, a key similarity between Liberian chiefs and community chairpeople is that both leaders’ authority partially stems from elder councils. These traditional political institutions were responsible for appointing chiefs in pre-war Liberia when succession based on kinship was unclear or contested, and remain influential in the selection of chiefs today (Baldwin and Mvukiyehe 2015). Elder councils also oversee the election or appointment of community chairpeople. For example, the elder council of Monrovia’s Slipway community intervened in the election of a new community chairperson following bouts of electoral violence.<sup>9</sup> Chairpeople also defer to the elder council when adjudicating serious disputes within the community.

Outside of Liberia, chairpeople are similar to other traditional leaders who operate at the community-level. Malawian town chiefs share many characteristics with community chairpeople: they are more prominent in urban settings, co-exist alongside other traditional leaders, receive neither pay nor legal recognition from the government, “derive their authority from a range of customary affiliations” but are not selected based on ethnicity or kinship, and manage their community’s interactions with the state (Cammack, Kanyongolo and Neil 2009, 36). The same parallels can be drawn between community chairpeople and *maliks* (village representatives) in rural Afghanistan, who are elected by community members, derive their authority from the customary mode of governance, and broker their community’s interests to the government (Murtazashvili 2016).

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<sup>9</sup>See [report](#), accessed June 8, 2021.

Our goal is to demonstrate that community chairpeople satisfy the minimum constitutive properties of traditional leadership laid out in [Baldwin \(2016\)](#), rather than to cast them as the archetype of traditional leaders. That community chairpeople serve at the pleasure of elder councils suggests that their authority is rooted in (Liberian) custom, as does the overlap between community chairpeople and traditional leaders in other settings. However, we acknowledge that significant variation exists in the role, authority, and title of traditional political institutions across settings ([Baldwin and Holzinger 2019](#)), and explore how the unique features of community chairpeople may affect the generalizability of our results in the discussion.

### **Community Chairpeople, Government Failures, and Protest**

From January to February 2020, we conducted three focus group discussions to explore how community chairpeople condition citizens' responses to government failures. Our research team recruited participants from three communities in Monrovia via a random walk protocol. All three communities reportedly experienced significant shortages in public services in the years prior but varied in their mobilization for protest. Men and women between the age of 18 and 60 participated in the focus groups and were compensated for their time. We present excerpts from the transcripts of these focus groups below.

We focus specifically on public service shortages for two reasons. First, service shortages are a common and salient government failure in Liberia. Less than 20 percent of Liberians have reliable access to electricity. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation services is similarly unreliable.<sup>10</sup> These shortages have incited protest in recent years. Protesters often block major roads or the entrances to government offices. These demonstrations draw the attention of government officials who—wanting to re-open blocked roadways—can pressure service providers to act. Indeed, protests have forced the Liberia Electricity Corporation

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<sup>10</sup>For more information on service shortages, see [fact sheet](#) from the United States Agency for International Development and [report](#) from the World Health Organization.

(LEC) to repair electricity infrastructure throughout Monrovia ([Genoway 2019](#)).

Second, resolving service shortages is one of a community chairperson's core tasks. Thus, citizens' beliefs about whether their chairperson is an effective broker plausibly conditions their responses to service shortages. When citizens believe their chairperson can hold government service providers accountable, then they may be less likely to protest in response to service shortages

Unsurprisingly, many focus group participants blamed service shortages on the government, commenting "the Government is preventing her citizens from accessing basic services" (FGD 1, R5). Some directly linked protest to service shortages: "The reason why people are protesting in Liberia almost every month is because the government is not providing those basic services to her citizens" (FGD 1, R2).

Participants who condoned protest focused on its ability to elicit "immediate" reform from the government (FGD 1, R5). Others similarly argued protest grabs the government's attention (FGD 1, R4 and FGD 3, R3 and R5), "tells the government that there is an alarming situation" (FGD 2, R2), and lets "[the government] know that it is their responsibility to provide these services" (FGD 2, R4).

Not all participants agreed protest would help resolve service shortages. Some cited the complicated history of non-violent demonstrations and civil conflict in Liberia. State repression of protests against an increased rice import tariff contributed to political instability preceding the first Liberian civil war.<sup>11</sup>

Others participants discounted protest because they thought less costly ways to resolve service shortages existed. Some participants preferred contacting government service providers directly (FGD 1, R2 and R4). If this failed, then participants would deputize community chairpeople to restore services before protesting: "we will contact the government through our community chairperson...[and] if there is no redress, we will protest" (FGD

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<sup>11</sup>See reports in the [New York Times](#) and the [Liberian Observer](#).

3, R5). Some claimed the first response to service shortages should always be deputizing chairpeople: “if [we] don’t have toilet, or other basic things like garbage [services]...let the community meet the community chairman...that is why we have a community chairman” (FGD 1, R1).

These responses suggest that community chairpeople can increase the opportunity cost of protest because they are appointed to elicit government reform on their communities’ behalf. Only one focus group participant named their chairperson when asked who organized protest (FGD 1, R3), and more depicted chairpeople as an alternative strategy for achieving reform that precedes protest. All else equal, citizens who believe their chairperson is an effective broker may be less likely to protest after experiencing public service shortages.

## Methods

The extensive fieldwork we implemented in Liberia lets us formally investigate if community chairpeople facilitate statebuilding as hypothesized in **H1**. We first use novel household panel data to estimate how citizens’ perceptions of community chairpeople moderate the association between public service shortages and protest. Then, we describe how community chairpeople relate to the state more broadly using interviews our research team conducted with acting chairpeople in Monrovia.

## Quantitative Analysis

We collected household survey data from 15 communities in Monrovia between January 2020 and July 2020. Survey participants were recruited using a random walk protocol, which should produce an as-if random sample because it prevents enumerators from selectively recruiting participants.<sup>12</sup> Then, once a month for six consecutive months, enumerators

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<sup>12</sup>See Appendix A for a description of this method and the demographic composition of our sample.

administered the same survey to participants over mobile phones.<sup>13</sup> Our final sample consists of 390 households.

Using mobile phones to survey respondents helped us overcome constraints that can interrupt data collection in post-conflict settings. For example, we were able to adjust our data collection protocol and remotely continue research activities after the onset of COVID-19 in Liberia, as Appendix B clarifies. Our reliance on mobile phones also allowed research to continue safely and at low cost after gasoline shortages increased transportation prices and sparked general unrest in Monrovia. Appendix D discusses concerns about response bias and attrition that are common to mobile-phone based surveys.

## Measurement

Our dependent variable is survey respondents' stated willingness to mobilize for protest. Respondents were asked how willing they would be to participate in a protest march and to block a major road. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. We collapse responses to each question into a binary variable indicating whether or not a respondent is willing to mobilize for protest generally.

One concern with our dependent variable is that stating some willingness to protest could just be "cheap talk." We argue that this concern is attenuated in our study. Conceptually, expressing some willingness to protest does map onto our broader construct of interest: the intensity of respondents' opposition to the government. Moreover, data collection began in February 2020, following a series of violently repressed demonstrations in Monrovia. The opposition party leader who organized these protests later fled from Liberia to Sierra Leone. Unsuccessful attempts to extradite him followed. These events heightened political tensions in Monrovia, implying the cost of voicing anti-government sentiment was uniquely high during our study period. Indeed, many focus group participants hesitantly expressed their po-

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<sup>13</sup>Table E3 contains summary statistics for survey measures used in our analysis.

litical views at first, perhaps fearing we would post group recordings on social media. Survey respondents faced the same risk, though enumerators constantly reaffirmed their anonymity. Nonetheless, we encourage readers to interpret our quantitative results as upper bounds, given that stated preferences for protest may not perfectly translate into mobilization.

We operationalize government failures using respondents’ exposure to three public service shortages over the previous month: electricity blackouts, water shortages, and shortfalls in solid waste collection.<sup>14</sup> These shortages are easily attributable to government actors in Monrovia, including the Liberia Electricity Corporation (electricity), the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation (water), and the Monrovia City Corporation (solid waste).<sup>15</sup> Survey respondents reported whether each service was available when they tried to access it over the past month. We take a count of the total services respondents could not access (0-3) as our primary measure, and specify additional measures of shortages as robustness checks.

We asked respondents to evaluate their community chairperson along two dimensions that should approximate their ability as brokers: their efficacy (“How confident are you that your community chairperson can fix a problem in your community?”) and their interests (“How confident are you that your community chairperson has the same interests as you?”). Responses to these questions were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. We sum how effective and representative respondents believe their chairperson to be as our primary measure, resulting in a score that ranges from zero to eight. As a covariate, we similarly measure respondents’ evaluations of district representatives—officials elected to the Liberian legislature.

