Conflict Ingredients

The Effect of Arbitrary Death Thresholds on Substantive Findings

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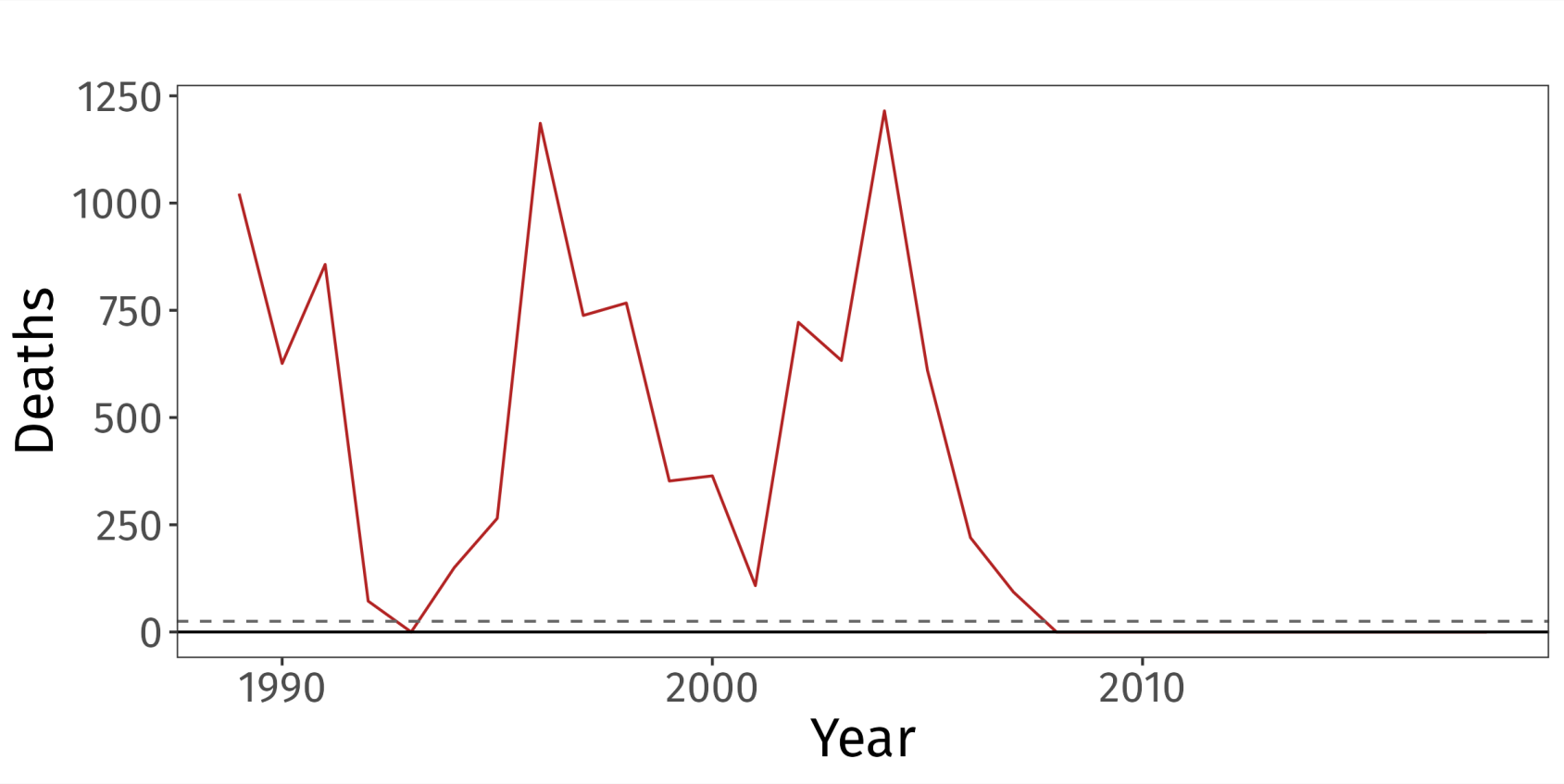
Research Questions

1. Do arbitrary death thresholds used to code civil conflicts influence substantive findings?
2. How might researchers address this concern?

What is a civil conflict?

What is a civil conflict?

Battlefield Deaths in Uganda



Anchoring Effects of Past Decisions

Google Scholar yields 6,000+ results for “25 battle-related deaths [or] 1000 battle-related deaths”

Patterns in International Warfare, 1816–1965

By Melvin Small and J. David Singer

Abstract: Patterns in international violence are discovered through the quantitative analysis of international wars which resulted in more than 1,000 battle-connected deaths. Between 1816 and 1965, members of the state system participated in 50 such interstate wars and 43 such colonial and imperial conflicts.

Anchoring Effects of Past Decisions

Google Scholar yields 6,000+ results for “25 battle-related deaths [or] 1000 battle-related deaths”

You mentioned in the beginning that the minimum threshold for categorizing a situation as a conflict was 25 people killed in a year. Isn't that a very low figure in light of the major conflicts going on? In many countries, one could probably come up with examples of inter-communal violence with 25 people killed in a year.

It is a very low one, and deliberately so. The tradition was to have a cut-off point at 1000 deaths. Other studies were using 200 or 100, but we wanted to have a low number, in order to capture conflicts when they were fairly small. It works because this makes prevention studies possible, as well as opening the way for new kinds of studies to determine how many of these small conflicts will actually escalate and become big conflicts. Surprisingly few actually do, which is good news. A low threshold also enables us to show that conflicts actually do fluctuate substantially.

