Fostering civic engagement in polarized, autocratic regimes: Evidence from a field experiment in Ethiopia

February 22, 2025

Scholars and practitioners have made a sustained effort to increase citizen participation in public life, based on the premise that greater participation enhances government responsiveness and builds social capital. Most of this work has been conducted in stable, democratic societies and focuses on outcomes related to political participation, such as voting. However, in autocratic settings characterized by conflict, such efforts must contend with risks that new engagement will take a sectarian form or channel participation into political institutions seen as illegitimate or repressive. Using a pre-registered field experiment in Ethiopia, we test an intervention designed to increase youth participation with civil society organizations in an electoral autocracy characterized by extreme polarization. Four months post-treatment, we observed increases in both self-reported and behavioral measures of civic participation without increasing polarization. However, some of this engagement was mobilized toward sectarian causes. Importantly, the intervention worked through new and existing social ties, showing that social networks are a powerful tool for youth engagement.

Word count: 10,789 (9,187 excluding references)

Introduction

Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers view robust civic engagement – voluntary participation of citizens in organized social and community life – as an essential ingredient for government responsiveness and social cohesion (Dahl, 1973; Mo et al., 2022; Paxton, 2002). Major strands of democratic theory and empirical research argue that a healthy civil society fosters government responsiveness in both democratic and nondemocratic settings (Putnam, 1994; Tsai, 2007) and that individual engagement in civic organizations can lead to greater political participation (Verba et al., 1995). By creating bonding and bridging ties, participation in civil society can also strengthen social capital by increasing interpersonal trust and social cohesion (Lijphart, 1997; Putnam, 2001). At the same time, research consistently finds surprisingly low rates of civic engagement, even in highly democratic countries (Rosenberg, 2018).

Motivated by evidence of high social returns to participation, there is a large literature investigating how interventions, especially civic education, can increase citizen engagement in public life. However, most of this evidence comes from relatively democratic contexts with low levels of societal conflict and where citizens see government as fairly responsive (Finkel et al., 2024; Finkel and Smith, 2011; Gottlieb, 2016; Harris et al., 2021; Larreguy and Marshall, 2017; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017).[1] Relatedly, these interventions focus on political participation outcomes, such as voting or contacting government officials (Ferrali et al., 2023; Finkel et al., 2024; Gottlieb, 2016; Harris et al., 2021; Hyde et al., 2023; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017).

While the bulk of our evidence on "what works" comes from liberal, low-conflict societies, donors target most civic education funding to autocracies. In 2022, the United States alone allocated $207,113,972 in foreign assistance to promote civic engagement. More than 75% of this spending went to Electoral Autocracies ($104,679,136) and Closed Autocracies ($52,313,646).[2] As Figure 1

[1] Hyde et al. (2023) and Ferrali et al. (2023) are notable exceptions, focusing on Cambodia and Morocco, respectively. According to VDem, Ethiopia has similar scores to Cambodia and Morocco during their respective study periods across a wide range of democracy indicators, but Ethiopia has significantly higher levels of polarization and political violence.

[2] Data from https://www.foreignassistance.gov/. Accessed February 22, 2025.

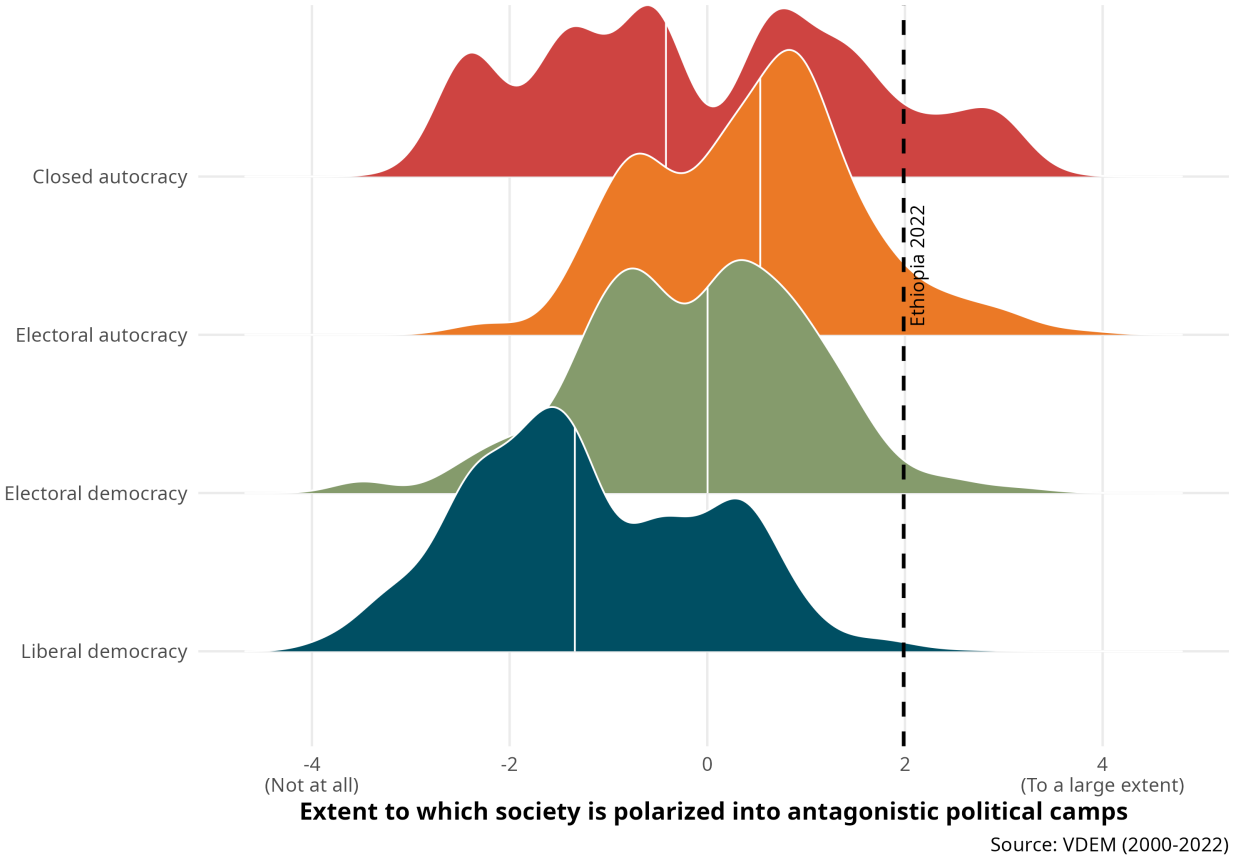

Figure 1: Distribution of societal polarization (*v2cacamps*) by regime type (*v2x_regime*). Polarization is highest among electoral autocracies.

shows, these are also the most politically polarized countries. The result is a mismatch between academic scholarship and the development field.

We argue that using this evidence to design interventions in autocratic, polarized contexts raises two concerns. First, more informed citizens in less democratic contexts may deliberately avoid engaging with political institutions seen as illegitimate or repressive (Croke et al., 2016; Karklins, 1986). Therefore, it is especially critical to consider modes of participation that are autonomous from government institutions and political parties in autocratic contexts. Second, in extremely polarized contexts, there is increased risk that mobilization will exacerbate societal divisions or channel participation toward sectarian causes (Berman, 1997; Satyanath et al., 2017). Interventions in such contexts must include measures to minimize this risk. As development aid comes under increased attack in the U.S. and elsewhere, ensuring that development projects are

fit-to-purpose is more important than ever.

We address these concerns through Tolerant Engagement Forums (TEFs), one-day workshops designed with a local civil society organization (CSO) to increase citizen engagement with civil society without increasing ethnic tensions or engagement with sectarian groups and causes. The TEF model connected students with high-level representatives from non-sectarian CSOs and provided them with actionable volunteer opportunities. This component mimicked a 'job fair' and was designed to reduce barriers to participation that disproportionately affect youth (Holbein and Hillygus, 2020).

We pair the participation-building components of our intervention with small-group sessions designed to increase social cohesion. Past work from autocratic and highly polarized contexts has found that contact, dialogue, and group-based problem-solving can reduce divisions (Alan et al., 2021; Charnysh et al., 2015; Mousa, 2020; Paler et al., 2020; Paluck et al., 2021; Svensson and Brouneus, 2013), even when these interventions are brief (Benier et al., 2024). TEFs placed students in small, ethnically diverse groups for structured dialogue around cross-cutting social and political issues affecting Ethiopia's youth and emphasizing their common youth identity.

