Fall 2019

When We're Connected to a Community, We're Less Likely to Be at War with It: The Effect of Strong Civil Society on Civil War Onset and Incidence

Benjamin R. Pontz
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

I argue that a strong civil society suggests the existence of institutions that provide alternate mechanisms to reduce grievance as well as opportunities for public problem solving, which, in turn, should result in a decreased probability of civil war onset as well as decreased civil war incidence (a proxy for civil war duration). Controlling for per capita GDP, ethnic fractionalization, regime type, and population -- the measures that tend to have the strongest association with civil war onset and incidence -- I find that the presence of strong civil society does, indeed, have a negative and statistically significant association with probability of civil war incidence, though not (at the 95% confidence level) with civil war onset. Nevertheless, insofar as civil society can emerge absent broader societal changes such as the expansion of economic opportunity, this research has broad policy implications for governments and international organizations seeking to alleviate the tolls of war.

Keywords

civil war onset, civil war incidence, civil society, civil war, northern ireland civil war

Disciplines

Peace and Conflict Studies | Political Science | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

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When We're Connected to a Community, We're Less Likely to Be at War with It: The Effect of Strong Civil Society on Civil War Onset and Incidence

By Benjamin Pontz '20
Political Science & Public Policy Double Major
Gettysburg College

POL 303: Civil Wars & Political Violence
Dr. Lindsay Reid
December 3, 2019

Honor Code:

*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity
in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

Introduction

Late in the summer of 1968, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) held a series of public demonstrations to protest what members saw as an abusive Protestant police force and to advocate for the end of discrimination in public employment and public housing, implementation of a one man, one vote electoral system, and abolition of the Special Powers Act. Soon thereafter, loyalist protesters began to stage demonstrations of their own, and, on several occasions in October of that year, clashes between protesters and the police led to injuries on both sides. Boiling discontent and deliberate attempts to provoke police overreactions threatened to spill over into sustained armed conflict until, in December, the government promised a series of reforms to mollify the Catholic protesters' sense of grievance (Bew and Gillespie 1999, 5-11). Despite initial success through direct appeals to television audiences, Prime Minister Terence O'Neill failed to galvanize grassroots support for his proposed program and, amid proliferating violence, he was forced to resign in 1969. Thus began a 30-year intermittent sectarian civil conflict that took the lives of more than 3,500 people. The violence exacerbated community divisions and resulted in barricaded "no-go" areas that physically separated Protestants and Catholics as bombings and internment amid charges of terrorism rose from decades-long fault lines unabated by attempts at mediation and bridge-building (McCittrick and McVea 2002, 1, 53-55).

As the violence progressed, however, hundreds of community organizations formed in the early 1970s and gained strength in the subsequent decades through a "mass wave of participation," and, in time, these groups turned their attention beyond direct aid and towards issues of alienation, neighborhood regeneration, and discrimination that were at the heart of the conflict (Birrell and Williamson 2001, 206). By the 1990s, the government realized that these organizations would be crucial to the peace-building process, and, indeed, civil society organizations and leaders were

foundational to the negotiation of the Good Friday Accords in 1998 that ultimately ended the 30-year "Troubles" (Acheson, Milofsky, and Stringer 2011, 18-19). While Acheson, Molofsky, and Stringer (2011) contend that civil society strength was not a panacea in the Northern Ireland case, they acknowledge that its role was, nevertheless, significant. Civil society organizations were not at the bargaining table themselves, but they built political pressure that ultimately resulted in successful peace negotiations (White 2011, 39). The Northern Ireland example of capacity building in civil society leading to more peaceful pluralism has been cited as an example for subsequent efforts in other countries (Bean 2011, 155). Indeed, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair pronounced that the success of the Northern Ireland peace process found its roots in civil society, not in the political sphere and was the result of "ordinary people whose yearning for peace engendered grassroots engagement and constructive dialogue," (Bean 2011, 156; Blair 2000). While scholars have treated Blair's pronouncement and the more general idea of a spontaneous eruption of civil society as the precipitating precondition for peace with bemusement if not outright condescension and hostility, the presence of civil society organizations with the capacity to mobilize collective action generally has been treated as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition to achieving lasting stability in post-conflict contexts.

In early-2000s Liberia, civil society played an indispensable role in mobilizing peace efforts during that country's second civil war as a women's peace movement emerged and not only put pressure on Liberian President Charles Taylor to go to the bargaining table, but ultimately – after the war – resulted in the election of Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Fuest 2009). During that conflict, women-dominated organizations organized marches, formulated petitions, and helped to solve policy local problems all the while cultivating a high level of social trust that helped to rebuild that country's social capital after its second civil war in

15 years had driven the country into seemingly intractable turmoil (Moser and Clark 2001, 10). Fundamentally, women's civil society groups facilitated collective action that created an environment not only in which peace talks *could* emerge, but in which political pressure forced peace talks *to* emerge (Theobald 2012, 49-54).