Extant Measures

- Extant definitions generally require:
  - An armed conflict that produces deaths
  - A non-state group fighting the government
  - A contested incompatibility between warring sides
- They differ on:
  - Numeric death threshold
  - Effect of interrupting a conflict on the coding
  - Whether to consider the distribution of deaths across parties

Extant Measures

- Fearon and Laitin
  - >1,000 battlefield deaths cumulatively
  - >100 deaths on average yearly
  - >100 deaths on both sides
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program
  - Major: >1,000 battlefield deaths in a year
  - Minor: >25 battlefield deaths in a year

Empirical Implications

Warming increases the risk of civil war in Africa

Marshall B. Burke, Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, +1, and David B. Lobell Authors Info & Affiliations

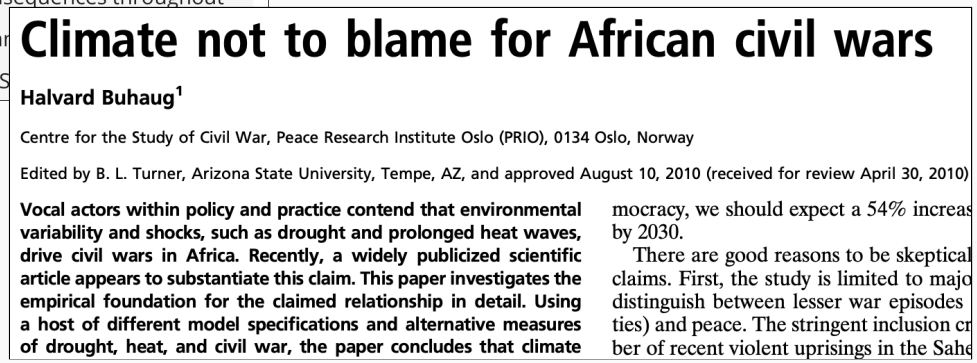
Edited by Robert W. Kates, Independent Scholar, Trenton, ME, and approved October 14, 2009

December 8, 2009 | 106 (49) 20670-20674 | https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0907998106

60,460 | 636 PDF/EPUB

Abstract

Armed conflict within nations has had disastrous humanitarian consequences throughout much of the world. Here we undertake the first comprehensive exar potential impact of global climate change on armed conflict in sub-S



Climate not to blame for African civil wars

Halvard Buhaug[1]

Centre for the Study of Civil War, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 0134 Oslo, Norway

Edited by B. L. Turner, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, and approved August 10, 2010 (received for review April 30, 2010)

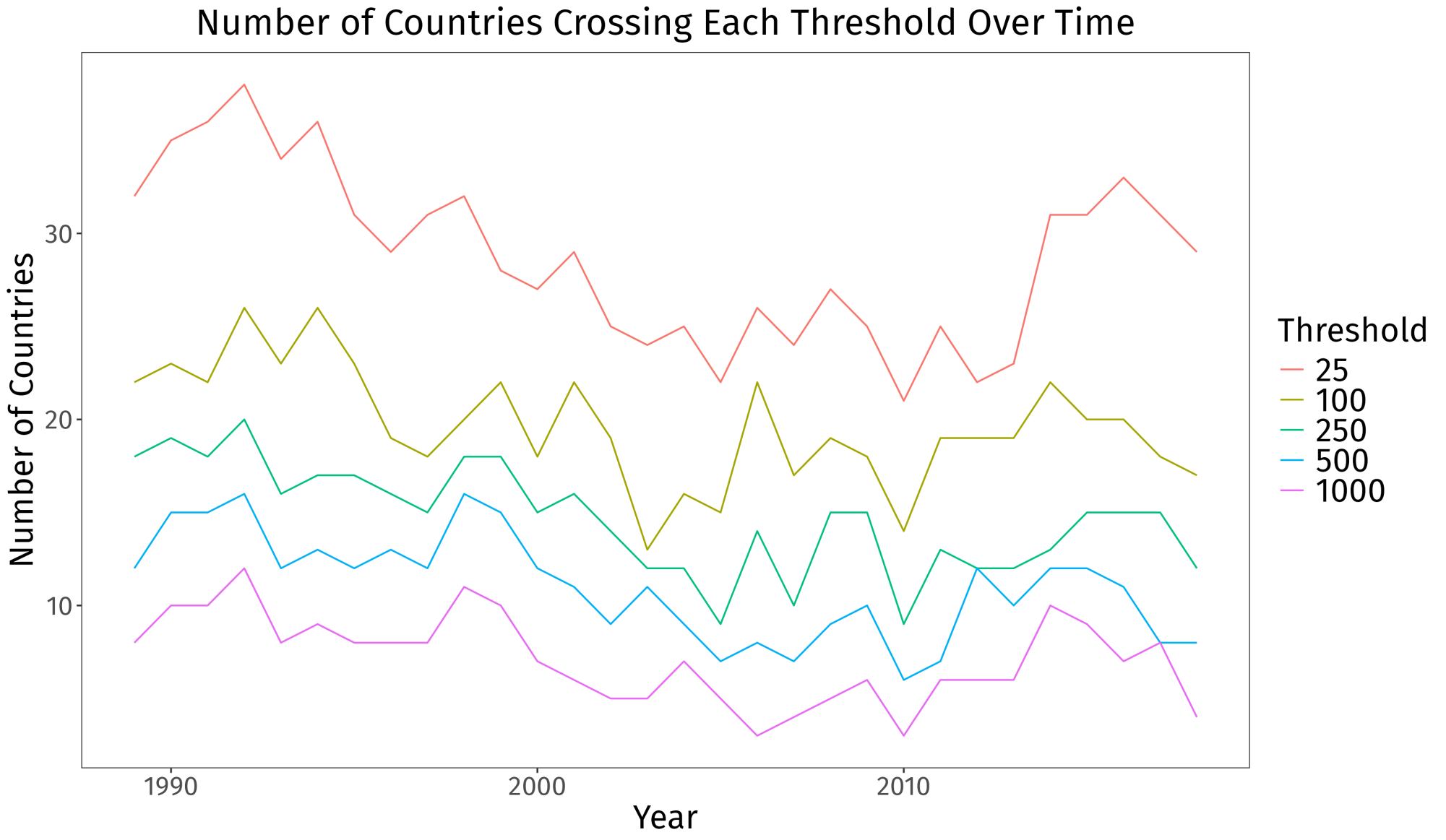
Vocal actors within policy and practice contend that environmental variability and shocks, such as drought and prolonged heat waves, drive civil wars in Africa. Recently, a widely publicized scientific article appears to substantiate this claim. This paper investigates the empirical foundation for the claimed relationship in detail. Using a host of different model specifications and alternative measures of drought, heat, and civil war, the paper concludes that climate

mocracy, we should expect a 54% increas by 2030.