In doing so, we leverage the previously unexplored complementarities between the social dynamics that underpin landmark findings around both participation (Bursztyn et al., 2021; Campbell, 2013; Eubank and Kronick, 2021; Masterson, 2023) and depolarization (Lowe, 2021; Mousa, 2020). Specifically, the 'volunteer job fair' component provided opportunities to socialize with existing friends, meet other students with common interests, connect with representatives of civil society, and sign-up for volunteer opportunities. The structured dialogue component encouraged deeper social interaction among diverse groups of peers interested in opportunities for engagement.

We tested this intervention among students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is an 'electoral autocracy' marked by a highly constrained civic space, barriers to political participation, significant limits on free expression, and recurring political violence (Wiebrecht et al., 2023). Deep ethnic divisions reinforced by ethnic federalism (Taye, 2017) are a defining

feature of Ethiopian politics. These dynamics came to a head in the months before our study with the outbreak of the Tigray War (2020–2022), which mobilized multiple ethnically defined armed groups (Paravicini and Endeshaw, 2020). Given the extreme increases in political repression and the intensification of ethnic animosities, including credible accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide, we faced particularly difficult conditions for encouraging civic engagement and inter-ethnic dialogue.

We focused our efforts on Ethiopia's youth for several reasons. First, youth participation is low around the world (Gupta, 2014). Although youth often play a central role in securing political change through mass, anti-regime mobilization (Fluckiger and Ludwig, 2018; Gerling, 2018; Goldstone, 2002; Yair and Miodownik, 2016), in Ethiopia and elsewhere, they tend to vote, attend community meetings, and join civic organizations at much lower rates than older citizens (Gupta, 2014; Sabu, 2020). However, evidence from diverse contexts – including in Ethiopia – suggests that a lack of information about how to engage rather than disinterest explain this participation gap (Ferrali et al., 2023; Holbein and Hillygus, 2020; Sabu, 2020). Prior research also shows that civic engagement is a habit formed early in life (Akee et al., 2018; Andolina et al., 2003; Coppock and Green, 2016; Holbein et al., 2022), making early intervention especially valuable.

This engagement gap likely contributes to poor outcomes. In many countries, youth face political exclusion (Gupta, 2014; Lin, 2011) and are disproportionately targeted for radicalization and recruitment into violent conflict (Beber and Blattman, 2013; Rink and Sharma, 2018). Young people are also a historically large and rapidly growing share of the population in many developing countries (Gupta, 2014). Ethiopia has the second-largest youth population in Africa, with 45% of Ethiopia's population under age 15 and 71% under age 30 (Admassu et al., 2022; Megquier and Belohlav, 2014).

In this study, We focus specifically on university students. Ethiopia's universities have historically been hot-spots for contentious ethnic politics and students played a critical role in the protest movements that sparked regime change in 2018 (Adamu, 2019). Given AAU's status as the oldest and most prestigious university in Ethiopia, one may expect that AAU students were better

connected to civil society at baseline, making them especially likely to respond to the treatment. However, there are several reasons to expect these results to travel beyond AAU students.

First, despite its excellence, AAU's enrollment is not highly selective. AAU is a public university with a massive student body, enrolling nearly 9% of the country's 388,186 undergraduates in 2018 (Mekonnen Yimer et al., 2024). During the study period, admissions were based on specific academic requirements and ethnic quotas set by the government rather than a competitive selection process.[3] Although AAU does not publish its acceptance rates, in 2021, acceptance rates across Ethiopia's universities was 55% (Getachew, 2024).

Second, we do not see heterogeneous treatment effects for ethnic minorities and women, who are less likely to have strong connections to civil society at baseline. Third, AAU students actually exhibit slightly lower levels of civic engagement than the general population at baseline. In Appendix B.1 we compare our pre-treatment baseline sample to nationally representative data to identify key differences in civic engagement and tolerance between our sample and the broader Ethiopian population.

Additionally, public sector employment also tends to increase in educational attainment (Appendix Figure A1). These factors suggest that interventions targeting highly educated youth are valuable on their own terms – regardless of generalizability to the broader population – given the importance of this social class to instigating reform and their disproportionate representation in government.

To evaluate the impact of TEFs on civic participation and social cohesion, we randomized invitations to participate among a representative sample of roughly 1,000 students. To better isolate the mechanisms driving any changes, we also randomized the level of diversity in our inter-ethnic dialogue groups. All hypothesis tests and subgroup analyses were pre-registered. All endline data was collected four months after treatment, ensuring that any observed effects are not merely short-term changes.

[3]In 2023, AAU was granted legal autonomy, allowing the university to control its admissions process. According to an interview with AAU's former Dean of Students,the university sought autonomy in order to make admissions more selective.

We measure civic participation outcomes directly related to the intervention, as well as political participation outcomes less directly related.[4] Importantly, the civic engagement outcomes we measure include high-cost modes of participation, such as self-reported attendance at student government meetings, attending a protest, or (more problematically) joining an ethnic interest group, and independently verified attendance at volunteer activities in the months after the intervention. We also collect data on attitudes and behavior bearing on efficacy and obstacles to participation, future career plans, social cohesion, political interest, and perceptions of discrimination and ethnic federalism. To understand the role of social dynamics, we also collected detailed data on pre-treatment social ties between students in our sample and data on new social ties formed among participants *during* the TEFs.

Intent-to-treat (ITT) estimates indicate that the TEFs significantly increased both self-reported and observed participation in civil society. However, we find no changes in participation with political parties or government institutions. Reinforcing these findings, we also see significant increases in self-reported future plans to work for or found a CSO; we do not see increases in plans to run for office or work in the public sector. These findings are robust when estimating Complier Average Causal Effects (CACE) in Appendix J and when controlling for potential violations of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA) in Appendix O.[5]

Additional analysis emphasizes the importance of social dynamics. First, a significant number of new social ties were formed during the TEFs, including cross-ethnic ties. Second, positive treatment effects were much stronger among respondents that either (a) were close friends with another member of the treatment group at baseline or (b) formed a new friendship with another member of the treatment group. However, we do not see evidence that these effects spilled-over to members of the control group that were close friends with members of the treatment group at

[4]We define civic engagement as voluntary participation in organized social and community life that remains relatively autonomous from state institutions and organized political parties. We separate civic engagement from political participation, defined as organized participation through formal institutional channels, such as voting, joining a political party, or contacting government officials.

[5]Our results remain largely similar when we consider TEF effects amongst students that actually attended the workshop, as shown in Appendix **??**. Additionally, we do not observe significant differences in treatment effects by reported gender or ethnic minority status.

baseline. We argue that designing civic engagement as opportunities for social interaction can increase their appeal to young citizens.

We do not see strong evidence that the intervention worked through other non-social mechanisms. We see only small increases in perceptions of self- and youth-efficacy in bringing about positive change among the treatment group, and we see a small *increase* in perceptions that respondents lack the necessary information to participate, perhaps resulting from increased awareness of these barriers. However, we do see a significant decrease in respondents' fear of negative consequences from civic participation, perhaps due to the normalizing effect of discussing and practicing civic engagement in a large group setting.

What about the *quality* of engagement generated by the TEFs? Our findings show no changes in inter-group tolerance, social cohesion, or other outcomes that could indicate rising ethnic tensions. However, we do find that self-reported interest in joining or active membership in ethnically-defined organizations increased. While attitudes towards out-groups did not deteriorate in response to the intervention, some of the increased engagement among youth was channeled to sectarian groups.

Our results expand on previous experimental research by focusing on formal engagement with civil society organizations rather than political institutions, which we argue is more appropriate in many autocratic settings. We demonstrate that boosting civic participation with civil society is possible, even in highly repressive, autocratic settings where citizens are reluctant to engage with political institutions. Given that most of the world's population lives under autocracy, and this share has risen sharply in recent years, this finding is significant (Boese-Schlosser et al., 2022).

Our results also reinforce previous findings from other contexts that the youth engagement gap is not driven by disinterest (Ferrali et al., 2023; Holbein and Hillygus, 2020). Students in the treatment group *did not* report a decrease in the extent to which low levels of interest prevented them from civic or political participation. However, it is unclear whether the information provided by the civic education component of the TEFs drove increased participation. On one hand, students in the treatment group attended volunteer opportunities advertised during the volunteer job fair,

suggesting this information changed future behavior. On the other hand, the treatment group *did not* report a decrease in the extent to which insufficient information prevented them from civic or political participation.