Figure E2a shows how alternatively operationalizing respondents’ perceptions of their community chairperson (e.g., as a standardized score centered on the average chairperson evaluation over the study period) and respondents’ experiences of public service shortages

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<sup>14</sup>We initially collected data on access to public education. However, these questions were omitted from our survey after schools indefinitely closed due to COVID-19.

<sup>15</sup>Appendix B discusses common causes of shortages in these services.

(e.g., dummy variables indicating shortages in individual services) affects our results. Figure E2b displays our results when we alternatively operationalize respondents' willingness to protest as an index score.

### Estimation

We use two-way fixed effects regressions to estimate how respondents' evaluations of their chairperson moderates the association between experiencing public service shortages and stating some willingness to protest. A generalization of our specification is

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 Service_{it} + \gamma_2 Evaluation_{it} + \gamma_3 Service_{it} \times Evaluation_{it} + \beta \mathbf{X}_{it} + \theta_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_j \quad (1)$$

where  $y$  indicates whether respondent  $i$  was willing to mobilize for protest in survey wave  $t$ ;  $\gamma_1$  represents the effect of experiencing an additional service shortage when respondents report no change in the evaluation of their community chairperson;  $\gamma_2$  measures the effect of respondents' evaluations of community chairpeople when they report no change in their exposure to service shortages;  $\gamma_3$  measures how the effect of additional service shortages on protest varies over changing evaluations of community chairpeople;  $\mathbf{X}$  is a matrix of time-varying controls (more below);  $\theta_i$  is a participant fixed effect; and  $\delta_t$  is a wave fixed effect. We cluster standard errors at the community-level ( $\epsilon_j$ ), since respondents' willingness to mobilize for protest likely is not independently and identically distributed within communities (Abadie et al. 2017).

### Identification

Our panel data allow us to specify wave and participant fixed-effects to control for time-invariant differences between participants, such as age, gender, and tribal affiliation. Therefore, our identification strategy hinges on specifying the correct set of time-varying covariates

that might be endogenous to the relationship between service shortages, traditional leaders, and protest.<sup>16</sup>

Feedback about protest from our focus groups inform the covariates specified in our analysis: income, the perceived efficacy of protest, evaluations of elected officials, expectations of violent repression, and the social obligation to protest. Each factor approximates the opportunity cost of protest and should be endogenous to our theoretical relationship of interest. If experiencing service shortages in communities where the chairperson is a poor broker limits economic opportunity, undercuts citizens' evaluations of their elected district representative, increases perceptions of protest's efficacy, lowers expectations of violent repression, and activates social obligations to mobilize, then these covariates might explain willingness to mobilize for protest independent of the interaction between service shortages and community chairpeople.

We caution readers against drawing strong causal conclusions from our analysis. While feedback from focus group participants increases our confidence that the aforementioned covariates capture the most salient dynamics of protest mobilization in our study's setting, we cannot specify the complete universe of potential confounds. As such, we subject our results to the omitted variable bias sensitivity analysis presented in [Cinelli and Hazlett \(2020\)](#). This sensitivity analysis allows researchers to formally quantify how strong an omitted variable would need to be to overturn their results, in relation to how much bias omitting a theoretically-relevant covariate the researcher specifies would induce. Results from this sensitivity analysis are particularly useful for studies relying on model-based identification strategies because they discipline the discussion about conditional ignorability. If a potential confound only nullifies our results when it induces significantly more bias than the covariates we specify would induce as omitted variables, then we can be more confident that any conditional association between public service shortages and protest we estimate is

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<sup>16</sup>We also assume linear additive effects ([Imai and Kim 2020](#)).

not spurious.

## Qualitative Analysis

We extend our quantitative analysis using interviews the research team conducted with community chairpeople in August 2020. Chairpeople were recruited from the 15 communities where we sampled survey respondents. In total, we interviewed 12 chairpeople in our implementing partner’s field office to ensure their privacy and the safety of the research team.

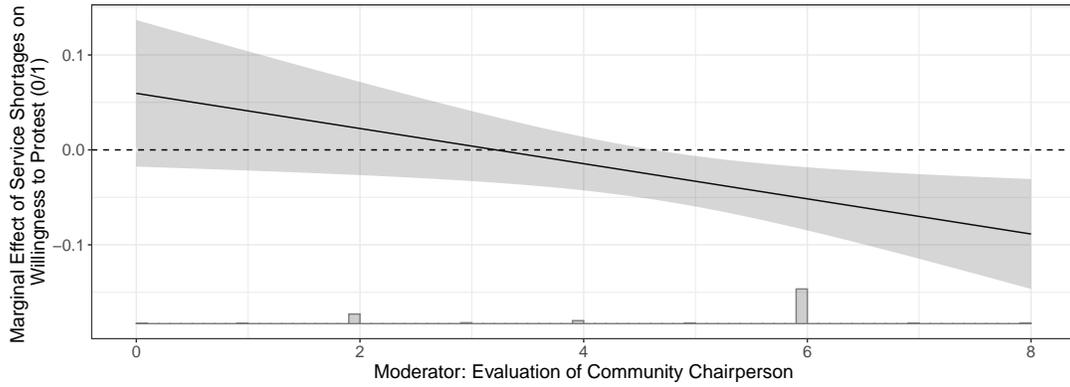
Below, we discuss chairpeoples’ responses to a prompt asking how they would react to two major government failures in their community: unsolved violent crimes and electricity blackouts. Both scenarios are common and are costly for chairpeople and their communities to endure. However, chairpeople cannot unilaterally address either because they have no legal authority. If chairpeople claim to not act extrajudicially in response to these scenarios, or encourage community members to forgo extrajudicial action, then we can be more confident that they complement the state and facilitate statebuilding.

## Results

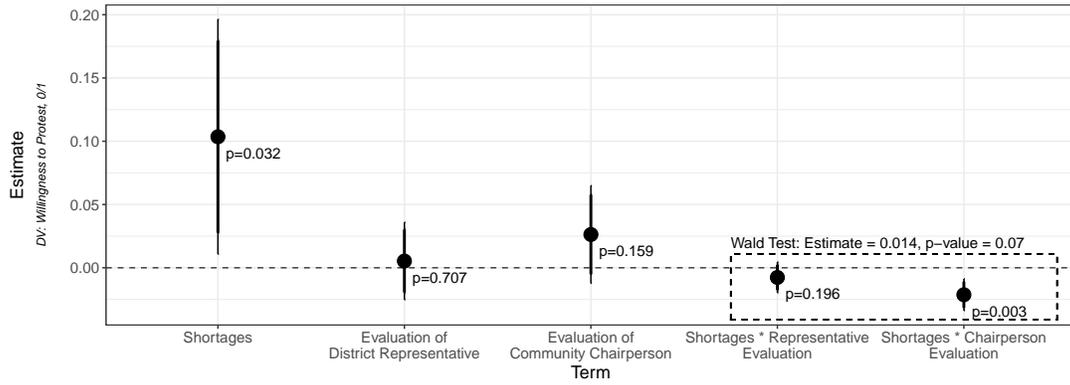
Effective community chairpeople moderate the relationship between public service shortages and citizens’ willingness to protest in a way that accords with our theory. The association between experiencing additional public service shortages and stating some willingness to protest decreases as respondents form more positive evaluations of their community chairperson (Figure 1a). Every point increase in a respondent’s evaluation of their community chairperson corresponds with a 2.4 percentage point decrease in their willingness to protest after experiencing additional service shortages. Therefore, moving from a slightly negative to slightly positive chairperson-evaluation appears to dampen the positive correlation between service shortages and protest we observe among respondents whose chairperson-evaluations

**Figure 1:** Community chairpeople facilitate statebuilding in Liberia.

(a) Effective community chairpeople moderate the association between service shortages on protest.



(b) Effective community chairpeople moderate the association between service shortages on protest, but effective district representatives do not.



Note: we measure chairperson and representative evaluations as a score, shortages as a count, and willingness to protest as a dummy variable. In Figure 1a, we estimate the conditional association between service shortages and respondents' willingness to protest using an OLS regression. The marginal effects plots is generated using the *interflex* package in R. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are displayed. Vertical bars on the x-axis represent the distribution of respondents' chairperson evaluations. In Figure 1b, we re-estimate our primary specification but include an additional interaction between service shortages and respondents' evaluations of their district representative. Both 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals are displayed as thin and thick vertical bars, respectively. The dashed box on Figure 1b encapsulates the two shortage-elite interactions included in our Wald Test for equivalence. Results from this Wald Test are displayed above the black dashed box.

are very poor ( $te = +0.085, p = 0.026$ ). These results are robust to different measures of service shortages, chairperson-evaluations, and when we measure willingness to protest as an index (Figures E2a and E2b).