As these cases illustrate, a strong civil society can play a role in waging peace from the depths of conflict and, thus, providing a path out of what might otherwise be an interminable civil war. We know less, however, about the capacity of a strong civil society to preempt civil war. If civil society is a key to conflict resolution, could it be a key to conflict prevention or shortening conflict duration? Can civil society be disentangled from broader ideas of state capacity and economic inequality that allow for the operationalization of grievances and thus the emergence of conflict? Is civil society a structural factor that is necessary – but perhaps insufficient – for long-term peace? These questions – at their core – lie beneath a simpler one that is the subject of this research: Does a strong civil society reduce the likelihood of civil war?

I argue that a strong civil society suggests the existence of institutions that provide alternate mechanisms to reduce grievance as well as opportunities for public problem solving, which, in turn, should result in a decreased probability of civil war onset as well as decreased civil war incidence (a proxy for civil war duration). Insofar as civil society can emerge absent broader societal changes such as the expansion of economic opportunity – which the Liberia case suggests is possible – such a finding would have broad policy implications for governments and international organizations seeking to alleviate the tolls of war. Namely, investment in building civil society rather than in placating extant regimes in the name of stability or economic capacity-building may well foster better living conditions for all.

In pursuing these questions, this paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the existing literature on civil society and its connection to civil war, identifying a significant gap that this research endeavors to fill. Second, I outline a two-step approach that presupposes both motivation and capacity for how civil war emerges and argue that civil society matters in that story. Third, using a civil society index at the country-year level, I show that – more than several explanations that existing literature presents as significant factors affecting war likelihood – the strength of civil society has a negative and statistically significant association with civil war incidence. Finally, I comment on the substantive implications of a finding that strong civil society decreases the likelihood for war, tying in literature on cautionary tales of international efforts to build civil society.

What We Know About Civil Society in Civil War

Civil Society in International Affairs

Particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, civil society has captured significant scholarly attention across disciplines as diverse as global finance (e.g., Schnabel and Scholte 2012) and environmental sustainability (e.g., Kirton and Hajnal 2006), but perhaps its most hotly-contested potential area of impact is in defusing conflict and cultivating liberty, thus unleashing the prospect of human flourishing (e.g., Gellner 1996; Putnam 2000; Kaldor 2003). Of course, the idea of civil society playing a central role in ensuring freedom through spheres of economic relationships, the rule of law, and voluntary associations is not new; it forms the basis of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. In that Hegelian conception of civil society, institutions breed justice and the means to solve problems in the public sphere (Stillman 1980, 622-623, 630). To Hegel (1942) – as to Tocqueville (2000) – the foundation of civil society lies in associations, which, regardless of

their underlying purpose, have inherent value in acculturating individuals to society and, by their very nature, undergird the rule of law.

In a more contemporary context, building the rule of law through the formation of strong institutions (particularly an independent judiciary) has been central to developing democracies in Africa (Widner 2001). Moreover, the existence of a rule of law before a conflict predicts the reconstitution of a rule of law after a conflict, a process ostensibly aided by enduring civil society organizations (Haggard and Tiede 2012). Numerous studies have asserted the importance of strong civil society as a necessary predicate to good governance, particularly in developing countries (e.g., Tandon and Mohanty 2003; Jarosz 2015; Grindle 2007), even as a newer strain of scholarship casts skepticism on civil society's inherent value (King 2015), arguing that it can merely democratize access to corruption or grifting (Anders 2010), imbue a bona fide colonialist mentality in developing states (Roy 2008), or tie up developing countries in meeting external benchmarks that do little to enhance quality of life (Mercer 2003). Furthermore, in a scathing commentary on the duplicitousness of international organizations in professing the importance of civil society organizations ostensibly to empower individuals and existing communities but, in fact, as vehicles for neoliberal economic policy and social re-engineering, Jenkins (2001) argues that organizations often intentionally overlook potential negative consequences of "strong" civil society such as social exclusion or imbued colonialism (see also Williams and Young 1994).

