We find that previous participation in the conflict on one side or the other, or exposure to war-related violence (either first-hand, as a family member, or as a witness), leaves a long-lasting impact on people’s perceptions of the peace agreement. The effect of exposure to violence is not mainly due to the type of violence, but to its source. For example, in Nepal, either having participated on the rebel side, or having been exposed to violence perpetrated by the government, are associated with stronger support for the restructuring of the state into a federal state and the abolishment of monarchy. Participation on the rebel side is also positively associated with support for the integration of Maoists into the Nepalese army and Maoist participation in the interim power sharing government. Similarly, those who participated in the conflict as part of the state police are much more negative to the restructuring into a federal state.

In Northern Ireland, former police as well as victims of Republican violence are more negative than others to the early release of paramilitary prisoners. Former members of the police are also more positive to the decommissioning of arms of paramilitary groups and to the declaration that Northern Ireland remains part of the UK if a majority so wishes, while victims of Republican violence are more negative to the provisions of a peace reform. The effects of former participation on the Republican side or exposure to state violence are consistently opposite. Victims of state violence and former Republican paramilitaries display less support for the decommissioning of paramilitary groups. Among former participants on the Republican side, there is also stronger support for the early release of paramilitary prisoners, and more opposition to the declaration that Northern Ireland remains part of the UK if a majority so wishes. Similar divisions, albeit less clear-cut, can also be found in Guatemala. Smaller differences in Guatemala could be the result of the long periods (20 years) that have passed since the end of the armed conflict, combined with a very young population – median age in the sample is 33 years, compared to 45 years in Northern Ireland. In sum, these findings indicate that people’s understanding of the conflict and the means necessary to end it is contingent on their previous conflict experience.

Implications of Popular Support

The recent referendum in Colombia, in which people rejected the proposed peace agreement with a very small margin, illustrates that popular support for peace agreements should not be taken for granted. As described here, people’s war experiences correlate with their approval of the means to end war. If peace negotiations fail to take into account these experiences and the cleavages shaped or reinforced by the war, elite compromises may not be viewed positively. In Colombia, the negotiators had to return to the table, searching for more acceptable bargains. But we also know that disapproval of peace agreements may have even worse consequences than the cold peace of Bosnia-Herzegovina after the 1995 Dayton Accords to the Rwandan genocide following the Arusha Agreement of 1993. The seemingly successful peace agreements in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland have had 10–20 years to gain wider acceptance, and initial scepticism may have been much higher. The relationship between popular support for peace agreements and durable peace has yet to be properly analysed by the larger research community. In our cases, support for the peace agreements is associated with higher levels of trust in political institutions. It is possible that agreements are popular when they succeed in ending conflict. However, one might also posit that agreements are able to secure durable peace precisely when and if a large majority of the population perceives them to be legitimate.

Although none of the cases in our study has seen a return to war, legacies of the conflicts are still present. In Guatemala, post-war violence is extensive and a majority of the survey respondents report political and criminal violence as a severe problem, including concerns about harassment by former rebels. More encouraging, impunity is being challenged, as former military leaders are currently on trial, and some are already sentenced, accused of being responsible for crimes against humanity during the war. Our data shows that these trials are widely supported by ordinary people.

In Nepal, the post-war period has seen several cases of political turbulence, most recently in 2015, when the passing to the new constitution led to turmoil and protests against the proposed borders of the new federal provinces. The protests led to about 50 fatalities, mostly due to a harsh response from the police. The PAP survey shows that the federal structure and the proposed borders are among the most controversial reforms currently being passed. However, the relationship between opposition against the federal restructuring and protest-related fatalities is not clear-cut. Closer inspection of the data indicates that the combination of support for a federal state, but opposition to the proposed borders, is associated with more protest-related fatalities.

Northern Ireland remains deeply divided. 40% of the survey respondents still consider necessary the peace walls separating Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, despite political disagreements and occasional suspensions of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the power sharing Executive continues to govern jointly, and a majority of respondents think that the political situation has improved in the post-conflict period.

