

Causes of Civil Conflict (Course Number Needed)

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Course Description

This seminar is designed to introduce students to the scientific study of civil conflict and equip them to pursue their own research interests in civil war and related topics. We will explore the many reasons that lead people to take up arms against the government. To help develop an understanding of these causes, the course explores theoretical arguments as well as narratives and case studies that chronicle civil wars throughout the world. As students become familiar with the explanations for civil conflict presented by scholars, they will apply this knowledge to a specific civil war and evaluate the accuracy of arguments made in media and academic literatures. In addition to helping develop research skills, the course seeks to motivate students to consider the problem of civil war in a global context and what might be done to reduce or prevent this type of violence in the future.

Topic Description

In the last half of the twentieth century, civil wars have killed more than 16 million combatants (Sarkees et al 2003). These wars afflict countless more civilians, as death, disease and displacement occur both in wartime and in the wake of violence (Cairns 1997; Lacina et al 2006). In the past two decades, civil wars continue to impact millions of lives throughout the world. In light of the high human as well as material costs associated with civil war, policy makers and academics have sought a greater understanding of this inherently political phenomenon. In this course, we will deal with the question of why these civil wars start (or civil war onset, as it is referred to in the literature).

The readings in this course will introduce students to the scientific study of war, including introductions to terminology, datasets, and theoretical arguments. Activities throughout the course give students experience in using source material to develop the ability to evaluate arguments presented in the academic work. By the end of the course, students will be familiar with the most common explanations for civil war. As we examine the arguments for how psychological factors, ethnicity, political institutions, economic incentives and state capacity affect the decision to fight we will also critique the authors and attempt to assess the merit of each argument in terms of theoretical consistency and empirical support. While the course is loosely structured around the distinctions between theories of civil conflict, we also want to recognize that the arguments are not mutually exclusive and the world is rarely deterministic.

The student will select a civil war (not the American Civil War) to research, summarize and analyze for their final paper. This paper will be written in sections and graded throughout the quarter. The student will demonstrate a detailed knowledge of a specific civil war and the ability to apply and evaluate a theoretical argument in the context of a case study.

Learning Goals

1. Provide a forum for discussion and debate around the causes of civil war.
2. Foster development of key analytical and research skills, including the ability to a) Understand and critique theoretical explanations for social phenomena as they are presented in academic writing, b) Collect information from primary and secondary sources, and c) Use case studies to evaluate theoretical arguments.
3. Consider potential policies that would reduce the risk of civil war.

Course Format

The course is intended to be primarily a discussion with minimal lecturing. Students should complete all readings before the first meeting of the week unless otherwise instructed. Some readings may prove confusing, but it is crucial that students go through all material and come to class prepared to offer summary, critique and questions. If I call on you and you have no input, your participation grade will suffer.

Most weeks include an activity that we will conduct in class during the second half of each meeting. Many of these activities require preparation on the part of the student, so be diligent to read through the activity in advance and complete any tasks before class. Again, failure to do so will result in a reduction of your participation grade and painfully awkward silence. Exceptional work in these activities may merit extra credit at the instructor's discretion.

The course includes a short paper which describes a civil war and applies the information from class. Section 7 includes more information about the paper, but I suggest that students begin early.

Readings

There is one required text (listed below) for this course, which will be available at the university book store as well as through online retailers.

DeRouen, Karl R. *An Introduction to Civil Wars*. 1st ed. Washington D.C.: CQ, 2015.

All others materials are either available online through the university's [library database](#) or will be made available on the course website.

Many of the readings are academic articles and can be difficult to understand. We will mainly read selections from these readings but know that these readings, though students are encouraged to read more in topics that pique their interest.

Similarly, many of these academic articles will include tables and figures that require some knowledge of statistics to understand. We typically will not read these sections, but if you are in global studies, I would suggest taking a stats course or two since it is an important topic. If you would like to skim these sections, the [following primer](#) may be useful. You are always welcome to ask questions about readings that you do not understand, but please do the readings first.

If you have trouble accessing the readings, please let me know. Many of the materials are also available through the library's media database. We will have a quick introduction on how to use this tool in the first week.

Most weeks contain additional readings that, while not required, would likely prove beneficial for anyone considering research in the area. You may also ask me for more material depending on your level of interest or search through the bibliographies to find more material.

Schedule

Week 1 – What are Civil Wars and Why Should we Study Them?

The goal for the first week is to introduce students to the task of defining and measuring “civil war.” What are the challenges associated with defining a civil war? Do the definitions used in the works below capture all instances of civil conflict? How will the definitions that we use to study civil wars affect us when we begin to ask what causes civil war? The datasets discussed in this week’s activity should help you choose a civil war for your final paper. They are also useful tools for any future research. The interview and selection from DeRouen serves to remind us of the effects of civil war and humanize what is sometimes a cold or sterile study of violence.

Readings:

1. DeRouen, pgs 1-14; 26-28.
2. Selection from [Correlates of War \(COW\)](#) coding rules. Only read the section on civil wars from pages 5-7.
3. Selection from [UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset coding rules](#). Section 2, pages 1-3.
4. Podcast: [What Constitutes a Civil War?](#)

Activities:

1. Group Assignment: form three to four person and read through an assigned portion of Chapter 2 in DeRouen, “The Costs of Civil War.” You will prepare a short presentation for the class.
2. Watch the [interview with Ishmael Beah](#), a former child soldier in Sierra Leone.
3. Go to your favorite international news source and look for an example of a current (or potentially a future) civil war. Could this conflict fit under any or all of the definitions of civil war covered in class?
4. Explore Civil Wars a. Access the Correlates of War Project and PRIO’s Armed Conflict Dataset and just look around. Find the list of civil wars in both projects. b. Do any of these wars seem interesting? Begin to think about which you might write about for your final paper.

Optional Readings: 1. Sambanis, Nicholas. 2004. “What is Civil War?: Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition.” 2. Harbom, Lotta, and Peter Wallensteen (2007). Armed Conflict, 1989-2006. *Journal of Peace Research*, 44(5): 623-634. 3. Sarkees, Meredith Reid, Frank Whelon Wayman, and J. David Singer. “Interstate, intrastate, and extrastate wars: a comprehensive look at their distribution over time, 1816–1997.” *International Studies Quarterly* 47.1 (2003): 49-70. 4. If you want to hear more from Ishmael Beah, you can see him on the now defunct [Colbert Report](#)