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Abstract

More and more research has begun to look at the impact that religion has on armed conflict. This paper takes a closer look at religious polarization and the impact that it has on the duration of civil wars. The central hypothesis focuses on the idea that polarized societies are less likely to reach a settlement in conflict; therefore, religious polarization should lengthen the duration of civil wars. The research compiled looks at the topic from a variety of different facets while paying attention to other possible contributing factors that can lengthen war and how religion in general plays a role in conflict. While this particular data set shows that there is no significant correlation between religious polarization and the duration of intrastate conflict, further research is warranted.

Keywords

religious polarization, conflict duration, civil war, religious conflict

Disciplines

Peace and Conflict Studies | Political Science | Religion

Comments

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Religious Polarization and the Duration of Civil Wars

Adrienne Poissant

Abstract

More and more research has begun to look at the impact that religion has on armed conflict. This paper takes a closer look at religious polarization and the impact that it has on the duration of civil wars. The central hypothesis focuses on the idea that polarized societies are less likely to reach a settlement in conflict; therefore, religious polarization should lengthen the duration of civil wars. The research compiled looks at the topic from a variety of different facets while paying attention to other possible contributing factors that can lengthen war and how religion in general plays a role in conflict. While this particular data set shows that there is no significant correlation between religious polarization and the duration of intrastate conflict, further research is warranted.

Introduction

Since the Cold War, trends in conflict have changed and focus has shifted to variables that the pre-Cold War world had not considered before. Wars have tended to cause fewer fatalities than before and are typically intrastate conflicts as opposed to interstate ones (Lacina, 2004). Religion, in particular, has increasingly become the focus of much research in the study of conflict. Although some scholars had hoped to be able to brush the importance of religion under the rug after the Cold War, the rise of religious-based wars and terrorist attacks has brought a new intensity to the study of it (Fox, 2004). In the wider view of war, Islam plays a disproportionate role in participation in conflict as opposed to other religions, but this statistic can not simply be taken at face value (Toft, 2006). The study of religion and conflict is much more complicated than it might first appear.

There are many different ways to consider how religion might impact a war: religious fractionalization, type of religion, and the amount of power in the hands of religious authority would all make interesting variables to study. This paper solely looks at how religious polarization affects the duration of wars. By learning how polarization does or does not impact conflict duration, policy makers can pay more attention to states experiencing a religiously polarized nation. On a more academic side, research on religious polarization will help break down the broader role of religion in conflict. It is a stepping stone to greater understanding of how religious identification could impact the trends of war.

This paper is structured as follows: first, I consider previous research on the topic of the duration of intrastate wars and religious polarization. This research will consider the impact religion has on conflict in general and will look at particular case studies to highlight situations.

Then, I will suggest my own hypothesis and highlight my central explanatory variable, control variables, and research methods. After that, I will present the data found and draw conclusions based on my findings. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research to better conceptualize religion as a variable and to understand the role that religion has in intrastate conflicts.

Literature Review

Civil wars have become the dominant form of violent conflict in recent years. In general, war is costly to a country and rebellions in particular need to rely on promises that there will be a victory (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2004). Despite the high costs, wars still exist. This shows that groups partaking in violence often are motivated by more than just self interest; they must also care about their group as a whole enough to be willing to fight for it (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013). These groups often take on social or political identities, and of particular interest is how religious identity participates in civil wars.

Religion has continued to play an important role in politics, even while many political scientists predicted its diminishing role after the Cold War (Lacina, 2004). Religion has particularly been studied in reference to the onset of conflict. Religion can be a major source of grievances that can lead to conflict, particularly when one's religious identity is seen as a source of an individual's troubles (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers, 2016). It is important to note that it is religious identities and not religion itself that leads to religious conflict. With so much focus on religious conflict, it's important to remember that this type of conflict accounts for the minority of armed conflicts in the world (Svensson 2007).

It is often thought that conflict rooted in religion lasts longer, is deadlier, and harder to resolve than non-religious conflict (Isaacs, 2016). This may be true for certain types of conflict, particularly revolutionary wars, but mass killings and ethnic wars do not seem to change in intensity regardless of the role religion plays (Fox, 2004). It is important to note the difference between a conflict centered around a religious issue and a conflict in which the participants happen to be of the same religious background. Religious conflicts tend to be longer, more destructive and less likely to be resolved in a negotiated settlement than conflicts where the central issue is not religious (Toft, 2006). These trends are part of why there is so much focus on religion in conflict. The presence of it seems to dramatically change the outcome of a conflict, which might be a reason why political leaders are tempted to incorporate it into their causes.