Alternatively, we see strong evidence that the social opportunities were a primary mechanism through which TEFs increased participation (Eubank and Kronick, 2021; Masterson, 2023). While the importance of social ties in civic and political life is well documented (Campbell, 2013), we argue that these dynamics have been under-utilized in interventions to boost engagement, which generally use civic education to target individual factors such as information, motivation, and self-efficacy. Our work underscores the idea that civic engagement is primarily a social activity: the opportunity to socialize with existing friends and make new friends draws many people into civic organizations and sustains their involvement.

Finally, our findings on the *quality* of civic engagement —- that participants become more invested in ethnically-defined forms of participation — raise thorny normative questions for civic engagement in polarized settings. Is mobilization around identity categories in these settings inherently troubling, or can citizens work within identity organizations to deepen democracy (Calhoun-Brown, 2000)? Our findings underscore the importance of the often-overlooked *opportunity environment* for civic engagement (Oliver, 1999; Vráblíková, 2014). In countries where the opportunity environment is dominated by sectarian groups, individuals who become civically engaged may do so through available channels, even if they are not motivated by inter-group animus. The quality of opportunity environments likely varies dramatically across countries, reflecting underlying tensions between ethnic groups or the regime's preferences over acceptable forms of mobilization (Hollerbauer et al., 2023; Lyons, 2019).

Context: Civic engagement and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa and one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Klobucista, 2020). For most of its history, Ethiopia has been characterized by constricted civic space, low levels of political participation, and autocratic rule. During the reign of Emperor

Haile Selassie (1930-1974) and the Derg military junta (1974-1991), Ethiopia was a closed autocracy with severe repression of autonomous CSOs.

Following the 1991 civil war, the Derg was replaced with a coalition of ethnic parties known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which implemented a system of ethnic federalism under which ethnically-defined regions enjoyed significant autonomy (Keller et al., 2002; Lyons, 2019). The bottom panel of Figure 2 highlights the unique nature of ethnic relations in the country: while there are unusually *high* levels of representation for disadvantaged groups due to the system of ethnic federalism, there are *low* levels of equality in access to key public services.

Since this transition, the country has been categorized as an electoral autocracy, carving out limited space for civil society groups to operate legally and holding multi-party elections that fall short free and fair. After surprisingly competitive elections in 2005, the government passed a series of draconian laws that "largely eliminated what were already weak independent media and fledgling civil society institutions" (Lyons, 2019).

In 2018, the Prime Minister resigned after three years of anti-government protests, ending EPRDF rule. The rise of Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party introduced a brief period of aggressive liberalization. However, attempts to reform the country's federal system lead to conflict with the leaders of Tigray, which dominated the previous EPRDF government. In September, the government of Tigray defied central government orders to cancel regional elections due to coronovirus, initiating two years of civil war estimated to have killed 600,000 and displaced nearly 3 million people (Miller, 2024).

As the war intensified, many of Ethiopia's democratic gains were reversed. The top panels of Figure 2 captures Ethiopia's trajectory since 1945 relative to OECD countries: very low levels of free expression and participatory democracy exhibiting periods of liberalization and retrenchment.

Ethiopia has the second-largest youth population in Africa, with 45% of Ethiopia's population under age 15 and 71% under age 30 (Admassu et al., 2022; Megquier and Belohlav, 2014). Young Ethiopians face substantial obstacles, including significant deficits in access to healthcare and

education, persistent gender inequalities, and a precarious labor market (OECD, 2017). The Global Youth Development Index 2020 ranked Ethiopia 158th out of 181 countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020).

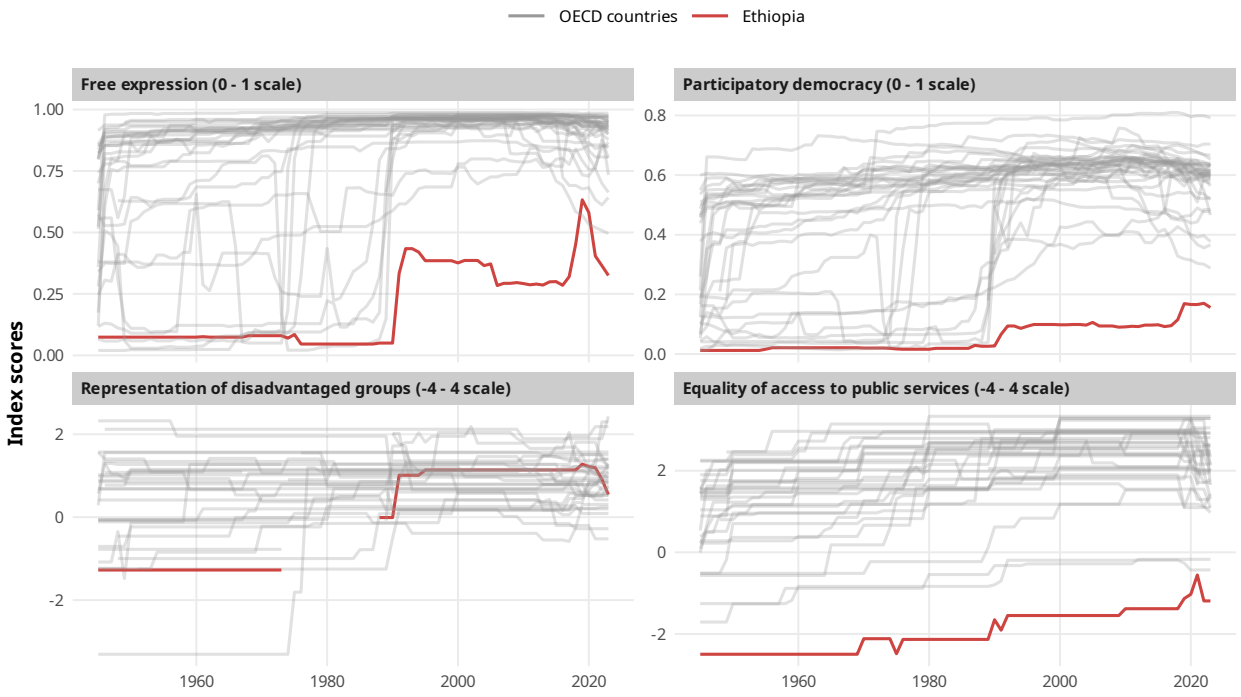

Figure 2: Source: Varieties of Democracy.

Despite these challenges, young people participate at very low rates, often due to barriers like limited political knowledge and socialization, exclusion from existing political institutions, closing civic space, and a fear of reprisals from peers or local elites (Gebremariam and Herrera, 2016; Sabu, 2020). Data from our own focus groups, discussed in Appendix P, also highlights the extent to which polarization and ethnic divisions make young people hesitant to participate in public life.

Where youth do participate, it has often been through extra-institutional channels such as mass protests rather than formal channels like voting, attending community meetings, membership in civil society organizations, or contacting public officials (Sabu, 2020). For example, youth played a critical role in the protest movements that sparked regime change in 2018 (Adamu, 2019). Universities have historically been hot-spots for contentious ethnic politics and youth political organizations have often been mobilized to form ethnic militias (Aalen and Tesfaye, 2022; Yusuf,

2019).

The timing of our study coincided with an extremely challenging period for ethnic relations. Two major events — the COVID-19 pandemic and the Tigray War — began shortly before the study period. Both events led to a further tightening of civic space, and the conflict also greatly increased the salience of ethnic tensions. We argue that these conditions made it particularly difficult to boost non-sectarian participation.

The intervention: Tolerant Engagement Forums (TEFs)

The TEFs were co-designed by the research team, including researchers from the United States and Ethiopia, and an Ethiopian CSO. The objective of the design was to create a relatively low-cost, scalable intervention to increase the *quantity* of citizen engagement with civil society without eroding it's *quality* by increasing ethnic tensions or engagement with sectarian groups and causes. During the design, we drew on previous results from the academic literature and the local knowledge and past experience of the research team and implementing partner. This intervention was also designed to fill the critical gaps in our theoretical understanding of "what works" in autocratic and polarized settings and the role of social incentives in motivating participation.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of AAU political and social clubs were also used to tailor both the intervention and measurement to the social environment. These discussions centered on students' experiences with civic and political engagement, identifying the most pressing issues for youth in the country, their attitudes towards political tolerance, cohesion, and diversity, and feedback on intervention and survey design. We specifically sought feedback on effective strategies for addressing sensitive topics in the TEFs and surveys. Some of the highlights of our discussion are summarized in Appendix P.

