

Why Civil Wars Happen, and What We Can Do About Them

POSC 1020 – Introduction to International Relations

Steven V. Miller

Department of Political Science



Puzzle(s) for Today

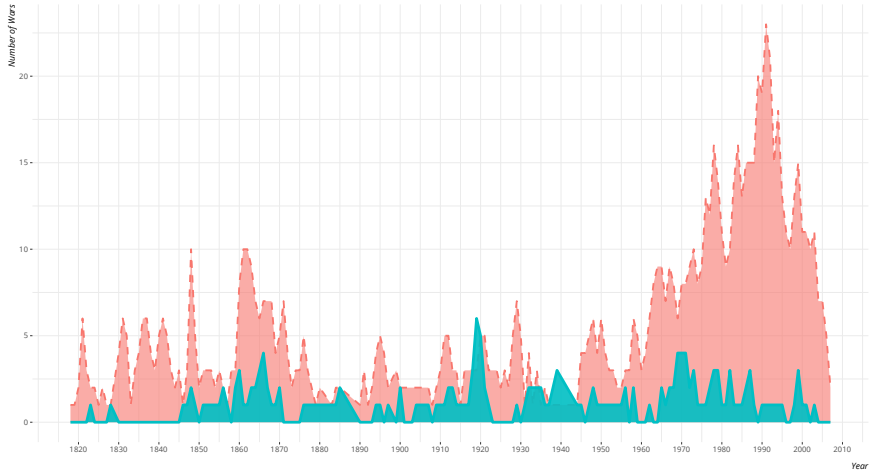
Civil war happens when a government and domestic non-state actor fail to peacefully bargain over differences. What explains when that happens?



Figure 1: Cuban soldiers in Angola during the Angolan Civil War

Intra-state Wars Are the Typical Case of War These Days

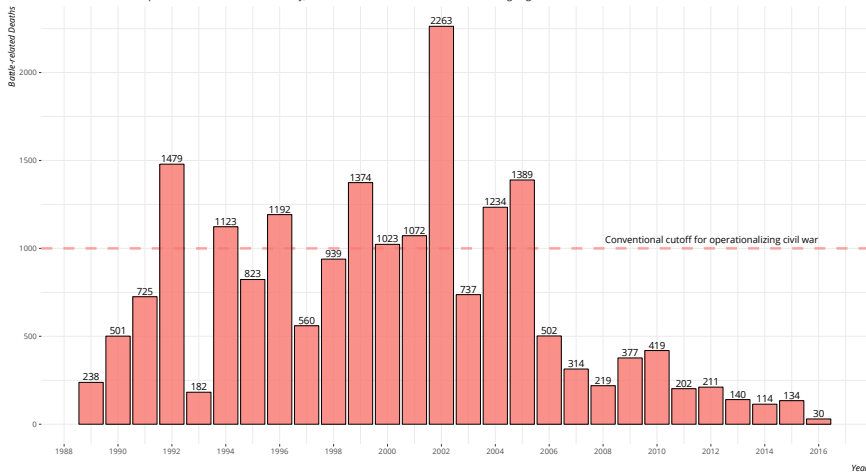
Intra-state wars (red-dashed line) increase in number after World War II and peak with the end of the Cold War



Data: Correlates of War War Data (v. 4.1). Temporal Domain: 1816-2007.

Battle-related Deaths in Colombia's Civil Conflict (1989-2016)

Civil conflicts tend to be protracted and fluctuate in severity, like the conflict in Colombia that has been ongoing since 1964.



Data: UCDP, via World Bank.

Why Study Civil War?

- Theoretical tools apply from international to domestic context.
- Civil wars rarely stay domestic.
 - Other countries intervene/take sides
 - Spillover effects

Why Rebel?

A quick typology:

- Greed vs. grievance
- Control of central government vs. secession
 - Separatist: non-state actor seeks to secede/form own country (e.g. Eritrea, South Sudan)
 - Irredentist: non-state actor seeks to secede/join another country (e.g. Donbass, Srpska)

When Dissatisfaction Leads to Armed Opposition

- Group-level explanation
- Country-level explanation
- International factors

Group-level Explanations

Groups better organize for rebellion when they can coordinate. What helps toward that end:

- Groups share ethnic, religious, or linguistic affinity (e.g. Sunni insurgency).
- Have access to resources to garner support (e.g. FARC).
- Share a sense of injustice directed at government.

Country-level Factors

There are several important country correlates for civil war.

- Poverty
- Non-democracy
 - Importantly, there may be more violence “in the middle.”
- Rugged terrain
- Bigger population

International Factors

- Foreign states may arm or aid rebels they support (see: Serbia)
- Sanctions against target government may embolden rebels (e.g. U.S. v. Nicaragua)

One wrinkle: international rivalries over territory may reduce likelihood of civil war onset.

Not All Disagreements Militarize

Not all conflicts between dissatisfied groups and the government result in civil war.

- Compare Tunisia (2011) with Syria (2011-present).

We can instead understand civil war onset as bargaining failure.

Civil War as Bargaining Failure

We study civil war in IR because the bargaining framework applies well.

- Incomplete information
- Commitment problems
- Issue Indivisibility

Civil War from Incomplete Information

Governments have a particular disadvantage gauging would-be rebels:

- Less scope for communication during bargaining phase
- Tough to gauge rebel capacity

Civil War from Incomplete Information

However, the protracted nature of civil conflicts don't fit well with arguments of incomplete information.

- That said, nature of civil war (i.e. insurgency, asymmetric warfare) magnify the information problem for central governments.

Civil War from Commitment Problem

- Very real incentives for preventative war
- Problems of post-war reconciliation
- Rebels cannot credibly promise compliance from radicals.

From this perspective, it's unsurprising that only about 25% of all civil wars end in a negotiated peace.

- Lasting peaces tend to follow outright victory.

Civil War from Issue Indivisibility

Demands also suffer from the 0/1 problem of issue indivisibility.

- Territorial concession creates major reputation problems in multiethnic states.
- Consociationalism/power-sharing only partially mollifies concerns over control of central government.
 - Even these have commitment problems (e.g. Lebanon).

Conclusion: What Can We Do?

If peace prevails through conquest, governments need counterinsurgency strategies.

- Conventional military forces are not always very effective against insurgencies.
- Often, conventional armies inflict collateral damage by killing women, children, and noncombatants.
 - This creates future rebels.

Conclusion: What Can We Do?

Any lasting peace needs to win over “hearts and minds.”

- Must build goodwill among population that previously rebelled.
- Need to integrate previous rebels into society/state.
- Economic development and democracy are almost musts.
 - But therein lies a major part of the problem.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Civil Wars

- A Typology of Civil War

- The Correlates of Civil War Onset

- Civil War as Bargaining Failure

Conclusion: What Can We Do?