

Electoral Meaning among Ex-Combatants in Liberia

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Exploring the use of Focus Groups

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Abstract

This paper investigates the meaning attached to elections among ex-combatants in Liberia, in particular in relation to the historic elections of 2005. These elections were generally considered successful, and should therefore be instrumental in the consolidation of democracy; this paper investigates the extent of such consolidation that can be seen in their wake. In particular, the meaning attached to elections are described in terms of voting behavior and motivation, as well as the extent of application of the equality principle, and finally in relation to the perceived legitimacy of the elections, based on focus group discussions carried out in the spring of 2008 in Liberia. This paper also tries to gauge the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups as a data collection method. In particular, the creation of trust in a well designed focus group, which given the field of research – post-conflict context – may be especially important. The conclusions presented in this paper are still preliminary, as not all groups have been scrutinized, but point to problems *vis-à-vis* the legitimacy of the elections which may have long term implications for the consolidation of democracy in Liberia. However, other areas, in particular attitudes towards vote buying, show more positive results.

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Introduction

The elections in Liberia in 2005 were extraordinary. Not only did the Liberian electorate elect the first female president in Africa ever, but the elections were also historic from a national perspective. In several different areas the elections excelled expectations; they were *free* and *fair* and were more similar to African peacetime polls than post-conflict elections. The elections were also highly competitive yet violence-free.¹ Given this remarkable assessment, this paper attempts to evaluate the perceptions of these elections among the ex-combatant community in Liberia, and their possible impact on the long-term democratization process.

Elections have come to take on a special, or even inflated, importance in the democracy literature and especially in terms of democratization.² Recognizing that elections matter is, however, not the same as reducing democracy to “the regular holding of elections”.³ Particularly, in this paper, elections matter, not just in and of themselves, but as stepping board for the development of a democratic culture. The consolidation of democracy seems to require not only the holding of elections,⁴ but also the creation of democrats, and this paper investigates those two things. Consolidation of democracy is defined in this paper as what Schedler has called the *deepening of democracy*, i.e. moving from the state of electoral democracy to liberal or advanced democracies.⁵ If we recognize that it is a question of making democracy *the only game in town*, it is not that removed from the creation of democrats (diffusion of democratic values) and the issue of popular support for the political system (popular legitimation),⁶ hence attitudinal issues are clearly at stake.⁷

Thus, this paper aspires to go beyond a mere observer’s view of elections, and instead explore the perception of elections among the citizenry itself, a perspective often ignored in this field.⁸ If election observers declare an election as free and fair,

¹ Harris 2006, 377f, 393, NDI 2007, 29.

² See Elklit and Svensson 1997, 34, Mainwaring 1992, 297 for a discussion on this.

³ Bratton 1998, 52, Schmitter and Karl 1991, 85.

⁴ Elections have been shown to matter for democratization, see Lindberg 2009.

⁵ Schedler 1998, 93, 100.

⁶ Cf Ibid., 91.

⁷ See also Linz and Stepan 1996, 15f.

⁸ Bratton 1998, 62, Mainwaring, 302f.

what does it matter if the electorate themselves cannot relate to such an evaluation? This entails exploring political culture as a way to take stock of the democratization process. It is not the entire citizenry that is the priority in this paper, but the volatile and potentially problematic group of ex-combatants. This group is particularly important as they, if they have the inclination, can more forcefully distort the democratization process, because of their size (100,000) and access to weapons and networks.⁹ In a sense they can also be seen as a litmus test for democracy, if this group lives up to the ideal of democratic citizenship, it is very likely that the entire citizenry will too.

The meanings attached to voting can vary quite extensively, and some can hardly be connected with the ideals of democracy; indeed our research community knows very little about the meaning attached to elections in general, and in Africa in particular.¹⁰ This paper will begin to rectify this, by examining and describing ex-combatants' understanding of, and meaning attached to elections.

The elections in Liberia in October and November of 2005 have generally been hailed as very successful and democratic, indeed some have called them "the freest and fairest elections that Liberia has ever seen".¹¹ Presidential and legislative elections were held at the same time, and since no candidate received 50 % plus one vote, a runoff presidential election was held a little later. In the end, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (a Harvard graduate, minister during the Tolbert regime in the late 70s and a former World Bank employee) won with 59.4 % of the votes against George Weah's (a high school dropout and international football star) 40.6 %.¹² Despite logistical problems, Liberians registered and voted in very large numbers (an estimated 90 % of the population registered, and participation stood at 74.9 % and 61 %, first and second round respectively).¹³ The conduct of campaigns and polling were orderly and professional. The election was also exceptional since no incumbent, nor former warlord was on the ticket, which left the field wide open, making these elections

⁹ Sawyer 2008, 188.

¹⁰ Schaffer 1998, 23, 88-89, 106, 128-129, 131, Young 1993, 307.

¹¹ Harris, 378.

¹² Electoral Division 2006, 51.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

even more different from other post-conflict or founding elections. No party or candidate achieved a landslide victory so common in Africa in general. Weah challenged the election results, but his claims of electoral fraud were, never proven to have systematically biased the results. In general, the elections must be considered as very successful, the question that remains to be answered in this paper is how such elections were perceived by actual voters. Were the elections of 2005 a gateway to democracy for Liberians; can we see evidence of a deepening of democracy among ex-combatants through their electoral experience?

