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Bringing them in or leaving them out? Mediator types and civil society inclusion in peace talks

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Abstract

The inclusion of civil society in peace accords can enhance the durability of peace. Mediators are in a unique position to influence who gets access to the negotiation table. However, we have limited knowledge of how mediators can influence peace talks, in particular, how the type of mediator shapes the inclusion of civil society at the negotiation table. In this study, we break new ground by asking *if and how the type of mediator influences the likelihood of inclusion in peace talks in civil wars*. We argue that depending on the type of mediator, there will be variation in whether civil society organizations are granted a seat at the table or not. To examine this issue, we leverage fine-grained data on civil society inclusion from the Non-Warring Actors in Peacemaking (NoWA) dataset, which we combine with comprehensive data on mediator types from the African Peace Process (APP) dataset, 1989–2018. In line with our theoretical argument, our findings demonstrate that UN mediators are associated with a higher chance of civil society inclusion. In addition, contrary to our expectations, we find that authoritarian states as mediators do not decrease the likelihood of including civil society.

Keywords civil war, inclusion, civil society, negotiation, mediation, United Nations

Mediators are in a unique position to influence the format and scope of peace talks, including *who* gets a seat at the peace table. Mediators vary in their ability to have leverage over the parties, but they often have some influence over the design of the process. One of the critical process design questions is how broad to make a negotiation process and whether actors other than the main belligerents should be invited to the table. The inclusion of other stakeholders beyond the warring sides, such as civil society organizations, has increasingly been recognized as important to integrating wider viewpoints and interests into peace accords, enhancing the legitimacy of the peace process, and creating more conducive conditions for durable peace. Previous literature demonstrates that civil society participation can help shape the content of peace agreements (Bell & Kitagawa, 2023, 2024), that women's involvement at the table can serve to improve women's rights (Anderson, 2016), and that civil society inclusion enhances the durability of peace (Nilsson, 2012; Wanis-St. John & Kew, 2008). Understanding how inclusion comes about is thus essential. The United Nations is one of the mediating agencies committed to creating more inclusive peace processes. For example, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres has noted: "For our part, the United Nations will double down on truly inclusive peacemaking and put women's participation and rights at the center of everything we do—everywhere we do it." (United Nations, 2021). Still, we do not know to what extent mediators have a discernible impact on the creation of more inclusive peace processes.

We are also seeing increasingly more assertive mediation efforts by other types of mediators, such as authoritarian states—Qatar in the Gaza war and in the war between Israel and the US against Iran, and Russia and Iran in Syria, as just some recent examples. Yet, we do not know whether these types of mediators have a different effect on the chance for civil society inclusion compared to actors such as the UN or liberal democracies, which have previously dominated the mediation scene and strongly articulated (although not necessarily consequentially implemented) the norm of inclusion. It is clear that we need to know more about this topic. To address this gap, we ask: *if and how does the type of mediator shape the likelihood of inclusion of civil society organizations in peace talks in civil wars*?

There is an emerging consensus in the policy sphere, as well as in the scholarly community, that inclusive peacemaking is important. However, we have limited knowledge on whether and how the type of mediator shapes the inclusion of nonwarring actors in peace talks. We contribute by providing the first large-N analysis across civil wars of how the type of mediator in peace negotiations affects the chance for civil society inclusion. We distinguish between five types of mediators that all feature prominently in civil wars: the United Nations, regional intergovernmental

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organizations, civil society actors, and two types of states: autocratic and democratic.

We start with the assumption that inclusion is generally costly for conflict actors—neither rebel groups nor governments have strong incentives to increase transparency or cede decision-making power. We argue mediators can help the parties overcome this reluctance to inclusion, but vary in both their incentives and capabilities to open the door to the negotiation room. In particular, we argue that different types of mediators vary in three central aspects—norms, mandates, and transparency—which in turn affect inclusion. To assess these claims, we use fine-grained monthly data on civil society inclusion from the Non-Warring Actors in Peacemaking data (NoWA)—covering a diverse set of actors, including women's organizations, youth movements, human rights groups, and religious actors—and combine them with comprehensive data on mediator types from the African Peace Process (APP) dataset, 1989–2018. Our findings show support for our argument, but only partly. We find that when the UN mediates, civil society is more likely to be included in the process. Moreover, we find some evidence that mediation efforts involving both the UN and regional organizations increase the likelihood of civil society inclusion. Contrary to our expectations, our results show that autocratic mediators are no less likely to be associated with inclusive peace processes than democracies.

Our study engages with several important debates. First, this line of research will help advance research on mediation types, which so far has not investigated the impact of mediator types on civil society inclusion in a large-N setting. Second, in a changing landscape in which authoritarian mediators are becoming more visible in the peacemaking scene, this article contributes to the field by exploring whether a mediator's regime type matters from an inclusion perspective. Third, our study adds to the emerging research on organizational differences and dynamics in civil wars by examining whether mediators' characteristics shape the inclusion of civil society organizations.

Previous research

The inclusion of civil society in peace processes has been shown to be an important factor in the transition from war to peace. There is a growing body of research on the dynamics and impacts of civil society (Belloni, 2008; Hellmüller, 2024; Lanz, 2011; Orjuela, 2003; Paffenholz, 2010; Palmiano Federer, 2023; Zahar & McCandless, 2019), and how civil society organizations (CSOs) adapt and learn in transitions to democracy (Bhattarai et al., 2026). Previous research demonstrates that civil society inclusion increases the durability of peace agreements (Nilsson, 2012), that civil society can participate in several different ways beyond being formally present at the negotiation table (Paffenholz, 2014), that inclusion can be incremental (Schädel & Dudouet, 2020), and that civil society participation can impact the quality of agreements (Bell & Kitagawa, 2023, 2024), in particular, the inclusion of women in peace processes increases postconflict peace (Krause et al., 2018). Hence, inclusion matters for several key outcomes related to peaceful transitions from war.

What do we know about the drivers of inclusion? This area of research is still very much in its infancy. Some recent findings suggest that civil society itself can influence inclusion. Previous literature shows that when civil society engages in protests, peace talks are more likely to include nonwarring actors such as civil society and political parties (Nilsson & Svensson, 2023). Relatedly, Dudouet (2021) explores strategies that different types of mass movements may rely on to influence negotiations. Research has also focused on which actors tend to resist inclusion (Cuhadar, 2020) and how the characteristics of the warring parties may influence inclusion (Martínez Lorenzo & Nilsson, 2023). Importantly for this study, an emerging line of research has begun to explore the role of third parties, including mediators' strategies (Hirblinger & Landau, 2020) and the challenges for mediators regarding inclusion (Pring, 2023). Some work has studied how third parties influence different forms of inclusion in communal conflicts in Kenya (Elfversson & Nilsson, 2022), as well as how nongovernmental and regional organizations, in their role as mediators, may shape norms of inclusivity in civil wars in South Sudan and Myanmar (Pring & Palmiano Federer, 2020). While these studies have provided important insights into the relationship between mediation and inclusion, we do not know whether the findings are applicable more broadly. Hence, we still lack sufficient knowledge about how mediator types can influence the inclusion of civil society in peace talks across civil wars.