To test whether community chairpeople uniquely condition the relationship between service shortages on protest, we re-estimate our primary specification but include an additional interaction between service shortages and respondents' evaluations of their district repre-

sentatives. District representatives do not appear to moderate respondents' willingness to protest after they experience additional shortages, at the conventional level of significance (Figure 1b). The point estimate for the representative-shortage interaction is nearly three percentage points smaller than the chairperson-shortage interaction. However, we can only reject the null hypothesis that both shortage-elite interactions are identical at the 10-percent level (Wald test,  $p = 0.07$ ). We are only marginally confident, then, that community chairpeople uniquely mitigate the risk of protest following government failures.

We perform diagnostic tests to make the inferential strength of our results transparent, in light of the assumptions underlying multiplicative interaction models (Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu 2019). Overall, we are reasonably confident that our results are not the product of unreasonable extrapolation and that the conditional relationship between service shortages and willingness to protest is linear (see Appendix D).

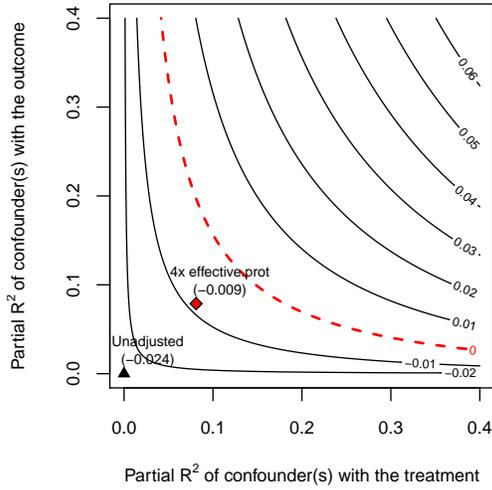
### Sensitivity Analysis

We implement the omitted variable bias sensitivity analysis proposed in Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) and applied in Hazlett (2020) and Hazlett and Mildemberger (2020). This analysis estimates the proportion of residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome an omitted variable would need to explain to problematically change an observed treatment effect. To help with interpretation, the analysis benchmarks the strength of a potential confound against a theoretically relevant covariate that would be a significant source of bias if it was an omitted variable. We benchmark our sensitivity analysis against respondents' perceptions of protest's efficacy, given that these perceptions are very likely to be endogenous to our theoretical relationship of interest.

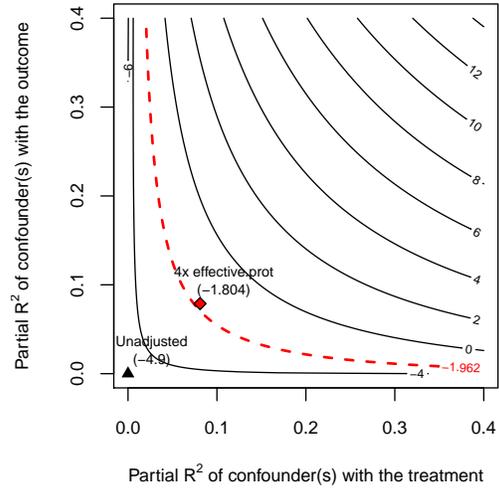
Figure 2b shows that an unobserved confounder would need to explain more than 7.6% of residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome to nullify the conditional association between service shortages and protest we estimate. An unobserved confounder 4 times as

**Figure 2:** Omitted Variable Bias Sensitivity Plots

(a) Sensitivity of Point Estimate



(b) Sensitivity of  $t$ -statistic



Note: Figure 2a demonstrates the sensitivity of the interaction between respondent’s exposure to service shortages and chairperson evaluation to different levels of unobserved confounding. The dashed red line represents the level of confounding at which the unadjusted  $t$ -statistic we observe (plotted as a black triangle) would be equal to zero. Figure 2a demonstrates the sensitivity of the  $t$ -statistic for the interaction between respondent’s exposure to service shortages and chairperson-evaluation to different levels of unobserved confounding. The dashed red line represents the level of confounding past which the unadjusted  $t$ -statistic we (plotted as a black triangle) observe would be statistically insignificant at the conventional level. The red diamond (labeled “4x effective prot”) denotes how our estimated treatment effect (and its  $t$ -statistic) would change in the presence of an omitted variable four-times the strength of the efficacy of protest.

strong as the efficacy of protest would be as an omitted variable would not change the sign of the interaction between service shortages and chairperson-evaluations. An unobserved confounder of the same strength would only just nullify our main result at the conventional level of statistical significance. If an omitted variable induced approximately 3.8 more bias than omitting the efficacy of protest would induce, the conditional association between service shortages, traditional leaders, and protest we estimate would remain statistically significant.

These results are especially insightful because the perceived efficacy of protest is an “important” covariate. Focus group participants who condoned protest often cited its efficacy. Respondents’ perceptions of protest’s efficacy also explains substantially more variation in their willingness to protest than do any of the remaining covariates we specify ( $t = 5.13$ ). Moreover, there are strong conceptual reasons to believe that the perceived efficacy of protest

is very endogenous to our theoretical relationship of interest. Respondents who believe protest is effective might live in a communities with a history of protest that the government has sanctioned by inducing service shortages. The same respondents also may be more likely to protest because they believe their community chairperson is an ineffective broker, as our argument suggests. We struggle to think of another theoretically relevant covariate that is neither differenced out via our time and unit fixed effects (e.g., ethnicity, tribal affiliation, changes in Liberia’s political climate) nor included in our battery of covariates and is approximately 3.8-times more endogenous to our theoretical relationship of interest than the perceived efficacy of protest.

Collectively, this sensitivity analysis supports a more causal, albeit narrower, interpretation of our main result. Conditional on there being no omitted variable that is 3.8-times stronger than the efficacy of protest, we find that effective community chairpeople plausibly mitigate the otherwise mobilizing effect of public service shortages on respondents’ willingness to protest.

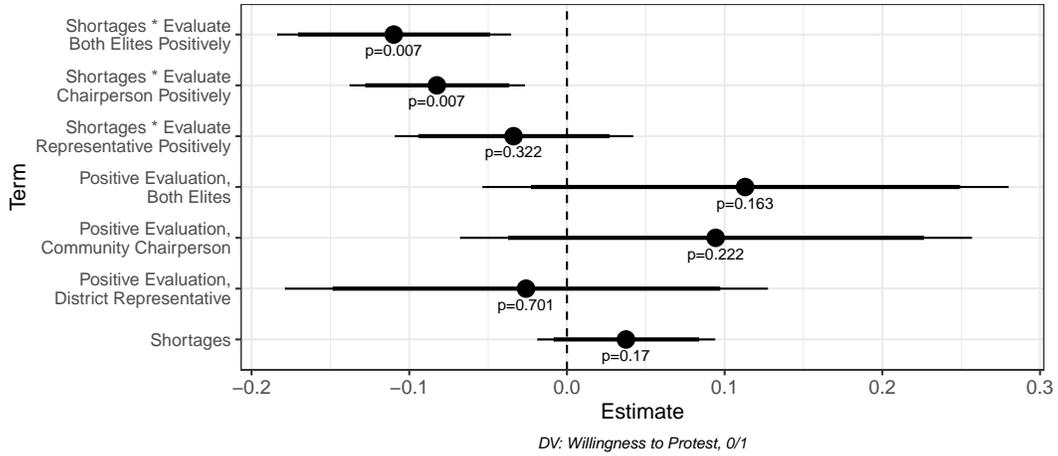
## **Community Chairpeople and Statebuilding**

Our main analysis provides quantitative evidence that community chairpeople moderate the relationship between government failures and protest. Respondents who experience service shortages appear less willing to mobilize for protest as they form stronger evaluations of their chairperson’s ability as a broker. However, it is possible this result indicates frustrated Liberians are exiting formal political processes entirely. This behavior would undermine statebuilding.

