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Segregation and conflict: An empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between segregation and several intensities of civil conflict. Our results are as follows. First, both ethnic segregation and language segregation exhibit a strong and robust correlation with the incidence of conflict at any intensity level; that is, from civil wars to social disorder and protests. Conversely, religious segregation does not affect any type of conflict. Second, ethnic segregation and language segregation are related to the escalation and continuation of conflict but are unrelated to its onset. Regardless of the mechanism of segregation, its effect is unrelated to the outbreak of violence but it is related to the reinforcing of existing conflicts. Third, two channels of influence are trust and secession threats, in the sense that the measures associated with those channels are influenced by segregation and, at the same time, reduce the effect of the geographic group concentration on conflict.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s a significant proportion of intra-state conflicts have involved different ethnic, religious, or cultural groups (Horowitz, 1985). This raised the question about whether group divisions affect conflict. Although the results using measures such as fractionalization or polarization are somewhat mixed, they tend to demonstrate a positive effect of grievances on conflict (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Esteban et al., 2012; Fearon, 2003; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005). However, those studies focused on group shares at the country level and not on their geographical distribution. As conflicts are typically localized, group segregation within a territory is presumably having a fundamental effect on the incidence of intra-state violence.

Although segregation may affect conflict the direction of the effect is far from obvious. The concentration of homogeneous individuals in some regions can certainly increase both their motivation to fight for their homeland and their ability to coordinate and mobilize for such a struggle (Toft, 2003; Weidmann, 2009), but it is also possible that geographic isolation decreases the incentives for violence because it separates the eventual contending factions. Local majoritarian groups may keep order and discourage minority groups from breaking out in open conflict. In fact, geographic partition has been proposed as a solution to ethnic civil wars (Kaufmann, 1996).

This study examines empirically the relationship between group segregation and conflict. We use the recent dataset on national segregation constructed by Alesina and Zhuravskaya (2012) to study the relationship between geographic group divisions and several intensities of civil conflict. Our results are as follows.

First, both ethnic segregation and language segregation exhibit a strong and robust correlation with the incidence of conflict at any intensity level, from civil wars with more than 1000 casualties per year to social disorder and protests. Moreover, segregation is the strongest predictor among group divisions. The correlations between conflict and ethno-linguistic fractionalization, polarization, or inequality become insignificant once we control for segregation. Ethno-linguistic divisions matter because all the groups share the same location. Religious segregation, on the other hand, does not affect any type of conflict.

Second, segregation is unrelated to the onset of conflict at any intensity level. On the contrary, the escalation and continuation of conflict are robustly related with both ethnic and language segregation. Whatever the channel between segregation and conflict, its effect is unrelated to the outbreak of violence from episodes of peace but rather to the reinforcing of existing conflicts over time.

Thirdly, we study some potential channels through which segregation may affect conflict. We claim that group concentration may increase the motivation for conflict by two different mechanisms. First, concentrated groups are more likely to see their territory as their homeland and thus might be more willing to fight for it. Second, segregation increases the animosity towards the other group due to the lack of interaction between them. We test these two hypotheses using measures of secession threat and trust, which are strongly correlated to segregation. We find that the inclusion of any of these measures decreases the magnitude of the correlation between segregation and conflict. However, the effect of segregation is still robust even when the two variables are included, meaning that other mechanisms are simultaneously operating.

This study is related to the recent literature about group concentration and conflict. A similar effort on this topic was undertaken by Matuszeski and Schneider (2006). Their work develops a diversity and

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clustering index for language groups. They find that civil war is more frequent in countries where inhabitants belonging to a given language group live in a more clustered manner and that the effect is mediated by language fractionalization. Our study is separate from this work in respect of our use of a more recent and multidimensional dataset for segregation, our inclusion of several other controls traditionally used in the literature, our study of all the intensities of conflict, and our reporting of potential mechanisms to explain the observed relationship.

In another related work, [Novta and Klasnja \(2012\)](#) used a simulated theoretical model to understand the effect of segregation and polarization on the spread of conflict. Their results, which contrasted with an Indian dataset on ethnic riots between Muslims and Hindus, suggest that the effect of segregation depends on the level of polarization. [Morelli and Rohner \(2014\)](#) constructed a frictionless bargaining game that predicts a higher likelihood of war, in equilibrium, when resource and group concentrations are high. Their empirical analysis, both at the country level and the ethnic group level, confirms the role of geographic concentration variables on civil war.

The next section explores some theoretical arguments linking segregation to conflict. [Section 3](#) describes the data and the sample and [Section 4](#) presents our main results. The following two sections explore robustness checks and mechanisms, respectively, while the final section presents our conclusions.

2. Theoretical relationships between segregation and conflict

It is plausible that group segregation is causing conflict but it may also be caused, or at least reinforced, by episodes of high violence. Here we will discuss the two links separately.