Notes

1. Note that this policy brief reports on preliminary, and hence somewhat uncertain, results.

2. Source for Figure 3: PAP survey data; conflict deaths from Dov, Quy-Toan & Lakhani Iyer (2010) Geography, poverty and conflicts in Nepal. Journal of Peace Research 47 (6), 733–748.

Public Support for Peace Agreements: The Cases of Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland

Peace agreements are often negotiated and signed by elites. The recent referendum in Colombia revealed that such elite compromises may not always be supported by citizens in conflict-affected countries. Yet, survey data from Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland indicates that peace agreements in these countries have strong popular support. While sociodemographic differences are not important for explaining variations in support, group identity, victimhood and former participation in the conflict are better predictors of support for the various provisions of the agreements.

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THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of consequences of and trends in conflict. The project contributes to new conflict analyses within political science and international relations by working through and quality-based analysis of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

THE AUTHORS

H. Eide is Chief Researcher at SINTEF.

THE PROJECT

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute established in 1959 whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

Notes

1. Overall, the peace agreements enjoy strong popular support across the cases.

2. Socioeconomic characteristics are not consistent predictors of support for peace agreements.

3. The popularity of specific provisions seems to follow the political fault lines of the conflict.

4. Failure to take into account war experiences and cleavages shaped or reinforced by the war may prevent popular approval of peace agreements.

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Peace agreements are usually the result of lengthy bargaining between conflicting parties that will not sign unless they believe they have more to gain from collaborating than from continuing to fight. As such, peace agreements rarely represent ideal solutions or roadmaps for future development. However, some are ambitious documents aiming at a fundamental re-structuring of society through a series of specific reforms.

In this policy brief, we examine public support for peace agreements in post-conflict contexts. The analyses are based on original survey data from Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland. These countries, representing three different world regions, are all relatively peaceful and democratic, but have a history of internal armed conflict that ended with the signing of a peace agreement. The Post-Conflict Attitudes for Peace (PAP) survey was conducted in the three countries during January–July 2016 (combined N = 3,229), using a questionnaire specifically developed for the purpose. We measure both overall support for the respective peace agreements and support for key provisions (1 = strong disagreement; 5 = strong approval).

Despite the elite-led nature of the creation of most peace agreements, the PAP survey documents strong popular support for the agreements that were signed in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland (Figure 1). The mean score of about 3.8 translates into “approving” of all the provisions representing the agreements that were signed in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland. While the difference is statistically marginally developed for the purpose. We measure both overall support for the respective peace agreements and support for key provisions (1 = strong disagreement; 5 = strong approval).

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2006) in Nepal was signed after 10 years of intense conflict between Maoist insurgents and the state, a conflict that claimed more than 120,000 lives. A key aspect of the agreement was to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. The agreement also abolished monarchy, established that Nepal would be a federal state, and called for socioeconomic restructuring, improved minority rights, and the end of gender and caste discrimination.

In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) put an end to 30 years of armed conflict. While negotiated, the conflict was less intense than in Guatemala and Nepal, with about 3,700 people killed. The agreement restored a devolved power-sharing government within the United Kingdom, and included provisions for executive power sharing between the Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists.

In the three cases, group inequalities played an important role in setting the conflict. In Guatemala, the insurgent groups supported marginalized groups like the rural, indigenous people, lower castes and ethnic minorities. In the territorial conflict of Northern Ireland, the dominant cleavage was between the largely Protestant community, which remained loyal to the United Kingdom, and the Catholic community, which has traditionally been closer to Ireland.

Variations in Popular Support

As for all phenomena that do not vary much (in this case represented by very widespread support), it is hard to identify determinants that explain the little variation there is. Overall, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics are only weakly associated with level of support. Moreover, the associations vary from one context to another. For instance, while men are more approving of the peace agreements in Guatemala and Nepal, there is no gender difference in Northern Ireland. While the Nepalese poor display stronger support for the peace agreement than their more prosperous peers, there are no significant differences between people at different income levels in either Guatemala or Northern Ireland. In Guatemala, most of the violence took place in poor, rural areas. In both Nepal and Guatemala, marginalized groups, such as rural, indigenous people, and lower castes and ethnic minorities were most affected. In Guatemala, we find no identity-based difference in the level of support.