Indeed, calls for "global civil society" were commonplace particularly around the turn of the millennium as alternatives to state-led action towards solving problems from gender discrimination to economic security; notably, in many cases, women – often excluded from formal centers of state power – have been at the forefront of efforts to build such a civil society (de Oliveira 1995, 130-131). In Kaldor's (2003) framing, civil society creates opportunities for human

emancipation that obviate the need for violence and thus can prevent war. That suggestion, however, was theoretical, not empirical. Indeed, with few exceptions (discussed in more detail below), the relationship between civil society and war – interstate or intrastate – has remained conspicuously absent from a literature on war that seldom fails to identify correlations (and assert causation) for any number of factors whose relation to violence seems far more tenuous than the well-grounded idea both in political theory literature and in war studies literature (e.g., Tilly and Tarrow 2015; for commentary on the state of the research, see Ward, Greenhill and Bakke 2010) that civil society underpins a society in which dispute resolution can occur through the rule of law rather than through violence.

Of course, the relationship between civil society and conflict can be a two-way street: just as it can enable peace, it can enable conflict. While civil society has an undeniable (and fairly obvious role) in facilitating dialogue, cross-cultural understanding, early warning activities, and preventive diplomacy, many of those activities – if they go awry – can accelerate or spark violence (Fischer 2006, 5; Barnes 2005). As Anderson (2012, 39) argues,

> [T]hough raising awareness of and denouncing inequality, abuses and injustices is meaningful and important work, it can escalate conflict by either igniting those perpetrating the injustices to increase their actions to quash the opposition, or, if the goals of the demonstrations and non-violent attempts to change the status quo are not sufficiently met, the oppressed may escalate to more violent methods to achieve change. In this way, civil society creates or increases conflict, just as conflict tears civil society apart.

However, Anderson's analysis is confined to a particular set of states experiencing conflict or in conflict's immediate aftermath, so the argument should not be interpreted too broadly. Fundamentally, the healthy skepticism towards international organizations' giddiness about civil society as a panacea towards development and good governance embedded within more recent literature (including, as discussed above, Jenkins (2001) and Williams and Young (1994)) coupled

with the absence of rigorous statistical analysis about the impact of civil society in improving social outcomes calls for robust quantitative analysis on the relationship between strong civil society and such outcomes.

One constraint on the ability to perform this type of comparative, cross-national research on the impact of civil society in various contexts is an inability to precisely measure its prevalence and strength particularly in forms beyond merely associational participation as a proxy for social capital (Hoelscher and Laux 2012, 16-17; Putnam 2000; Fukuyama 2001). Labigne and Nassauer (2012, 138-139) avoided this constraint by studying the violence that extant civil society organizations do perpetrate and found that, while such violence is rare, it tends to arise in the same sorts of circumstances (e.g., opportunity, psychological discontent, and ethnic or religious boundaries) that spark intrastate violence with other actors. On the whole, though, such research is rare and constrained by the underlying problem that, in many cases, scholars simply do not know the extent or impact of civil society in a given country or year (Hoelscher and Laux 2012).

Civil War Onset

Much literature examines factors that contribute to – or at least correlate with – civil war onset, and, depending the definition what exactly constitutes a civil war, a range of factors can appear statistically significant and lead to conclusions – perhaps overwrought – about what matters (for a review of these possibilities for varying outcomes, see Sambanis 2004). Most of the research falls into buckets that try to assess motivation, feasibility, or both (Selway 2011, 112-113). In an assessment of both feasibility and motivation, Lulaja (2010), for example, contends that the presence of natural resources is a defining factor in predicting both civil war onset and (especially) duration by affecting the incentives of actors. Thies (2010), however, directly disputes this finding and argues that, while the presence of primary commodities does affect state capacity, state

capacity does not affect civil war onset. Fearon and Laitin (2003) reject ethnic or religious diversity (which would point towards a motivation hypothesis) as predictive characteristics, instead arguing that state weakness (a feasibility characteristic), which they proxy through per capita income, is the dispositive factor. This conclusion about ethnic and religious diversity is counter to subsequent research by Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011), who suggest that ethnic division results in horizontal inequalities between groups that sow resentment and grievance and can spark civil war. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) concede that the economic variables that do seem to have explanatory power could be a proxy for some grievances, but they instead suggest that several factors nested under the rubric of opportunity – the ability to mobilize diaspora support, the involvement of third-party groups, and natural resources – operationalize the grievances that otherwise remain latent and, as such, civil war is ultimately borne of greed. Overall, the state of the research is rather inconclusive as to what factor or factors predominate in explaining civil war onset. Indeed, exploration in search of a single, defining variable led Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke (2010, 363) to warn of the "perils of policy by p-value" in assessing the likelihood of civil war onset and conclude that correlation-seeking research that implements adequate controls is unlikely to identify anything other than population and GDP as statistically significant factors.