What do we know about mediator types in peacemaking? Research demonstrates that international mediation is performed by different types of actors, who also vary in their motives and strategies (e.g., Touval & Zartman, 1989). The mediation pool is diverse and includes actors such as countries, regional and global organizations, and individuals (Greig & Diehl, 2012, p. 62). International organizations are prevalent as mediators and have developed their capacity to engage in international mediation (Lundgren, 2017). International organizations have long been recognized as among the most prevalent types of mediators (Bercovitch, 1985, p. 742). In particular, there is extensive research on UN mediation (e.g., Beardsley et al., 2015), but this literature generally does not compare the UN to other types of mediators. The empirical track record for UN mediation is mixed. The UN has been criticized for its inability to effectively mediate in armed conflicts (e.g., Touval, 1994; Zartman, 2023), and internationalized conflicts seem to be a particular challenge (Hellmüller, 2021). At the same time, the UN has a comparative advantage in drawing international attention to a problem, as well as "staying power" that allows it to persist in its efforts even in intractable conflicts (Hampson, 2004). Regarding regional organizations, we know they often take on particularly challenging cases; yet, once we account for these dynamics, mediation by these actors shows a positive effect on peace agreements (Gartner, 2011). Regional organizations can be seen as an insider type of mediator (Elgström et al., 2003), with geographic proximity as one of their main advantages (Nguyen, 2002). Regional organizations comprise a large and heterogeneous category of mediators, varying substantially in the character of their members and the orientation of their organizations.

Sometimes civil society actors serve as mediators. These actors (often referred to as insider-partial), for example, Church leaders mediating in conflicts in Latin America, can, through their networks with the local communities and credibility, act as important peacemakers (Svensson & Lindgren, 2013; Wehr & Lederach, 1991). States are another key type of mediator, with the mediator's regime character highlighted as a central dimension. In this category, we find democratic countries that are far away from the

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theater of conflicts but, as part of their specialized national profile, specialize in mediation, such as Norway and Switzerland. In other cases, and increasingly so, these state mediators are not necessarily liberal democracies, come from the region, and not uncommonly have ties to the parties in conflict, such as Malaysia in Thailand, Kenya in Sudan, or Qatar in Gaza. Hence, while there are significant differences across mediators, we do not yet know how mediator type affects inclusion.

Theory

We develop a framework that draws on two bodies of literature—mediation and inclusion. The premise of our argument is that mediators can overcome conflict actors' resistance to more inclusive processes and create space for civil society actors to enter a peace process, but that international mediators vary in their capacity and interest to do so. We define civil society as the organizational sphere between the state, the market, and the family, consisting of a plethora of groups, associations, and movements, such as trade unions, faith-based organizations, youth actors, and women's groups (Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014). While these are separate from the warring parties, they may have ties to the government or rebel groups. Moreover, while such actors may be civil in terms of being non-armed, our conceptualization is not restricted to actors necessarily characterized by a high degree of civility.

In line with previous research, we view international mediation as a diplomatic activity aimed at finding peaceful solutions to armed conflicts through dialogue, persuasion, or leverage (Bercovitch et al., 1991; Wallensteen & Svensson, 2014). Mediation is a consent-based intervention conducted by a third party that occurs when the conflict parties perceive themselves as unable to resolve or manage their differences. Mediation, as understood here, is a broad term that encompasses categories that can be further subcategorized into facilitation and power diplomacy.

We propose that the type of mediator can influence who gets a seat at the table. The inclusion of civil society is costly for parties involved in conflicts. First, warring parties may resist the inclusion of civil society actors, as their inclusion can reduce their representativeness as legitimate spokespersons. Second, the involvement of civil society can also increase the transparency of the process in situations where the warring parties are vulnerable to exposure of private information (for instance, around popular support, commitment to a cause, or capacity to fight). Third, civil society actors can bring their own issues to the table that governments and rebels alike would like to avoid. While this can make peace processes more attuned to existing grievances and problems within the wider society, it can also make deal-making more difficult. As Cunningham has pointed out, civil society may introduce additional demands, thereby reducing the bargaining space. Therefore, the belligerent parties in conflicts—governments and rebels—generally have incentives to create exclusive negotiations (Cunningham, 2013). While resistance to inclusion may also come from other powerholders in society, it is not uncommon for belligerents to oppose efforts to widen negotiations (Cuhadar, 2020). In sum, it is to be expected that the warring parties tend to resist the inclusion of civil society at the table.

The case of the peace process in Sri Lanka can illustrate this. The Norwegian-facilitated process between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka was restricted mainly to the two main parties. Other political actors from the Tamil and Sinhala communities were not included in the negotiations, despite the presence of many civil society actors active in Sri Lanka (Orjuela, 2003). Both the government and the LTTE resisted attempts to widen the negotiations. The conflict parties' ownership of the process permeated the entire process (Höglund & Svensson, 2011). In the evaluation of the Norwegian mediation efforts, it is noted that "Key steps and breakthroughs—the CFA, the Oslo communiqué, P-TOMS—were negotiated in relative isolation. The government and LTTE kept it that way and the Norwegian team concurred." (Sørbø et al., 2011, pp. 89–90). Opening the negotiation table would have jeopardized the two sides' control over the process and risked creating a platform where critical voices could be raised against the two hierarchical actors. The fact that mediation rests on the consent of the conflict parties thus puts governments and rebel groups in a position to reject any efforts to make peace negotiations more inclusive.

However, mediators may be able to overcome the resistance that conflict parties may have to broader inclusion. Mediators are uniquely positioned to influence how a negotiation process is structured and who is included at the table. Mediators have process power. While this means mediators have agency, it does not mean that mediators determine the process. The mediation process results from negotiations between the mediator and the conflict actors. However, it means that mediators have the opportunity to influence the extent to which the process is inclusive. An essential element of mediators' work is process design, in which the question of who to include is central. As mediation rests on the protagonists' fundamental consent (Hellmüller, 2021), mediators cannot force more inclusive processes against the belligerents' will. But mediators can nevertheless persuade, incentivize, and push, and formulate proposals that may convince conflict parties to agree to broaden the process.