2.1. From segregation to conflict

The literature on civil war divides the causes of conflict into two groups. Some factors are related to the motivations for fighting. In that respect, conflict occurs when grievances are sufficiently acute that people would engage in violent behavior ([Horowitz, 1985](#)). Another factor increases the opportunities for fighting, namely the possibility that violence is a viable strategy to achieve material benefits ([Collier and Hoeffler, 2004](#); [Fearon, 2003](#)). The first type of explanation highlights the role of economic and ethnic divisions while the second one highlights material conditions such as income or geographical advantage. We follow [Weidmann \(2009\)](#) in the use of this distinction to explain the role of geographic concentration groups on civil wars.

Segregation may increase the motivation for fighting by two different mechanisms. First, concentrated groups are more likely to see their territory as their homeland and thus might be more willing to fight for it ([Toft, 2003](#)). Territory is an indivisible issue, and if a group is majoritarian in a territory, they are likely to demand some degree of control over that territory. But where that same group is not majoritarian in the whole country and does not control the central administration, the state is not willing to grant them autonomy and conflict emerges. Segregation implies both a higher likelihood of autonomy claims by a group that is concentrated at the local level and a reduced willingness of states to give up control over the group territory since that group does not have the same leverage at the national level.

Second, when groups are segregated, the differences and animosities between them may increase. Separated groups reinforce negative stereotypes because they have less information about each other and can therefore be easily manipulated by special interest politicians ([Glaeser et al., 2002](#)). The lack of interaction increases future prejudices and the distance between group preferences ([Conejeros and Vargas, 2012](#)). Segregation is empirically correlated to low generalized trust between members of different groups ([Uslander, 2008](#)), and that may foster violence against each other.

We provide measures of variables associated with these potential channels that were constructed by [Alesina and Zhuravskaya \(2012\)](#).

The territorial motive is associated with a measure of secession threat. This variable is a dummy that indicates whether any ethnic group has, according to the Minority at Risk dataset, engaged in an active or autonomy movement in the past 25 years. The animosity motive is associated with generalized trust; it is constructed from the World Value Survey as the average percentage of respondents in each country who answer that most people can be trusted.¹ We will test whether segregation explains the measure associated with a channel and whether the direct inclusion of that variable decreases the magnitude of the effect of segregation on conflict.

Apart from motives, geographically concentrated groups may have better opportunities for conflict. Segregated factions face fewer difficulties in overcoming the collective action problem, becoming cohesive, and successfully mobilizing for conflict. Participation in social activities is significantly lower in more unequal and in more racially or ethnically fragmented localities ([Alesina and LaFerrara, 2000](#); [Skirmuntt, 2012](#)). Cultural ties make coordination easier at the local level and geographic concentration may also reinforce coalition stability. [Caselli and Coleman \(2013\)](#) argued that ethnicity allows coalitions to be enforced ex-post because non-coalition members can be excluded from a winning coalition based on their ethnicity. This mechanism is likely to be reinforced when the coalition members share the same territory and many public goods, such as roads or schools, as a spatial dimension.

We have no empirical test to demonstrate that segregation enhances collective action or cohesive behavior. However, we can observe to what extent the measures associated with motive-driven channels are reducing the effect of segregation on conflict and conjecture that the unexplained part of the effect may be related to this other opportunity-driven channel.

2.2. From conflict to segregation

We recognize that, at least to some degree, the segregation of groups in a territory is endogenous to conflict. Population migrates as the response to intergroup violence. In a well-known example, Catholics and Protestants self-segregated their communities in Northern Ireland as the response to religious tensions and high intensity violence. In order to deal with endogeneity, [Alesina and Zhuravskaya \(2012\)](#) construct not only segregation measures but also instruments for those indices. Those instruments are based on the idea that people belonging to a particular group gravitate towards the borders of countries with the same ethnic groups. If a group living in the country is also present in a neighboring country, then it is likely that this group will be segregated close to the border. Based on these ideas, the authors computed the predicted location of members of each group and a predicted segregation, which they use as instruments to control for endogeneity regarding the quality of government regressions. However, in the context of conflict, the exclusion assumption seems hard to defend. Neighboring countries with the same ethnic group may have a direct effect on the probability of conflict, such as the presence of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds in the frontiers of Iraq clearly demonstrates. For this reason, even when our results are robust regarding the use of this instrument variable strategy², we prefer to exhibit our results as correlations rather than claims for causal inference.

However, reverse causality problems are not equally important in all the estimations. Our work is not only focused on high intensity conflict but also on low and medium episodes of violence. We certainly expect that endogeneity would be a major problem in identifying the effect of segregation on civil wars given that ethnic and cultural migrations are

¹ Ideally we would like to have separate data on between and within-group trust, but only a measure of generalized trust is available for a broad set of countries. Thus, the underlying assumption of our exercise is that this generalized measure is capturing some of the between-groups component of trust.

² For language segregation, all the results are robust to the use of instrumental variables. For ethnic segregation, cross-sectional results are robust but panel results are not.

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