More recent scholarship has, however, taken a more nuanced and holistic approach to assessing from where civil war emerges. Selway (2011), for example, argues that looking solely at motivation or feasibility characteristics cannot yield robust, theoretically sound results. Grounded in sociological and anthropological theory on "cross-cutting," he argues that social structure broadly affects the likelihood of civil war and that, when ethno-religious cross-cuttingness is low – in other words, when divisions along ethnic lines create a similarly sharp break along religious lines – fractionalization does, in fact, increase the likelihood of civil war consistent

with the more general ethnoreligious grievance hypothesis postulated by, among others, Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011). In terms of state capacity, Reid et al. (forthcoming) build on the contagion and diffusion literature and contend that the broader environment in which a state exists matters when assessing whether civil war onset is likely. Put more simply, state capacity does not exist in a vacuum, and it can be affected by unrest in neighboring states. This finding is consistent with Braithwaite (2010), who concludes that stronger states are more likely to resist contagion than weak states.

Linking Civil Society and Civil War Onset and Incidence

Research on the effect of civil society on civil war onset is largely limited to analyses of how the presence and strength of certain institutions affects civil war rather than broader inquiry that uses an index or even considers multiple components of a strong civil society. Thyne (2006), for example, finds that strong government investment in education has a pacifying effect on civil wars insofar as such investment signals to people that the government cares, which reduces grievances, and that such investment provides tools for peaceful dispute resolution. While the latter argument is consistent with a broader conceptualization of how civil society might matter (a theory more fully explicated in the next section), the former says little about the broader impact of civil society organizations especially given that, in general, civil society organizations are non-governmental, whereas this conceptualization explicitly considers governmental investment in educational institutions.

Civil society organizations have been shown, however, to be important tools of mobilization for collective action. The networks such organizations provide help both to change the incentive structure that otherwise would lead one to conclude that the costs of joining a movement outweigh the costs of not joining (a framing explicated in the civil war context by

Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) and Humphreys and Weinstein (2008)) as well as to mobilize existing resources that otherwise might lay dormant (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1997, 155).

In the only study that appears to assess the association between civil war onset and civil society specifically, Wu (2012) – using a two-step theory for civil war onset mirrored in the theory this paper will present in which a motive (or grievance) and the resources (or opportunity) are necessary precipitates to conflict onset – finds that strong civil society functions as an organizing resource for social capital that mobilizes collective action that can spark a civil war. Put more succinctly, civil war is more likely where civil society is strong, and the effect of civil society increases as state repression (a grievance) increases. In Wu's story (2012, 29-30), dense networks in a strong civil society foster a Putnam-style (1995, 67; see also Chong 1991) sense of "we" in grievances that mobilizes collective action. The empirical data he uses to test this theory is less ironclad, however. Though he stipulates that time-series data at the country-year level that assesses the civil society environment in a country would be best to assess his hypothesis, citing data availability constraints, Wu uses the number of several types of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a proxy for civil society strength (50-54). Given that the quantity of NGOs does not have a clear correlation to the relative strength of civil society, this approach seems to use a weak measurement tool to test the underlying hypothesis that strong civil society mobilizes the type of collective action that foments rebellion.

Conspicuously absent from the literature is an analysis that includes the type of data that Wu sought – a country-year level index of civil society strength – and country-year level data on civil war onset and duration and considers them against the backdrop of what we know to be strong predictors of civil war onset and duration such as high population, low per capita GDP, and horizontal inequalities as evidence of grievance. Fundamentally, this research fills that gap.

How Civil Society Might Matter

At its core, a strong civil society has two primary effects: fostering collective action and creating shared purpose rooted in collective identity that can solve problems. Both matter when considering civil war. In terms of collective action, Olson's (1965) classic exposition on the matter posits that collective goods – such as those that would be obtained via civil war – are obtained only when people incur individual costs. As such, without selective incentives that alter the opportunity costs (and thus rational choices) of actors, war seems unlikely insofar as, potential benefits notwithstanding, the costs of action outweigh the costs of inaction. Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) argue, however, that, in war contexts, the cost of free-riding through non-participation can have costs greater than participation (such as the loss of security that membership in a combatant group controlling the territory in which one lives may provide). That construction presupposes that some inflection point that changed the status quo to create such a scenario, which still would have required overcoming a collective action problem. It is there that civil society enters the story. Aya (1984, 332-333) observes that some kind of organization must convert latent discontent into collective action likely through the deployment of some kind of incentives. Wu (2012) argues, in that context, that civil society organizations provide the social capital to mobilize that sort of collective action. That conceptualization does find credence in the Northern Ireland case, where general public support from a supposed silent majority disconnected from any civic organization for the Prime Minister's reform program did not stanch burgeoning violence from a cadre of well-organized civic organizations, whose protest efforts ultimately turned violent and sparked a reaction from the British government that landed the country in a 30-year civil conflict.

