



Does inequality lead to civil wars? A global long-term study using anthropometric indicators (1816–1999)



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ABSTRACT

We test for the influence of absolute and relative deprivation — proxied by anthropometric methods — on civil war risk. A comprehensive height data set allows us to go back to 1816 for a global sample. We measure absolute deprivation using human stature and we use height inequality within birth cohorts to measure relative deprivation. We take care that selectivity caused by missing values does not bias the results. We find that relative economic deprivation within populations (i.e., inequality) had a strong and consistent impact on the propensity to start civil wars. By contrast, absolute deprivation was significant in most but not all specifications. We also attend to potential endogeneity through instrumental variables.

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1. Introduction and literature overview

Despite an extensive literature and the existence of a journal dedicated to the study of civil war, there have been no definitive conclusions about the reasons for civil war.¹ Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and Collier et al. (2009) ask whether civil wars can be explained best by 'grievance' such as inequality or a lack of political rights, or by 'greed'. The latter can entail control over natural resources or control over government in general to extract rents from the population. Arnson (2005) states that, although resources are central to the duration and intensity of war, the roots and objectives of war can be explained best by grievances. The factors that have been commonly found to underlie civil war are poverty, ethnic or religious discrimination, lack of democracy, and opportunities for rebellion (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004).

We focus on inequality as the determinant of the onset of civil war. Early theoretical studies often consisted of consideration of the appropriate functional form for the relationship between inequality and the onset of civil war. See for example Muller (1985), Davis (1954), Havrilesky (1980), Parvin (1973), Nagel (1974), and the review by Lichbach (1989). The studies that have assessed

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¹ Relevant studies include Sambanis (2001), de Soysa (2002), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), Ross (2004), Collier and Sambanis (2005), Ron (2005), Lujala et al. (2005), Fearon (2005), Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005), Blattman and Miguel (2010), World Bank (2011), etc.

the relationship between inequality and civil war empirically (see for example [Alesina and Perotti, 1996](#); [Cramer, 2003](#); [Muller and Seligson, 1987](#), among others) have reported both positive and negative findings.²

Some authors admit that the empirical results are compromised by severe data problems for the poor and conflict-prone regions in the world. Only incomplete or imprecise estimates of GDP per capita or Gini indices are in general available for countries affected by civil war. [Miguel et al. \(2004\)](#) conclude that, as a result of lack of reliable data on income inequality, especially with respect to African countries, it is not possible to assess the relation between income inequality and onset of civil war. [Fearon and Laitin \(2003\)](#) state: “The poor quality of the inequality data, available for only 108 countries, does not allow us to go beyond the claim that there appears to be no powerful cross-national relationship between inequality and onset (...).”

By using a comprehensive dataset, we are able to overcome the data problems that have hindered other studies. We hypothesize that populations in which people feel deprived compared to others are more likely to start a civil war and we also propose a positive relationship between absolute deprivation and increased risk of civil war. The absolute deprivation therefore depicts the average level of poverty or well-being within a population, while relative deprivation is defined here as inequality measured by anthropometric indicators. The novelty of our study is that we do not define poverty or inequality in monetary terms but take an approach that is close to Amartya Sen's capability-emphasizing approach to human well-being.³ Martha Nussbaum, who refined the approach by developing a list of the most fundamental capabilities a society should have, proposes health – defined as “being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter” – as one of the central human capabilities ([Nussbaum, 2003](#)). Our proxies for well-being and inequality – average height and the inequality thereof – are determined to a large extent by this capability.⁴ While recent studies limit their scope to the time period since World War II or even the post-Cold War period, our method allows us to investigate a much longer period. We assess civil wars from 1816, amounting to 306 conflicts. We also take into account potential endogeneity issues, a problem that has been ignored in many earlier empirical studies.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) presents our data and introduces our proxy for absolute and relative deprivation as well as the subsequent hypotheses. [Section 3](#) presents the estimation framework and results. [Section 4](#) concludes.

2. Data, methods and hypotheses

Because of the extended time period covered, we use an enlarged version of the Correlates of War (COW) Project's data⁵ on intrastate wars, beginning in 1816.⁶ The onset of civil war is coded as a dichotomous variable adopting the value 1 if at least one new civil war started in a given country during a ten-year period. The COW database only contains information on those conflicts that caused at least 1000 battle-related deaths (of all participants) per conflict year.⁷ Furthermore, a civil war is only included in the data set if one of the conflict parties is the government of a state⁸ and both sides are organized armed forces, capable of “effective resistance”.⁹ As the COW database excludes colonies, we apply the same definition to Clodfelter's compilation of civil wars ([Clodfelter, 2002](#)) and hence obtain global coverage, as far as historical sources commented on such large-scale civil war events.

Economic deprivation has often been mentioned as one of the major determinants of civil conflict, but so far it has always been measured in terms of purchasing power in the literature. Moreover, it has never been possible to assess this factor over two centuries. Instead of using GDP per capita, we introduce adult male height as an indicator of the biological components of well-being, with low heights functioning as a proxy for absolute deprivation.¹⁰ There is comprehensive anthropometric theory documented in the literature that cannot be reported here in detail ([Komlos, 1985](#); [Steckel, 1995](#); [Baten, 2000b](#); and on height inequality especially [Baten, 2000a](#)). These studies provide proof that genetic factors matter strongly at the individual level, while population averages are mostly determined by nutrition and health conditions. If a person's parents were tall, he or she is also tall for genetic reasons, but, at a population level, the Dutch were very short during a period of severe protein malnutrition during the mid-19th century, for example. Many patterns that earlier anthropologists considered to be attributable to genetics (such as tall Masai and Tutsi) turned out to be the results of special nutritional and health environment features.

² [Thaize Challier \(2010\)](#) analyzed whether greater social distance was positively related to socio-political conflicts in France between the 11th and 14th century, but did not find a clear impact.

³ Capabilities in Amartya Sen's approach are opportunities that depend on peoples' personal and social circumstances.

⁴ Of course, bodily health is also positively related to monetary wealth as richer people have better access to food and health services.

⁵ Cf. [Sarkees \(2000\)](#).

⁶ For further information, see [Singer and Small \(1972\)](#), or: <http://www.correlatesofwar.org>.

⁷ In order to be considered a war participant, a state has to contribute at least 1000 troops or suffer 100 battle-related deaths while the war participant non-state group is already considered a war participant if it commits 100 armed people or suffers 25 deaths.

⁸ This criterion differentiates classical intrastate conflicts from so-called ‘New Wars’ in which the government does not have to be involved (see [Münkler, 2003](#); [Chojnacki, 2005](#)). Please note that according to the new definitions of the COW project, war types 6 and 7, Regional internal and intercommunal wars are also considered to be intra-state wars, but not civil wars. Civil wars are either civil wars for central control (type 4) or civil wars over local issues (type 5).

⁹ Effective resistance means that either “(a) both sides had to be initially organized for violent conflict and prepared to resist the attacks of their antagonists, or (b) the weaker side, although initially unprepared, is able to inflict upon the stronger opponents at least five percent of the number of fatalities it sustains.” The definition of wars is explained in the Intra-State war Codebook, available at http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/WarData_NEW/WarList_NEW.html (last access, January 16th, 2013).

¹⁰ For collections of recent examples, see [Komlos and Baten \(1998\)](#), [Steckel and Floud \(1997\)](#), and [Komlos and Cuff \(1998\)](#). On height inequality research, see [Soltow \(1992\)](#) and [Quiroga and Coll \(2000\)](#).

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