There are good reasons to be skeptical claims. First, the study is limited to majo distinguish between lesser war episodes ties) and peace. The stringent inclusion cr ber of recent violent uprisings in the Sahe

Investigating the Effect of Thresholds on Findings

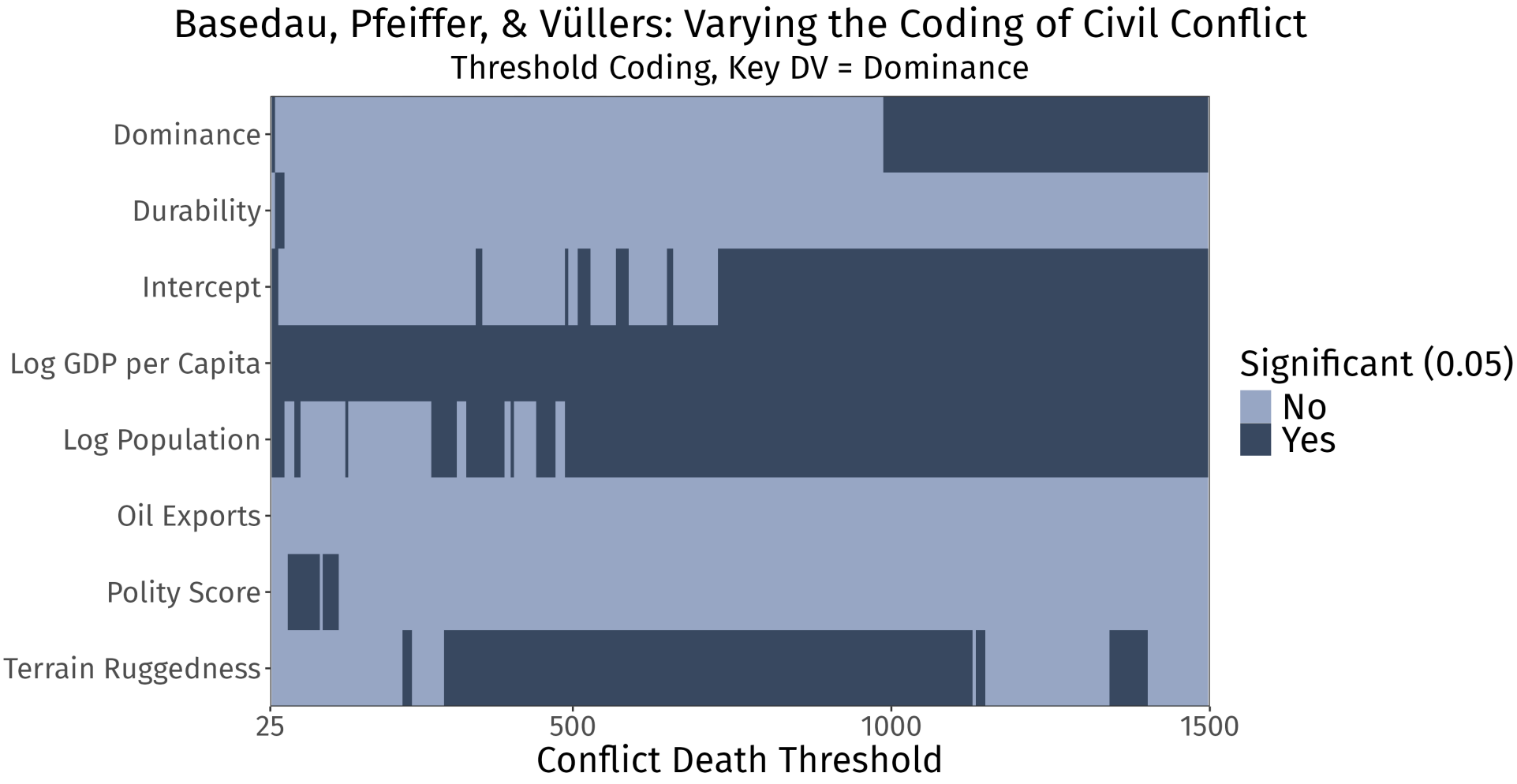
- Employ a simulation approach to eliciting patterns of significance across many candidate thresholds
- Create dichotomous variables for conflict that use two approaches:
  - Threshold: vary yearly deaths from 25 to 1500
  - Cumulative: vary cumulative deaths in a conflict period from 25 to 1500
- Approximately 600 candidate outcomes
  - Vary in their plausibility and utility
  - Enable us to assess the consistency of findings across the potential candidates to elicit patterns
  - No ‘right’ solution