Of course, civil society organizations can also mount collective action towards peace as occurred during the Second Liberian Civil War when a grassroots women's movement overcame

the obvious individual-level disincentives to speak out against a violent regime and managed to drive that regime to the bargaining table without firing a single bullet. Acheson, Milofsky, and Stringer (2011) take a skeptical view towards the importance of grassroots civic associations in building social capital as an end in and of itself, but they concede that – as the Liberia case illustrates – such associations can direct pressure on NGOs and political elites consistent with Lederach's (1997) three-tier approach to how social capital affects peacemaking. In that context, their skepticism notwithstanding, Putnam's (1993, 1995, 2000) argument that voluntary associations encourage the types of horizontal ties that can foster problem-solving in the public sphere appears to hold water in the civil war context insofar as such ties help to foster a sense of shared purpose that flows from the type of common understanding communal association imbues. That shared purpose can breed collective action towards mitigating conflict and promoting peace.

Fundamentally, as White (2011, 38) observes, peace "requires a redress of the fundamental conflict that exists among groups in a society." When common understanding breeds social trust and common purpose, bargaining and compromise leading to mutual gains among groups are possible. At the core of any civil conflict is something over which combatants are fighting and, while, to the point of Collier and Hoeffler (2004), such motivation to fight is everywhere, such grievances remain a necessary – if insufficient – condition to foment conflict. In that context, the presence of a strong civil society can create an atmosphere conducive to peaceful problem-solving that prevents grievance from spilling into violence. In other words, where there is grievance, institutions can provide peaceful mechanisms towards resolution at a lower opportunity cost (following the Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) construction) than fighting on the battlefield. Moreover, those same institutions can, by their very nature, make progress on policy problems, thus preventing grievance from arising in the first place. This, too, would decrease the likelihood of

civil war. More broadly, higher levels of social capital as manifested through the presence of strong institutions such as schools, hospitals, and churches have been associated with a higher quality of life that, once again, should reduce the individual and community level incentives to wage civil war (Putnam 2000; Kaldor 2003; Carney 2019).

This conception of civil society as a collective action-enabling peacemaker and a bridge-building problem solver leads to two straightforward and related hypotheses:

(1) Strong civil society should reduce the likelihood of civil war onset.

(2) When civil war does occur, strong civil society should reduce its duration.

Research Design

This analysis uses data from two sources: Correlates of War (COW) (Sarkees and Wayman 2010) gleaned from Reid et al. (forthcoming) and Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) (Coppedge et al. 2019). Appended together with control variables discussed below, the COW data and V-DEM data contain 8,297 observations from 1960 through 2006 from 200 countries coded at the country-year level. This dataset is analyzed using a logistic regression model to assess the relationship between the binary dependent variables (civil war onset and civil war incidence) and the continuous independent variable (Core Civil Society Index).

Civil war onset and incidence are each coded 1 if a civil war began or was present (respectively) in a given country-year and 0 if a civil war did not begin or was not present. COW data codes a civil war if more than 1,000 battle deaths occur in a 12-month period during a sustained conflict involving effective resistance and organized armed forces within the recognized boundaries of a territory or state (Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003, 58-59). Onset measures whether a civil war began during a particular country-year while incidence measures whether a civil war was present during a given country-year. Using the latter as a rough proxy for duration,

I develop models with each dependent variable to assess the extent to which independent and control variables may affect the likelihood of a civil war to begin as well as to endure. Each variable analyzed has important practical considerations for policy-makers and scholars developing strategies to prevent and resolve such conflicts. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for civil war onset and civil war incidence measures across the time series.

Table 1: Civil War Onset and Incidence, 1960-2006 N = 8,297 country-years		
Code	Onset	Incidence
0 = no civil war	6,673	6,682
1 = civil war	206	711
. = missing	1,418	904

To measure civil society, I use the V-DEM Core Civil Society Index (CCSI), which assesses the robustness of civil society – "understood as one that enjoys autonomy from the state and in which citizens freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, however conceived" – in a given country-year (Coppedge et al. 2019b, 275; Bernhard et al. 2017). The index amalgamates findings on the presence of civil society organizations, the repression of such organizations, and the extent to which people participate in such organizations to produce a continuous index from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest). I use this index – cognizant of its limitations to assess the types of civil society organizations present (which could matter insofar as some types of organizations are more apt to provide dispute resolution mechanisms other than war than others) – as the independent variable in models assessing impact both on civil war onset and civil war duration. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics (percentile values) as well as the mean and standard deviation for the CCSI across the time series.