Yet, we argue that different types of mediators vary in their willingness and ability to empower and create space for civil society to be included in the process. Mediators may have much leeway in what they can do, but who they represent is likely to matter. Even mediators who refrain from exerting any influence will still have some impact on how the process is designed, including the format and modalities of negotiations, as well as who will be invited to participate. The willingness and ability of mediators to seek to overcome conflict parties' barriers to inclusion are related to three different but complementary aspects—norms, mandates, and transparency—which vary across mediator types. We recognize that mediation is a complex process where several different types of mediators may be involved as part of the same mediation effort (Crocker et al., 1999; Menninga, 2024), and we theorize here how the presence of one type of mediating actor, sometimes as part of a larger team, can influence the chances of inclusion.

First, the *norm* of inclusion varies across mediator types. For some types of mediators, there is an explicit norm to include wider segments of society in their peacemaking efforts, whereas for others, this norm is less explicitly stated. By norms, we refer to principles, rules, and explicit assumptions that underpin and regulate organizational behavior. Another key distinction among types of mediators lies in how their *mandates* are crafted and designed, including the diverse set of routes for gaining access to various actors in society, which likely affects the likelihood of inclusion.

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Thus, depending on the basis on which mediators are authorized to engage, different types of mediators may have stronger or weaker incentives to try to overcome the conflict parties' resistance to inclusion. On the one hand, deriving mandates from the conflict parties will give mediators less room to set conditions for the process, including inclusion-related demands. On the other hand, deriving the mandate for mediation externally will create more attention for the mediator to design more inclusive processes. Lastly, another difference highlighted in previous research is the degree of *transparency* in the process; some mediators may be required to operate more openly, for example, by being transparent about their eventual progress or setbacks, whereas others can operate more freely behind the scenes. There may be trade-offs between secrecy and inclusion (e.g., Corredor & Anderson, 2024; Wanis-St. John, 2008). Secretive processes are, by their nature, often more exclusive. For instance, it has been argued that negotiations held in secrecy are associated with the exclusion of women (Corredor & Anderson, 2024), and more generally, confidential and secret negotiation processes are often less open to inclusive approaches.

We now turn to discuss how these aspects play out for the different types of mediators: the United Nations, regional intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, autocratic states, and democratic states. First, the United Nations is an important actor in the mediation arena. The United Nations has always had to balance the sometimes contradictory norms of upholding international norms and serving as an unbiased mediator useful to the parties' dispute resolution process (Skjelsbaek, 1986). The underlying norm of inclusion has become a significant principle within the UN system, particularly in its mediation engagements. Thus, as the inclusion norm appears to be prevalent in the UN system (Hirblinger & Landau, 2020), we expect UN mediators to strive for inclusion. This norm can be expected to influence UN mediators to open negotiation processes to parties beyond the warring parties (Hellmüller, 2020). As shown by Hirblinger and Landau (2020, pp. 7–8), various UN documents and policy materials emphasize that inclusion should extend beyond the warring parties and include local stakeholders to help build legitimacy for peace. The landmark resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security is, of course, important in this regard, as is resolution 2250 regarding youth, peace, and security. Moreover, in the Pact for the Future, the leaders of the world declared that they will "[d]eliver on our commitments to ensure that women can fully, equally, safely and meaningfully participate in all United Nations-led mediation and peace processes" (United Nations General Assembly, 2024, p. 17). Thus, this norm of inclusion has been particularly pertinent to the inclusion of women's organizations and, increasingly, to youth actors as well.

Mandates provide the basic authorization for mediators and set limits and aspirations for their mission (Crocker et al., 2003; Nathan, 2017, 2018; Svensson & Wallensteen, 2025). The UN has a formalized mandating procedure, where mediators are assigned by the UN Secretary-General or the UN Security Council (or a combination of those). This means that mediators are appointed not by the parties to the conflict, but by the UN organization. UN mediators have a stronger negotiating position in the process, as their mandates are not derived from the parties themselves (Svensson & Wallensteen, 2025). UN mediators are not, in the same way, dependent on the warring parties, thereby providing them with some leeway to pressure the parties to open negotiations. The question of mandate is related to entry and access questions (e.g., Greig & Regan, 2008; Maundi et al., 2006; Touval, 1993). Commonly, the UN has natural entry points into conflicts when acting in its member countries, but it primarily does so through formal, and particularly state-based, channels. Moreover, more transparent processes will increase the chance that civil society actors can engage. UN mediators need to report back to the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) and/or the UN Security Council (UNSC) through public statements, such as statements and briefings to the UNSC, often with the expectation that the mediators will inform the Council regarding what they have done to fulfill the mandates given to them. Reports by designated mediators to the UNSC are often widely reported in the international press.

Yemen is an illustrative example of where the UN took the lead in expanding the inclusion of civil society actors in the peace process. For example, in 2022, a few months into the UN-mediated truce between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, a platform for a wide set of actors, including civil society actors and activists, was brought together in Stockholm, Sweden. The peace process was mediated by the UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg, who actively sought to include additional actors beyond the main armed protagonists.

In sum, for reasons related to norms, mandates, and transparency, we generally expect that mediation efforts led by the United Nations are more likely to include civil society than those involving other mediators. As these mechanisms are complementary, it is their combination that helps explain why UN mediators are particularly likely to be associated with inclusive peace processes. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: If mediation is carried out by the United Nations, civil society organizations are *more* likely to be included in the peace talks.

Moving to another type of mediator—regional intergovernmental organizations—there is a wider heterogeneity in terms of their expected impact on civil society inclusion. Regional organizations' mandates for mediation are often externally provided and through official channels; thus, the mediators' access is derived externally to the conflict and its actors. Gartner observes that regional organizations are commonly mandated by their constitution to mediate among their members (Gartner, 2011, p. 380). Many regional organizations share the UN norms on inclusion (Pring & Palmiano Federer, 2020). For example, one of the twelve principles for mediation of the African Union Mediation Support Handbook states that "…civil society must be involved in the mediation and negotiations." (AU, 2014, p. 15). Other regional organizations, however, may have less pronounced norms of inclusion. Even with inclusion norms, their specific mandates for involvement do not create space to bring civil society on board. For example, in the AU-led negotiations leading to the Pretoria Agreement ending the Tigray war in Ethiopia, civil society actors were neither included nor consulted. The process was elite-driven and elite-confined (which can also help account for its inherent weakness) (Carpenter, 2025). Being insiders in conflict contexts, regional organizations should also have pre-existing networks and deeper knowledge to draw on (Elgström et al., 2003), which should facilitate their ability to include civil society. However, it is often conducted by assigned member states that do not necessarily prioritize inclusion. At the same time, mediation by regional organizations is sometimes conducted in secret, while other times it is carried out with a high

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degree of transparency and publicity. To illustrate the latter, during the peace talks in Burundi, held under the auspices of the African Union (AU), negotiations were often conducted in plenary sessions and widely publicized. In the Burundian case, there were higher levels of civil society inclusion. Thus, the norms, mandates, and transparency associated with mediation interventions carried out by regional organizations vary substantially within this category of mediators; therefore, we should not expect this type of mediator in general to make civil society inclusion any more or less likely. Hence, we present the following hypothesis:

H2: If mediation is carried out by regional organizations, civil society organizations are *no more or less* likely to be included in the peace talks.