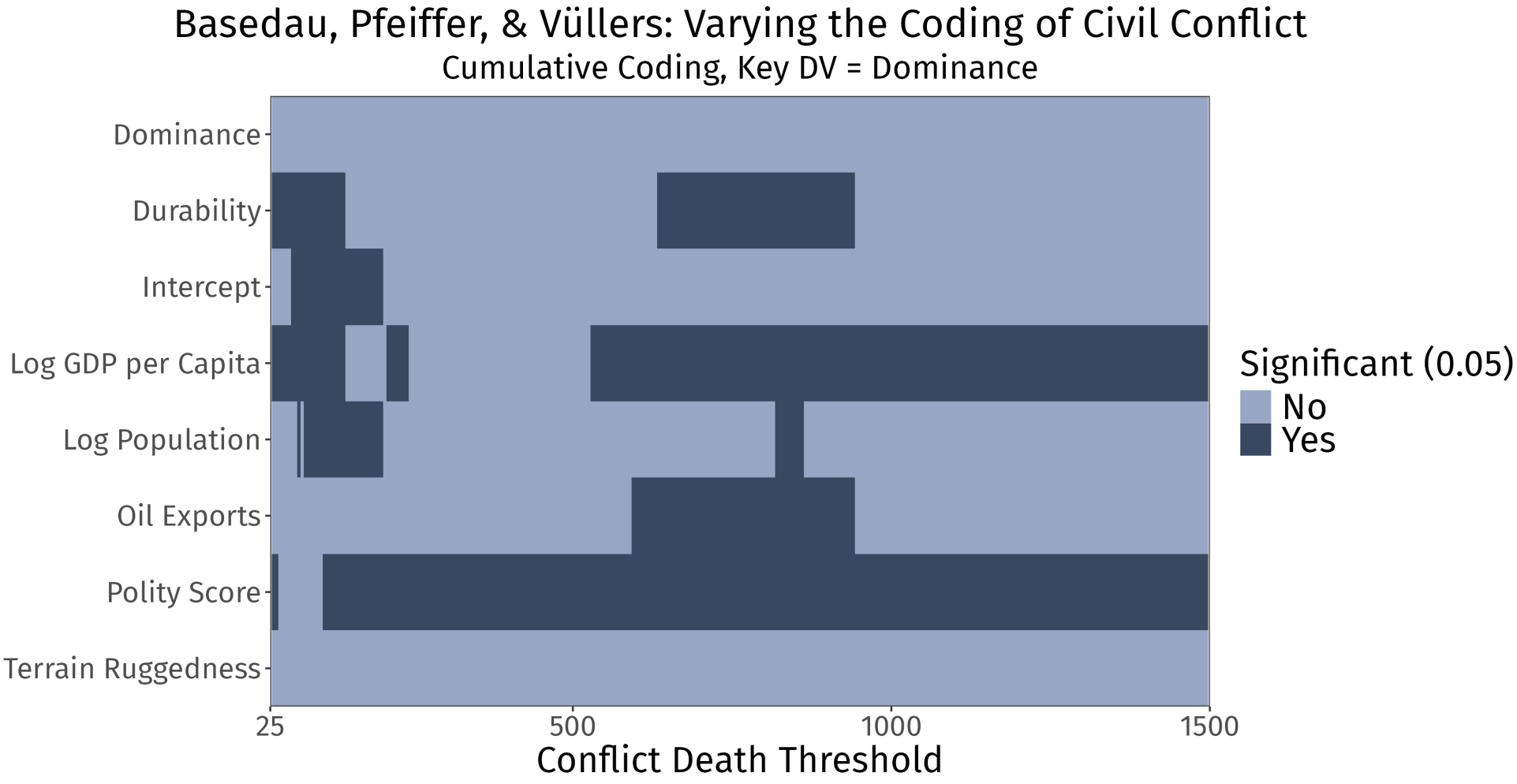

Number of Countries Crossing Each Threshold Over Time
Number of Countries
30
20
10
1990
2000
2010
Year
Threshold
25
100
250
500
1000

Investigating the Effect of Thresholds on Findings

1. *Bad Religion*: Religion incites violence, but how? Provide evidence for mechanisms: the overlap of religious and other identities, religious groups' grievances, and religious leaders' calls for violence
2. *Ethnicity, Insurgency, and War*: 'The factors that explain which countries have been at risk for civil war are not their ethnic or religious characteristics but rather the conditions that favor insurgency.'