Minorities and Group-Based Grievances

Group-based inequalities and grievances, ethnic composition, and distribution of power among different ethnic groups have been much studied as possible drivers of internal armed conflict. As potential support bases for future spoilers, it is relevant to also look at group-level differences in support for the peace agreements. While group-based cleavages play a role in all three conflicts, there is a striking lack of difference in the repels of those who respond that they are discriminated against due to their language, religion, ethnicity, or caste, compared to the majority. However, Catholics in Northern Ireland, who have historically been discriminated against, are significantly more approving of most provisions in the peace agreement than Protestants. In ethnically heterogeneous Nepal, there are also significant differences between people who identify with ethnicities and castes. Notably, the most advantaged groups (Newar people and people of the Brahmin caste) display significantly less support, whereas groups that have been more discriminated against are more approving. In Guatemala, we find no identity-based difference in the level of support.

Geographical Variations in Support

Many internal armed conflicts have clear urban-rural dimensions or are geographically limited to certain regions. In both Nepal and Guatemala, most of the violence took place in particular areas. In Guatemala, there is little evidence of geographical variations in support for the peace agreements, whereas in Nepal, the level of support is significantly lower in the three capital districts than in the rest of the country. District-level differences explain about 20 per cent of the variance in overall support for the peace agreement, and people in rural areas show substantially higher levels of approval. Statistical analysis yields some support for the assumption that people in more conflict-affected areas are more approving of the peace agreement (Figure 3). In Northern Ireland, local differences explain a substantial proportion of the variance in level of support, at least in part a result of the segregated settlements of Catholic and Protestant communities.

A growing literature addresses the effects of conflict-related experiences and traumas on individual behaviour and attitudes after conflict. So far, evidence has been mixed. While some studies suggest violence may engender personal growth and increased political participation, others find that conflict exposure causes negative outlook perceptions. Overall, our data indicates that having participated on either side of the conflict is not associated with diverging levels of support for the peace agreement. However, looking at support for specific provisions, those who have participated tend to follow the fault lines of the former conflict, particularly in Nepal and Northern Ireland.
Popular Support for Peace Agreements

Peace agreements are usually the result of lengthy bargaining between conflicting parties that will not sign unless they believe they have more to gain from collaborating than from continuing fighting. As such, peace agreements rarely represent ideal solutions or roadmaps for future development. However, some are ambitious documents aiming at fundamental re-structuring of society through a series of specific reforms. In this policy brief, we examine public support for peace agreements in post-conflict contexts. The analyses are based on original survey data from Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland. These countries, representing three different world regions, are all relatively peaceful and democratic, but have a history of internal armed conflict that ended with the signing of a peace agreement. The Post-Conflict Attitudes for Peace (PAP) survey conducted was in the three countries during January–July 2016 (combined N = 3,229), using a questionnaire specifically developed for the purposes. We measure both overall support for the respective peace agreements and support for key provisions (1 = strong disagreement; 5 = strong approval).

Despite the elite-led nature of the creation of most peace agreements, the PAP survey documents strong popular support for the agreements that were signed in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland. The mean score of 3.8 translates into “approving” of all the provisions included in the survey. Overall, the Northern Irish peace agreement enjoys somewhat stronger support than the other two agreements. While the difference is statistically significant, it is also relatively small. There is greater diversity of opinion in Guatemala than in the other two countries. While it is hard to know how representative these cases may be for other post-conflict contexts, the findings from the survey indicate that peace agreements in these three protracted conflict contexts enjoy widespread support.

Breaking down overall support into support for specific key provisions shows that while most provisions are popular, some are clearly more controversial than others (Figure 2). The most striking finding is still the widespread support for most provisions covered by the survey.