Civil society actors are another type of mediator. While civil society organizations vary substantially in nature and character, we expect them, on average, to be carriers of inclusion norms. Previous research demonstrates that civil society has the agency to create conditions for inclusion (Nilsson & Svensson, 2023), including by influencing the inclusivity norms (Pring & Palmiano Federer, 2020). When civil society organizations serve as mediators, they will generate a mandate from *both* the warring parties and a broader societal constituency, which incentivizes them to create more open processes. While some organizations may work confidentially with the parties, many will often, as movements and organizations representing sectors outside the conflict parties, engage in ways that seek to create more transparent processes. For example, in Sri Lanka, Orjuela identifies informal diplomacy as a key contribution of civil society, which entails upholding dialogue and conveying messages (Orjuela, 2003). By undertaking this task, civil society can act as a mediator, paving the way for further and other types of civil society engagement. Taken together, we expect that inclusive processes are more likely when civil society serves as a mediator.

H3: If mediation is carried out by civil society mediators, *civil society* organizations are *more* likely to be included in the peace talks.

Beyond international, regional, and civil society organizations, countries are the most prevalent types of mediators. Previous research has highlighted the importance of the political system of the mediators more generally (e.g., Crescenzi et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2003). Within the category of countries, one key distinction can be made between democracies and autocracies, and we theorize that this dimension is likely to matter for the inclusion of civil society.

Regarding nondemocratic countries serving as mediators, the norm of inclusion is generally not very strong (such as in several African or Gulf states engaged in mediation). The norms and mandates for authoritarian countries that act as mediators are generally not premised on promoting the inclusion of civil society. Secrecy and the ability to negotiate without the potential for critique from a wider audience are among the key advantages of authoritarian mediators. For example, one of the qualities that marks Qatari mediation is "…its foreign ministry's ability to take decisions without being questioned or scrutinized by the public" (Barakat, 2024, p. 39). At the same time, secrecy entails a trade-off with inclusion (e.g., Corredor & Anderson, 2024; Wanis-St. John, 2008). The lack of transparency we can expect in situations where authoritarian states mediate will thus also increase the risk that processes will be less inclusive.

In contrast, we do not expect this to be true for democratic mediators. Democratic mediators would, in general, be more likely to be associated with more transparent processes. If conflict parties or international organizations mandate a democracy to engage as a mediator, it would generally be expected that its democratic culture would be associated with inclusive approaches. In contrast to authoritarian states, democratic states should be heavily influenced by the norm of including a broader spectrum of society. Indeed, the norm of inclusion is prevalent in mediating countries that are liberal democracies. Countries such as Norway, Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, and Canada have all placed the inclusion of civil society high on their agenda in mediation assignments. This norm is closely associated with the domestic experiences of democracies of peaceful conflict resolution, political compromise, and transparency (e.g., Böhmelt, 2021; Crescenzi et al., 2011). Thus, the norms associated with democracies should lead mediators from democratic political systems to be attentive to the need to include wider segments of society in negotiations.

H4: If mediation is carried out by authoritarian countries, civil society organizations are *less* likely to be included in the peace talks.

H5: If mediation is carried out by democratic countries, civil society organizations are *more* likely to be included in the peace talks

To summarize, based on our theoretical framework, we expect that when the United Nations, CSOs, or democratic states act as mediators, civil society actors are more likely to be invited to the negotiation table. In contrast, when autocratic states serve as mediators, we should be less likely to see civil society inclusion. We further expect that, when regional organizations are engaged, these mediators should, on average, neither be more nor less likely to include civil society representatives. In our analysis, we will thus compare these different mediator types. Yet, as mediators frequently work as part of a larger mediation team, we will also explore mediator types in combination.

Research design

To explore the determinants of inclusion at the negotiation table, we rely on the Non-Warring Actors in Peacemaking (NoWA) dataset, which provides detailed information about different types of civil society organizations (CSOs) in peacemaking efforts, for example, women's organizations, religious actors, or human rights groups (Nilsson & Svensson, 2023). The NoWA dataset is built on the structure of armed conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and uses the government-rebel dyad-month as the unit of analysis, covering 1989–2018. In line with UCDP, armed conflict is defined as a conflict between the government and one or more rebel groups over government and/or territory that results in 25 battle-related deaths in a year (Pettersson et al., 2019). One advantage of using this dataset is that each conflict dyad is followed for 24 months after violence has subsided to capture negotiations held also after a cessation of hostilities, or when violence has dropped below the level of 25 battle-related deaths. The unit of analysis in the current study is the government-rebel

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dyad-month, as we have access to monthly data on both inclusion and mediation. For our analysis, we focus on all conflict dyads in Africa from 1989 to 2018.

The NoWA dataset captures information on negotiations between the warring parties and whether nonwarring parties held a seat at the negotiation table. To qualify as negotiations, the peace talks need to relate to one or more issues in the armed conflict, either concerning the conflict behavior or the incompatibility.[1] As our dependent variable, we use the dummy variable *CS inclusion*, which is coded 1 if a civil society actor was included as a full participant or an observer in the peace negotiations in a given month, and 0 otherwise. Hence, this measure focuses on involvement in these respective roles and thus does not account for civil society mediators. This measure captures civil society organizations, including religious associations, trade unions, nongovernmental organizations, and women's groups. It focuses on civil society actors granted a seat at the table and hence does not capture involvement in so-called parallel talks.