Bad Religion Robustness


Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers: Varying the Coding of Civil Conflict
Threshold Coding, Key DV = Dominance
Dominance
Durability
Intercept
Log GDP per Capita
Log Population
Oil Exports
Polity Score
Terrain Ruggedness
25
500
1000
1500
Conflict Death Threshold
Significant (0.05)
No
Yes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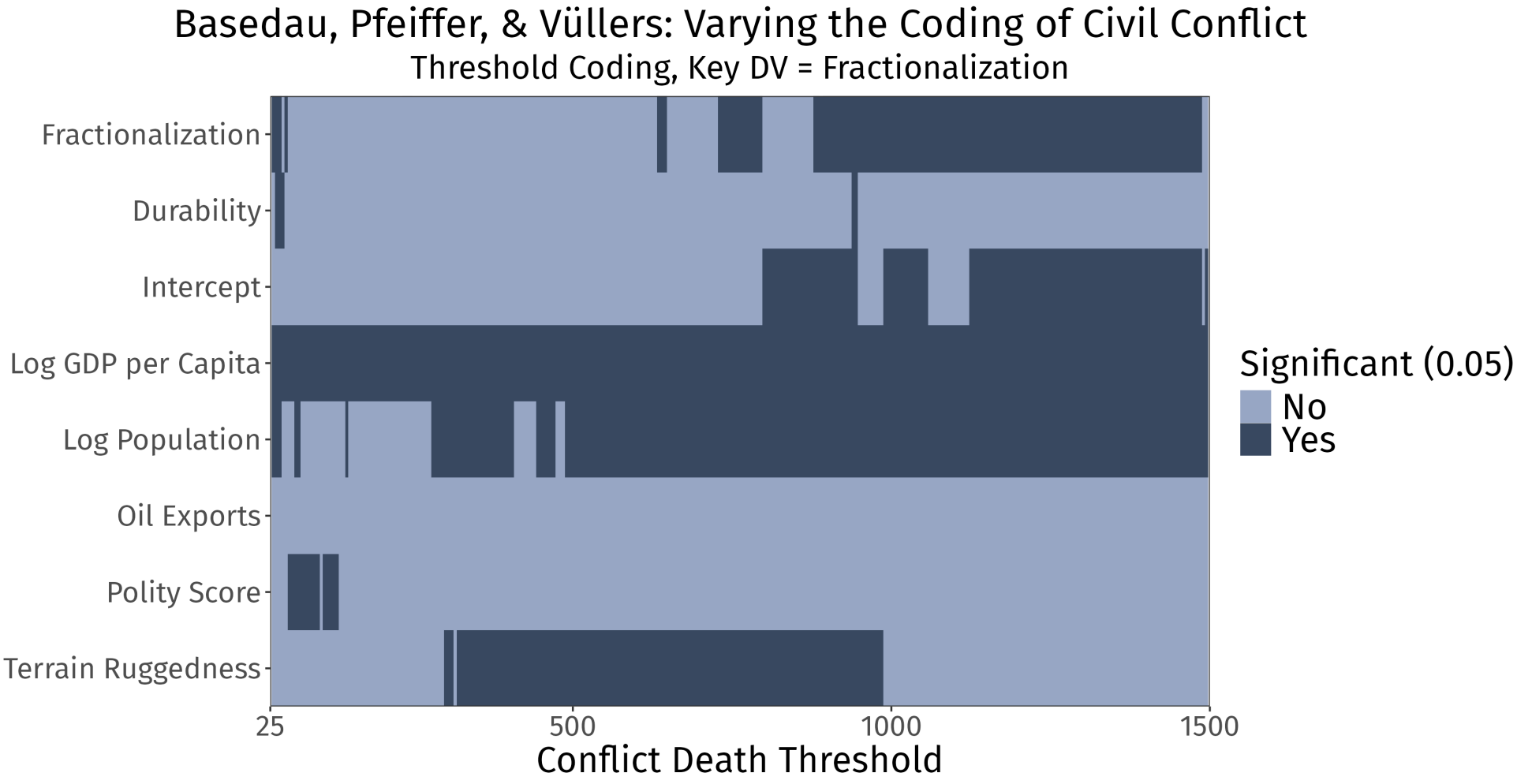
Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers: Varying the Coding of Civil Conflict