Since the informants for this study represent a wide range in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, military faction and program experience, a lot can be said on the basis of this material.¹⁴ Although they are representative of the ex-combatant community, caution is required, as the sampling process reminds us more of a snowball sample than anything else, and specific groups were targeted rather than a catch-all strategy. The goal of this paper is to present the similarities, the general traits they have in common, and only when called for, present opposing or different opinions when they were voiced by the participants. Given the nature of focus groups, this paper will not offer quantitative summaries of the opinions of the participants, rather this paper sets out to map the types of meanings attached to elections by ex-combatants in Liberia.

This paper also has methodological aims. The evaluation of electoral meaning is a way to gauge the appropriateness of applying focus groups to this field. Focus groups are still a rare tool in political science, and when applied, it is usually as a preamble for designing a survey. This paper makes clear, that it is a data collection method valid on its own, for multiple reasons.

¹⁴ Out of the 99 informants, 9 were non-combatants that participated in programs geared toward ex-combatants. Not all groups are used in the analysis of this paper.

The issue of Elections

Clearly, elections are not the only scene where the political worldview of ex-combatants in Liberia can be observed. However, elections do provide a convenient starting point, both empirically and conceptually. Empirically, because it is an event that is easy to relate to for the participants, and conceptually because we cannot have democracy without elections, and election experiences are likely to shape individual experiences and their understanding of democracy. Indeed, elections are literally the main event where they are able to practice their democratic citizenship.

So what does it mean to be searching for the meaning of elections? To some it includes the issue of legitimacy, the interpretation of outcomes; these struggles over electoral meaning can involve and be directed towards different audiences ranging from the international community, the national elite to the masses.¹⁵ Bratton also makes the argument that where there is contestation over the legitimacy of the election results the consolidation of democracy is unlikely to move forward, and yet the fact that contestation is taking place is a sign that elections actually matter.¹⁶ Others suggest that the meaning of voting in Africa remains tangled up with problematic ideas of representation, and that the vote itself is far removed from the notion of *one person–one vote*, and express communal links and potential material gains, rather than political preference.¹⁷ Clearly, there are reasons to be interested in the meaning of elections in Africa in general and in Liberia in particular.

The Gateway to Democratic Citizenship

As stated by Elklit, the experience and meaning attached to elections has bearing on the democratization process:

Only when voters experience meaningful contestation and participation in the political process [...] will they develop some kind of normative commitment to democracy. That is an ingredient in the consolidation process which should not be forgotten, in spite of the focus that many analyses train on the importance of elites and their behavior.¹⁸

¹⁵ Bratton, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., 63, 66.

¹⁷ Chabal and Daloz 1999, 39.

¹⁸ Elklit 1999, 32. See also Akokpari and Azevedo 2007, 75, Rustow 1970, 344f.

Others are more hesitant about the potential of elections in the democratization process, especially in a post-conflict situation.¹⁹ The purpose of my research is to examine these aspects, particularly as it relates to ex-combatants. In order to systematize the investigation of electoral meaning, I have opted to link it conceptually to the idea of democratic citizenship. A large section of the quantitative literature on democratic norms rarely discuss in detail what these are or why they are included. I have adopted, at least in part, Bratton's division which seems the most appropriate and theoretically sound for this study. Bratton divides the concept of democratic citizenship into three dimensions: behavior (voting, collective action, contact), values (tolerance, accountability and equality) and attitudes (preference for democracy, the nature of the support for democracy and patience).²⁰ This division applies to democratic citizenship per se, and not necessarily the meaning of elections, but by building on this division, one can develop a reasonable approach to understanding the meaning of elections. The framework presented below is no longer a division into dimensions, but rather points of assessment.

The issue of *behavior* is easily incorporated and expanded upon. Political behavior in relation to elections becomes narrowly defined as those acts related to voting and election campaigns. Political behavior can consist of other things as indicated by Bratton, but they are not as election-orientated and are therefore not included. Voting is studied as it relates to *motivation* and *participation*.

Whether, elections are seen as having the potential to change things, matters for determining their perceived importance. In order to gauge their opinions regarding voting, pictures of the election in 2005 were used as a starting point for the discussion. How much weight is attached to this form of behavior, and do they feel motivated to use this opportunity? Whether they voted is also relevant here, and if elections are not seen as a means to impact, clearly you are unlikely to feel motivated to use your vote. Meanings attached to voting vary extensively, and some can hardly be connected with the ideals of democracy.²¹ Depending on the

¹⁹ Sawyer, 178.

²⁰ Bratton 2006, 11-13.

²¹ Schaffer, 88-89, 106, 128-129, 131.

motivation behind, voting may not be an act of democracy. If material gains rather than political agendas are behind the vote, this influences electoral meaning.²² Finally, the degree of participation in elections, and how they feel about participating in the future are relevant here.

With regard to *values*, one aspect in particular is relevant in relation to elections: *equality*. From the standpoint of the citizenry equality is mainly about the right to vote. Is it seen as a right? Who should have it, and secondly how should this right be applied, *one vote-one person*? Thus the aspect of equality relates to how access to voting is portioned out.