For data on mediation, we rely on the African Peace Process (APP) dataset, which is coded for all conflict dyads on a monthly basis (Duursma & Gamez, 2023). Mediation is defined as "a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict" (Duursma & Gamez, 2023; Mediation Support Unit, 2012, p. 4). In this study, we focus on mediation, given that our criteria for negotiations have been fulfilled. Hence, mediation that occurs outside of negotiations is not captured here.[2] The APP dataset provides information about several different types of mediators. In our analysis, we focus on mediation by the United Nations, regional organizations, civil society organizations, and states. Our measures of mediation are all dichotomous. First, *UN mediator* is coded 1 if the mediation effort involves the United Nations in a mediating capacity. Second, *RO mediator* is coded 1 if a mediation effort involves some type of regional organization, for example, OAU, AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, OIC, Arab League, or EU. Third, *CSO mediator* is coded 1 if the mediation is carried out by either a local or international civil society organization, such as the Catholic association Community of Sant'Egidio, which has been involved in mediation efforts during the civil wars in Mozambique and Uganda. Fourth, the variable *autocratic mediator* measures whether at least one of the mediators was an autocracy. Fifth, and similarly, our measure *democratic mediator* captures whether one or more of the mediators was a democratic state or not. In line with Lindberg (2016), we use the electoral democracy index with a cutoff of 0.5 to distinguish democracies from other regimes. The electoral democracy index ranges from 0 to 1, from nondemocratic to full democracies, and is derived from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2024). Among the democratic mediators, we find, for instance, Switzerland in the peace process in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Norway in the peacemaking efforts in Sudan. As examples of autocratic mediators, we can note Djibouti in Somalia's peace efforts and Algeria in Mali's peace talks. Democratic and autocratic states are sometimes involved in the same peace efforts and, in some cases, they operate alongside other mediators such as international organizations. We are interested in the effects of different types of mediators compared with mediation without such involvement. Hence, to capture this effect, in all our models, we control for *no mediation*. This way, we can, for example, compare the effect of different types of mediators. Strictly speaking, this means that we are comparing a particular type of mediator to other types of mediators as long as these are not concurrently involved alongside the mediator type of interest. To disentangle the effect of different mediator types in combination, we will also explore this in our empirical analysis.

To account for confounding relationships, we introduce a set of controls. Conflict characteristics such as the intensity and the protractedness of the conflict may influence the type of mediators involved, as well as the inclusiveness of the negotiations. Here we use data from the UCDP. We control for the *intensity* of the conflict, distinguishing between conflicts that previously have reached 1,000 battle-related deaths and those that have not. The variable *duration* captures the number of years the conflict has been active since it first reached 25 battle-related deaths in the conflict episode. The vibrancy of civil society in a country could influence both the possibilities for inclusion in civil war negotiations and the type of mediators that become involved. Hence, we control for *civil society robustness*, which is an index from V-dem (Coppedge et al., 2024, p. 314) capturing how robust civil society is "…understood as one that enjoys autonomy from the state and in which citizens freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, however conceived." To account for time trends in our data, we also create a decay function based on the time since last inclusion, *decay since inclusion*, with a half-life of four months.

Results and analysis

Before we present the findings, we provide an overview of how common—or rare—it is for civil society actors to have a seat at the table. See Table A1, Appendix, for summary statistics. In Africa during the studied time period, 172 government-rebel dyads are active; out of these, 89 conflict dyads, at some point, engage in negotiations. Civil society inclusion occurs in 10% of the dyad-negotiation-months and in 24% of the government-rebel dyads that engage in negotiations. Not all peace negotiations are mediated negotiations: 64 out of the 89 conflict dyads that engage in negotiations involve one or more mediators. If we instead look at the number of dyad-months, 355 of 680 negotiations are mediated. Looking more closely at the type of mediator, across all mediated dyad-months, the UN is involved in 25%, regional organizations in 53%, civil society organizations in 11%, autocratic countries in 56%, and democratic countries in 46%. These different types of mediators are frequently involved together with one or more types of mediators. To illustrate, in 46% of cases involving the UN, it serves as a mediator alongside another regional organization. Since mediators often work together as part of a team, we will revisit this issue in the empirical analyses to examine combinations of different mediator types. As we do not have strong priors for which mediator teams to compare, we focus on the UN in combination with the other types of mediators.

We now present our main findings in Figure 1. Since we expect the UN, civil society, and democratic states as mediators to enhance inclusion, we begin by comparing them with other types of mediators (the omitted category in Model 1). We theorized that there are differences across mediators in terms of norms, man-

[1] This is in line with the UCDP definition: https://www.uu.se/en/department/peace-and-conflict-research/research/ucdp/ucdp-definitions. In contrast to UCDP, the negotiation variable in NoWA does not capture tasks that merely focus on humanitarian assistance, prisoners, or amnesties, unless these are part of the incompatibility.

[2] This means that the mediation may have an effect outside of negotiations, something that we do not capture here.

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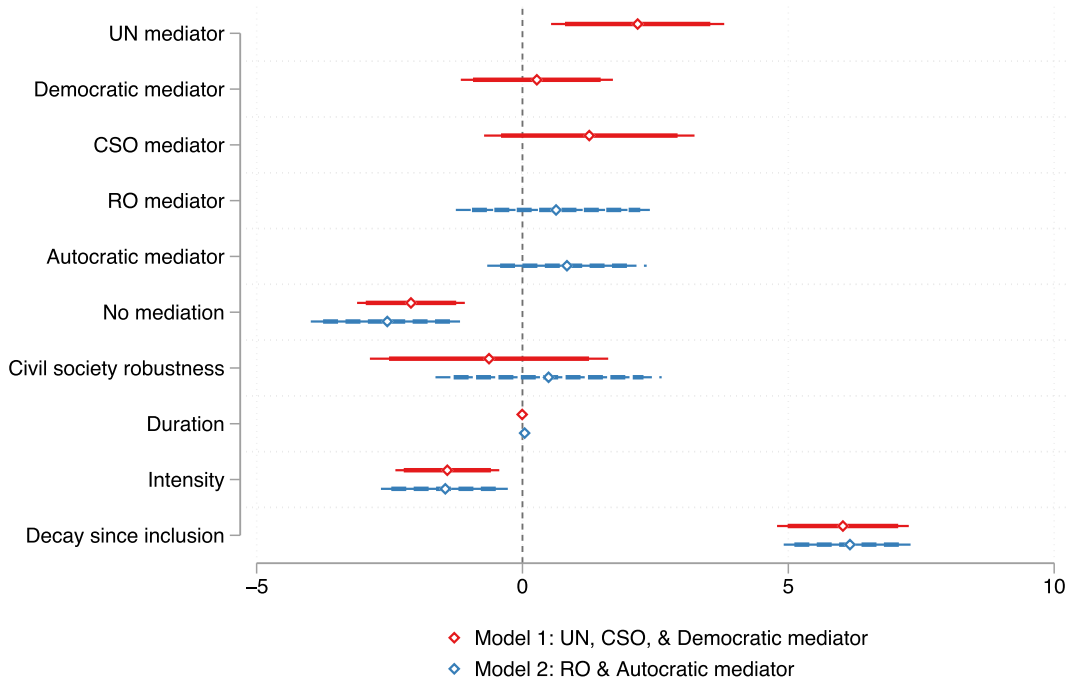

Figure 1 Types of mediators and civil society inclusion. Whiskers show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

dates, and transparency, which should influence the prospects of inclusion. Based on this, we expected UN mediators to be more likely to foster the inclusion of civil society actors. For our statistical analysis, we rely on logit models. As shown in Figure 1, Model 1 (see also Table A2, Appendix), when the UN is involved as a mediator, there is a higher likelihood of civil society being granted a seat at the negotiation table. We thus find support for Hypothesis 1. Mediation by the UN is associated with a higher chance of inclusive peace processes. To account for the potential influence of Resolution 1325, we also estimated the effect of UN mediation before and after 2000. We found a positive and significant effect of UN mediation at the 90% level or better, both before and after the year the resolution came into effect (not reported here). Thus, there is no direct evidence of an impact of the resolution on the UN trajectory.