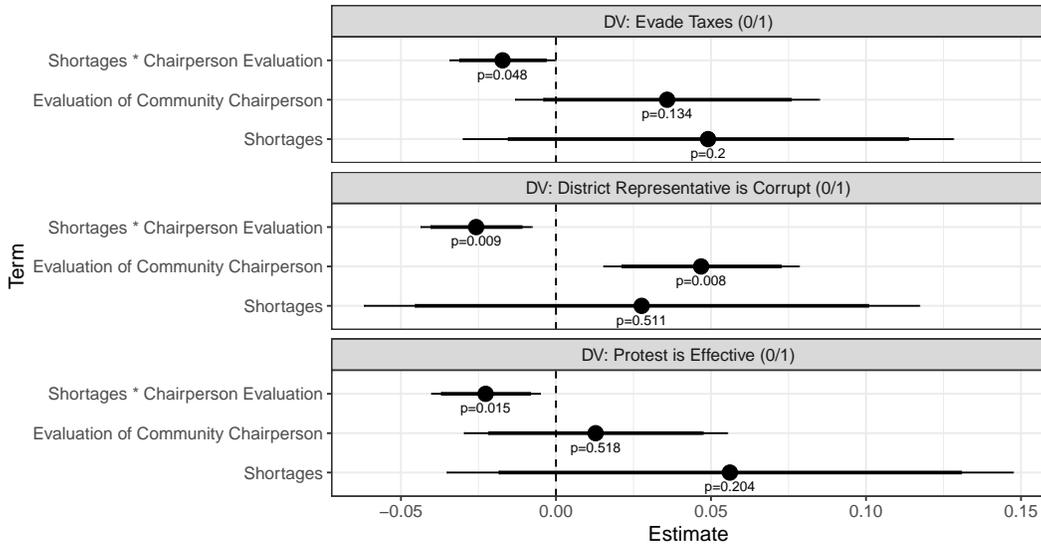
Therefore, we extend our main analysis in two ways. First, we explore whether chairpeople mitigate other anti-government attitudes and behaviors citizens might express in response to service shortages. Second, we describe chairpeople’s relationship to the state using interviews we conducted with chairpeople in Monrovia.

**Figure 3:** Community chairpeople complement the Liberian government.

(a) Effective community chairpeople independently moderate the relationship between service shortages and protest, but effective district representatives do not.



(b) Effective community chairpeople moderate other anti-government responses to service shortages.



*Note:* in Figure 3a we create a categorical variable measuring whether respondents evaluated both their chairperson and district representative positively (“Positive Evaluation, Both Elites”), either positively, or neither positively (reference category). In Figure 3b, we measure respondents’ evaluations of their community chairperson as a score. Service shortages are measured as a count in Figures 3a and 3b. All results are from OLS regressions with standard errors clustered at the community-level. Both 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals are displayed as thin and thick bars, respectively. For the three regressions underlying Figure 3b, we control for respondents’ evaluations of their district representative, income, and expectations that the government will repress protest.

## Quantitative Evidence

Figure 3 suggests that community chairpeople complement district representatives when they displace citizens’ frustration with the government. The regression underlying Figure 3a in-

teracts service shortages with a categorical variable recording whether respondents evaluated both their chairperson and representative positively, either positively, or neither positively. Respondents who experience additional service shortages and form stronger evaluations of their chairperson exclusively appear eight percentage points less likely to protest, compared to respondents who report no improvement in either elite and experience additional shortages. Forming stronger evaluations of both elites only increases this point estimate by approximately three percentage points. Moreover, we find no evidence that positive evaluations of representatives alone moderate the association between service shortages and protest ( $te = -0.03, p > 0.1$ ).

We also estimate how respondents' perceptions of their community chairperson moderates the association between service shortages and three other measures of government legitimacy: respondents' tax morale, beliefs about government corruption, and perceptions of protest (Levi, Sacks and Tyler 2009). If service shortages do not correlate with lower levels of tax morale, stronger beliefs about government corruption, and heightened perceptions of protest as an effective tool to catalyze policy change as respondents forms stronger evaluations of their chairperson's capacity as a broker, then we can be more confident that chairpeople facilitate statebuilding.

The correlational evidence presented in Figure 3b attenuates concerns that community chairpeople substitute for the state when they moderate the relationship between government failures and protest. Given the onset of additional service shortages, respondents who report a one-point improvement in their chairperson-evaluation state a lower willingness to shirk on tax payments for better public services, are less likely to report that their district representative is corrupt, and are less likely to perceive protest as effective.

## Qualitative Evidence

The opportunity to interview 12 chairpeople from communities where we recruited survey respondents allows us to further comment on their contribution to statebuilding. These interviews provide first-hand evidence that chairpeople act as informal statebuilders because they encourage aggrieved citizens to engage with the government.

Despite personal frustrations with government officials, chairpeople overwhelmingly expressed support for the state when asked how they would respond to costly government failures like unsolved violent crimes and public service shortages. For instance, consider one chairperson who said it was “so hard...to get in contact with government officials” because his district representative had “neglected the whole district” in recent years (Interview 1). When asked how he would respond to a prolonged electricity blackout, he promoted “engaging the government constructively” rather than encouraging the community to stage a protest (Interview 1). Furthermore, he would do community outreach to “educate” citizens about the government’s limitations, if the government could not immediately restore electricity (Interview 1). This same chairperson reported having “taken two cases to the police...[about] attempted rape” in recent years rather than pursuing extrajudicial action (Interview 1). These responses collectively indicate a willingness to coordinate with the state when it fails to effectively govern.

Another chairperson similarly described his complementary relationship with the state, despite reporting “serious challenges” for engaging government officials (Interview 2). When asked what he would do if a major crime occurred in his community, he responded: “I would encourage my citizens, especially those [suspects] involved, to abide by the rules of the law...because this country is a country of law” (Interview 2). His statement is representative of how other chairpeople responded to these scenarios: e.g., “give the police a chance...[because] you don’t sabotage police investigations” (Interview 3), or “educate the community to understand that..[when a suspect] is not guilty...you can’t kill them” (Inter-

view 4).

How chairpeople responded to our questions on protest further emphasizes their role as informal statebuilders. Even though their opinions of protest diverged—some equated it to violence that “brings chaos” (Interview 5) while others emphasized citizens’ “right to protest” (Interview 3)—each chairperson claimed they would intervene on behalf of the government if their community staged a protest. Responses ranged from encouraging citizens to resolve their grievances “diplomatically” (Interview 6) among chairpeople who condemned protest to ensuring protesters were allowed to “speak...within the confines of the law” (Interview 2) among chairpeople who condoned protest. Chairpeople who did not condone protest outright believed negotiating with the government would be more effective, stating the “best thing is dialogue” (Interview 4) because “there are so many ways that you can engage the government” (Interview 1).

Even though they receive neither funding nor legal recognition from the state and often are frustrated with government officials themselves, the chairpeople we interviewed do not appear to undermine support for the state when given the opportunity to do so. Chairpeople act in place of the government when it is absent, but as an informal extension of the state: e.g., preventing extrajudicial violence and encouraging their constituents to work with the government when aggrieved. Thus, chairpeople are better understood as informal statebuilders who complement the government, rather than competing sources of political authority that undermine statebuilding.

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

This study generates new insights about the relationship between informal governance and statebuilding. Using original fieldwork from a post-conflict setting, we specifically demonstrate that traditional leaders can facilitate statebuilding when they redirect citizens’ frus-

trations with the government through state institutions.

Three scope conditions underlie our theory and results. First, government officials must be sensitive to traditional leaders' demands for reform. Second, the state must have some capacity for repression. Finally, traditional leaders must have some incentive to contribute to statebuilding.

These scope conditions characterize many developing democracies in the Global South. For example, village chiefs in Zambia govern locally, coordinate public goods provision with government officials who depend on them for mobilizing votes ([Baldwin 2016](#)), and may offer citizens an alternative path to reform given the the state's proclivity for repression ([Amnesty International 2020](#)). [Baldwin \(2016\)](#) also argues Zambian chiefs have strong incentives to coordinate with government officials because doing improves their economic and social well-being.

Additional research exploring what incentivizes traditional leaders to support statebuilding would help clarify whether our results extend to other post-conflict settings. One solution may be to formalize the authority and role of traditional leaders ([Henn 2020](#)). For example, programs encouraging city chiefs and government officials to collect taxes together improved tax compliance and increased government revenues in the Democratic Republic of Congo ([Balan et al. 2020](#)).

However, bringing traditional leaders into state institutions may not always produce better statebuilding outcomes. [Murtazashvili \(2016\)](#) shows that customary leaders and organizations in Afghanistan improve citizens' evaluations of the government, despite existing in parallel to state institutions. [Baldwin and Mvukiyehe \(2015\)](#) find that introducing formal elections to select Liberian clan chiefs increases protests and riots and decreases community contributions to public goods. Supplanting informal governance with formal governance may allay concerns that traditional leaders will mobilize against the state but does not guarantee that citizens will believe the state is legitimate.

While formally testing why community chairpeople contribute to statebuilding in Liberia is beyond the scope of this study, we propose two explanations that should generalize across different post-conflict contexts. First, violent conflict may have directly increased chairpeoples' preferences for state authority. Exposure to wartime violence can increase citizens' political participation (Blattman 2009) and deference to the state (Blair 2020a). It is possible that the legacy of civil conflict in Monrovia, where many witnessed wartime violence firsthand (Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer 2011), shapes chairpeoples' relationships with the government today.

