
Determinants of civil war

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The last three years have seen a downward trend in deaths from armed conflict. Still, the world has seen 280 distinct conflicts since 1946, with the vast majority being intrastate or civil wars. In each year of the 1970s and 1980s, there have been between thirty and forty major armed conflicts in progress, and over one hundred thousand people were killed in armed conflicts just in 2016.

While the world is relatively more peaceful than in previous decades, the unacceptable scale of death and destruction as a result of conflict merits ongoing attention and intervention.

Historians and social scientists who study conflict are preoccupied with the question: what are the determinants of civil war?

Traditionally, scholars identify what we call grievance factors as the primary determinants of civil conflict. This is intuitive: what could make a nation go to war other than deep-rooted political and social upset? This variable is made up of factors that one might expect. Concerns such as ethnic fractionalisation, religious conflict, lack of democracy or poor political institutions are all expected to lead to grievance. Researchers also expect factors such as income and land inequality, colonial legacy and militaristic cultures to be highly relevant for grievance outcomes.

However, using series of proxy variables and available data, economists and empirical researchers have managed to complete studies indicating the relevance of such factors in causing civil conflict. Surprisingly, they find that they are insignificant.

This finding is a blow for political theorists – our intuition and understanding of civil conflicts in the modern era has extremely limited empirical support. In the world of research, empirics are tantamount. To make matters worse, economists' alternative findings are particularly controversial.

Rather than finding grievance as being relevant to causing civil wars, many researchers found instead that profit seeking is the causal factor instigating internal violent conflict – hence the greed versus grievance debate. The implication is that rebellion is an industry, and rebels are, rather than ideologues, looters, equivalent to bandits. This situation is caused by an atypical context, where opportunities for profit arise. The rational actor seeks to maximise profit, and so goes to war.

In this scenario, opportunities for predation are preferred to productive activities, and where property rights are not well defined, rebel groups can loot and plunder as they please, thereby accumulating funds. Especially in the context of poor government institutions where rule of law is limited and private property is poorly defined, insurgent groups find opportunity to capture and claim profitable assets.

For example, it was found that the presence of natural resources increased the probability of civil war: where extractable raw materials were present, they could be captured and their rents extracted during conflict as a source of funding. There are many examples of such scenarios: the diamond conflicts in West Africa, conflict in Cambodia where there is abundant timber and cocaine as a natural resource ripe for extraction in Colombia. This situation is not aided by the extensive research on the natural resource curse, whereby countries rich in primary commodities are often found to have poor public service provision, corruption and economic mismanagement.

When potential soldiers are foregoing very little income, they may choose rebellion. In this case, civil war is simply the accumulation of conditions that make it worthwhile to enter into conflict, rather than a call to action due to insufferable

conditions or ideology. This is a tough pill to swallow: over one hundred thousand deaths and more per year as a result of human greed.

However, a 2003 paper by Fearon and Laitin throws a spanner in the works. Their empirical studies find that neither greed nor grievance factors are significant in determining the onset of civil war.

It is undoubtable that the conditions that favour uprising and civil war include weak states, poverty, and instability. However, it is argued that the motivation behind civil war is irrelevant: civil war motivated by greed or grievance looks the same. Rather, what determines civil war is simply if it is feasible or not.

In any given nation, it's likely that there are a subset of individuals who may be rallied to commit insurgency. It may be that they are ideologically or economically motivated. In fact, you are likely to find individuals motivated by both factors. Indeed, one does not need a particularly large group to instigate civil war. Rather, the factors distinguishing nations in civil war and nations at peace are the conditions that allow for rebellion to take place at all.

For instance, empirical studies find that increased per capita income lead to a decrease in incidences of civil war. The greed argument interprets this as being relevant to opportunity costs, whereby soldiers are willing to give up low wages in cases where going to war is more profitable. According to the feasibility argument, however, low per capita income is indicative of poor state capacity. Low per capita income greatly increases the feasibility, rather than motivation, of war as it indicates a weak state.

In employing the greed or grievance argument, a nation like Saudi Arabia would surely experience civil war. There is extensive political repression, poor welfare institutions and vast natural resources available for capture and exploitation. However, the Saudi Arabian government is wealthy and employs a massively powerful military force. Here, civil war is simply not a viable strategy, regardless of motivation. Even in the United States of America where informal militias are extremely well armed and political polarisation is at a recent high, there would be relevant greed and grievance motivations to go to civil war. Of course, this is simply completely unfeasible given the sheer brute strength of the American military and institutions.

Essentially, greed and grievance motivations are always present. However, they are not what determine if civil war occurs or not. Rather, the feasibility of conflict is what acts as the primary determinant of civil war. A lack of funding, a surety of failure or simply being completely overpowered militarily mean that the ability to rouse potential rebels is irrelevant when civil war is entirely unfeasible.

This thinking has provided an interesting new lens on the research on determinants of civil war. However, empirical studies on civil war and conflict in general suffer from many issues, not least of all being data availability. What is clear, though, is that much more work needs to be done if we are to be rid of conflict altogether.