We also theorized about the potential impact of regional organizations and the likelihood of inclusion. Due to heterogeneity among regional organizations, we did not expect to see an increase or decrease in the probability of inclusion. In line with these expectations, we find no significant effect of regional organizations as mediators on civil society inclusion, see Figure 1, Model 2 (see also Table A2, Appendix). To further disentangle this relationship, we also assess the effect of three common regional organizations—AU, ECOWAS, and IGAD—but none of these shows a significant effect (see Table A3, Appendix). Hence, while the overall result is in line with Hypothesis 2, this may not be primarily due to heterogeneity, as none of these regional organizations individually shows an increased or decreased likelihood of civil society inclusion.

Next, we present our results regarding civil society organizations. See Figure 1, Model 1 (see also Table A2, Appendix). We theorized that this type of mediator may push for the inclusion of civil society actors, due to their generally inclusive norms, mandates from the conflict parties and wider societies, and a relative degree of transparency and openness. We find no evidence that, when civil society organizations serve as mediators, there is a higher likelihood of peace talks involving civil society as either full participants or observers.

Subsequently, we hypothesized that if autocratic mediators are involved, civil society should be less likely to be included. In contrast to our expectations, autocratic mediators do not seem to worsen the prospects for civil society inclusion. There is no discernible negative effect of autocratic mediators (see Figure 1, Model 2, see also Table A2, Appendix). Thus, norms, mandates, and secrecy of autocratic mediators do not appear to incentivize them to seek more exclusive negotiations. We also theorized that democratic mediators enhance the prospects for civil society inclusion. Our findings do not show any support for this theoretical expectation (see Figure 1, Model 1, see also Table A2, Appendix). It is also of interest to compare autocratic and democratic mediators directly vis-à-vis each other. Yet, when we examine the effect of autocratic mediators in comparison to democratic mediators, we do not find any significant differences between these categories either (see Table A4, Appendix). In contrast to Hypotheses 4 and 5, neither autocratic nor democratic mediators display any significant effect on civil society inclusion. Since mediators may be able to influence inclusion more directly when acting independently, we examine autocracies and democracies in the absence of other mediators. When we do, we find that neither autocracies nor democracies tend to include civil society actors when acting alone, which aligns with the overall observation that we do not find significant differences between regime types.

In an alternative specification, we include all the different types of mediators considered here (excluding the *no mediation* variable). We find that all types of mediators, except the democratic mediators, show a positive and significant effect on civil society inclusion at the 90% level or better (see Table A4, Appendix). We

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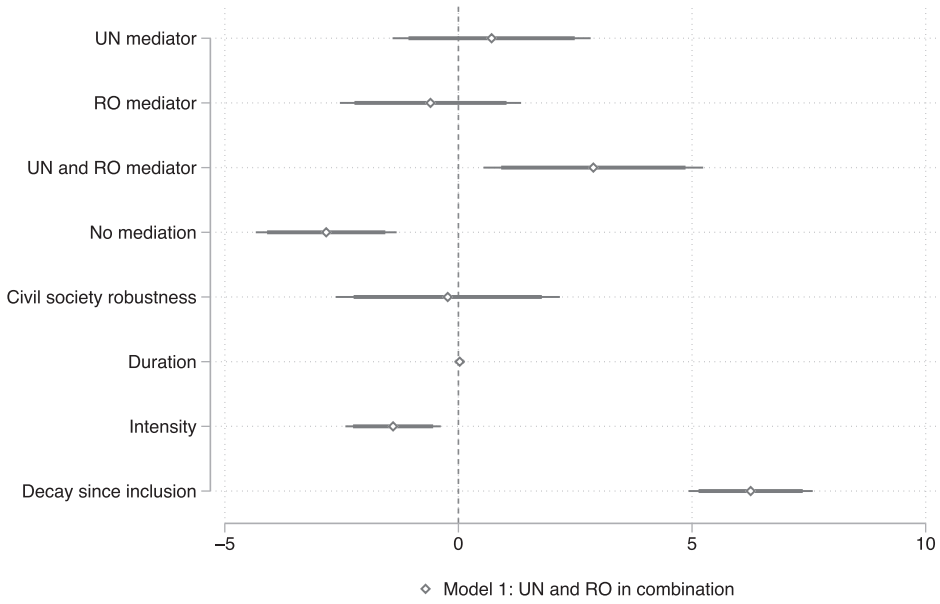

Figure 2 UN and regional organizations as mediators in combination and civil society inclusion. Whiskers show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

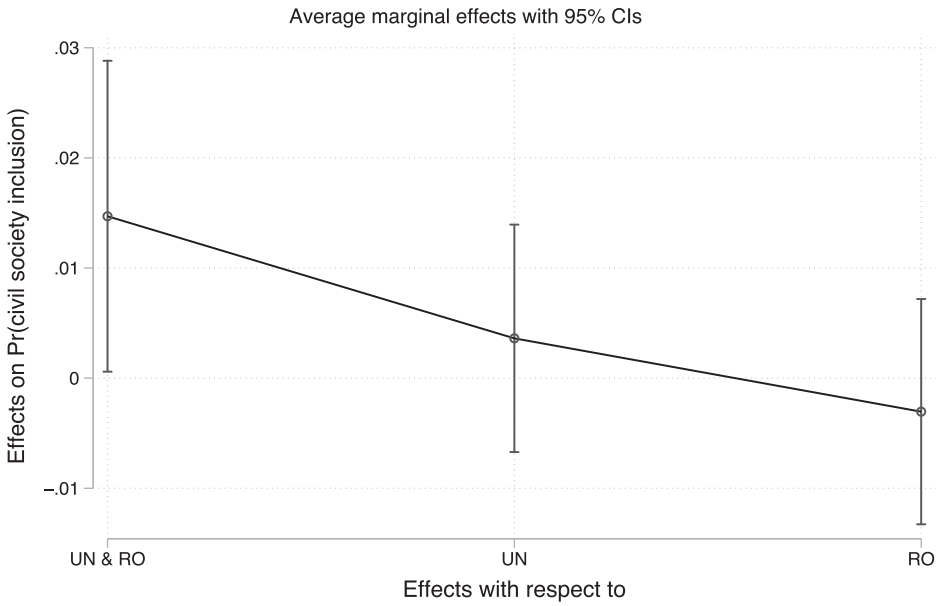

Figure 3 Average marginal effects of UN and regional organizations as mediators and civil society inclusion.

also compare UN mediation to each of the different types of mediators, but none of these tests show any significant differences. The key takeaway from that analysis is that mediation in the context of negotiations matters; however, to better disentangle the effect of mediator types, we next explore whether different mediator types, when combined, may be of importance.