Participants were recruited from AAU undergraduate students in years 1-3. Students in year 4 were excluded to avoid attrition by students that graduated before endline. We conducted three identical (to the best of our ability) TEF events over June 17-19, 2022. Space constraints and COVID safety protocols prevented us from including all participants in a single TEF event. This also

allowed students to engage in smaller groups, arguably improving the quality of interactions.

Each TEF event took place over the course of a full day and was composed of two distinct sessions. All participants attended both sessions. An overview of the TEF events is provided in Table 1.

Session	I Morning	II Afternoon
Description	CSO and NGO fair, presentations, panels, networking with CSO representatives	Facilitator-led discussions of country's challenges, youth-based issues, social and political challenges
Mechanisms	Information, motivation, networking	Inter-group contact, cross-cutting cleavages, perspective-taking, networking
Groups	All participants	Small groups (approx. 10)

Table 1: Description of TEF events

Session I: Intervention and theory

The morning session focused on increasing the *quantity* of youth civic engagement. Session I provided a venue for students to connect with high-level representatives of non-partisan volunteer organizations working on broad issues, such as development and conservation. Representatives gave brief presentations on their organizations' work and held panel discussions on the importance of youth civic engagement. These sessions included a 'volunteer job fair' where students could socialize and coordinate with existing friends, meet other students with common interests, connect with representatives of civil society, and sign-up for specific volunteer opportunities.

Theoretically, Session I aimed to reduce the types of informational and motivational barriers to participation that disproportionately affect youth (Holbein and Hillygus, 2020; Sabu, 2020). The session provided participants with information about both the activities CSOs are engaged in and an opportunity to sign-up for specific volunteer opportunities. A unique element of

informational barriers in autocratic settings like Ethiopia is that, given restrictions on CSO activities and the highly polarized environment, it is often difficult to identify *which* organizations are autonomous from state institutions, political parties, and sectarian interest groups viewed as hostile or illegitimate by many students.

We also anticipated that social opportunities would reduce motivational barriers to engagement. We expected that opportunities to interact with existing friends and make new connections with civically interested students, as well as connecting with representatives of civil society, would increase their motivation to participate. Research shows that new and existing ties with active peers can drive higher levels of political participation through social pressure and sanctioning, and that network ties are crucial for mobilizing people into organizations and keeping them active (Bursztyn et al., 2021; Campbell, 2013; Eubank and Kronick, 2021; Masterson, 2023).

Session II: Intervention and theory

The afternoon session focused on improving the *quality* of civic engagement. Participants were randomly assigned to small dialogue groups, each led by a facilitator from the implementing partner. Groups consisted of approximately ten students, with a minimum of three women and three ethnic minorities. [6] Beyond this minimum, we randomly varied the number of women and ethnic minorities in each group to assess the impact of greater diversity on outcomes.

The discussions aimed to normalize political dialogue among peers and emphasize issues affecting youth broadly, such as unemployment, while at the same time allowing for structured conversation around divisive topics at the heart of Ethiopia's conflict. Students were encouraged to express their perspectives and hear from others in a safe, moderated setting.

Session II's theory of change is rooted in research on depolarization, contact theory, and perspective-taking (Corno et al., 2019; Lowe, 2021; Mousa, 2020; Scacco and Warren, 2018). This work suggests that, under the right conditions, collaborative contact among members of antagonistic groups can build tolerance, increase social ties, and reduce tensions. One such condition is

[6] Under this randomization procedure, there could be up to eight majority-ethnic group men in a group of 11, though this rarely occurred.

the presence of cross-cutting or 'superordinate' identities – such as the participants being young, or attending the same university – that can reduce the salience of group boundaries (Charnysh et al., 2015; Paluck et al., 2021). For instance, Paler et al. (2020) show that inter-group discussions in Lebanon between Christians, Sunnis, and Shia reduced support for sectarian politics, especially when individuals shared the same economic class, creating a basis for solidarity. These results suggest that combining increased contact with measures to decrease the salience of group differences may strengthen the impact of that contact on tolerance. Importantly, there is evidence that these tools can work even when interventions are brief (Benier et al., 2024).

Finally, we also expected Session II to facilitate the formation of new, cross-ethnic social ties that might persist after the treatment. Evidence presented in the Results section validate this expectation.[7]

Research design

Sample and randomization

Figure 3 provides an overview of the study design. Our study population includes all AAU undergraduate students in years 1-3, comprising nearly 30,000 students. To recruit participants, we obtained basic demographic and contact information for the full student body from the university registrar. Students were invited to participate in the baseline survey via their university email. We also employed a survey firm to conduct follow-up phone calls to reduce non-responses.[8] In total, 968 students were recruited for the study through baseline data collection. In Appendix B.2 we discuss the representativeness of our sample by comparing the attributes of participants with those of the broader student body. We highlight a few differences but conclude that they are minor. Baseline demographic characteristics and measures of civic engagement and political

[7] In the pre-analysis plan, we conceptualized the formation of network ties during TEF events as 'treatment intensity.' We now view these network ties as potential mechanisms or moderating factors shaping TEF effects. However, our tests and analysis remain unchanged.

[8] As a financial incentive, students received $5 USD in exchange for their participation. A random sample of 6,309 students received an initial email invitation to take the survey. We captured responses from the first 968 students to respond.

tolerance are available in Appendix D.

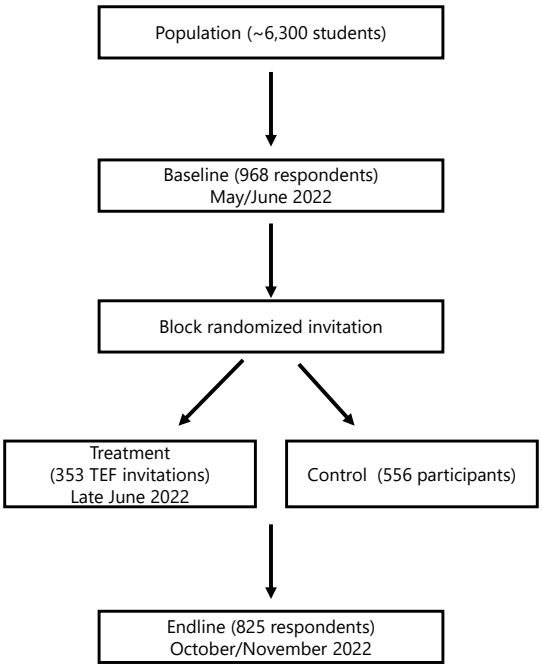

Figure 3: Study outline

Following baseline data collection, we randomly selected 353 baseline respondents to receive invitations to the TEF workshop.[9] To ensure a sufficiently diverse group of invitees, we used block randomization based on gender and ethnic minority status. The implementing partner coordinated with students to schedule their attendance for one of the workshop days. A total of 257 students attended one of the TEF workshops in June 2022. Later on, we discuss the estimation of treatment effects in the face of non-compliance.

Following the TEF events, we conducted endline data collection in October and November of 2022, measuring outcomes and, for those in the treatment group, asking about their experiences at the TEFs. We aimed to recontact all original baseline survey participants (both treatment and control) and achieved a high follow-up rate of 91%. The attrition was balanced between the treatment and control groups, with an 11% attrition rate for the control group and an 8% attrition

[9]We randomize *invitations* because attendance was ultimately voluntary; we discuss the implications of this for estimating treatment effects in our section on estimation.

rate for the treatment group.[10]

It is worth highlighting the timing of the TEF intervention (June of 2022) relative to when the outcomes were measured at endline (fall of 2022). Approximately four months pass between the TEF workshops and the measurement of outcomes at endline, which has important implications for the effects we estimate. If TEF effects are stronger immediately after the intervention and decay over time, our design may not capture these short-term effects. On the other hand, the effects we estimate after four months are arguably more meaningful due to their durability.

Outcome measures

At the broadest level, our goal is to test whether TEFs meaningfully shift participants' levels of engagement and tolerance. To this end, we collect data on a wide range of attitudes and behaviors related to these outcomes, measured at both baseline (pre-TEF) and endline (post-TEF). A key challenge in using multiple outcomes to measure treatment effects is addressing concerns about multiple comparisons. Here, we provide a general overview of our pre-registered approach to this problem and our strategy for estimating treatment effects. Detailed information on index construction and each outcome measure is available in Appendix E, and the full wording of survey questions can be found in the Pre-Analysis Plan[11].