Threshold Coding, Key DV = Fractionalization
Fractionalization
Durability
Intercept
Log GDP per Capita
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Oil Exports
Polity Score
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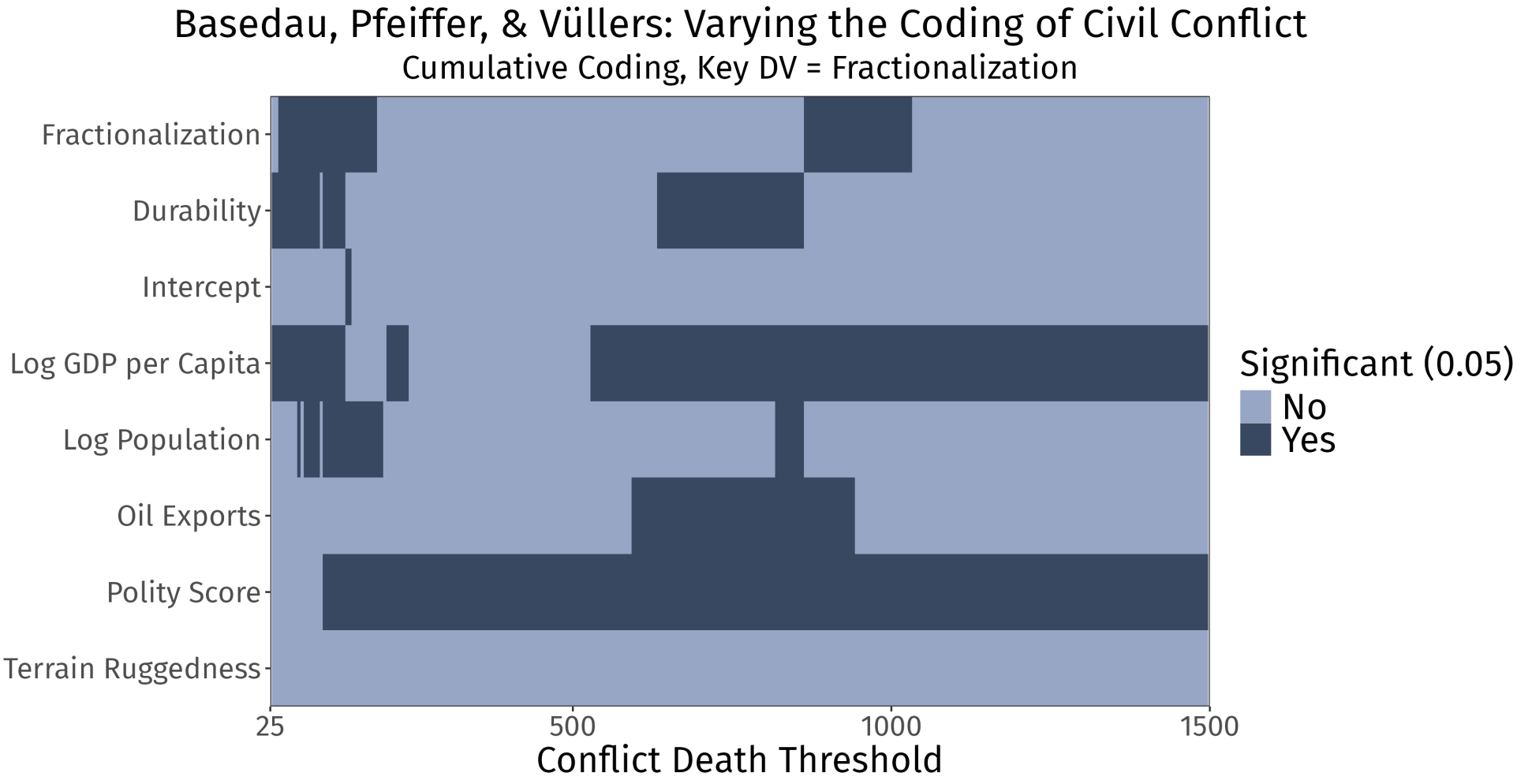
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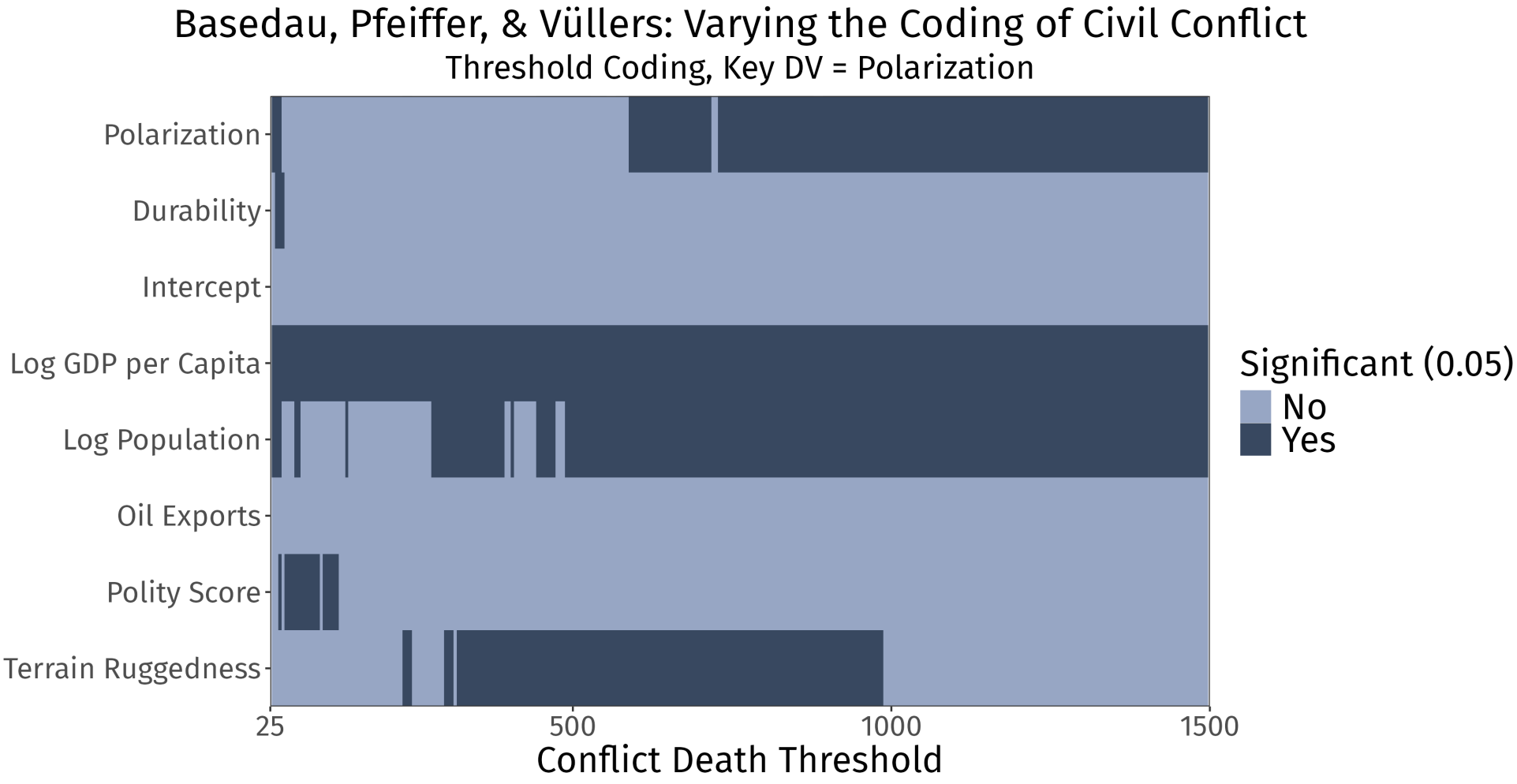
Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers: Varying the Coding of Civil Conflict
Threshold Coding, Key DV = Polarization