There are many reasons why religion might become central to a conflict but a handful of popular theories get the most attention. Political leaders might feel as though they could gain more power and support by engaging in religion and using religious rhetoric among their followers (Toft, 2006). There is an idea that when a conflict becomes centered around religion, the participants will feel as though there is little way to end the violence with compromise, so leaders can use this perception in order to ensure a longer loyalty among their followers (Svensson, 2007). Religion can also be considered through an organizational lens. Because of the way many religious institutions are set up, members of those institutions can gain organizational and leadership skills that are required in order to garner support and mobilise people (Fox, 2004). On the other hand, there is a belief, with reasonable amount of evidence, to suggest that religion does not proceed violence; violent organizations adopt religious rhetoric in order to try to gain support after already coming to the decision to engage in violence (Isaacs, 2016).

The study of religion in conflict becomes more complicated when considering what researchers are looking at when deciding if religion is a factor in a conflict or not. Researchers have a tendency to separate religious and ethnic conflict despite the fact that almost half of all ethnic conflicts are religious and ethni-religious conflicts have a longer duration and higher rate of fatalities (Fox, 2004). It all seems to come down to a matter of personal identification. Individuals can choose to identify with a religious or ethnic group but they also might choose to identify with both or neither. This makes it difficult to accurately predict how people will react to a religious conflict. Groups may identify as a certain religion, but not be loyal to religious leaders. On the other hand, religious groups might identify with the group's history, which can create more tensions between different identities as grievances become generational (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013).

In the case of Catholic-Protestant tensions in Northern Ireland, religious identity overlaps with national identity as Catholics tend not to consider themselves British while Protestants do (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013). Conflict between the two groups might take on political dimensions or it might take on religious dimensions, or, more likely, both. Identity overlaps are often the cause of interreligious conflict and the likelihood of violence intensifies when religious leaders begin to use their status to call for violence (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers, 2016). For most countries, minority groups have a tendency to identify less with the nation than with their own culture (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013). When a minority group does not identify with the national identity and feels aggrieved,, the chance of conflict will probably increase, particularly when the issue of separatism emerges (Svensson, 2007). When religious and ethnic identities combine in conflict, the conflict will last longer and have more fatalities than a plain ethnic

conflict (Fox, 2004). All of these trends have a potential to be heightened when a conflict includes both religion and polarization.

Polarization is highlighted as an important source of conflict onset, regardless of whether that polarization is economic, ideological, or religious (Esteban and Schneider, 2008).

Polarization itself occurs when two major groups identify with each other but alienate the other group. This contrasts with fractionalization, which is a situation with many different identity groups. There is some evidence to suggest that, as a predictor of civil conflict, polarization outperforms fractionalization and that countries that have a population where the dominant group is more than 80% of the population do not experience as much civil conflict as do other countries (Esteban and Schneider, 2008). The same article also suggests that polarization can prevent conflict due to the high costs that would occur should there be violence (Esteban and Schneider, 2008).

It might be logical to assume that religious polarization increases the potential for civil conflict. In the case of intrastate conflict in the Middle East, the violence is often centered around two major forms of Islam (Sørli, Gleditsch, and Strand, 2005). The presence of two distinct religions in an area without a strong presence of other religions creates the perfect example of religious polarization. However, previous research actually proves the opposite: religious polarization actually decreases the likelihood of conflict (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers, 2016). Interestingly, even though religious diversity does not impact the size of a conflict, ethnic polarization does (Lacina, 2006). However, it has been found that conflicts that have a religious dimension to them tend to last longer as opposed to non-religious conflicts (Basedau, Pfeiffer,

and Vüllers, 2016). There is also the suggestion that highly polarized states are less likely to go to war at all due to the high costs that violence would incur (Esteban and Schneider, 2008).

It is important to note that the duration of civil wars can be the effect of many different variables and varies based on the particular type of conflict. A religious dimension to the conflict is not the only variable that can strongly impact duration. Within civil wars, religion can make a war last longer, but because the statistic is not statistically significant, it can not be considered a tried and true law (Toft, 2006). The fact is that there are so many aspects to consider when it comes to conflict that it is hard to explain the exact impact variables have on the duration. It does seem to be agreed that military intervention on the side of rebel groups and countries with higher populations tend to have longer lasting wars (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2004). Economic intervention, on the other hand, does not seem to impact duration (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2004). GDP per capita is another variable that seems to be significant in the study of duration, which will be considered later on in this paper (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2004). If a certain side of the war believes that victory is within reach, they will be less likely to settle the conflict peacefully and continue fighting, lengthening the war (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2004).