We group our outcomes into two *families*: engagement and tolerance (Table 2). Each family consists of *primary* indicators: outcomes most directly related to the theory of change in the TEF intervention. For example, civic engagement is a primary indicator within the engagement family that we expect TEFs to increase. Each family also contains *secondary* indicators: outcomes more distantly related to the intervention, or those that act as mechanisms related to a potential treatment effect. Participant's anticipated career trajectories – whether they want to work in the NGO or public sector, for instance – are secondary indicators of engagement.

Each primary and secondary indicator is comprised of individual outcome *measures*. For the

[10]Students were again offered a $5 USD incentive for participating in the endline survey. To further reduce attrition, we introduced a lottery in which six randomly selected endline respondents received a $30 payment.

[11]The pre-analysis plan is hosted at ANONYMIZED.

Outcome family	Primary indicators	Secondary indicators
Engagement	1. Civic engagement 2. Political engagement	1. Sectarian (ethnic or religious) engagement 2. Sense of efficacy and obstacles 3. Future career plans
Tolerance	1. Political/ethnic tolerance 2. Social cohesion	1. Perceptions of discrimination 2. Preferences for ethnic federalism 3. Out-group social contact

Table 2: Outcome variables and indicators. Note: in response to reader feedback, we slightly changed the labeling of outcome families from the pre-analysis plan for clarity.

civic engagement indicator, these include measures of whether participants have attended an NGO event or volunteered in civic activities during the study period. For the purposes of hypothesis testing, we aggregate these outcome measures into averaged z-score *indices*.[12]

Each primary and secondary indicator thus has an associated index constructed from multiple component measures linked to the indicator. Rather than deciding whether the estimated TEF effects across a series of individual outcome measures are jointly meaningful, we assess whether the overall index shifts in response to treatment. For each outcome, we report both the estimates for the outcome index and the individual component measures that comprise each index.

Estimation of treatment effects

Participation in the TEFs was voluntary. As a result, we randomized *invitations* to participate among a subset of students from the baseline survey. Participants received invitations to participate in the TEFs, while those in the control group did not. Compliance was relatively high: approximately 73% of participants who were invited to the TEFs actually attended, and we observed only one-sided non-compliance (i.e., no one in the control group attended a TEF). Non-compliance appears to be largely idiosyncratic, with many invited participants unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts.

[12]We begin by calculating z-scores for each component of the index. As participants were not required to respond to all questions of our baseline and endline surveys, the number of respondents answering each question varies. When constructing z-scores, we impute the column average for NA values. Therefore, when we present the averaged z-score index, the number of observations corresponds with the number of respondents that answered the most frequently answered question in the index. To show that this imputation does not drive our outcomes, when results are presented for index components, we use the variable in its original scale without imputation.

Our primary estimand is thus the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect. Roughly speaking, the ITT estimand tells us what the likely impact of the intervention is on a population but leaves open the possibility that some participants do not comply with treatment assignment (e.g., some invited to participate in the TEFs did not attend). The ITT estimand is commonly used in this literature and whenever researchers cannot control treatment uptake but can meaningfully manipulate the *probability* of uptake.

To estimate the ITT effect of the TEF intervention on the outcomes of interest, we estimate Equation 1:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 Y_{i,t-1} + \beta X_i + \gamma(T_i \times Block_i) + \epsilon \tag{1}$$

where Y_{it} is the value of participant i on an outcome measure or index at endline and T_i is an indicator for whether participant i received an invitation to participate in the TEFs. β_1 represents our estimate of the ITT effect of the TEFs on participant outcomes. In all models we control for *baseline* values of the outcome measure for respondent i, $Y_{i,t-1}$, and we present results with and without an optional vector of pre-treatment control variables X_i (see Appendix C for balance table). Finally, we include block fixed effects interacted with the treatment indicator (γ) and calculate heteroskedastic robust (HC2) standard errors. Further details on estimation, including our approach to estimating CACE, heterogeneous effects, and SUTVA violations are available in Appendix F.

While valuable, ITT estimates can be difficult to interpret (Gupta, 2011). We cross-referenced invitations to participate with actual participation in the TEF events to identify which invitees actually attended the TEFs and thus complied with the treatment assignment. Our secondary estimand is the Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE) of TEF participation. The CACE captures the effect of *actual* TEF participation, rather than just being *invited* to participate, among those who complied with the treatment assignment.

We estimate the CACE using the standard two-stage least squares (2SLS) approach, with the randomized invitation to participate serving as an instrument for actual participation. More details

available in Appendix ??. Given the low and idiosyncratic nature of non-compliance, we argue that the CACE is a credible and policy-relevant quantity of interest.[13]

Results

Below, we present coefficient plots for our main outcomes. Coefficient plots for all secondary outcomes are available in Appendix H. Regression tables for ITT estimates of all outcomes are available in Appendix I. CACE estimates of all outcomes are available in J. ITT estimates of heterogeneous effects for all pre-registered subgroups, including respondents randomly assigned to more diverse dialogue groups, are available in Appendices K through N. ITT estimates of spillover effects are available in O.

More civic, but not political, participation

Overall, we find that invitation to the TEF had a positive effect on student's civic engagement in the four months following the intervention. Figure 4 plots the ITT estimates for our civic engagement index and its components. Specifically, we find a significant and positive effect of the TEFs on the overall civic engagement index, as well as on attendance at community and student government meetings, intentions to join a voluntary organization, and participation in protests.

The size of the TEF effect for the civic index is a modest but important increase of approximately 0.11 standard deviations. Further, the TEF is associated with a 0.36 increase in the number of community or student government meetings attended (a 35% increase from a mean of 1.04). Similarly, TEF attendance is associated with a 0.16 increase in participants' intent to join a voluntary organization (a 4% increase from a mean of 4.33) and a 0.18 increase in the reported count of protest attendance (a 44% increase from a mean of 0.38). The effect on protest attendance is interesting, as protests are potentially contentious forms of collective action. We return to this finding in the conclusion.

[13] Finally, as specified in the PAP, we also explore heterogeneous effects across several relevant subgroups. In these models, we interact our subgroup indicator of interest with the treatment indicator.