The Cases

The Guatemalan Agreement of Firm and Durable Peace (1996) ended 36 years of internal armed conflict between leftist guerrillas, the government, and the military, which led to more than 200,000 civilian deaths. The state was responsible for most of the violence, which has left a legacy of impunity. The peace agreement included the formal recognition of indigenous people and their rights, the promise of a land reform and several other measures to reduce inequalities and expand political and economic rights.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2006) in Nepal was signed after 10 years of intense conflict between Maoists insurgents and the state, a conflict that claimed more than 13,000 lives. A key aspect of the agreement was to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. The agreement also abolished monarchy, established that Nepal would be a federal state, and called for socioeconomic restructuring, improved minority rights, and the end of gender and caste discrimination.

In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) put an end to 30 years of armed conflict. While protracted, the conflict was less intense than in Guatemala and Nepal, with about 3,700 people killed. The agreement restored a devolved power-sharing government within the United Kingdom, and included provisions for executive power sharing between the Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists.

In the three cases, group inequalities played an important role in shaping the conflict. In Guatemala and Nepal, the insurgents enjoyed support from marginalized groups like rural, indigenous people, and lower castes and ethnic minorities. In the territorial conflict of Northern Ireland, the dominant cleavage was between the largely Protestant community, which remained loyal to the United Kingdom, and the Catholic community, which has traditionally been drawn to Ireland.

War-Time Experiences and Support for Peace Agreements

As for all phenomena that do not vary much (in this case represented by very widespread support), it is hard to identify determinants that explain the little variation there is. Overall, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics are only weakly associated with level of support. Moreover, the associations vary from one country to another. For instance, while men are more approving of the peace agreements in Guatemala and Nepal, there is no gender difference in Northern Ireland. While the Guatemalan poor display stronger support for the peace agreement than their more affluent counterparts, there are no significant differences between people at different income levels in either Guatemala or Nepal. While the young display stronger support for the agreements in Guatemala and Nepal, old people in Northern Ireland are significantly more positive than the young. However, the differences are statistically small.

Minorities and Group-Based Grievances

Group-based inequalities and grievances, ethnic composition, and distribution of power among different ethnic groups have been studied as possible drivers of internal armed conflict. As potential support bases for future spoilers, it is relevant to also look at group-level differences in support for the peace agreements. While group-based cleavages played a role in all three conflicts, there is a striking lack of difference in the replies of those who respond that they are discriminated against due to their language, religion, ethnicity, or caste, compared to the majority. However, Catholics in Northern Ireland, who have historically been discriminated against, are significantly more approving of most provisions in the peace agreement than Protestants. In ethnically heterogeneous Nepal, there are also significant differences between people of different ethnicities and castes. Notably, the most advantaged minorities (Newar people and people of the Brahmin caste) display significantly less support, whereas those who have been discriminated against are more approving. In Guatemala, we find no identity-based difference in the level of support.

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Many internal armed conflicts have clear urban–rural dimensions or are geographically limited to certain regions. In both Nepal and Guatemala, most of the violence took place in rural areas. In Guatemala, there is little evidence of geographical variations in support for the peace agreement, whereas in Nepal, the level of support is significantly lower in the three central districts than in the rest of the country. District-level differences explain about 20 percent of the variance in overall support for the peace agreement, and people in rural areas show substantially higher levels of approval. Statistical analysis yields some support for the assumption that people in more conflict-affected areas are more approving of the peace agreement (Figure 3). In Northern Ireland, local differences explain a substantial proportion of the variance in level of support, at least in part a result of the segregated settlements of Catholic and Protestant communities.

Provisions for Guatemala:
1. Transforming the National Police into the National Civil Police
2. Removing internal security as an area of responsibility for the Guatemalan army
3. Allowing the INHG to transform into a political party
4. Agreement to have a land reform
5. Strengthening of civil and democratic control over the army
6. Establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission
7. Forcible removal of the remains of the victims of genocide
8. Restructuring the National University of Guatemala
10. Establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission
11. Provision for Northern Ireland:
12. Early release of paramilitary prisoners
13. Establishment of a power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive
14. Reform of the police to address the under-representation of Catholics
15. Establishment of a devolved, democratically elected Northern Ireland Assembly
16. Declaration that the Northern Ireland Assembly is a part of the United Kingdom and that the majority of the population so wishes
17. Normalisation of security arrangements group reductions
18. Measures aimed at combating unemployment and eliminating differences in employment between the two communities
19. Decommissioning of paramilitary groups