Second, two decades of external intervention in Liberia may explain why chairpeople work as informal statebuilders. The United Nations (UN) deployed peacekeepers to Liberia from 2003 until 2018. Nine UN agencies remain active in the country. Interacting with international interventions both can decrease non-state actors' use of extrajudicial justice (Blair 2019) and is associated with greater political participation (Mvukiyehe 2018). Through their coordination with international actors, chairpeople may have internalized norms of statebuilding which cast state authority as a necessary condition for development. Notably, traditional leaders similar to community chairpeople exist in Sierra Leone, where a UN peacekeeping mission was deployed from 1999 until 2006.

One limitation of our study is that we focus on the relationship between citizens, traditional leaders, and the state in an urban setting. Nascent post-conflict government should struggle both to project power and to extend public service provision over large swathes of territory (Herbst 2000). Thus, the incentives for traditional leaders to support statebuilding may be far weaker in more rural locations. As much suggests that our results may not generalize outside of the urban and peri-urban areas surrounding many capital cities in sub-Saharan Africa, though Murtazashvili (2016) finds that *maliks*—village representatives who are similar in both form and function to community chairpeople—support statebuilding rural Afghanistan.

Relatedly, our theory and results may not generalize to settings where traditional leaders oversee particular institutions that liberal statebuilding would upend and/or all traditional authority is vested in a single elite. For example, some chiefs in rural Liberia have derived their authority from unregulated secret societies that extrajudicially resolve disputes (Ellis 1995).<sup>17</sup> Statebuilding interventions in Liberia have sought to extend formal judicial institutions (e.g., national courts and police) into the hinterlands (Blair, Karim and Morse 2019), posing a clear threat to the chiefs whose authority stems from secret societies. Traditional leaders who are more monarchic also may hesitate to support statebuilding, since doing so may subject them to additional oversight and reduce their ability to capture public goods (Mamdani 1996).

Another limitation of this research is that our panel data do not capture alternative explanations of why traditional leaders increase the opportunity cost of protest for aggrieved citizens. Effective traditional leaders may do so because they can hold government officials accountable and foster norms encouraging political participation, as existing research (Tsai 2007; Stokes 2006; Baldwin 2013; McClendon and Riedl 2019) and feedback from our focus groups and interviews demonstrate. Alternatively, effective traditional leaders may reduce the incidence of protest because they provide citizens with temporary catharsis. Additional data on how citizens engage with and perceive traditional leaders may help identify the most relevant mechanism in future work.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study makes two contributions. First, we develop a new micro-level theory of statebuilding which positions traditional leaders as brokers who help reconnect aggrieved citizens with the state rather than actors who necessarily supplant the government when it is weak. To the best of our knowledge, our theory is among the first to transport cutting-edge research on informal governance from comparative politics (Baldwin

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<sup>17</sup>Chiefs in other Upper Guinea Coast countries, like Sierra Leone, appear to have a similar relationship with secret societies (Knörr and Schroven 2019).

and Holzinger 2019; Baldwin and Raffler 2019) to the study of post-conflict statebuilding at the local level.

Second, we use quantitative and qualitative data collected over six months of fieldwork to test our theory in post-conflict Liberia. On balance, we show that community chairpeople facilitate statebuilding when they can effectively broker their community's interests to the government. Our research offers a loose template for studying informal governance and statebuilding when more intensive interventions (e.g. field experiments) are not viable for ethical reasons, like when protest is the outcome of interest. Focus group discussions helped us design our survey instrument with an eye towards the simulation-based sensitivity analysis which quantifies the robustness of our main result to omitted variable bias.

Allowing traditional leaders to legitimately operate alongside nascent governments could expedite statebuilding. Doing so appears to repair the damage past public service shortages have done to citizens' perceptions of the government in Liberia. While additional research spanning multiple settings is required, this approach may be particularly compelling when governments are acutely weak and the potential consequences of civil unrest are significant. Rather than enduring frequent periods of instability, relying on traditional leaders to augment government capacity could offer an alternative path for statebuilding.

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# Online Appendices

“Traditional Leaders Facilitate Statebuilding: Evidence from a Liberian panel survey.”

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## A Sampling

We worked with a Liberian research organization—the Center for Action Research and Training, Liberia—to construct the six-month long panel dataset used in our study. This panel dataset contains information from residents of the Greater Monrovia area, spread across 15 different communities. Recruitment to this panel and data collection proceeded as follows:

- Enumerators recruited thirty-five respondents per community. Twenty were randomly selected to participate in the monthly study; fifteen were used to replenish the panel given attrition.
- Respondents were recruited using a random walk protocol. Within communities, enumerators began recruiting respondents either near heavily trafficked areas, such as markets, or near LEC transformers. We focused on these points of interest to reduce the chance of recruiting respondents to increase the chance that respondents had household connections to basic services or could access them communally.
- Once a month for six months, enumerators contacted respondents and administered a thirty minute-long mobile survey. Respondents were compensated for their participation. Enumerators would attempt re-contacting respondents no more than three times per day for three days. Respondents were removed from the panel and replaced if we could not contact them after three days.

## B Common Causes of Service Shortages in Monrovia

We list common causes for service shortages below, based on conversation we had with service providers and our own observations during the fieldwork.

Solid waste services from the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) can go short (e.g., no trash pickup) because (1) the MCC did not have enough resources or staff to perform

scheduled cleaning; or (2) residents did not deposit waste in MCC bins.

Water services from the Liberian Water and Sewer Company (LWSC) can go short because (1) LWSC pipes broke; (2) drought; (3) mismanagement (e.g., LWSC incorrectly stops services for paying customers); and (4) illegal connections to LWSC pipes.

Electricity from the Liberia Electricity Corporation can go short because (1) LEC transformers/meters fail; (2) illegal connections to LEC transformers; (3) LEC fails to provide timely maintenance because international funding causes shortage of required supplies (e.g., transformers).

### **Adjustments to Data Collection**

After COVID-19 emerged in Liberia, we adjusted our data collection protocols so that they complied with public health ordinances in Monrovia. Our research team at the Center for Action Research and Training (CART) in Monrovia made this decision collaboratively, acknowledging that the suspension of project activities posed a significant financial risk to project staff, many of whom rely on payment from the project as their primary source of income (approximately \$200 USD/month). As other opportunities for employment in Liberia receded given the impact of COVID-19—e.g., the termination of other research activities that employed project staff—salaries from our project became the sole source of income for a majority CART’s employees.

Specifically, we:

- Limited the number of enumerators working in the CART office to three. No more than three enumerators were allowed into the CART office at one time.
- Committed to halting data collection indefinitely if an enumerator displayed COVID-19 symptoms.
- Limited the length of the workday. To ensure that enumerators could easily comply

with the government’s public health order, we worked from 8AM to 12PM. Enumerators were compensated the same amount for each day of work, despite the shortened workday.

- Provided enumerators with personal protective equipment. Prior to entering the CART office, enumerators were required to use a CART-provided hand-washing station. Enumerators also received hand-sanitizer and a face mask for use throughout the workday.
- Physically separated enumerators in the CART office. Enumerators worked in separate rooms of the CART office to ensure that they remained at least six feet away from each other throughout the workday.
- Disinfected all project equipment and working areas at the end of each workday. The CART supervisor used Clorox to disinfect the phones, tablets, and working areas enumerators used during each workday. The CART manager wore gloves and a face mask while disinfecting workstations.
- Encouraged enumerators to travel on foot to the CART office, if possible.
- Provided enumerators a larger travel stipend to ensure that enumerators can take a private cab to and from the CART office if necessary.

## **C Qualitative Data Collection Activities**

Block quotations for the qualitative evidence we include in the main text from the focus group discussions and interviews we conducted are listed below.

### **Focus Group Discussion 1: Jan-29-2020**

- R2: “When there is no food for the citizen to eat, there will plenty noise behind the government. In other words, ‘a hungry man is an angry man.’ The reason why people

are protesting in Liberia almost every month is that the government is not providing those basic services for her citizens.”