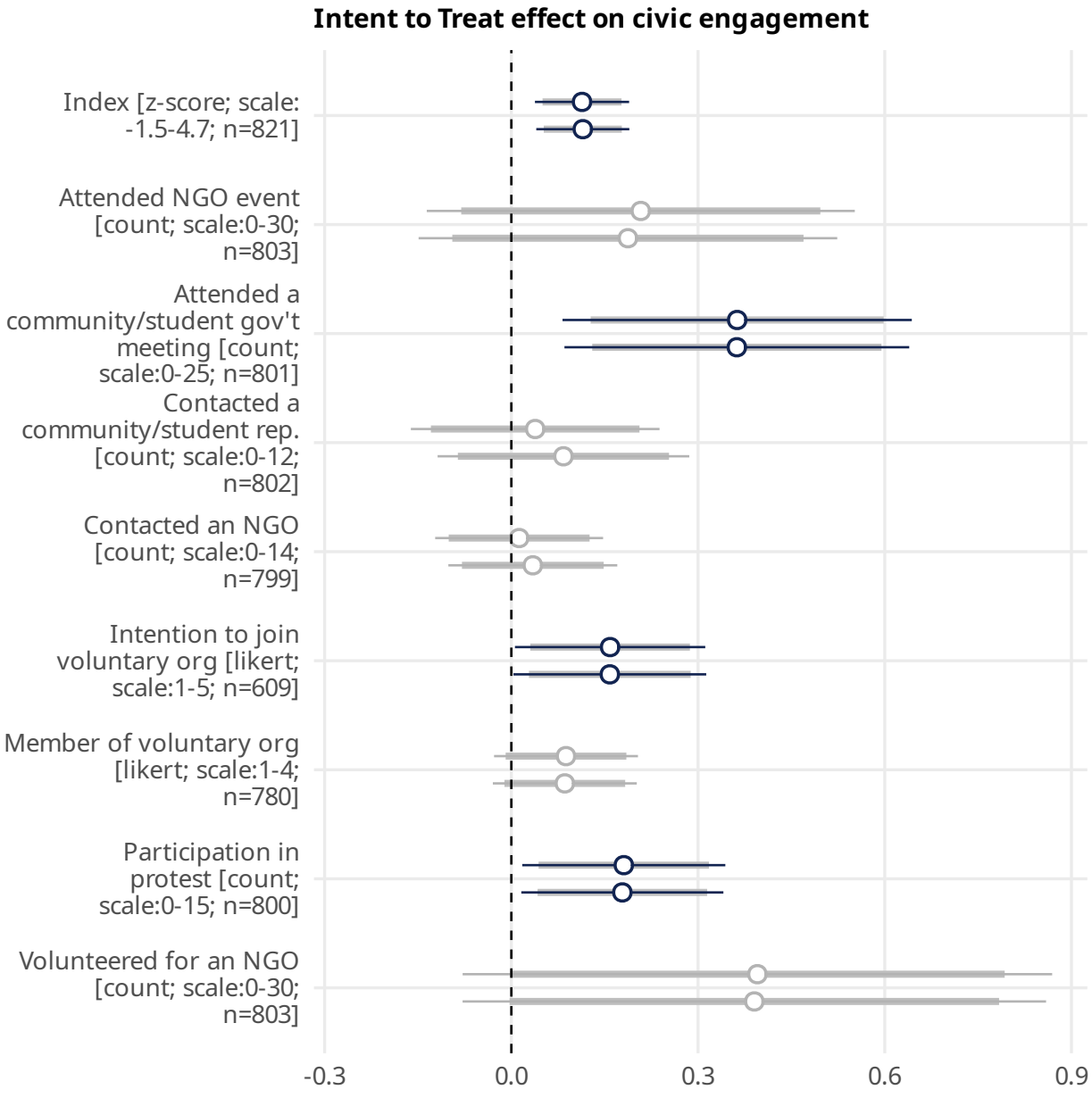

Figure 4: Effect of the TEFs on civic engagement. Estimates are on the scale of the outcome variable. Upper bars are models using pre-treatment covariates. Thick and thin bars are 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Dark blue indicates $p < .05$. For the index measure, missing values of component variables are imputed.

These findings are robust when estimating Complier Average Causal Effects (CACE) in Appendix J and when controlling for potential violations of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA) in Appendix O.

We observe increases in *self-reported* levels of civic engagement, but do these changes translate into actual behavior? There is concern that social desirability dynamics could be biasing our treatment estimates. To address these concerns, we also provide evidence of changes in real-world behavior. A core part of the intervention involved connecting participants with representatives of CSOs to learn about engagement opportunities. Using administrative data on post-treatment attendance at volunteer opportunities compiled by CSOs that participated in the TEFs, we matched names, email addresses, and phone numbers to link new volunteers with students in the treatment and control group.

TEF participants volunteered with these organizations at *much* higher rates than respondents in the control group. Specifically, 14% of students in the treatment group (36 students) volunteered with at least one of these organizations in the four months after the TEFs. In contrast, only 1.4% of students in the control group (7 students) volunteered during the same period. In Appendix**??**, we present the distribution of volunteer opportunity uptake across CSOs (Figure A16) and a regression table estimating ITT effects (Table A15). As expected, the results are stronger when estimating the CACE.

Despite substantively meaningful positive effects on several high-cost *civic* participation outcomes, we do not see any evidence for increased *political* participation. Figure A17 in Appendix H shows that the impact of TEFs are near-zero and insignificant across a range of political behaviors. This aligns with our expectations, as the TEF events were designed to be as "nonpartisan" as possible, with NGOs and CSOs selected to maintain some distance from the incumbent regime, which is likely seen as repressive and unresponsive, especially to youth (Croke et al., 2016).

Reinforcing these findings, Figure 7 in Appendix H shows significant increases in students' self-reported future plans to work in civil society or start their own CSO. We do not see increases in plans to work in politics, the public sector, or run for office.

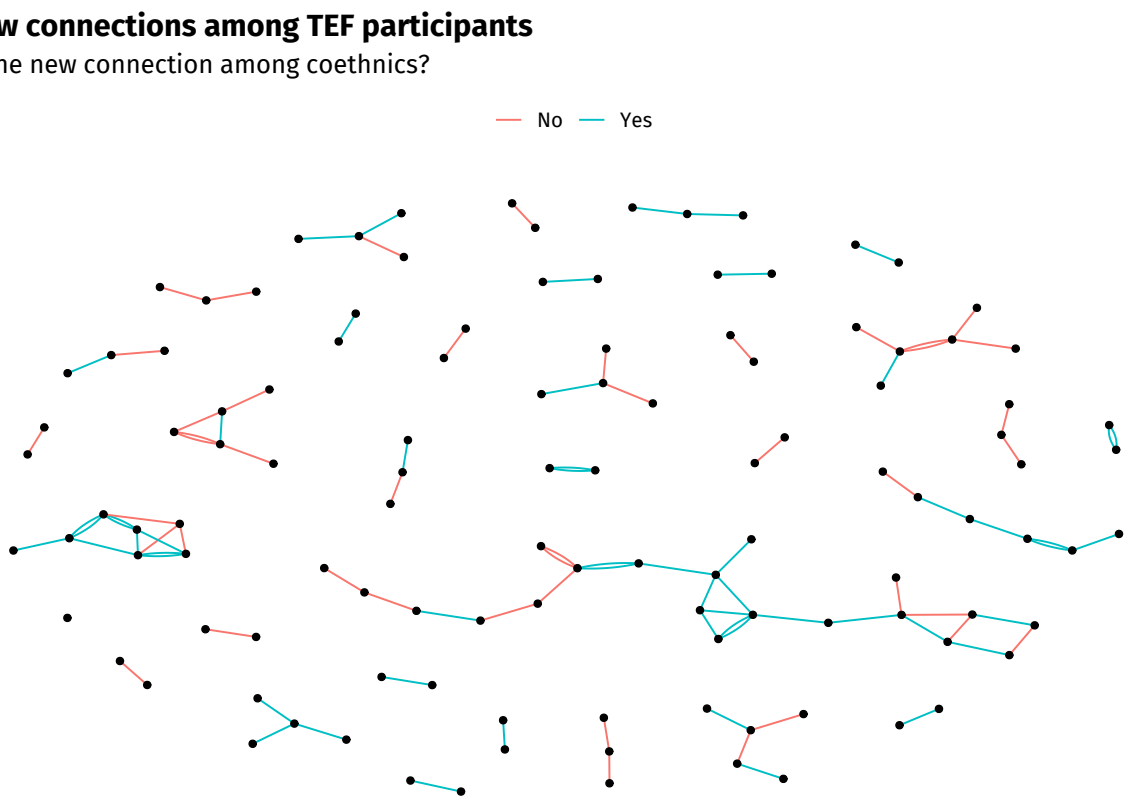

Figure 5: New connections among TEF participants. Nodes indicate participants, edges indicate the presence of a new connection.

Social dynamics strengthened impact but did not create spillovers

Both Session I and II included opportunities for social interaction among participants. We expected that building social interaction into civic education would increase the impact of the treatment by allowing participants to coordinate on specific participation opportunities with existing friends who are also in the treatment group and new friends made during TEF activities.

To track the formation of new social ties, our endline survey asked respondents to list up to three new friends they had made during the TEF and stayed in contact with over the following months. We matched these names with the roster of TEF attendees to count the number of new social ties made by each participant and identify whether ties are primarily within or across ethnic groups. Of the 257 invitees who actually attended the TEFs, 224 TEF attendees reported making at least one new connection.

To estimate the moderating effect of new social ties, we interact treatment assignment with an indicator for whether the participant made at least one new connection.[14] Overall, we find that TEF effects are significantly stronger among participants who made new connections. Appendix M provides regression tables for the moderating effect of new social ties on all outcomes. Furthermore, almost half of these connections were across ethnic lines.

We stress that these results are suggestive and correlational: we did not randomize the formation of these ties, and so any factor that correlates with the formation of these ties could bias estimates (Imai et al., 2011). However, we interpret these results as strongly suggestive of social dynamics playing a critical role in the intervention's impact.

We do not see strong evidence that the intervention worked through other non-social mechanisms. In Appendix H, we see only small increases in perceptions of self- and youth-efficacy in bringing about positive change among the treatment group, and we see a small, unexpected *increase* in perceptions that respondents lack the necessary information to participate, perhaps resulting from increased awareness of these barriers. However, we do see a significant decrease in respondents' fear of negative consequences from civic participation, perhaps due to the normalizing effect of discussing and practicing civic engagement in a large group setting.

