

# Repression, Dissent, and the Onset of Civil War: Understanding the Interaction of States and Dissidents in the Production of Violent Conflict

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## Dissertation Summary

The prevailing wisdom among scholars of civil war is that ‘weak states’, or resource-poor states, are the most prone to this form of political violence. Yet, a large portion of resource-poor states never experience civil war. What can account for why resource-poor states like El Salvador are prone to civil war while resource-poor states such as Bhutan are not? I offer a theory of civil war onset that explains how dissidents and states interact to produce civil war. This theory moves beyond structural explanations and explains how the choices of states and dissidents jointly produce violence. From the theory, I derive the expectation that states that repress their citizens are the most likely to kill citizens and to generate dissident violence. In short, the resolution to the puzzle is: State leaders from resource-poor states, who choose to repress, are the most likely to generate violence that exceeds the civil war threshold. This insight not only resolves an academic puzzle but when tested provides a model with better in-sample prediction of civil war than previous models.

After explicating the theory and discussing concepts, I empirically evaluate the hypotheses implied by these arguments using a large cross-national dataset including a global sample from 1975 to 1999. I utilize structural equation modeling as well as two-stage procedures to estimate the direct and indirect effects of variables outlined in the theory. Using a novel approach to reducing bias in my data, time-dependent propensity score matching, I isolate the causal effects of repression on a state’s likelihood of experiencing civil war. I then extend the insights of the model to other forms of political violence including terrorism and interstate war. The model offers hypotheses relating to current debates over counterinsurgency policy and the relationship between state making and interstate war.

## Chapter 1—Conceiving of State Capacity

State strength is a contested concept that many scholars use to explain state behavior. Although a great deal of work utilizes this concept, many current scholars of civil war utilize a minimalist definition, or that resources available to the state constitutes capacity, which excludes theoretically relevant attributes. I argue for a multidimensional conception of state capacity, or that resources and societal support make up the basis for economic and political capacity of the state. I contrast other conceptions of state power and demonstrate that my

approach yields useful new hypotheses while maintaining a definition similar to common usage.

## **Chapter 2—Theory**

Chapter 2 offers definitions of important concepts, outlines my assumptions, and offers hypotheses derived from these assumptions. In brief, I argue that a multidimensional conception of state capacity can explain why some weak states are more likely to experience civil war. I develop a model of state and dissident incentives that explains the micromotivations of each actor and how their choices under constraint jointly produce violence. This model builds on Levi (1988) and what others term the predatory model of the state but also includes expectations concerning dissident behavior.

One novel implication is that state leaders faced with dissent will discount the future more than those with quiescent publics, and are thus more likely to invest in repression. Repression in turn leads to decreases in support for the state. A reduction in support for the state mobilizes dissidents and increases the likelihood of civil war. In short, civil war is more likely to occur in weak *repressive* states. I highlight the fact that civil war can only occur through joint state and dissident violence and thus this theory emphasizes the need to look at the mediating effects of repression and dissent.

## **Chapter 3—Empirical Tests, Two Stage Procedures**

My theory offers expectations related to both state and dissident choices that increase the likelihood of generating responses by their opponent. Since this process occurs in at least two-stages, single equations can not unpack the endogenous relations among the variables. Although endogeneity in these models is ubiquitous, the current practice is to simply estimate a single-stage model with a set of independent and control variables. In contrast, I model these direct and indirect effects using a two-stage instrumental variable approach suitable for binary endogenous variables. I offer a causal diagram of the model and test the hypotheses of the theory using this two-stage technique.

## **Chapter 4—Empirical Tests, Structural Equation Modeling**

Another method for estimating direct and indirect effects involves utilizing structural equation modeling. Similar to the two-stage approach, the presence of binary endogenous variables complicates the estimation. Using a limited information weighted least squares approach, I also estimate models and test the hypotheses derived from the process theory of civil war onset using structural equation techniques.

## **Chapter 5—Empirical Tests, Time-Series Matching**

Estimating causal effects can be model dependent. In other words, our inferences can be dependent upon certain estimation choices. One way to reduce this potential bias is to

preprocess the data using propensity score matching. While this has become quite common among experimentalists, it is more rare among scholars doing large cross-national research. One important barrier is that current matching techniques assume that observations are independent. I identify two ways to potentially match in the face of time-series cross-sectional data: year by year matching and balanced risk set matching. First, I match observations within a year then combine all the yearly matched data for the estimation sample. Next, using a recent advance from statistics, I use a survival model to estimate time to failure for the "treatment" variable. This allows for the creation of a propensity score, the hazard rate from the model, for each observation taking into account time dependency. Using this so-called 'balanced risk set' technique, I am able to reduce bias in the data making the inferences less dependent upon modeling decisions. I compare matching outcomes for current standard approaches to cross-sectional matching, year by year, and balanced risk set matching.

## **Chapter 6—The Microdynamics of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency**

Why do some counterinsurgency campaigns pacify while others stoke insurgency? Previous work identifies resolve, capabilities, and strategic interaction as answers to why some counterinsurgent campaigns succeed while others fail. Building on this work and using insights from the process theory of state-dissident violent interaction, I investigate the microdynamics of insurgent-counterinsurgent interactions in Iraq. One important insight is that where counterinsurgents use violence on already unsupportive groups of citizens, they are more likely to generate violent dissident responses. Using an original data set of counterinsurgent operations in Iraq, I find that less militarized counterinsurgent responses are more successful at reducing violence given certain distributions of support for the state and its policies. Implications from the statistical model are then discussed with reference to current policy in Iraq.

## **Chapter 7—State Capacity and International Relations**

Recent research exploring the transnational factors affecting civil war has focused on the role of bad neighbors, refugees, and other region specific processes. While most agree that conflict processes do not respect physical borders, few studies explain how *international relations* affects civil war. In other words, relatively little is known about how the character of international system affects the likelihood of domestic conflict. Using insights from international relations and a process theory of civil war I identify several hypotheses related to the international system and civil war. I evaluate these hypotheses using a times-series cross-sectional research design confirming that a reduction in the concentration of power in the international system increases the likelihood of civil war, that increased external conflict in the form of militarized interstate disputes increases the likelihood of civil war, and having foreign policy similarities with great powers reduces the likelihood of civil war. I discuss the implications for the further study of civil war in the conclusion.