Finally, in terms of *attitudes*, the issue is very much support for the principle of democracy for Bratton, and translated to the study of election, this becomes a question of support of the process, i.e. the *legitimacy* of the elections and the election results. Electoral victory does not guarantee the legitimacy of the results,²³ not even in free and fair elections as we shall see later. The elections also impact on the legitimacy of democracy as a whole.²⁴ Who is seen to own the process; did the right person win; did they win with legitimate means?²⁵

Thus, to summarize, electoral meaning will be investigated as it relates to behavioral aspects (*motivation* and *participation*), the application of the *equality* principle regarding the vote, and the *legitimacy* of the elections.

²² Chabal and Daloz, 154.

²³ Ibid., 151.

²⁴ Akokpari and Azevedo, 79.

²⁵ These issues can be linked to what has been termed as the *systemic dilemma* of peacebuilding and democratization. See Jarstad and Sisk 2008, 11.

Methodology

The data collected for this paper used 18 focus groups from four areas in Liberia, three counties: Lofa, Grand Gedeh and Montserrado, and within Montserrado both the rural and urban, i.e. the capital Monrovia.²⁶ The groups included 99 participants, of which 28 were female and 71 were male, and only 90 of those were ex-combatants. The data collection was carried out between April 15th 2008 and June 15th 2008. In this paper only eight of the focus groups are included, with a total of 41 participants. Among these 15 were female and 26 were male.²⁷ See appendix 1 for details on group composition.

Why focus groups?

The answer given here should offer a rough guide as to why this form of data collection is useful and preferable. The reasons are several; some are pragmatic and others are related to ontological issues.

Starting with the more pragmatic reasons, using focus groups gives rise to two forms of knowledge, one is related to the content of the conversation and the second one is related to the interaction between participants.²⁸ Theoretically, one could have an interest in both forms of knowledge, which is the case in this research project as a whole, although not in this paper. The alternative would be to conduct both individual interviews and observational work, which seems inefficient in comparison. It may also be easier for most participants to express their opinions in these groups, than it would be in individual interviews. Holmberg and Petersson claim that in countries where politics is conflictual and the democratic institutions are less established than in the west, people may be more weary to expose their political views to strangers.²⁹ Using focus groups should at least partially help alleviate this problem, although it cannot eradicate it. The presence of a white

²⁶ Two of the groups are only included as points of comparison. One group (5) consists of non-combatants that participated in the same program as ex-combatants. The second group (6) consisted of participants from the veterans' organization.

²⁷ The field work was financed through grants from NAI, SAREC and *Rektors resebidrag från Wallenbergs Stiftelse*.

²⁸ Eriksson 2006, 44. See also Morgan 1997.

²⁹ Holmberg and Petersson 1980, 68.

female westerner should also become less intimidating in the group setting than in the individual interview; in focus groups there certainly is both safety and power in numbers.

The ontological reasons can be divided into two: the depth of human opinion and the nature of human opinion. Survey work and even individual interviews presupposes that all individuals have an opinion regarding all questions. Particularly with regards to surveys, people may often feel forced into offering an opinion, which infringes upon the reliability of the study. We simply do not know if the opinions were offered because it was theirs, or because they felt like they ought to have a response.³⁰ Clearly, the answers we care about are those the interviewee feel convinced about. The focus group setting allows you to take this into consideration; no one is forced to answer anything and the social pressure to give *any* answer is reduced as others are likely to speak instead.

The other aspect relates to whether opinions are independent of context, the nature of human opinion. Is the self independent of her context? If she was, then one “merely [has] to ask the right questions and the other’s ‘reality’ will be revealed,”³¹ but to think that we are able in individual interviews to isolate the individual from the group is illusory, for one, we cannot completely eradicate the interviewer. The production of knowledge cannot be atomized in this fashion, even if we try.³² Pool asserts that:

the social milieu in which communication takes place modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying ‘true’ opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide the baseline.³³

Taking the idea seriously, that “opinions are created in the act of communication in which they are expressed,”³⁴ should not only entail that we are sensitive to the impression the interviewer herself may make, but that creating the social milieu that reflects our target group the best should also be attempted in order to capture

³⁰ Ibid., 73f.

³¹ Gubrium and Holstein 2002, 12.

³² See also Drury and Stott 2001, 62f, Gubrium and Holstein, 5-13.

³³ Pool 1957, 192.

³⁴ Ibid., 194.

something that, although not conceived of as the *true* opinion – because there are doubts as to whether such a thing exists - can be considered as a more fruitful form of individuals' opinions. The use of focus groups is in part an answer to this call; they frame the individual in a group context, and in a group context relevant to the research subject at hand. To disregard this element of human opinion completely when collecting data seems defective. Focus groups, on the other hand, allow for a nuanced form of research, which allows the participants to reflect and reconsider their statements, in the relevant group context.³⁵

One problem often raised by researchers not familiar with focus groups, is: What is your unit of analysis? This is a valid question, but perhaps not as problematic as one might think, and especially not if you accept the idea that opinions are never independent of context. The question is also relevant when we discuss the issue of political culture. Can political culture be measured in one individual, or do we need to rely on aggregate data? As has been expressed by Patrick, political culture is a question of something shared among individuals, thus the unit of analysis can be thought of within this tradition as “individuals in their plurality”.³⁶ The focus group offers a way to capture this: the individual in the group context. Thus, the unit of analysis is not one nor the other, but rather a combination of the two, or a vacillation between the two. Clearly, this can create problems if the researcher is out to establish variation solely at the individual level, or solely at the group level, but in this research and in many other cases that is not the goal.