To examine this, we explore mediator types in combination, focusing on the UN alongside other mediator types. First, we consider UN mediators in combination with regional organizations. To assess this, we introduce an interaction term between these types of mediators. As shown in Figure 2, there is no significant effect of either mediator acting on its own, but we do observe a positive and significant effect of these in combination. The marginal effects are presented in Figure 3. If the UN and a regional organization are part of the team, the probability of civil society inclusion increases by 1.5% points, holding all other variables constant. While this may appear as a small increase, it is important to keep in mind that we analyze this at the dyad-month level. It should be noted that we are not able to distinguish different forms of multi-party mediation constellations, for example, whether the mediation efforts by different types of mediators are synchronized or represent rival tracks.

While we have considered estimating the effect of the UN in combination with civil society mediators, there is too little variation to make this meaningful. When looking closer at the cases, we note that it is rare that the UN works together with the civil society mediators, and almost all instances are found in Uganda. Hence, any effect found would be driven by this particular case.

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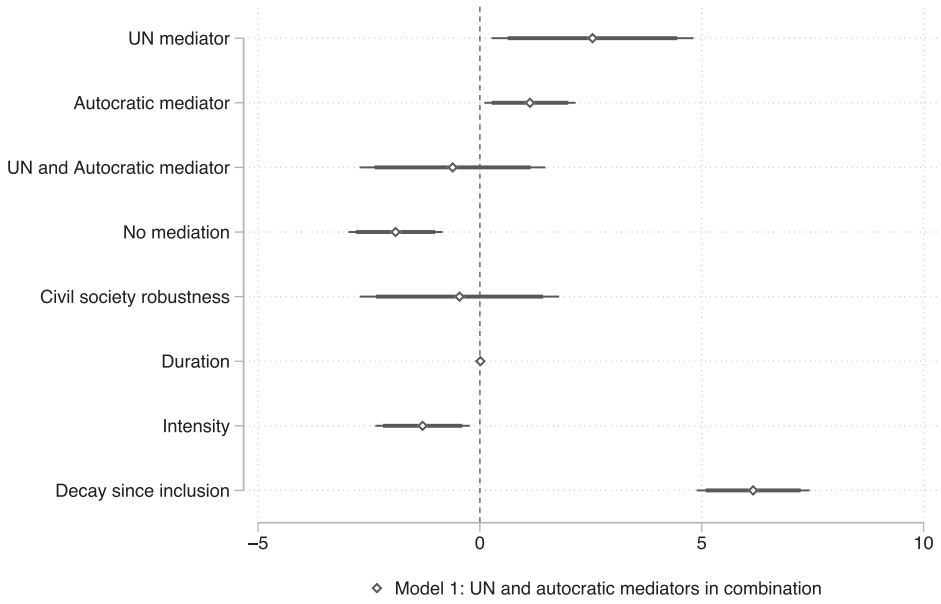

Figure 4 UN and autocracies as mediators in combination and civil society inclusion. Whiskers show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

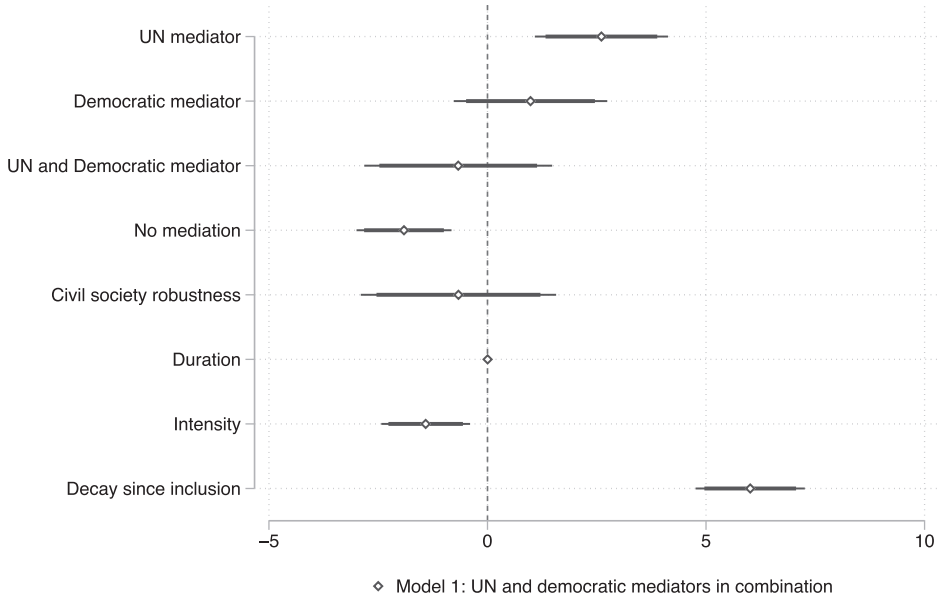

Figure 5 UN and democracies as mediators in combination and civil society inclusion. Whiskers show 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

Next, we consider the United Nations, along with autocratic countries, as mediators. While both component terms are positive and significant, there is no evidence to suggest that the effect is enhanced when these mediators work together. See Figure 4. This indicates that both the UN as well as autocratic mediators may increase the chance for civil society inclusion, but interaction between these two types of mediators does not. Regarding marginal effects, the likelihood of civil society inclusion increases by 1.3% points when the UN is involved without an autocratic country, holding all other variables constant. The corresponding figure for an autocratic mediator without UN involvement is 0.6% points.

We also consider the effect of the UN in combination with democratic countries. We find no evidence of an effect on inclusive peace talks when the UN and democratic countries collaborate. If anything, we observe that the UN is effective even when the other is not present. See Figure 5. The marginal effect increases by 1.3% points when the UN is involved in the absence of democratic mediators, holding all other variables constant. While our theoretical framework suggests that each of these actors should be able to promote inclusion in peace talks independently or together, we find evidence that only the UN does so.