Figure 2: Support for key provisions (mean, error bars)

Figure 3: Conflict deaths (1996–2006) and mean support for the peace agreement in Nepal, by district

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CONFLICT TRENDS 03/2016

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We find that previous participation in the conflict on one side or the other, or exposure to war-related violence (either first-hand, as a family member, or as a witness), leaves a long-lasting impact on people’s perceptions of the peace agreement. The effect of exposure to violence is not mainly due to the type of violence, but to its source. For example, in Nepal, either having participated on the rebel side, or having been exposed to violence perpetrated by the government, are associated with stronger support for the restructuring of the state into a federal state. Participation on the rebel side is also positively associated with support for the integration of Maoists into the Nepalese army and Maoist participation in the interim power sharing government. Similarly, those who participated in the conflicts as part of the state police are much more negative to the restructuring into a federal state.

In Northern Ireland, former police as well as victims of Republican violence are more negative than others to the early release of paramilitary prisoners. Former members of the police are also more positive to the decommissioning of arms of paramilitary groups and to the declaration that Northern Ireland remains part of the UK if a majority so wishes. Similar divisions, among army prisoners, and more opposition to the declaration that paramilitary groups and to the declaration that the proposed borders of the new federal provinces are better predictors of support than other factors, such as the type of violence, but to its source.

Although none of the cases in our study has seen a return to war, legacies of the conflicts are extensive and a majority of the survey respondents still consider the peace agreements to be legitimate. The recent referendum in Colombia revealed that such elite compromises may not always be supported by citizens in conflict-affected countries. While survey data from Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland indicates that peace agreements in these countries have strong popular support. While sociodemographic differences are not important for explaining variations in support, group identity, victimhood and the means necessary to end it is contingent on their previous conflict experience.

Implications of Popular Support

The recent referendum in Colombia, in which people rejected the proposed peace agreement with a very small margin, illustrates that popular support for peace agreements should not be taken for granted. As described here, people’s war experiences correlate with their approval of the means to end war. If peace negotiators fail to take into account these experiences and the cleavages shaped or reinforced by the war, elite compromises may not be viewed positively. In Colombia, the negotiators had to return to the table, searching for more acceptable bargains. But we also know that disapproval of peace agreements may have even worse consequences. From the cold peace of Bosnia-Herzegovina after the 1995 Dayton Accords to the Rwandan genocide following the Arusha Agreement of 1993. The seemingly successful peace agreements in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland have had 10–20 years to gain wider acceptance, and initial scepticism may have been much higher. The relationship between popular support for peace agreements and durable peace has yet to be properly analysed by the larger research community. In our cases, support for the peace agreements is associated with higher levels of trust in political institutions. It is possible that agreements are popular when they succeed in ending conflict. However, one might also posit that agreements are able to secure durable peace precisely when and if a large majority of the population perceives them to be legitimate.

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In Nepal, the post-war period has seen several political turbulences, most recently in 2015, when the passing to the new constitution led to turmoil and protests against the proposed borders of the new federal provinces. The protests led to about 50 fatalities, mostly due to a harsh response from the police. The PAIP survey shows that the federal structure and the proposed borders are among the most controversial reforms currently being passed. However, the relationship between opposition against the federal restructuring and protest-related fatalities is not clear-cut. Closer inspection of the data indicates that the combination of support for a federal state, but opposition to the proposed borders, is associated with more protest-related fatalities.

Notes

1. Note that this policy brief reports on preliminary, and hence somewhat uncertain, results.


PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PEACE AGREEMENTS: THE CASES OF GUATEMALA, NEPAL, AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Peace agreements are often negotiated and signed by elites. The recent referendum in Colombia revealed that such elite compromises may not always be supported by citizens in conflict-affected countries. Yet, survey data from Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland indicates that peace agreements in these countries have strong popular support. While sociodemographic differences are not important for explaining variations in support, group identity, victimhood and former participation in the conflict are better predictors of support for the various provisions of the agreements.