We also investigate whether pre-treatment social ties between participants caused spillover effects or violations of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA) assumption. Violations of SUTVA may arise if social ties create pathways for interference or cause heterogeneity in treatment effects. To measure pre-treatment social ties between participants, we use a question from the baseline survey that asks respondents to report the name and enrollment year of their three closest friends. We cross-referenced these names with the roster of TEF attendees and counted the number of friends each respondent had from the treatment group. 77% of respondents reported zero friends in the treatment group, 18% reported one friend, 4% reported two friends, and 1% reported three friends. The treatment and control groups are highly balanced, different by

[14]Since our control group did not attend the TEF and therefore could not make new friends, they are always equal to zero. Since the control group is always equal to 0, the main term for new friends drops out of this model. Our estimate is therefore equivalent to subsetting the data to only treated respondents and estimating the 'effect' of making new friends among the treated.

a maximum of 2% across all four values.

We estimate heterogeneous treatment effects by interacting our treatment indicator with the count of the number of friends. We do not find any evidence for spillover effects on members of the control group that reported a friendship with a member of the treatment group. However, we find strong evidence that the treatment effect is significantly stronger for members of the treatment group that had a pre-treatment friendship with another member of the treatment group. These findings reinforce the importance of social ties for the impact of the treatment on engagement. Appendix O provides a descriptive table and regression tables for each outcome.

No changes in social cohesion, but increased interest in sectarian organizations

Our results thus far suggest that it is possible to increase the *quantity* of civic participation in an illiberal, polarized setting. But what about the *quality* of that engagement? Whether new engagement contributes to existing ethnic tensions or generates sectarian mobilization is a critical question.

Overall, we find no evidence that TEFs produced changes in the primary indicators of tolerance (Figure 6) or social cohesion (Figure A18). This is true of both the overall indices of each indicator and the sub-items that comprise each index. These patterns are consistent with two interpretations.

One possibility is that the TEFs (including the inter-ethnic dialogue) failed to improve inter-group relations and attitudes. This failure could be a function of the treatment being weak or ineffective, or the population we consider being especially resistant to change in attitudes. One such possibility is a 'ceiling effect' among AAU students due to their relatively high levels of tolerance at baseline (see Appendix **??**). A different possibility is that the new engagement generated by the TEFs worsened inter-group relations, and the tolerance interventions in Session II successfully *mitigated* those negative effects. In this scenario, the TEFs *can* work to improve inter-group relations that would otherwise have been worsened by increases in engagement.

We cannot definitively distinguish between these possibilities. However, in either scenario, the TEFs do not appear to meaningfully *worsen* inter-group tolerance: participants become more

active and engaged without an accompanying increase in tensions. This is an important finding, which we revisit in the conclusion.

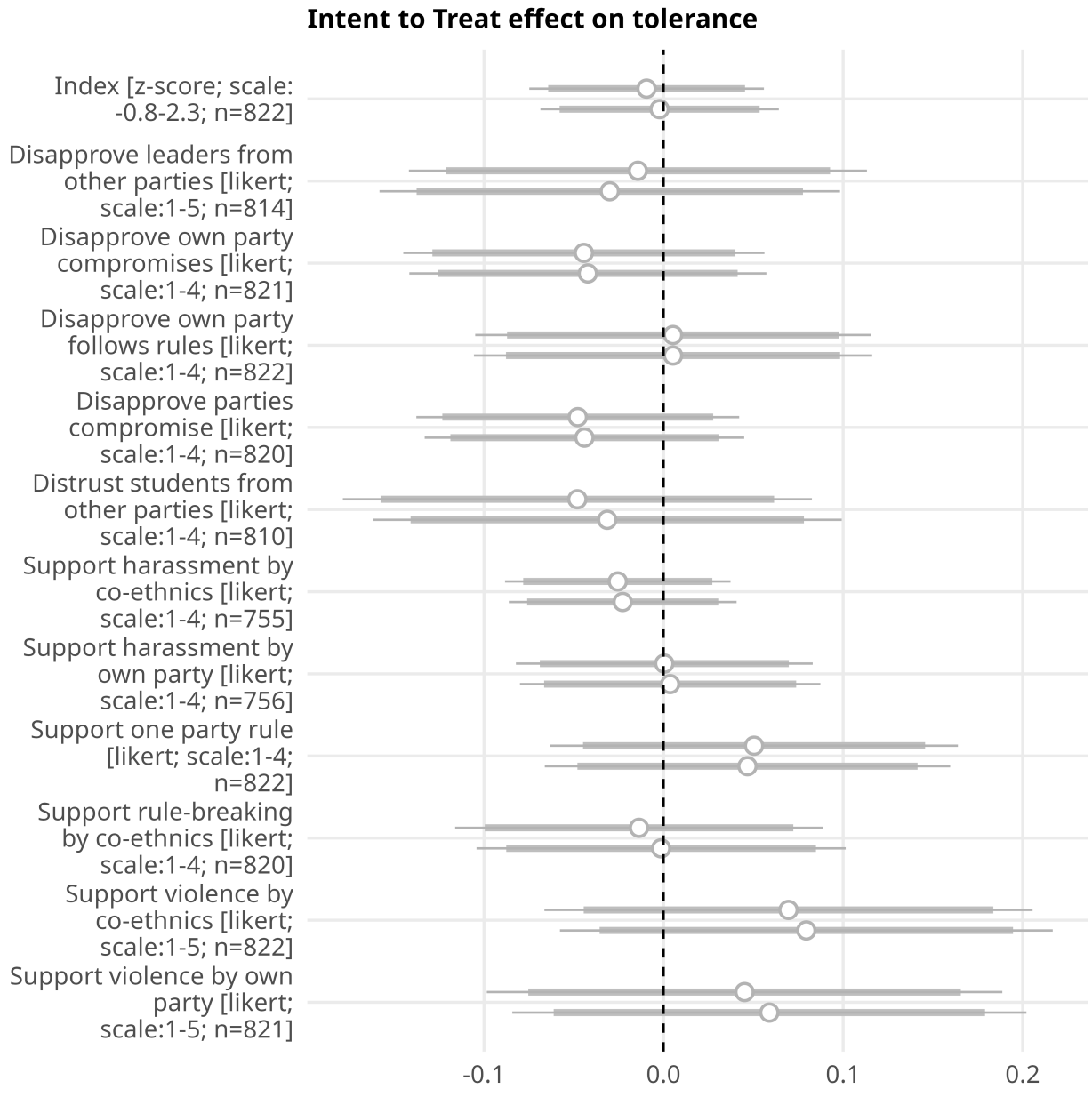

Figure 6: Effect of the TEFs on tolerance. Estimates are on the scale of the outcome variable. Upper bars are models using pre-treatment covariates. Thick and thin bars are 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Dark blue indicates $p < .05$. For the index measure, missing values of component variables are imputed.

We also find no evidence of TEFs moving secondary indicators of tolerance, including perceptions of discrimination, preferences for ethnic federalism, or out-group social contact (Appendix Figures A19 - A22). These null findings are robust to CACE estimation and controlling for spillovers.

We do, however, find some evidence that the new engagement is being channeled through organizations tied to ethnicity. Figure 7 visualizes treatment effects on forms of participation we categorize as *sectarian*—where the defining quality of the group is either ethnic or religious. We find that the invitation to the TEF increased the sectarian engagement index by 0.11 standard deviations. This effect appears to stem from an increased interest in ethnic interest groups rather than religious groups. Specifically, the invitation to the TEF is associated with a 0.22 unit increase in students' intentions to join ethnic interest groups (a 9% increase from a mean of 2.48) and a 0.08 unit increase in membership in ethnic interest groups (a 4% increase from a mean of 1.87).