We now assess the results in more detail and provide some robustness tests. Our findings are robust to clustering the standard errors on the government-rebel dyad instead of conflict. The only result affected is the model considering the combination of UN and autocratic mediators; however, UN remains positive and significant, whereas autocratic mediators without UN is no longer

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significant. We also added a control for GDP per capita logged and replaced our measure of civil society vibrancy with a measure of liberal democracy (see Appendix, Tables A6 and A7). Here, we rely on data from the United Nations (2020) and V-dem (Coppedge et al., 2024). The main findings are robust, but the result for the UN in combination with regional organizations is no longer significant when controlling for regime type, and is significant at the 90% level when controlling for economic development. That civil society inclusion may be less applicable to liberal democracies that have already established forms of representation of the wider society has been recognized in the literature (Kyselova, 2023). When controlling for economic development, the UN, in the absence of autocratic or democratic mediators, is significant at the 90% level or better, whereas the effect of autocratic mediators in the absence of the UN is insignificant.

Moreover, selection bias is an obvious concern. It could be the case, for instance, that any association we observe between different types of mediators and inclusion is not due to the mediators themselves, but rather reflects the circumstances in which certain types of mediators choose to intervene. Mediators do not select where to intervene at random, and the selection process may bias our results. We diagnosed this problem by using Clayton and Dorussen's (2022) strategy, using third-party occurrence in the global system as an instrumental variable in a two-stage model. We follow other studies in conflict research, relying on a recursive bivariate probit (e.g., Ruggeri et al., 2017), where we expect the supply of mediation in the system to influence the likelihood of mediation, but not the second stage, civil society inclusion. We focus here on our findings regarding the UN and the effect of the UN in combination with other types of mediators (see Tables A8–A10, Appendix). As an instrument, we use *regional mediation,* defined as mediation efforts in the African region, lagged by two months, excluding the conflict in question. Yet, we note that these models are sensitive to specification, and the instrument and *rho* vary in significance across the models. Our main finding regarding the UN as mediator is not robust across all model specifications. The UN is significant in some models that examine its combination with other mediator types, and, as noted, these vary in the instrument's usefulness and in whether a selection model is appropriate (as indicated by *rho*). We present these models in the appendix. We conclude that as the sample size is limited future research should explore these selection processes in greater depth as more data become available.

Finally, to address concerns regarding selection and unobserved factors across civil wars, we also employed conflict- and year-fixed effects. Our main result regarding the UN remains robust. When considering UN and regional organizations together, we find that this is not robust to conflict- and year-fixed effects in a logit model. However, the sample then includes only ten conflicts. Therefore, we also estimated a linear probability model with conflict- and year-fixed effects, and the results remain robust to this specification. Moreover, when using country- and year-fixed effects instead of conflict- and year-fixed effects, we obtain very similar results. See Tables A11–A14, Appendix.

Conclusions

This study started from the premise that although previous research has shown the importance of including civil society in peace processes, we still need more knowledge about how inclusion is created in the first place. We thus aim to contribute to filling this lacuna by examining how different types of mediators affect the probability that civil society will be granted a seat at the table. Drawing on previous research, we identify three mechanisms that often vary across types of mediators—their norms, mandates, and degree of transparency—that can complement one another and, together, shape mediators' interests and capabilities to include actors beyond the warring parties. Importantly, the overall picture that emerges from this line of research is that mediation matters for inclusion. When mediators engage in negotiations, they can overcome the parties' resistance to more inclusive processes. Compared with situations in which no mediators are engaged, almost all types of mediators are associated with a higher likelihood of CSO inclusion. The type of mediator also matters.

Many actors have advocated for more inclusive processes, particularly the UN, and as we can demonstrate here, UN mediation does make a positive difference. In fact, when the United Nations serves as a mediator, we generally see a higher chance of civil society inclusion, and we further find that the UN, in combination with regional organizations, appears to enhance the prospects of inclusive peace talks. We have not examined the extent to which representatives of included civil society organizations are afforded space to influence decision-making and negotiations. However, being at the table is at least a first step, and often a requirement, for any such influence to occur.

Authoritarian mediators are becoming more prevalent. Western states, such as European countries and the US, are decreasing their mediation engagement, while this vacuum is partly filled by countries such as Qatar, Türkiye, and Oman (Badanjak & Peter, 2024). What we find here, however, does not suggest that authoritarian regimes pose a threat to inclusion. It is also worth noting two limitations of our study regarding the data used. First, the time frame of our study ends in 2018, and it thus remains an open question whether the patterns would differ if we also took into account more recent developments in which authoritarian mediators have become more visible actors in the mediation arena. Second, our empirical focus is limited to Africa, and it remains to be determined whether these findings can be generalized more broadly. Yet, even with these two caveats in mind, the surprising result that the mediator's regime type has no effect on civil society inclusion warrants reflection on and represents an important direction for future research. This may be explained by the fact that democracies, when mediating, sometimes prioritize efficiency over legitimacy, driven by the urgency to end conflicts. It may also reflect insufficient leverage to promote inclusion and overcome the barriers that conflict parties create, particularly when they are mandated to mediate on the behest of the conflict parties. Another avenue for future research is to explore whether other conceptualizations or measures of regime type, for instance, by accounting for differences within democracies and autocracies, would yield different results.

Our findings have implications beyond the debate on inclusion. They tap into an emerging research discussion on mediation mandates. In particular, exploring how different types of mediators affect civil society inclusion helps better understand the extent to which mediators' mandates shape the processes they engage in (Svensson and Wallensteen 2025). Some mediators—the UN, in particular, have underlying normative and often operational (specific) mandates (Nathan, 2017) to include civil society. One way to

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ascertain whether such normative mandates for mediation matter is to examine whether there is systematic variation in the types of mediators and the inclusion of civil society.

In the present landscape, larger peace settlements may be increasingly difficult to reach. Research has therefore recommended the need to also "[r]ecognize that seemingly small successes can make important contributions to change, such as the establishment of participatory mechanisms to broaden contributions to peace" (Whitfield, 2024, p. 116). Civil society inclusion is therefore an important indicator of progress that can be studied, even in the absence of a full-fledged peace settlement. Our study contributed to this scholarly endeavor. By merging insights from research on mediation, we can better understand the conditions under which broader approaches to peacemaking can be enabled.

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Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to this article.

Conflicts of interest

D.N. holds the position of associate editor for the *Journal of Peace Research* and has not peer-reviewed or made any editorial decisions for this paper. I.S. holds the position of editorial committee member for the *Journal of Peace Research* and has not peer-reviewed or made any editorial decisions for this paper.

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Data availability

The dataset and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets.

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