- R4: “The good side of protest is that it calls government attention, and the bad side is properties can get damage.”
- R4: “When government cannot provide services you need, you should continue to engage government or the agency that is responsible for providing that particular services that you are lack of.”
- R5: “The government is preventing her citizens from accessing basic services. Those agencies that are responsible for distributing these services like LEC [Liberian Electricity Corporation], LWSC [Liberia Water and Sewer Company] and MCC [Monrovia City Corporation] are not being monitored by the government. As a result, they go about doing their own things, which is seriously affecting us. At times, you will have credits in your meter but your light will just go off, and to get LEC to come and repair your meter is like a war; the same with LWSC and MCC.”
- R5: “The good side of protest is that result is immediate, and bad side is properties get damage, people get wounded in the process.”
- R5: “When I cannot access services that government should be providing for me, like LEC I will be patient and wait for God and government time. While waiting I will in provides by buying my flash light to sleep on, secondly if it is water that I cannot get, I will get water from the community well, and for dirt I will bury my dirt under the ground.”

### **Focus Group Discussion 2: Jan-31-2020, Seven Participants**

- R2: “The benefit of protest is it tells the whole world the poor performance of a particular government. It also tells the government that there is an alarming situation in the country that needs to be attended to.”
- R2: “Protest is not the best way to make change in Liberia. From our history, protest is not good for us. People always losing their lives in protest, properties damaged and protest also drive investors away.”
- R4: “If the government is not providing services to us as citizens, we will protest to make them to know that it is their responsibility to provide these services to us.”

### **Focus Group Discussion 3: Feb-03-2020, Seven Participants**

- R3: “Protest can also bring the government to attention.”
- R5: “The first thing is we will contact the government through our community chairperson. If there is no redress, we will protest.”
- R6: “The benefit of protest is you can get quick result. The bad side of protest is people will get injured in the process, some may will lose their lives and property will be damaged.”

### **Community Chairperson Interviews: Sep-2020**

- Interview 1: In describing how he used a television interview about iron contamination in his community to get government assistance, he comments “The water has iron in it...Slowly, slowly, slowly, you be dying, you don’t know. So that’s it. It’s so hard for me to get into contact with the government officials; I was so lucky that day when I did that interview and [was] surprised to see them in my community.”

- Interview 1: Asked how the government treats him generally, he responds “The representative? District number eight? The man neglected the whole district. The man neglected the whole district.”
- Interview 1: “That has been happening. I have taken two cases to the police; rape, attempted rape.”
- Interview 1: “The community youth wanted to stage a protest to block the road. I told them ‘No, under my leadership, you don’t do that.’...So what we do, we engage the government constructively, and listen...I educate them. I tell you, if I go to meeting, if I go to LEC, I come from there...and use the town crier to make an announcement.”
- Interview 1: “We can’t stage protest. The issue here; protest has two-fold. And that fold is: one, positive, and two, negative. And the negative aspect is more severe than the positive aspect.”
- Interview 1: “There are so many ways that you can engage the government, I really know that. That sitting in the street [i.e., protest] will not make government come in.”
- Interview 2: “In general, you know, we have serious challenges, because sometimes government at the time you be in need of them, they will not respond to you immediately.”
- Interview 2: “I think I would encourage my citizen, most especially those who are involved, to abide by the rules of law, to go through the investigation. Because, this country is a country of law; nobody is above it...I would encourage my citizens to always be law-abiding.”
- Interview 2: “The people will have to speak [i.e. protest] through their constitutional guidance...You let them speak, but it should be in the confines of the law.”

- Interview 3: “Well, you give the police a chance to do their investigation. You don’t sabotage police operations.”
- Interview 3: “That is their [i.e. citizens’] right to protest.”
- Interview 4: “We educate our community to understand that alleged crime does not mean that the man is guilty, so you can’t kill them. Because, in the past, our community was noted for beating on [suspects], killing [suspects].”
- Interview 4: “We would advise that protest is not the way, especially in this COVID-19 period...So the best way is dialogue.”
- Interview 5: “We put it under control. There are people that are not satisfied with the government. But we don’t; you know, the protest, it can bring chaos. So, we go to get a meeting and talk it.”
- Interview 6: “When we have issues, we manage to channel [them] diplomatically...In other communities, they are throwing stones and taking placards.”

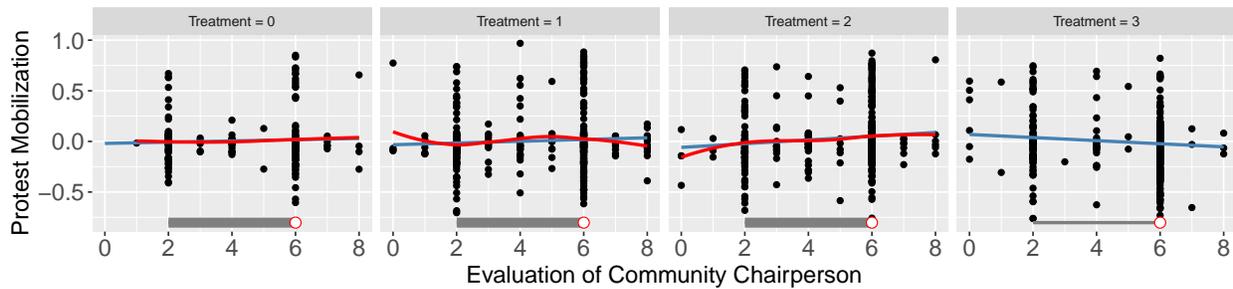
## D Additional Robustness Checks

### Diagnosis of Linear Interaction Effects

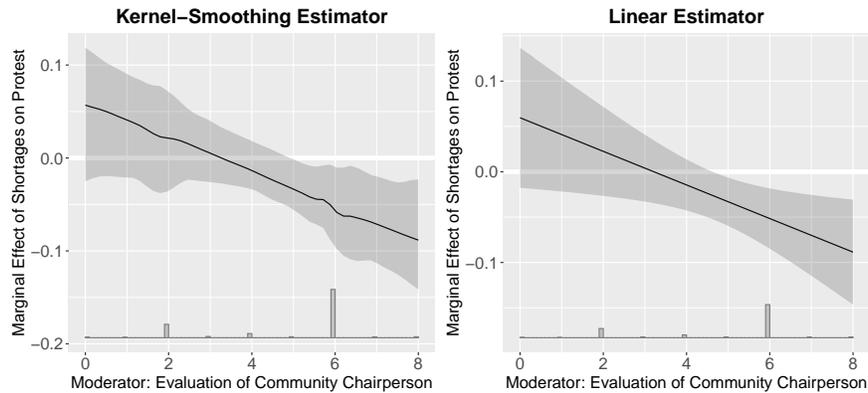
We refit our primary specification using the kernel smoothing estimator suggested in [Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu \(2019\)](#), which allows us to flexibly estimate the functional form of the marginal effects of service shortages on willingness to protest across the full range of respondents’ evaluations of community chairpeople. Figure [D1b](#) plots the results of a standard linear multiplicative interaction model next to the results of the kernel estimation. The marginal effects of service shortages on willingness to protest the kernel estimator fits over various evaluations of community chairpeople appear reasonably linear and mimic the conditional marginal effects generated using a linear multiplicative interaction model.

**Figure D1: Linear Interaction Effect Diagnostics**

(a) Respondents' evaluations of their community chairperson vary over different exposures to service shortages.



(b) The conditional effect of shortages on willingness to protest is plausibly linear.



Note: figure generated using the *interflex* package in R. In Figure D1a, “treatment” is defined as the count of service respondents report having gone short in the past month; blue lines visualize the linear association between chairperson evaluations and willingness to protest at each level of treatment; and the red line visualize the association between chairperson evaluations and willingness to protest at each level of treatment using a kernel-smoothing estimator. We measure respondents' evaluations of community chairpeople as an index reflecting their effectiveness and inclusiveness.

Figure D1a also demonstrates that there is fairly common support for our moderating variable across different values of treatment. Respondents’ evaluations of their community chairperson vary from scores of 0 to 4. However, the majority of these responses are clustered around scores of 1 (“ineffective”/“self-interested”) and (“effective”/“representative”), particularly among respondents who experience shortages in all three services.

## Reporting Errors

The conditional relationship between service shortages and protest mobilization we observe might be due to respondents systematically overstating the service shortages they experienced in the last month to “justify” their decision to protest. In anticipation of this challenge, the research team had designed a protocol to verify respondents’ reports of service shortages.<sup>18</sup> However, this protocol was halted during the first month of implementation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an alternative strategy, we explore whether the number of service shortages citizens report is positively correlated with other measures capturing their dissatisfaction with the government: their willingness to protest, perceptions of government officials, and opposition to Liberian President George Weah. If reports of service shortages are systematically higher among respondents who are dissatisfied with the government, then our measure of service shortages may just reflect political attitudes rather than the objective material conditions of respondents.