Focus groups allow room for social pressure to conformity,³⁷ and this is partly its purpose but it can also be troublesome if it gets out of hand. This is why it is important to pay attention to the group interaction displayed in each group, in order to determine the level of group conformity. I would argue that different personas are visible through this type of data collection; the groups do not homogenize to such an extent as to render invisible differences in opinion or language use. However, in this particular paper the main unit of analysis will remain the group because the issue

³⁵ Eriksson, 43.

³⁶ Patrick 1984, 285f.

³⁷ Eriksson, 284-285.

area covered here is quite limited; there is not enough data to evaluate and assess each individual adequately.

Selection and selection bias

The selection of focus group participants was done strategically, as delimiting the entire population is problematic. The groups were recruited in different ways. In some cases I approached the ex-combatants through the elders of the village, those in charge of the program or trainers known to have participated in the program. In one case I also visited a training facility to speak directly to some of those currently enrolled. And finally, I worked with a veterans' organization in Monrovia, and through their network contacted potential participants and invited them to come to a discussion.

Examining the individual characteristics of the ex-combatants involved, the potential for generalization is not stifled, although the composition differs from the population composition of ex-combatants in Liberia. In part, this has been intentional, so as to allow for important comparisons, e.g. the female component was larger than in the population (30 % vs. 22 %).³⁸ The groups also cover 14 of the 16 ethnic groups of Liberia, and have an age range of 13 to 44 years (mean 28). The participants also match the geographical spread and reintegration program experience³⁹ of the ex-combatant community.⁴⁰ With a small and strategic sample it is hard to match the distribution of demographic characteristics of the ex-combatant population, but the important issue is rather if these individuals are different from individuals with the same characteristics in the population. There are no apparent reasons to suspect that this is the case, except for some self-selection issues, see below. For more details on group composition, see Appendix 1, but in general the groups were as homogenous as possible, with respect to gender, faction, program experience and ethnicity.

³⁸ Bugnion, et al. 2006, 30.

³⁹ The training programs included in the sample are Young Men Christian Association (YMCA), Monrovia Vocational Training Center (MVTC), the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) and German Agro Action (GAA). The other groups were either involved in formal education or no program at all.

⁴⁰ JIU 2008, UNDP 2004, 38.

Self-selection is to some extent a problem, as the participants can choose not to take part; in this case it is likely that those who do participate will hold more positive democratic values. All participants were given monetary compensation for their time and to cover transportation costs, to the amount of five USD (varying slightly depending on transportation needs). This economical provision should have decreased the number of those who particularly enjoy talking and debating in the sample, and encouraged others not so interested in participating.⁴¹

Doing the interviews

Each discussion began with a discussion over the research aims, issues of confidentiality and academic independence over some light snacks and drinks. Before starting the recorder all were asked whether they consented to recordings being made of the talk. The average length of the discussions was an hour and 45 minutes, but ranged from one hour to three hours. The size of each group varied from four to seven, but most groups included six participants. A group of six worked the best, as it was large enough to create a feeling of a group and small enough to ensure that the length of the discussions remained reasonable. At the end of each discussion, they were asked to fill in a short survey that mainly covered demographic issues. Often I would read the survey out loud and they would check the appropriate box, or I would assist them in that as well depending on the reading and writing skills of the particular participants.

All groups were exposed to the same opening questions, but follow-up questions varied depending on the discussion itself. In order to achieve more depth in the material, the groups were also prompted by questions such as: *Could you give an example of what you mean? Why do you think that is? Does everyone agree? Are there any alternatives? Why do you say that?* Sometimes the discussion had to be cut of, in order to cover all of the questions included. Only very rarely was there a need to stop a discussion that was of substantial interest to the researcher.

⁴¹ There is a large debate concerning the appropriateness of paying research participants, but the arguments in favor of reimbursing participants for their time and costs outweigh the negative. For a more detailed discussion on this, see e.g. Grady 2005, McKeganey 2001, Russell, et al. 2000.

The bulk of the discussion concerning elections was towards the end of each talk, and initiated through the presentation of images depicting the election in 2005. The pictures included people voting, standing in line and campaigns for both Johnson Sirleaf and Weah. The use of pictures was motivated by two things, firstly it helps as a memory device to take participants back to the situation at hand, and as the pictures were neutral they also allowed participants to voice spontaneous thoughts and ideas in relation to the pictures. All of the groups really liked looking at the pictures. This method of broaching a topic made it easier for the participants to gear the conversation towards issues that mattered to them, thus allowing them to set the agenda within an area predefined by me as the researcher.

Another technique employed in the focus groups, although not relevant to the analysis with respect to election, was the witnessing of the interaction between the participants, in order to evaluate the extent to which they have an open mind to other people's arguments and ideas. Partly, this was one way around asking them to comment on fairly abstract ideas such as dissent. Depending on the views of the participants they may have explored this on their own, but if not, I simulated an alternative opinion to their ideas (verbal stimuli/manipulation),⁴² and by observing their reactions to this determine their open-mindedness.

In the groups carried out in the rural setting, language was more of a problem. All interviews were carried out in English, but in the four groups in Grand Gedeh, a translator was present. I would start the conversation in English, and when required, this would be translated into Krahn, and if a participant so wished they could express themselves in Krahn and the translator would then translate it back to English for me. The majority of the conversation was always carried out in English however. In the two groups in Lofa County, no such separate translator was present, but individuals in the group would help to explain words or questions in Kissi to those not as fluent in English as themselves.