Polarization
Durability
Intercept
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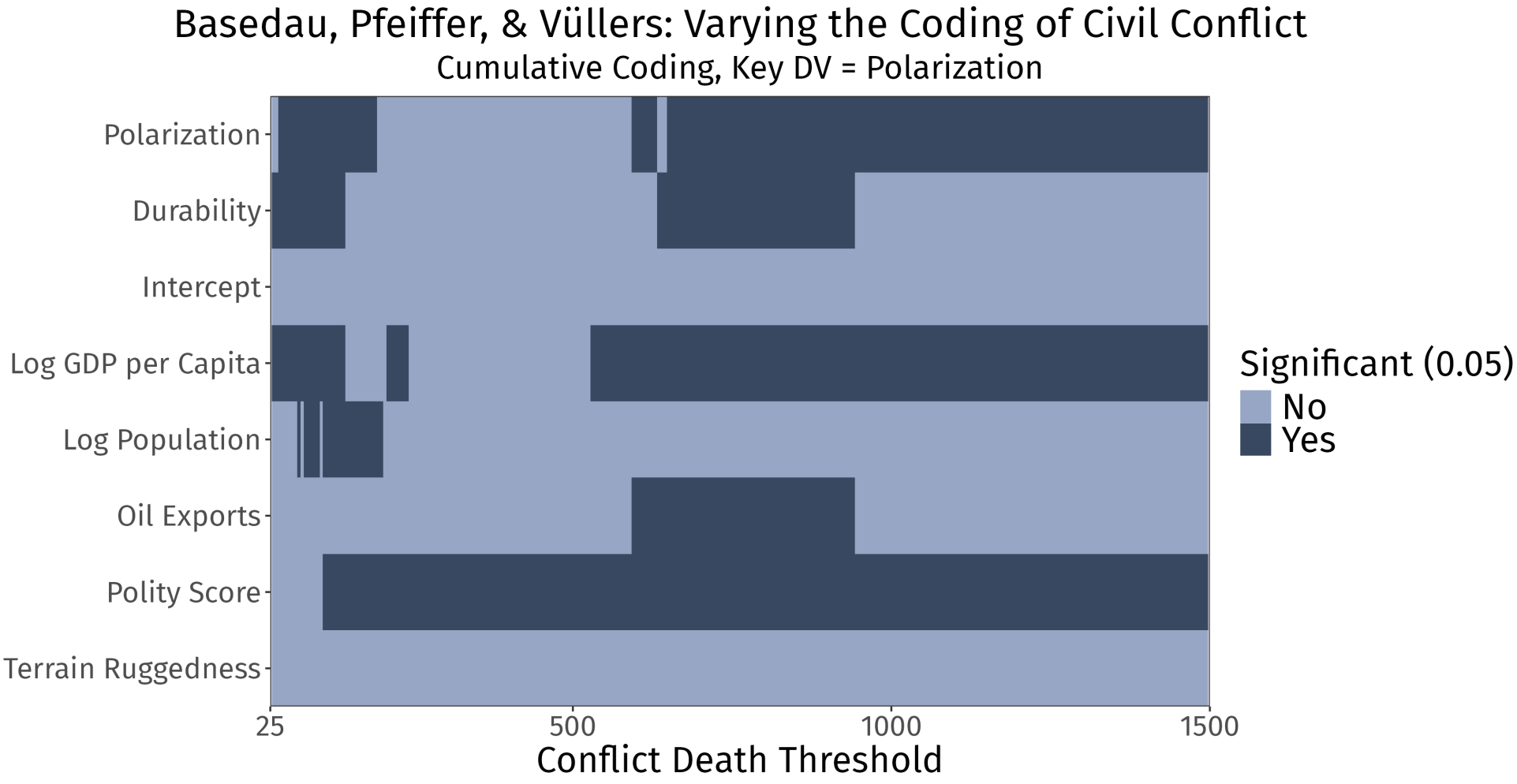
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Polity Score
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1500
Conflict Death Threshold
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No
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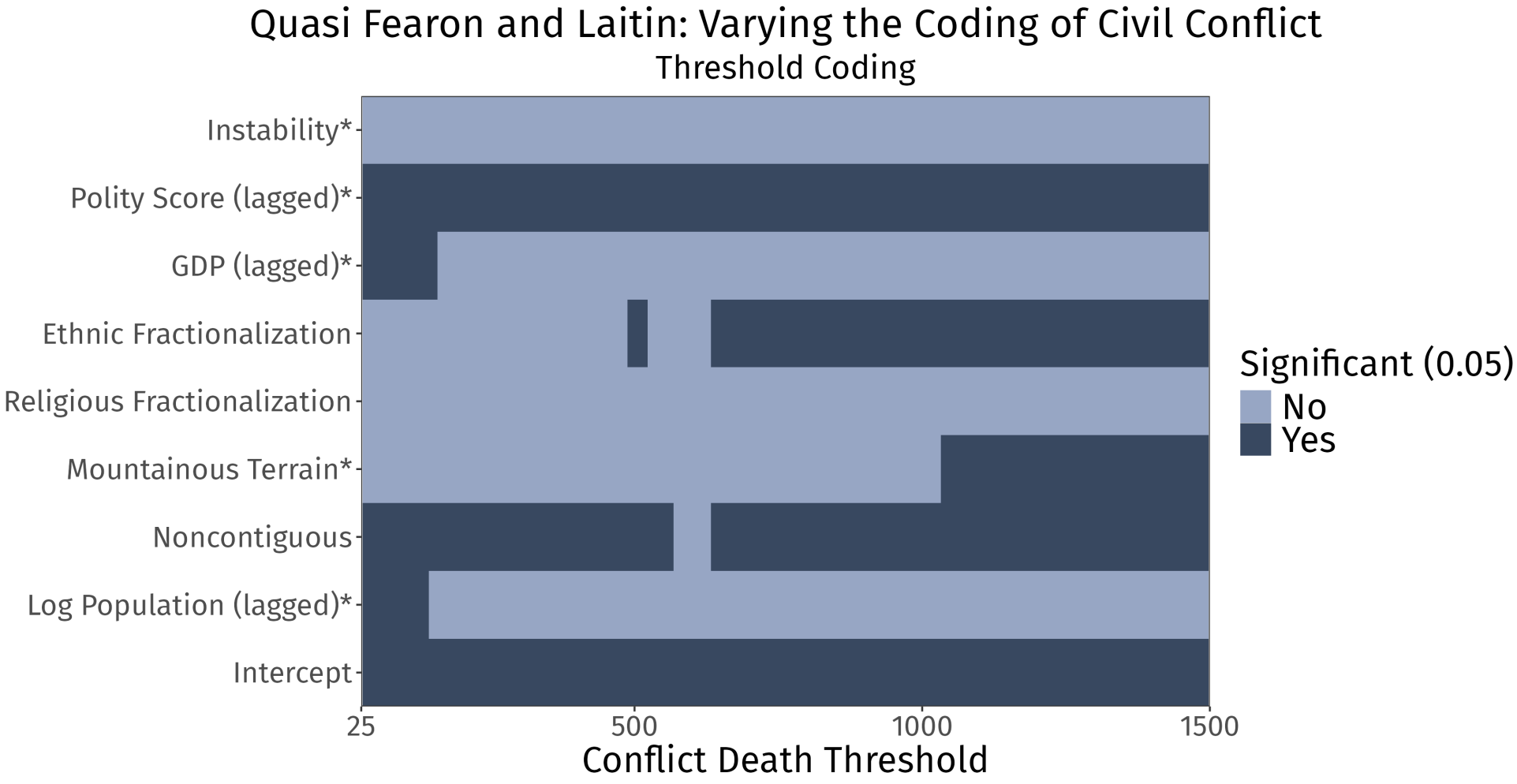
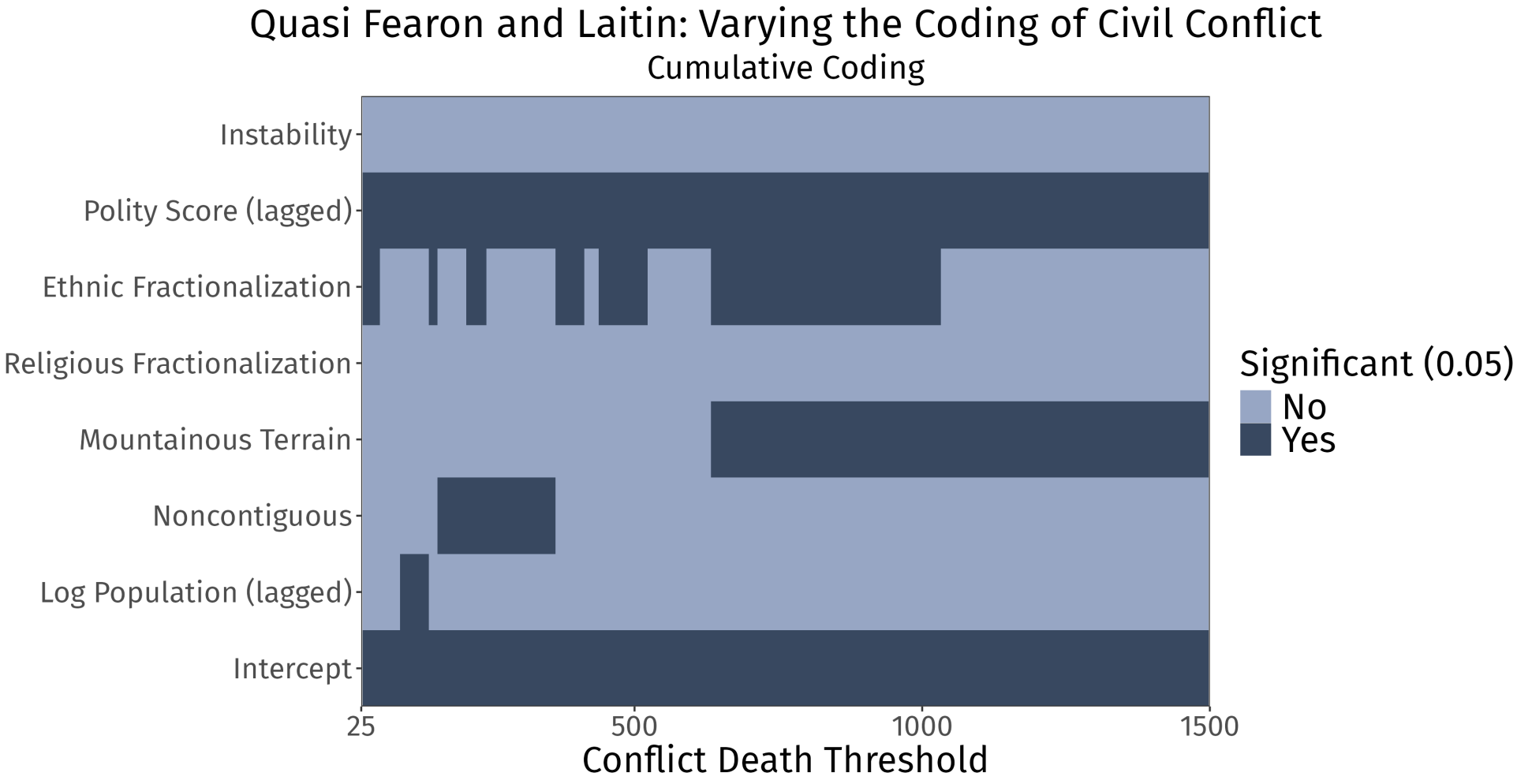
Bad Religion Robustness Across