Table 2: Percentile Values for Core Civil Society Index, 1960-2006 N = 8,297 country-years				
Mean: 0.510986		Standard Deviation: 0.31273		
Percentiles				
10th	25th	50th	75th	90th
0.095	0.209	0.497	0.841	0.927

To isolate the impact of civil society in civil war, I control for several factors shown in the literature to have statistically significant impacts (and theoretically strong potential linkages) to civil war onset or incidence. First, I control for population size using data from Heston, Summers, and Aten (2012) (via Reid et al. forthcoming). In general, higher population correlates with higher probability of civil conflict (e.g., Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010; Fearon and Laitin 2003).

Second, I control for income again using data from Heston, Summers, and Aten (2012) (via Reid et al. forthcoming). Across a variety of theoretical conceptualizations including real GDP per capita as a measure of overall economic well-being in a grievance-based analysis of civil war (for an overview of such studies, see Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010) and as a proxy for state capacity (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003), income level has a negative correlation with the probability of civil war.

Third, to isolate the impact of civil society, which, definitionally, is independent of the state, I control for governance type using the Polity Score using data from Reid et al. (forthcoming). Strong democracies and autocracies tend to be more resistant to civil war while transitioning or weaker democracies or states tend to be more prone to such conflict (Regan and Henderson 2002). In the context of the data, which is coded on a 21-point scale from -10 (representing hereditary monarchy) to 10 (representing consolidated democracy), values closer to zero are expected to be more ripe for war given the curvilinear relationship between democracy and civil war (Reid et al. forthcoming, 27).

Fourth, I control for ethnic fractionalization using a measure from Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) (via Reid et al. forthcoming). Scholarship has been mixed with respect to the impact of ethnic fractionalization on civil war likelihood. Fearon and Laitin (2003) dismiss ethnicity and religious characterization as mere proxies for underlying conditions of state weakness, a finding largely corroborated by Collier and Hoeffler (2004), while Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011) suggest that such ethnic divisions – when coupled with inequality between such groups – do increase the likelihood of conflict. Because I am interested in the extent to which strong civil society organizations may mitigate the likelihood of such conflicts emerging and theorize that such organizations may provide alternate paths to ameliorating the grievances that Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch show may spill into conflict, I do include a measure of ethnic fractionalization. The variable is coded from 0 to 1 on a continuous index where 1 represents the highest levels of ethnic fractionalization and 0 represents the least (in other words, higher values indicate a smaller dominant ethnic minority) to assess the variable's impact against a measure of civil society's prevalence (Vanhanen 1999).

Finally, I run a model of onset and a model of incidence in which I control for Reid et al.'s (forthcoming) Conflict Environment Score, which demonstrates that, even when controlling for relevant domestic factors, neighborhood matters. More specifically, states in close proximity (both spatially and temporally) to conflict are more apt to descend into such conflict themselves. The score is a continuous variable that ranges in value from 0 (the environment least prone to conflict) to a maximum value of 3.291 when using Armed Conflict Database data from Uppsala Conflict Data Program or 9.646 when using COW data (Reid et al. forthcoming, 21). To understand whether this phenomenon impacts the relevance of strong civil society organizations, I include it in one model for each dependent variable.

Using these independent, dependent, and control variables, I test four models to assess the hypothesis that strong civil society organizations will reduce the likelihood of civil war onset and of civil war incidence: one with and one without the Conflict Environment Score measuring civil war onset, and one with and one without the Conflict Environment Score measuring civil war incidence.

Results

Table 3 presents the results for Models 1 and 2, which test the effect of CCSI on civil war onset. Model 1 does not find statistically significant support for the hypothesis that strong civil society reduces the likelihood of civil war onset, while Model 2 finds such support only at the 90 percent confidence level. In both models, the effect of population has a positive and statistically significant effect, meaning that higher population is associated with a higher risk of civil war. Ethnic fractionalization also has a positive and statistically significant effect, albeit only at the 90 percent confidence level in Model 2. Polity score has a statistically significant relationship with civil war onset only in Model 2, but, given its coding mechanism and the past research showing that consolidated democracies (coded 10) and hereditary monarchies (coded -10) are less susceptible to civil war than weaker states in the middle, substantively interpreting this finding is difficult. However, a separate model included polity squared as a robustness check (given the literature's finding of a curvilinear relationship between democracy and conflict), and that model did not change the sign of any variable (and, in fact, made CCSI significant at the 90 percent confidence level), which suggests that the finding here is, at minimum, a valid control. The Conflict Environment Score has a positive and statistically significant effect at the 99 percent confidence level. Finally, though, as expected, it has a negative sign, real GDP per capita does not have a statistically significant effect on civil war onset in either model.