One issue that proved hard to mediate was the issue of my allegiance. The participants had no problem seeing me as disconnected from the government of

⁴² Bositis 1988, 336.

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Liberia, but were harder to convince of my non-allegiance to the NGO community. This prompted explanations of my work not only before the interviews, but also at the end of the discussions to further press my academic independence.

Electoral meaning among ex-combatants

Voting: motivation and participation

It was clearly the norm among all the participants to vote if you were able to. The few, who were unable to vote, cited sickness, registration problems, or that they were underage as the reason. There were three main reasons for voting: personal gains, community gains and the rights argument.

Vote buying, in the form of money, rice, or smaller local projects, has been common in Liberia for a long time, and was confirmed during the elections of 2005.⁴³ Clearly, if vote buying is part of the electoral process, if the elections become about the exchange of material resources rather than registering political preferences, then casting a vote is no longer the same type of political action as in the latter case.⁴⁴

Motivation based on personal gains was judged very differently by the groups. In some (3 and 11) this behavior was seen as reprehensive and one of the problems of politics in Liberia, whereas for other groups (1, 2 and 4) the complaint was more about failed promises. Politicians would make promises in exchange for votes, leaving the ex-combatants feeling let down. This experience led them to question the honesty of all politicians. In other groups (4 and 7), participants expressed experience with vote buying but without evaluating the event positively or negatively. Given the history of vote buying, it is not surprising that this view and experience still lingers on. What is more surprising and promising is that several, although having experienced this behavior, are condemning it as inappropriate. One caveat is, however, in order here, professed norms or expectations on future behavior does not necessarily entail actual adherence in the future.⁴⁵ This paper does not purport to predict future behavior, but rather describe current reasoning and norms among ex-combatants in Liberia.

Those that were motivated by community gains (3, 4, 11 and 12) often mentioned development (trade, investors, and work opportunities) and peace, or for the price of

⁴³ Sawyer, 195, Barr and Moor 2005. See also Bratton, 63.

⁴⁴ Chabal and Daloz, 154.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Utas and Christensen 2008.

rice to come down (4).⁴⁶ Quite often the need to get a good leader was cited as the main reason for why they voted (3 and 11). A good leader was also seen as instrumental towards the goal of increasing foreign investment and development (1). A few also expressed the more explicit argument of representation, that voting was about selecting those that could represent your interests (12), or at least those that could forward your interests the most: “but I think about my future plan. [...] I only think what... who will be usually best for me. You know, yeah. That I’ll vote for. Not because you... what you give me, I will vote for you.” (Bill, 3).⁴⁷

Others also made the argument that it was their *right to vote* hence they felt motivated to exercise it. Not using your vote meant that you were giving up your say in the process, which could be detrimental both to the voter herself, but also the specific candidates and for the overall result (8 and 12).

For some, the elections provide the only, or main, point of interaction with politicians. Democracy only happens for them on Election Day (2). The weight of elections, i.e. whether elections had the potential to change things, was often iterated, although some also stated that elections can bring both good and bad things and the outcome depended upon the character of those elected (Bart, 3), and others explicitly mentioned that elections is not the only way to change things (7).

In terms of whether they want to vote again in the future, most answered in the affirmative. As two women in group four commented on the issue of voting again next time: “We still want development. – We vote for development” (Bethany and Barbra). Thus, issues that motivated them in the last election remain relevant for their motivation in the next election. Notably group two was an exception to this, who did not feel motivated to vote period next time. One participant also added that next time he would *shut his eye*, i.e. not listen to politicians and be fooled, but only take his own opinions into consideration when voting (Brandon, 3). No one was explicit about using their vote to punish politicians who had failed them during the

⁴⁶ Rice has always been a political issue in Liberia. The country has never been self-sufficient in rice production, although it is the main staple food. In 1979 the rice riots in Monrovia was the result of government intention to increase the price of rice, and some claim that this event set Liberia on the path toward war. The price of rice has continually been increasing over the past decades, and in April of this year 50 kg of rice cost 34 USD, compared to half that amount just six months prior. Thomas 2008-04-22.

⁴⁷ The names used are not the real names of the participants.

previous mandate (creating accountability), although some did express that they were voting for someone different.

The ex-combatants do not seem to differ from the general population, regarding voter turnout: voting was carried out in large numbers. The issue of vote buying is more worrisome, although there is a dissent towards such behavior, hence an awareness of what democratic behavior should be. In addition, representative issues or community gains matter for motivation. Overall, there is reason for a positive appraisal, especially since most feel motivated to vote again; the vote represents a useful way to participate in the democratic process for ex-combatants.