Ind. Var.	Cumulative	↓ Threshold	↑ Threshold
Dominance			✓
Fractionalization	∼		✓
Polarization	✓		✓

(Quasi) Fearon & Laitin Robustness


Quasi Fearon and Laitin: Varying the Coding of Civil Conflict
Threshold Coding
Instability*
Polity Score (lagged)*
GDP (lagged)*
Ethnic Fractionalization
Religious Fractionalization
Mountainous Terrain*
Noncontiguous
Log Population (lagged)*
Intercept
25
500
1000
1500
Conflict Death Threshold
Significant (0.05)
No
Yes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Polity Score (lagged)
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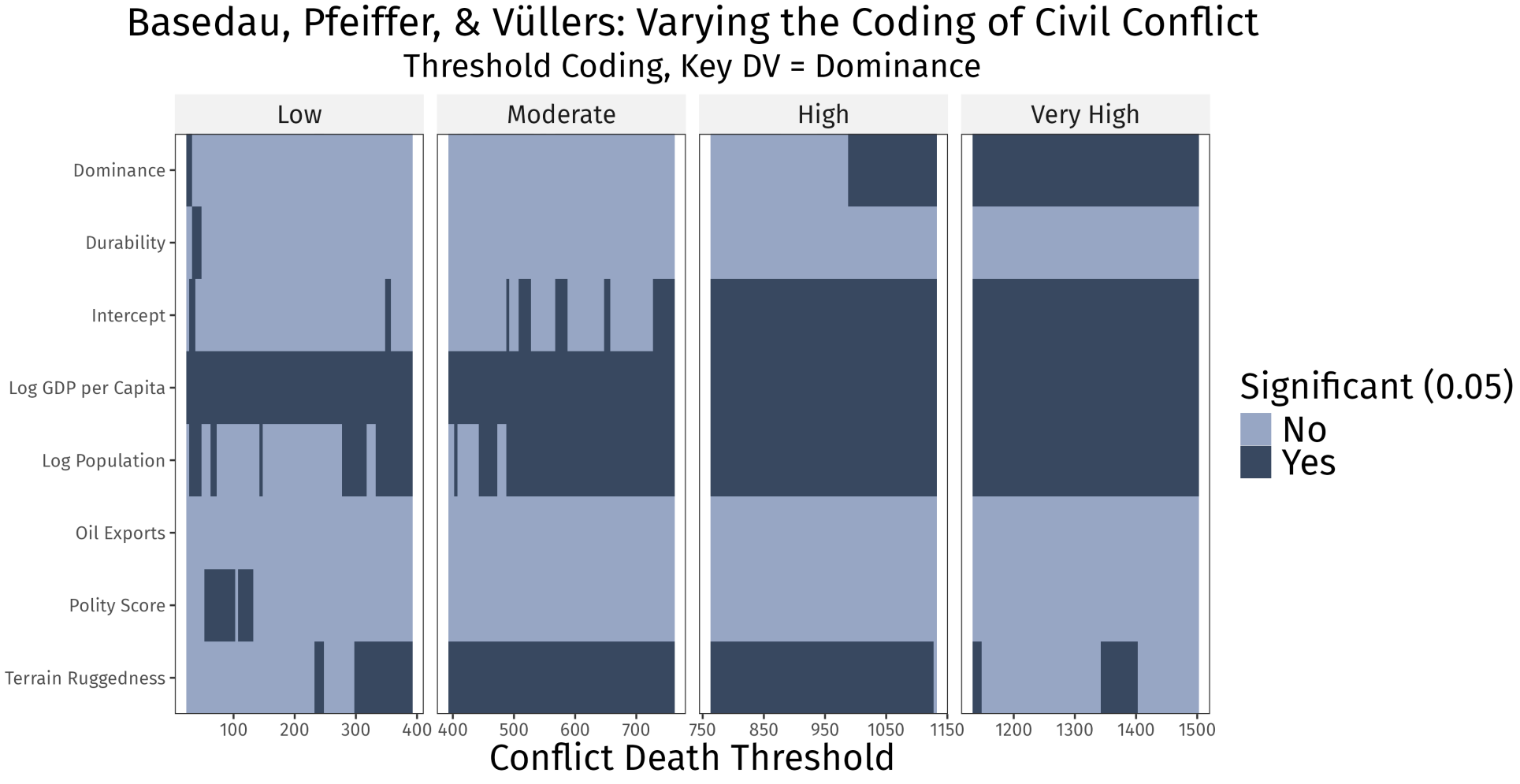
Next Steps


Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers: Varying the Coding of Civil Conflict
Threshold Coding, Key DV = Dominance
Low
Moderate
High
Very High
Dominance
Durability
Intercept
Log GDP per Capita
Log Population
Oil Exports
Polity Score
Terrain Ruggedness
100
200
300
400
400
500
600
700
750
850
950
1050
1150
1200
1300
1400
1500
Conflict Death Threshold
Significant (0.05)
No
Yes

Conclusions

- Traditional battlefield death thresholds are arbitrary
- Measures of political violence need to align with our theories rather than default thresholds
- Researchers should test their models across key candidate outcomes that resemble different types of conflicts to ensure consistency and elicit the bounds of their theory
- Next steps: collate results of robustness across studies, consider alternative measurement strategies without sharp thresholds, & formalize a structured robustness assessment process