Table 3

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Dependent Variable	Did civil war onset occur in the given country-year?	
Core Civil Society Index	-1.0791 (0.6612)	-1.2333 (0.6674)*
Population (ln, lagged)	0.3509 (0.0971)***	0.3200 (0.1016)***
Polity Score (lagged)	0.0327 (0.0252)	0.04587 (0.0256)*
Real GDP per capita (ln, lagged)	-0.2200 (0.1654)	-0.2389 (0.1553)
Ethnic Fractionalization	1.0851 (0.5501)**	1.0016 (0.5468)*
Conflict Environment (lagged)		0.4807 (0.1207)***
Constant	-4.8352 (1.9277)**	-4.4424 (1.8727)**
N	4735	4564
Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$		

Table 4 presents the results for Models 3 and 4, which test the effect of CCSI on civil war incidence. Both models find statistically significant support for the hypothesis that strong civil society reduces the likelihood of civil war incidence as demonstrated by the negative signs (as well as the fairly robust coefficients) and significance at the 99 percent confidence level. Higher population levels and higher polity scores are also associated with higher levels of civil war at the 99 percent confidence level. As with civil war onset, higher levels of ethnic fractionalization are positively associated with higher levels of civil war at the 95 percent confidence level, and, once again, Conflict Environment has a positive and statistically significant correlation with civil war incidence. In these models, real GDP per capita has a negative association with civil war onset only at the 90 percent confidence level.

Table 4

Variable	Model 3	Model 4
Dependent Variable	Did civil war incidence occur in the given country-year?	
Core Civil Society Index	-2.3056 (0.7079)***	-2.4794 (0.6928)***
Population (ln, lagged)	0.4005 (0.1058)***	0.3628 (0.1128)***
Polity Score (lagged)	0.0733 (0.0272)***	0.0878 (0.0277)***
Real GDP per capita (ln, lagged)	-0.2781 (0.1590)*	-0.2824 (0.1544)*
Ethnic Fractionalization	1.4140 (0.5854)**	1.3098 (0.5865)**
Conflict Environment (lagged)		0.5733 (0.1188)***
Constant	-3.1591 (1.6215)*	-2.8201 (1.6160)*
N	5166	4991
Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$		

Discussion

Findings & Relationship to Existing Research

This research marks the first attempt to understand empirically the relationship between civil society and civil war, and its findings confirm the hypothesis that, as the strength of civil society increases, the probability of civil war incidence decreases. It provides some support – but not outright statistically significant confirmation – for the hypothesis that strong civil society decreases the likelihood of civil war onset. The dichotomy between those findings is curious, and discerning its roots is somewhat beyond the scope of this research. One possible explanation is that – as both the Liberia and Northern Ireland cases demonstrate – civil society organizations tend to proliferate in number and strength after conflict onset and endeavor to push for resolution. In that context, paradoxically, civil war onset may well increase the strength of civil society.

Nevertheless, the fundamental inverse relationship between civil society strength and civil war prevalence finds empirical support here.

What finds less support, however, is the expected negative correlation between per capita GDP and civil war onset and incidence. As Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke (2010) noted, a statistically significant correlation between economic woe and civil war onset has rapidly become one of the only surefire relationships across studies of civil war, yet this study did not find such a statistically significant relationship when factoring in civil society strength. This either calls into question Fearon's and Laitin's (2003) conceptualization of state capacity as being merely a factor of economic circumstance by introducing a new component to be considered in analysis of such capacity, or it questions state capacity as a determining factor altogether, which would be consistent with the findings of Thies (2010).

In either case, this paper's findings support the broader trend in the research (as manifested, for example, in Reid et al. (forthcoming)) towards considering a state's holistic structural, institutional, and regional environment when assessing its risk for civil war onset rather than a series of discrete factors that bear less theoretical strength in telling a story that encapsulates both the necessary motivation and the rebel group's capacity for success. Civil society organizations, as both the theoretical argument and empirical findings of this paper and the broader literature demonstrate, can mobilize collective action both towards civil war and towards peaceful problem solving.