Equality: the right to vote

This area probably provides the most surprising and positive results concerning the extent of democratic citizenship among ex-combatants in Liberia. Issues of ethnicity and citizenship have been polarized and problematic for a long time in Liberia. In the 1980s President Doe made matters worse through his declaration that Mandingos⁴⁸ were citizens; it was perceived by many as a *naturalization* of the Mandingos, i.e. that they were not truly Liberian but only accorded such rights through the acts of a partial president. During Doe's regime Mandingos and Krahns were positively differentiated from other ethnic groups through the actions of the state. During the war (1989-2003) things became even more polarized, especially in relation to Mandingos; the Taylor regime beleaguered the Mandingos in particular, and the composition of the different factions during the years of war also reflected this polarization, notably the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) catered towards the Mandingos, as did the United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO-K), a possible precursor to LURD. During the elections there were accusations of Mandingos either not being allowed to register and vote, or fraudulently coming in from neighboring countries to vote. Although such claims have been exaggerated, Mandingos did make up a large part of Liberian refugees and

⁴⁸ The ethnic group of Mandingos settled later than other groups in Liberia, but they were present when the American Colonization Society landed in Liberia and created the Liberian state. They do not have a majority in any of the counties in Liberia, and are often seen as different partly because of religious issues (they are more often Muslim than Christian), but also because of business acumen.

as such were disproportionately disenfranchised.⁴⁹ Clearly, during the elections of 2005, the issue of Mandingo citizenship was a contentious one.⁵⁰

Most of the participants were adamant about an inclusive *demos*, which included Mandingos. Naturally, one might suspect that this was a product of the interview context, and a wish to conform to what they thought was sought for. But if this was the case, the data still speaks to an interesting finding, namely they perceive an inclusive *demos* as the *norm*, as the 'correct' answer. The groups that were in favor of extending the right to vote to Mandingos included 2, 3, 4, 8, 11 and 12. Although not all participants extended the right to vote to Mandingos, this issue usually created some discussion, were defenders of an inclusive *demos* were the most vocal and expressive. This highlights the usefulness of focus groups; it allows us to gauge the strength of opinions. Thus, although not universal, there is reason to be optimistic given the extent of this polarization in Liberia in the past.

The right to vote was linked to the issue of citizenship, i.e. no citizenship - no right to vote (4 and 8). It did not matter whether such individuals were totally disinterested and ignorant about politics, if they could claim citizenship the focus groups were steadfast in their extension of the right to vote to such groups. Interesting to note is that there was some disagreement regarding the voting rights of prisoners (8).

The right to vote was often seen as a legal concept, as something regulated through law and the constitution. When asked to defend the reason for why only people 18 years old or older should be allowed to vote, only such legal claims were invoked and they would only on occasion offer a substantive argument for why such delineations made sense. Thus, being Liberian and adult (18 or more) were the two basic requirements for access to the vote (11 and 12).

The groups were also very forthright about the equality of the vote, the idea of *one vote-one person* was very much engrained in the participants. Playing the devil's advocate I tried to suggest that more educated people for instance should be given

⁴⁹ Harris, 380, ICG 2005, 3.

⁵⁰ Akokpari and Azevedo, 86, ICG, 19, Sawyer, 194.

more votes, based on their knowledge and experience, an argument they did not buy into, but argued against (2, 3 and 4).

The inclusiveness of the vote was greater than could have been expected. The right to vote is plainly linked to citizenship and being Liberian, the only other qualifying characteristic is age. The notion of *one vote-one person* also seems quite engrained among the participants.

Legitimacy: election results

The issue of legitimacy plays into elections in several ways: the rules of the game, long-term legitimacy, contested election results and fulfillment of election promises.

Concerning the rules of the game, several of the participants agree with the notion of majority rule (1, 3 and 12). Some even described this as a local tradition, as something inherently Liberian to abide by results in this manner (Bishop, 12). Several of them also recognized that if you do not win this particular election, there is always the next election that you can turn to; this must be seen as evidence of long term trust in the process (3). As one participant expressed it: “if they not win, the second time they can win” (Bethany, 4), thus they recognize that elections are a recurring event, and that losing is not a permanent state. There were other positive appraisals of the elections as well, which point to the legitimacy of the elections, for instance some participants expressed a sense of pride in the election results (that a female won the presidential election) (Kirby, 11), others described the elections as free and fair, a first for Liberia, which also led them to make a positive appraisal of the overall state of democracy in Liberia (Chad and Curtis, 12).

However, a fair amount of the participants felt disappointed by the elections. This was related to unfulfilled expectations, either in the form of campaign promises not carried out, or a more general disappointment linked to the behavior of politicians after the elections. The participants often mentioned a feeling of abandonment after the elections; politicians stopped listening or interacting with the electorate, again resurfacing the feeling that democracy only happens during elections (1, 3, 4, and 11): “Yeah, the elections, you know, I feel good. But, what I want... for the government to do I can’t see them do it. So now I am feeling bad

again.” (Brandon, 3). Others felt cheated by politicians as it relates to representation, i.e. the self-interests of the politicians take over as soon as the election is over. One participant expressed it thus: “the representatives are not able to represent, those we send, they are not able to represent us” (Kasper, 11) and another participant expressed it as “they are only there for themselves, they are not there for... the poor people, grass-root people, they are not there for them” (Kevin, 11).

In several of the groups the issue of the presidential elections and Weah’s loss did put in question the legitimacy of the elections as a whole. In Liberia you need 50.0 % plus one vote in order to carry that particular election, thus when Weah and Johnson Sirleaf failed to do so (Weah received 28.3 % and Johnson Sirleaf 19.8 %),⁵¹ a second round of presidential elections was required. In the end Johnson Sirleaf won the run-off with 59.4 % of the votes to Weah’s 40.6 %. Weah contested the results, and only conceded a month after the results were declared, and rigorous court appeals.⁵²

A lot of the participants did not understand why a run-off election was organized; their line of argument was that Weah got the most votes, so he won the first round, hence there was no need for a second run. Thus, in part, the idea of run-off elections seemed to several as staged by those who wanted a different result. Some were very clear about who they suspected of cheating, namely the international community, others were more vague, but had doubts about whether the will of the people was accurately reflected in the election results (Kasper, 11).