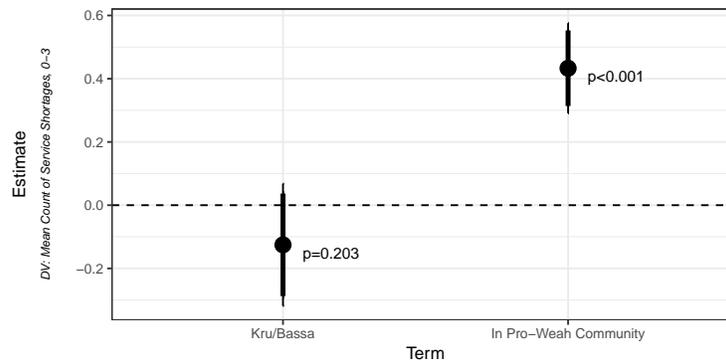
To measure respondents’ support for President Weah, we rely on two proxy variables: their ethnicity and their community. Specifically, we code respondents as supportive of President Weah if they are of the Kru or Bassa tribe or if they live in Popo Beach, Central West Point, Slipway, Vai Town, or Zondo Town. Members of the Kru and Bassa tribe constitute

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<sup>18</sup>The design of the survey instrument also minimizes this risk. Respondents are asked about their willingness to mobilize for protest after they report to enumerators whether they experienced shortages in electricity, water, and solid waste services in the previous month.

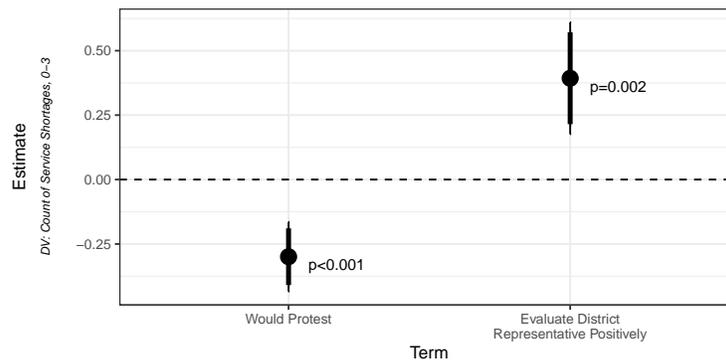
the bulk of support for the Weah administration. These citizens expressed continuous support for the President during the economic recession that has followed the onset of COVID-19 in Liberia and despite widespread discontent towards the government’s COVID-19 response. The aforementioned communities are referred to as “slum communities” in Monrovia and were the main targets of the President’s “Pro-Poor” campaign platform that saw him elected in 2018.

**Figure D2:** Co-ethnicity and co-partisanship with the incumbent party does not predict overreporting of service shortages in the hypothesized direction.



Note: results from OLS regressions. All regressors are specified as dummy variables. Both 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals are presented respectively as thin and thick bars.

**Figure D3:** Respondents’ dissatisfaction with the government does not predict overreporting of service shortages in the hypothesized direction.



Note: results from OLS regressions. All regressors are specified as dummy variables. Both 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals are presented respectively as thin and thick bars.

We find no evidence suggesting respondents who oppose the incumbent government report higher counts of service shortages per survey wave than do respondents who are not frustrated with the government (Figure D2). Respondents who are co-ethnics with President Weah do not report different counts of service shortages per month than do respondents who are not co-ethnics with President Weah. Moreover, respondents in Pro-Weah communities like Vai Town appear report slightly *more* service shortages per month than do respondents who do not reside in Pro-Weah communities. This pattern is inconsistent with concerns implying respondents' reports of service shortages reflect their frustration with the government rather than their living conditions.

Broader indicators of citizens' dissatisfaction with the government similarly do not comport with concerns about reporting bias (Figure D3). Counterintuitively, respondent who state some willingness to protest report *fewer* counts of service shortages per month than do respondents who state no willingness to protest. Respondents who evaluate their district representative positively report *greater* exposure to service shortages than those who evaluate their representative negatively. We would expect the sign on each of these point estimates to be flipped if respondents were strategically over-reporting their experience of service shortages to justify their frustration with the government.

### **Design Effects and Attrition**

To ensure that our findings are robust to design effects, we test whether the number of times that respondents participate in the survey predicts their willingness to mobilize for protest. We find no evidence that the number of times participants have been surveyed affects their willingness to mobilize for protest at the conventional level of statistical significance (SI Table E1).

We also investigate whether respondents who drop out from the panel over the study period (n=37) are meaningfully different from those who remain in the panel, since the same

factors that might predict attrition could predict respondents’ evaluations of their community chairperson, experience of service shortages, and willingness to mobilize for protest. To test whether attrition is plausibly exogenous, we test for balance among the variables used in our main analysis between respondents who dropped out of the panel and those who did not (see SI Table E2). We find that subjects who remain in our panel are comparable to those that drop out over the study period, along all of the variables we use in our main analysis.

## E Additional Tables and Figures

**Table E1:** Respondents are not more likely to express a willingness to mobilize for protest as they participate in additional panel waves.

	Estimate	Standard Error	N
Rounds Sampled	-0.07	0.09	2016

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

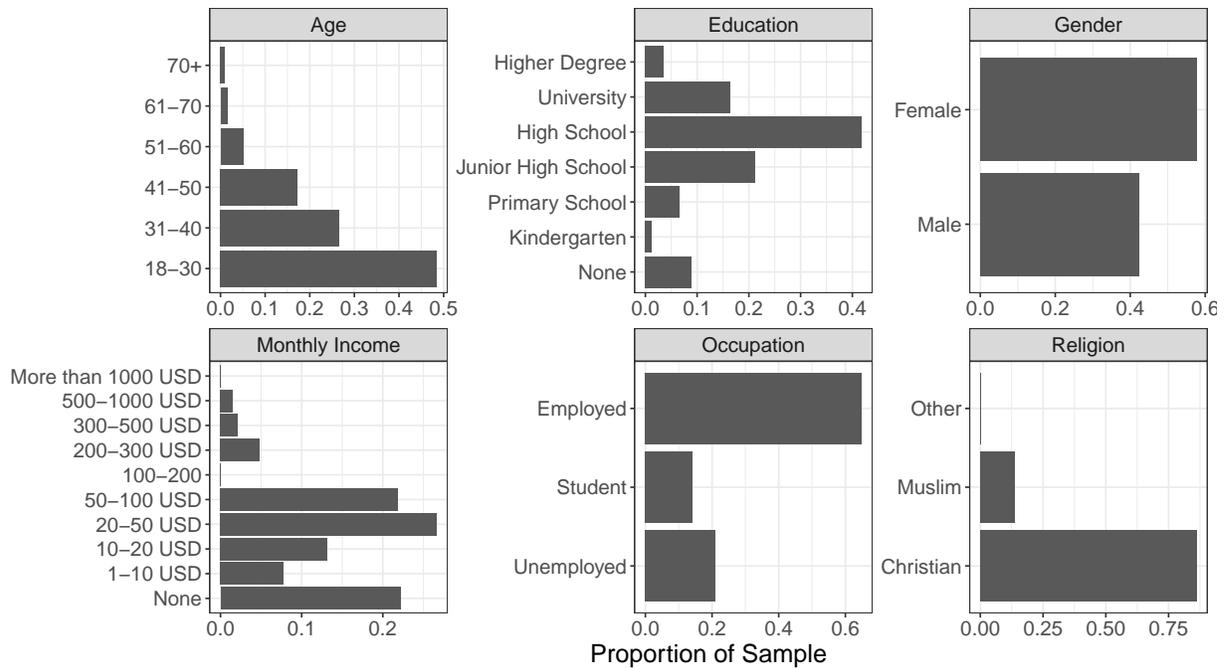
**Table E2:** Balance between subjects who did and did not drop out of the panel.