Policy Implications

While the obvious policy implication of a finding that a strong civil society reduces the likelihood of civil war even without an immediate structural change in underlying economic or social conditions would be for policymakers to support efforts to build a stronger civil society in

states at risk for civil conflict, recent international efforts to build civil society in developing states suggest the international community should proceed with caution. Jenkins (2001) documents numerous cases in which international institutions such as the World Bank and US Agency for International Development (USAID) have essentially co-opted civil society organizations to serve international or American political objectives. In a more specific case study, Mercer (2003) documents how, in the name of "partnership" towards "good governance," international institutions have inculcated features of the global economy through selective lending that, through the token appearance of civil society organizations, is given the appearance of legitimacy but, in fact, merely imbues a 21st century colonialism on developing countries by failing to engage meaningfully with the very organizations ostensibly helped by the international aid. Even more direct, philanthropic efforts from non-governmental sources to support civil society organizations can have negative consequences. As Belloni (2008, 182-184) observes, international funding of civil society organizations can skew organizational priorities away from less-glamorous capacity-building efforts that bear more fruit in the long-term towards efforts that show immediate "results." This undermines the very strength of civil society, which is to provide a forum through which complicated, thorny, and divisive issues can be resolved without resorting to violence. All of this is to say that stronger civil society tends to be good, but international efforts to develop it have had their share of problems. As much as recent scholarship has lampooned the idea that such efforts must arise organically from the ground up, the recent history of efforts to do so otherwise seem to suggest that, in classically Putnam fashion, voluntary associations best rise voluntarily.

Limitations & Future Research Directions

The robust findings of this paper notwithstanding, measuring the strength of civil society remains a vexing endeavor. Perhaps the most robust quantitative attempt to do so – the Civil

Society Index Project (Dörner and List 2012) – exists only back to a pilot phase in 2000 and is intended as a forward-looking, policy-oriented measure (i.e. will not be built "backwards"), so it has minimal overlap to any meaningful quantity of civil war onset data. Furthermore, the theoretical reason for why civil society might matter likely cannot be fully explored using a traditional regression analysis with controls; the approach of Blimes (2006), in which a separate factor (in his case, ethnic diversity, and, in the case of this research, civil society) has a pronounced impact when other known determinants of civil war are present seems apt, but deploying such a method was beyond the scope of this research. Future inquiry into the connection between civil society and civil war, an area in which this paper finds tentative evidence to support correlation if not robust causal support for onset alongside statistically significant and fairly robust support for incidence, should explore the use of more nuanced quantitative methodology, and scholars of numerous disciplines would benefit from continued work towards better modeling of civil society at the country-year unit of analysis.

Moreover, in absolute terms, the 206 instances of civil war onset captured in this dataset represent a low N to conduct robust analysis on the effect of civil society as measured through an idiosyncratic, continuous index. That the 711 instances of civil war incidence do provide evidence of a statistically significant relationship at the 99 percent confidence level without a strong, non-speculative theoretical reason for why civil society should impact incidence but not onset presents a puzzle for future research given that the N-value for civil war onset (hopefully) will not rise precipitously as data for additional country-years becomes available.

Conclusion

It should not be surprising that, as people engage more meaningfully in civil society institutions and, as such institutions gain strength in the public arena as potential problem-solvers,

people are less apt to take up arms against their neighbors and fellow citizens. When such violence does occur – whether in a large-scale civil war or even in a more isolated incident such as the death of Heather Heyer during 2017 protests in Charlottesville, Virginia – it comes necessarily as a result of the breakdown (or non-existence) of institutions capable of mediating underlying disputes. Conventional wisdom suggests that a flourishing civil society follows, or, at most, co-evolves, with a society that flourishes economically, but recent research by Carney (2019) and others suggests that the two can be mutually exclusive. In other words, social capital is distinct from economic capital, and living in a community with high levels of social capital has benefits distinct from living in one that is economically thriving. Ultimately, life is about more than income level.

In the context of civil war research, while material prosperity or stability may mask underlying discontent, when a sense of belonging is absent, a sense of grievance can be mobilized, and, when civil society institutions are unable to provide a forum in which to air such grievances and see them ameliorated to a satisfactory degree, that grievance may well spill into violence. This paper suggests that existing research is right to point to large-scale structural factors as providing the opportunity and even motive for civil war, but that its conception of those conditions is too narrow and may lead to the wrong policy prescriptions. Fundamentally, institutions matter. At a time when, around the world, confidence in such civic institutions – from the press to the church – is waning even as economic circumstances improve (see, for example, OECD (2013) for data on countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), rebuilding such confidence ought to be a central concern for policymakers and citizens around the world. That the strength of civil society has a strong relationship to the incidence of war should serve only to enhance the sense of urgency in that endeavor.

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