Several statements made by the Weah campaign, such as Weah winning the first round with 62 % of the votes, or claims that he could only be defeated through massive cheating engineered by the USA,⁵³ have certainly contributed to the current perceptions among his supporters and ex-combatants. These statements and the campaign’s refusal to accept the election results have played a part in the creation of this mistrust, but what is important to note is that almost three years later this suspicion still lives on. The groups covered so far have not been typical regarding this issue; this experience was much more common among the urban ex-

⁵¹ Electoral Division, 48.

⁵² Most losers in African elections tend to challenge the election outcomes, see Bratton, 55.

⁵³ Harris, 390, NDI, 24.

combatants. The longevity of such issues seriously decreases the legitimacy of the elections and could potentially have detrimental effects on the overall democratization process. Indeed, quite a few felt less motivated to participate next time as a result of these issues.

In comparison to the general sentiment among several of the ex-combatants that Weah was cheated out of the election, in reality several things actually worked in favor of Weah rather than Johnson Sirleaf: the native-American-Liberian divide, wealth, media coverage and endorsements by other leading politicians.⁵⁴ However, it has been harder to validate or repudiate the idea that the international community had decided on Sirleaf Johnson. Clearly, there were no blatant moves in favor of Johnson Sirleaf, but it has been hard to ascertain the sources and size of the campaign contributions to Weah's and Sirleaf's campaigns; thus it is impossible to determine whether Johnson Sirleaf had an advantage in terms of resources and an implicit support from the West.⁵⁵

Summary

The conclusions offered in this paper are preliminary as not all groups are included, however, the general trend is believed to be similar. Overall, there is reason both for cheer and concern. Participation seems to be the norm, and there is considerable critique against vote buying. Given Liberia's long history of vote buying, the presence of such critique is noteworthy. In terms of applying the principle of equality, ex-combatants are living up to such ideals, although there are exceptions relating to the inclusion of Mandingos. Yet, a large part did extend the right to vote to Mandingos, as long as they could claim Liberian citizenship, and again given Liberia's history of polarization between the Mandingo community and the other ethnic groups, this is cause for cheer. Finally, in relation to the legitimacy of the elections, the most notable problem is the lack of trust in the results.

The group that was the most disillusioned with the experience of voting was group two; they were mainly disappointed with politicians failing to live up to

⁵⁴ Harris, 384, 388, IRI 2006, 13, NDI, 20-22, Sawyer, 185, 187.

⁵⁵ Harris, 390, 378, IRI, 10, NDI, 14, 15.

promises made during the election, this disappointment was so extensive that they had doubts about voting next time. The group most explicit about their critique concerning vote buying was group 11. This group was also the most expressive about their political worldview out of all the groups. In general, four out of the groups would have to be characterized as overall positive, namely group 3, 4, 11 and 12. In particular, group 12 and 3 clearly expressed strong opinions in favor of a democratic citizenship, and perhaps more strikingly, group 3 and 11 did so despite negative experiences.

What characteristics can be said to be of importance relative to electoral meaning? The two youngest groups, seven and eight, were clearly the least expressive in general, and in relation to elections most of them were too young to have participated at all. Life experience in general, rather than level of education was a larger determinant of political awareness. Distrust concerning the election results was more present among the urban groups; possibly this could be connected to a closeness to politics in general (many had participated in rallies for Weah). In the countryside however, there is rarely any competition in the media space. The feeling of abandonment and failed election promises, was more abundant in Grand Gedeh (group 1, 2, 3 and 4). In the 1980s this region became closely involved with politics, as President Doe originated from Zwedru, the county capital, and this point of comparison is of importance for their current day experience of politics. Yet groups two, three and four are noticeably dissimilar regarding their assessment and conclusions regarding voting. Especially group two stands out, the reasons for which are rather obscure at present, but could be related to more intense negative experiences with politicians.

Conclusion

This paper has taken stock of the emerging democratic culture among ex-combatants in Liberia, through an analysis of their personal experiences of the elections of 2005. The data used for this paper, was collected in three areas of Liberia during the spring of 2008, through focus groups. In this paper, 8 out of 18 groups were scrutinized. The analysis was focused on the group level, as the particular issue of election was too narrow to allow for a detailed analysis on the individual level. In the larger research project dealing with democratic citizenship in its broader sense, such individual analysis will be possible however.

Certain observations are pertinent concerning the chosen methodology. There seem to be certain advantages of this form of data collection in a post-conflict setting. Ex-combatants have often been described as a problematic group to do research on, particularly regarding truthfulness, which seemed to suggest that only lengthy participant observation would yield the data necessary.⁵⁶ Although such issues are never eradicated, the fact that the participants openly voiced their experience concerning vote buying, is evidence of a willingness to be open about issues that are usually seen as sensitive or precarious, which should indicate that this problem was not that grave. Compared to the individual interview setting, trust was established at a much faster rate, which in a post-conflict context is vital.

Their opinions are clearly exposed to social desirability bias, both internally among themselves but also in relation to me, the interviewer. However, if they filtered their opinions accordingly, such data is not useless, but rather the opposite. Such opinions are perceived by the ex-combatants as the norm, or the 'correct' answer, and thus reflect their social reality in a more accurate way. The group context also creates a reliability test, as the groups were not aware of what questions would be discussed, hence they could not coordinate their answers in advance. Hence, the content of the conversation was subjected to a form of control, as the participants had the opportunity to object or present an alternative view if there was disagreement or differing experiences.