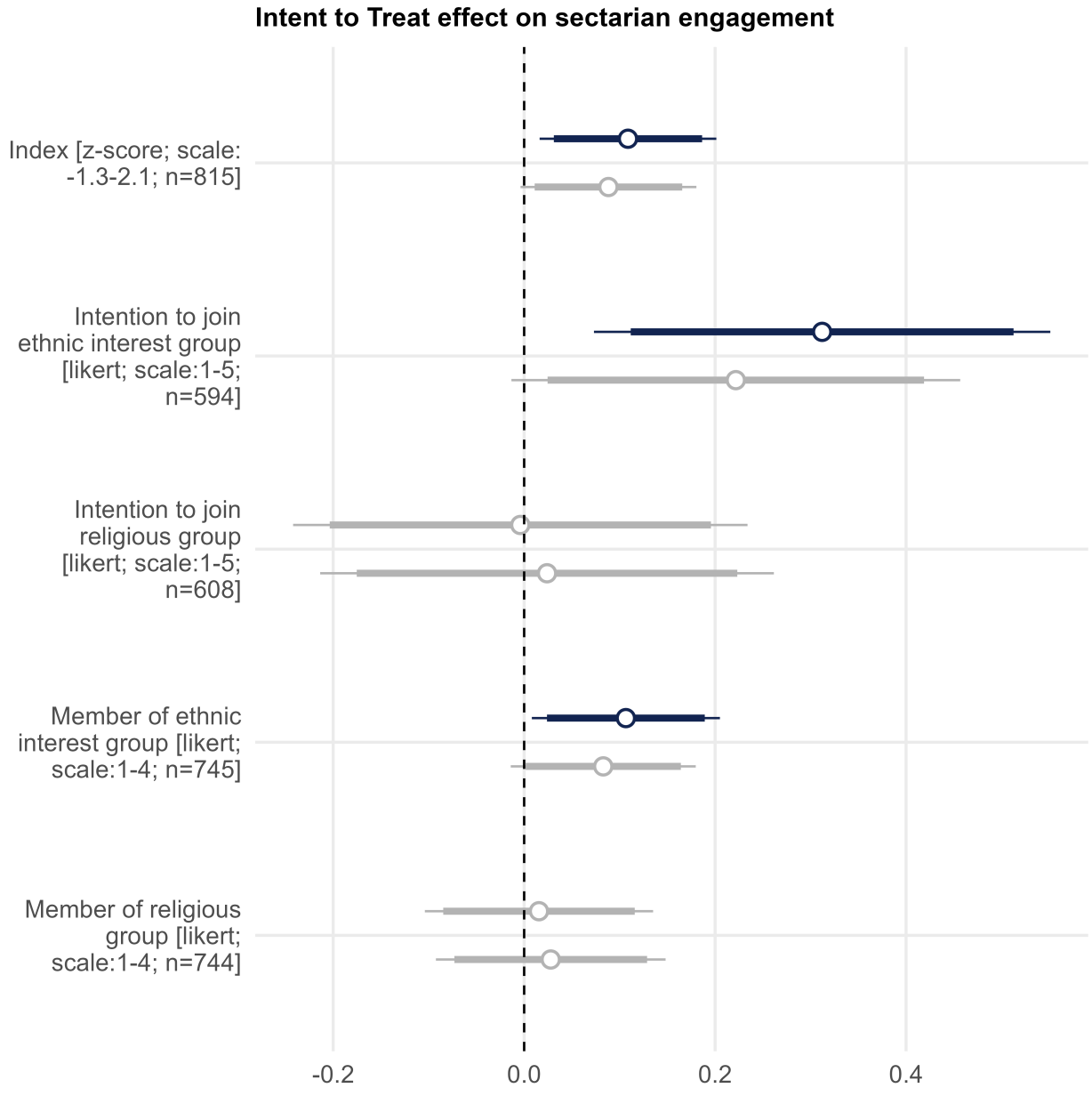

Figure 7: Effect of the TEFs on sectarian engagement. Estimates are on the scale of the outcome variable. Upper bars are models using pre-treatment covariates. Thick and thin bars are 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Dark blue indicates $p < .05$. For the index measure, missing values of component variables are imputed.

Together, these results suggest participants become more invested in forms of organizing linked to ethnicity, even as levels of inter-group tolerance remain unchanged. We discuss these results in more depth in the conclusion.

Finally, we investigate whether assignment to more diverse dialogue groups moderated the effect of TEFs on our tolerance outcomes. Students were randomly assigned to a discussion group. Groups were comprised of either 10 or 11 students, with a minimum number of women (3) and ethnic minorities (3). Above this minimum, we randomly vary the number of minorities in each group to assess the impact of greater diversity on outcomes. Specifically, we estimate heterogeneous treatment effects for respondents in groups in the 75th percentile of diversity, which corresponds to groups for which at least 60% of participants are *not* a member of the two largest ethnic groups. We do not see any evidence for differential treatment effects across our tolerance and social cohesion measures. Additional details and regression tables for all outcomes are available in Appendix N.

No heterogeneous effects across gender or ethnicity

In addition to the main effects of the TEF, we also explore whether it had heterogeneous effects on our primary outcomes by gender and ethnic identity. Overall, we find strong evidence that the TEF worked in increasing civic engagement across genders and ethnic groups. This is important since women and minorities face significant additional barriers to participation. Similarly, we do not detect meaningful differences in the impact of TEF activities on our tolerance and cohesion outcomes. ITT estimates of heterogeneous effects for all pre-registered subgroups are available in Appendices K and L.

Conclusion

Many modern autocracies do not fully prohibit popular participation; rather, they constrain and channel it into acceptable, non-threatening forms. These constraints shape both the *quantity* and *quality* of civic engagement that can, and does, occur in these settings. There is a fear that,

in the face of these barriers, citizens will become disengaged in ways that stifle nascent drives for democratic reform (Croke et al., 2016). A related fear is the possibility that when people do mobilize, it is towards illiberal, intolerant ends. This latter fear exists in all regimes but is particularly acute in modern autocracies, where the rules of the game are illiberal and societal divisions often more pronounced.

Our study provides evidence that there is more room for civic engagement in these settings. We find that there is appetite for more engagement among young people, who exhibit higher levels of engagement four months after our randomized intervention. These effects are strongest among participants who made new connections during our interventions, which belies the social dimension of civic life. Overall, these findings suggest that fears of citizens in authoritarian regimes fully disengaging may be unwarranted. Young people desire to participate more, even under difficult circumstances (Holbein and Hillygus, 2020).

Based on our analysis of participant's experiences during the TEFs, we speculate that some of this new engagement is a function of network ties that can mobilize people and keep them mobilized (Campbell, 2013). A limitation of our work – and indeed, most work on network effects (Masterson, 2023) – is that the formation of these new ties is endogenous to various factors we cannot manipulate. An open question is whether it is the ties themselves that are doing the work of amplifying intervention effects or whether it is variation in sociability acrosss individuals. If the former, it would be valuable to understand the exact mechanism by which ties increase engagement: is it through information dissemination or social pressure to avoid free-riding (Bursztyn et al., 2021; Eubank and Kronick, 2021)? If the latter, there is an opportunity to connect with the extensive literature in social psychology on why people vary in the value they derive from social interactions.

To what extent does the second fear – that new engagement could be "hostile to democratic life" (Gutmann, 1998) bear out? Our findings point to increased mobilization around ethnicity even as a battery of outcome measures bearing on inter-group hostility remain unchanged. What to make of this pattern, normatively, is difficult. On the one hand, there is nothing that says

organizing around identity categories is, in and of itself, troubling for democracy. Black churches, for instance, were central to the deepening of democracy in the United States during the civil rights era (Calhoun-Brown, 2000). The fact that we do not find worsening inter-group relations is encouraging. On the other hand, a history of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and similar contexts raises concern about ethnic mobilization becoming precursors to violence or inter-communal hostilities (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013; Wilkinson, 2006).

Part of what is at stake in the question of whether more ethnic mobilization is inherently troubling is how a country's opportunity environment structures civic participation (Oliver, 1999; Vráblíková, 2014). In Ethiopia, ethnicity plays a dominating role in structuring mobilization. The link between ethnicity and politics is inscribed in the Constitution through articles that outline ethnic groups' preeminent relationship to the nation, creates a system of federalism that assigns ethnic homelands to each major ethnic group, and stresses the rights of ethnic groups to self-determination (Lyons, 2019). In light of this context, it is not surprising that newly mobilized young people would find themselves channeled through ethnic organizations, even if they were not motivated by inter-group animus. We suspect opportunity environments vary dramatically from country to country; what we need is more work that characterizes and explains variation in such opportunity structures (Vráblíková, 2014). One approach is to extend interventions of this kind to settings that are more or less restrictive in their opportunity environments. A different possibility is to manipulate the opportunity environment in lab or lab-in-the-field designs, as Masterson (2023) cleverly shows is possible with respect to manipulating the composition of social networks.

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