Variable	Abs. Std. Mean Difference
Count of Shortages (0-3)	0.01
Income (0-9)	0.02
Willingness to Protest (0/1)	0.03
Believe Repression is Likely (0/1)	0.04
Protest Effective (0/1)	0.06
Evaluation of District Representative (0-8)	0.05
Expressive Benefits from Protest (0/1)	0.07
Evaluation of Community Chairperson (0-8)	0.09

**Table E3:** Summary Statistics, Survey Measures

Group	Variable	Mean	Min	Max	SD	N
Protest	Willingness to Mobilize	0.13	0.00	1.00	0.34	2016
Service Shortages	Count	2.04	0.00	3.00	1.03	2014
	One Shortage	0.90	0.00	1.00	0.30	2014
	Two Shortages	0.69	0.00	1.00	0.46	2014
	Three Shortages	0.45	0.00	1.00	0.50	2014
	Electricity Shortage	0.83	0.00	1.00	0.38	1927
	Water Shortage	0.72	0.00	1.00	0.45	1988
	Solid Waste Shortage	0.79	0.00	1.00	0.41	1363
Elite Evaluations	Community Chairperson	5.02	0.00	8.00	1.73	2003
	District Representative	4.07	0.00	8.00	2.06	2005
Covariates	Efficacy of Protest	1.86	0.00	4.00	0.97	2013
	Expressive Benefits of Protest	0.31	0.00	1.00	0.46	2015
	Income	2.90	0.00	9.00	1.85	2012
	Repression Likely	0.48	0.00	1.00	0.50	1809

**Figure E1:** Sample Demographics (N=370)



**Table E4:** Main Results; Community Chairpeople, Service Shortages, and Protest

	DV: Willingness to Protest (0/1)		
	(A)	(B)	(C)
Service Shortages (0-3)	0.09*	0.10*	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Evaluation of Community Chairperson (0-8)	0.03	0.03	
	(0.02)	(0.02)	
Evaluation of District Representative (0-8)	-0.01	0.01	
	(0.01)	(0.01)	
Positive Evaluation, Community Chairperson (0/1)			0.09
			(0.07)
Positive Evaluation, District Representative (0/1)			-0.03
			(0.06)
Positive Evaluation, Both Elites (0/1)			0.11
			(0.08)
Expect Repression (0/1)	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Protest Effective (0/1)	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Social Obligation to Protest (0/1)	-0.07	-0.07	-0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Income (0-9)	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Shortages×Evaluation of Chairperson	-0.02**	-0.02**	
	(0.01)	(0.01)	
Shortages×Evaluation of Representative		-0.01	
		(0.01)	
Shortages×Evaluate Chairperson Positively			-0.08**
			(0.03)
Shortages×Evaluate Representative Positively			-0.03
			(0.03)
Shortages×Evaluate Both Elites Positively			-0.11**
			(0.03)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.47	0.48	0.48
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.32	0.32	0.32
Num. obs.	1795	1795	1799
N Clusters	15	15	15

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Table E5:** Secondary Results; Community Chairpeople, Service Shortages, and Other Anti-Government Attitudes/Behaviors

	DV: Tax Evasion <sup>1</sup>	DV: Gov't is Corrupt <sup>2</sup>	DV: Protest is Effective <sup>3</sup>
Service Shortages (0-3)	0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Evaluation of Community Chairperson (0-8)	0.04 (0.02)	0.05** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Evaluation of District Representative (0-8)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.12*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)
Expect Repression (0/1)	-0.13* (0.05)	-0.19** (0.06)	-0.15** (0.04)
Income (0-9)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.05* (0.02)
Shortages×Evaluation of Chairperson	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.44	0.71	0.45
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.27	0.63	0.30
Num. obs.	1794	1728	1795
N Clusters	15	15	15

Note: \* p< 0.05; \*\* p< 0.01; \*\*\* p< 0.001

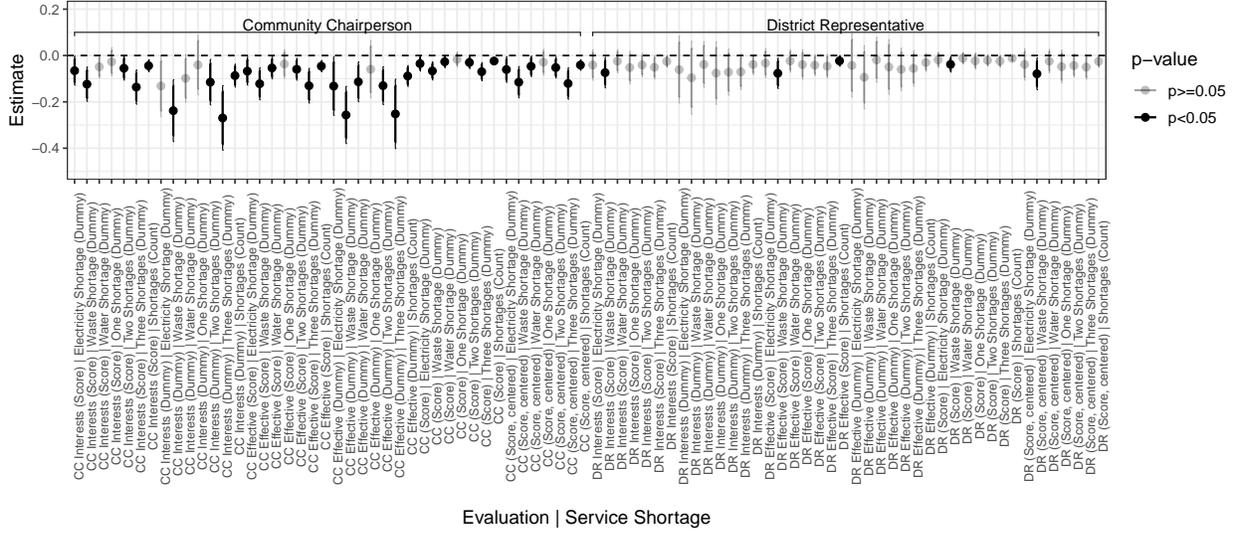
<sup>1</sup>**Tax Evasion:** we ask respondents to indicate whether they should pay less, the same, or more in taxes to receive better services from the government. We collapse these responses into a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 if respondents are not willing to pay additional taxes and a value of 1 if respondents are willing to pay additional taxes.

<sup>2</sup>**Gov't is Corrupt:** we ask respondents how corrupt they think their district representative is, on a five-point Likert scale. We collapse these responses into a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 if respondents believe their district representative is not corrupt and a value of 1 if respondents think their district representative is corrupt.

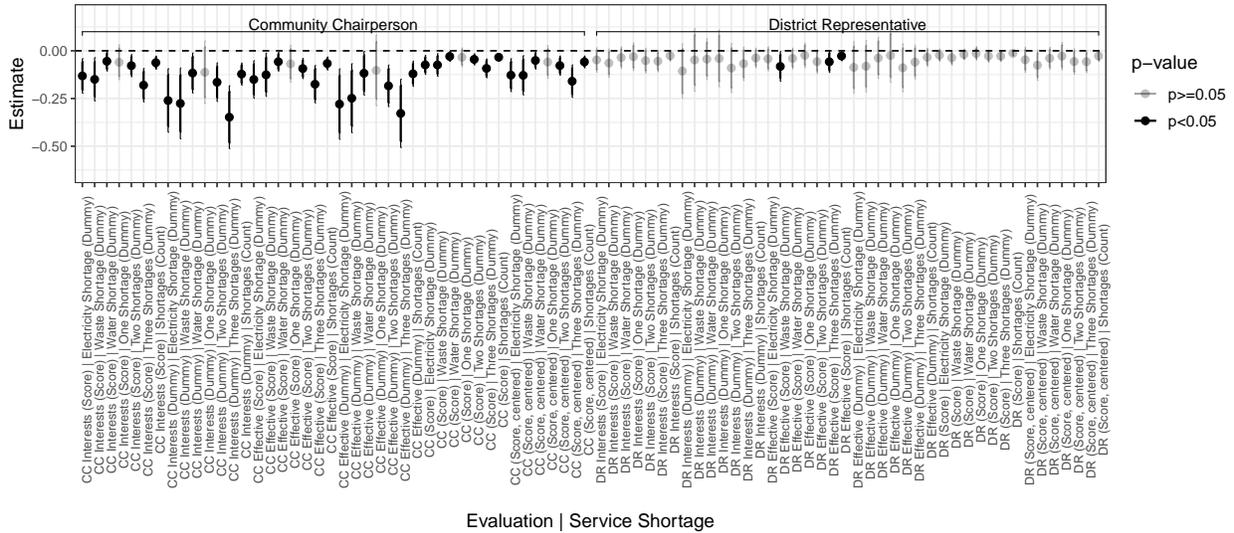
<sup>3</sup>**Protest is Effective:** we ask respondents how effective they think protest is to achieve change in Liberia, on a five-point Likert scale. We collapse these responses into a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 if respondents believe that protest is ineffective and a value of 1 if respondents think protest is effective.

Figure E2: Various Specifications of Main Results

(a) Protest Mobilization as a Dummy Variable



(b) Protest Mobilization as an Index Score



Note: each point estimate corresponds to the service shortage-elite evaluation interaction (see  $\gamma_3$  in estimating equation) from a single estimation. The constitutive terms of this interaction, and how they are operationalized, are listed on the x-axis. Black point estimates are significant at the 5-percent level, grey point estimates are significant at the 10-percent level, and transparent estimates are not statistically significant. This figure demonstrates that the main results presented in E4 are not extremely sensitive to various measurement strategies.