⁵⁶ See Utas 2003 for more details.

Clearly, some of the groups did exhibit very uniform opinions; but some did not – hence I believe this variation has more to do with the participants themselves than the instrument used for data collection. In these cases I am led to conclude that it relates more to their culture of discussion and debate; i.e. these participants value uniformity and consensus to a much higher degree than other participants. Analysis of the individual differences is still possible within focus groups.

Some of the notable disadvantages of using focus groups in this field relate to the problem of representativeness and the range of questions that can be covered in such a data collection method. In a survey you are able to cover a wider spectrum of questions, but the answers will not be as nuanced as those obtained from focus groups, nor will you be able to evaluate the strength of such opinions. In terms of the representativeness of the results obtained, this is hampered by the use of a strategic sample, the presence of an attitude cannot be easily quantified and generalized. Focus groups map out the territory of opinions, and if significant group differences exist one can deduce that such differences of opinions are likely to exist among those segments of the population.

There are three points to be made regarding the issue of democratization. Firstly, the perception of the legitimacy of the elections, partly a result of Weah's behavior, is a serious problem for the consolidation of democracy. Contestation over election results stands in the way of consolidation, but one could argue that contestation as such denotes the increased importance of the elections. In the national perspective this point seems valid, but for the specific individual such distrust of the election results are much more problematic; the legitimacy of the system as such becomes questioned, and democracy may not be the only game in town. Secondly, for some, it appears democracy only happens on Election Day, in light of consolidation this is not a positive result either; ideally the empirical experience of democracy should extend beyond elections. Thirdly, however, there are rays of light; some of the ex-combatants are clearly aspiring higher ideals, particularly *vis-à-vis* motivation for voting. The notion of vote buying as something reprehensive and the notion of representation, and of 'one person - one vote', are penetrating the electoral political

culture of ex-combatants. This is noteworthy, particularly in the face of the otherwise weak political institutions in Liberia.

The investigation of the extent of democratic citizenship among ex-combatants does not stop with the experience of election, but it does yield some interesting conclusions. Given the heritage of oligarchy and warlords, i.e. what Sawyer describes as a lack of “a political *tabula rasa*” in Liberia,⁵⁷ the prospects for democracy in Liberia are not as grim as suspected. However, an election generally considered such a success has also failed to produce unconditionally positive results with respect to the general electorate. This highlights the importance of taking into consideration the experience of the masses when exploring the importance of an election in the democratization process. If we are to evaluate an election, international observations are important, but in terms of the consolidation of democracy, the experience of the voters themselves is fundamental.

The conclusions in this paper also have implications for organizing and handling elections in transitional contexts in general. Simplicity matters. If the electorate cannot relate to and understand the principles and organization of the election, even in the face of rigorous voter education (as in the case of Liberia), this poses serious problems for the acceptance of the outcome and ultimately the consolidation of democracy. This is a serious challenge for organizers of elections. Is the lack of legitimacy the failure of voter education? I am hesitant about making such a conclusion, as the idea of the *right to vote* had made inroads. Rather, I believe this is due to competing channels of authority: different stories were told concerning the election results, which is not the case concerning the right to vote. Another aspect is the issue of broken election promises, an event not unfamiliar to developed democracies, but an aspect of more fundamental importance in the transitional context. Failure to live up to election promises in the Western context may be detrimental to the specific parties involved, and in the long run damage the overall trust in the democratic system (as witnessed by decreasing voter turnout), but for transitional countries they pose a much graver threat. In the face of weak

⁵⁷ Sawyer, 199.

institutions, persons matter, and when they fail there is no offsetting force that can attenuate such experiences, thus the potential impact is greater. This calls for attention to the behavior of politicians and campaigns during transitional elections.

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Appendix I: Group Composition

No	Program	Area	Gender	Faction	Ethnicity	Size	Comment
1	GAA	Rural	Male	MODEL	Krahn	7	
2	GAA	Rural	Female	MODEL	Krahn	5	
3	GAA	Rural	Male	MODEL	Krahn	4	
4	GAA	Rural	Female	MODEL	Krahn	6	
5	MVTC	Urban	Male	-	mixed	5	Not combatants
6	Various	Urban	Male and female	mixed	mixed	6	Staff at veterans' organization
7	UMCOR	Rural	Male	Mixed	Kissi	4	two were not ex-combatants
8	UMCOR	Rural	Female	GOL	Kissi	4	
9	MVTC	Urban	Male	GOL	Bassa/Kpelle	6	
10	MVTC	Urban	Male	LURD*	Bassa*	6	
11	None	Rural	Male	GOL/LURD	Kpelle	5	
12	YMCA	Urban	Male	LURD/GOL	Mixed	6	
13	YMCA	Urban	Female	GOL	mixed	6	
14	None	Urban	Male	GOL	Loma	6	
15	YMCA	Urban	Male	MODEL	Kpelle*	6	
16	MVTC	Urban	Male	MODEL*	Mixed	6	
17	University	Urban	Male	GOL	Mixed	5	
18	High School	Urban	Female	GOL	Gio*	6	

* indicates that the group consisted mainly of such individuals, but not exclusively

Groups in bold are included in the paper.