Individual religions do not serve as significant variables when it comes to violent conflict. What this means is that one religion is not more violent than another. In the instance of Islam, it might seem easy to assume that Muslim-dominated countries are more prone to conflict, as more than 80% of religious civil wars involve Islam (Toft, 2006). But Islam itself is not the reason some of these countries experience conflict; many other factors are at play (Sørli, Gleditsch, and Strand, 2005). A study involving conflict in the Middle East found that ethnic

polarization and religious fractionalization were insignificant when compared to natural resource dependence when it comes to cause of conflict (Sørli, Gleditsch, and Strand, 2005). Christian groups are actually more likely than Islamic groups to be involved in conflict although Islamic groups tend to have a higher percentage of interreligious conflict (Fox, 2004).

Explanation and Hypothesis

I believe that there is a connection between religious polarization and civil wars. More specifically, I think religious polarization will increase the duration of civil wars. When polarization exists in a society, it means that there are two distinct groups that are clustered on opposite ends of a spectrum. It tends to create an 'us vs. them' mentality for groups, as individuals see themselves belonging to a particular group that is very distinct from another group (Esteban and Schneider, 2008). I believe that this separation would extend to communication and that the two groups, when engaged in conflict, would be less likely to begin open dialogue than a non-polarized society.

Previous research shows a connection between polarization in general and the onset of conflict (Esteban and Schneider, 2008). Ethnic polarization in particular shows a large impact on conflict, as it can impact the severity of conflict, the likelihood of conflict onset, and the duration of conflict (Lacina, 2006; Sambanis and Shayo, 2013). Because of the known overlap between religious and ethnic conflicts, it is reasonable to assume that some of these trends will be present within religiously polarized situations, meaning these situations would also be longer and more severe than others without religious polarization (Fox, 2004).

This would be particularly prevalent in countries where religion is a major aspect of public life. When someone's personal identity is closely linked to a religious identity, they will be less likely to compromise on an issue and more likely to continue fighting even when the opportunity costs grow. This lack of compromising dialogue and refusal to give in would increase the duration of a civil war significantly. My hypothesis is as follows:

A country experiencing religious polarization will experience a longer civil war than a country in which religious polarization is absent..

Research design, data, and methods

My research is based around the central explanatory variable of religious polarization. I use the dataset from Lacina's research on explaining the severity of civil wars. In this dataset, Lacina coded religious polarization as either 0 or 1. 0 represents a country without any religious polarization and 1 represents a country with religious polarization. Since this is a dummy variable, there are no numbers in between 0 and 1; a country is either religiously polarized or it is not. My dependent variable is duration, and the variable will be measured by the natural log of duration. For this variable, 0 represents one year of conflict while 4.007 represents 55 years.

In order to fully understand the impact of religious polarization, I control for three additional variables. I control for GDP using the natural log of GDP. In addition, I control for intervention and democracy. Both are coded as either 0 or 1, with 0 meaning 'no' and 1 meaning 'yes'. They, like the central explanatory variable, are dummy variables that do not take into account the degree of intervention or democracy, only whether or not they exist.

In order to see how the variables impacted duration, I ran an ordinary least squares regression model using the central explanatory variable and the control variables. I considered whether or not the relationship between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable was positive or negative, and how strong the relationship was. Then, I determined whether or not my findings were statistically significant by looking at the P value associated with each variable. A statistically significant variable means that the likelihood of the null hypothesis being correct is low. A variable with a P value of greater than .05 was deemed insignificant while a variable with a smaller P value was deemed significant. If there is a variable with a P value of less than .05, it was noted as such.

Results and analysis

There were a total of 107 observations that were analyzed in the model. The r-squared for the observations was .1124, meaning that 11% of the variance in the duration variable can be predicted by the independent variables. This applies for both the central explanatory variable and the control variables. After running the regression model, we can see that religious polarization has a negative relationship with duration, meaning it shortens the duration of civil wars. GDP also has a negative relationship with duration, but it is not as strong as the other relationships considered. Both intervention and democracy have strong positive relationships but intervention has the strongest relationship out of all the variables.

The coefficient for religious polarization is -.1988, meaning that religious polarization actually shortens the duration of a conflict. While this is an interesting finding, the P value shows that there is almost a 50% chance of this relationship not existing. GDP also has a negative

relationship that is insignificant. Democracy, on the other hand, has a coefficient of .3480, meaning it lengthens the duration of civil war. While the P value is not small enough for it to be considered significant, it is smaller than GDP and religious polarization. The only statistically significant variable in this study was intervention, with a coefficient of .7251 and a P value of less than .01. This shows that intervention is a very strong factor in the duration of civil wars.

While there is a fairly strong relationship between religious polarization and duration, it should not be taken as an important relationship due to the lack of statistical significance. This indicates that there is a high probability that there is no connection between religious polarization and the duration of civil wars. There is also a possibility that this particular study was not adept at capturing that relationship. This possibility will be explored later in the paper along with additional suggestions for future research. Either way, this study does not provide support for my hypothesis that religious polarization increases the duration of civil war. The relationship that does exist, while not significant, is negative.

Table 1: Religious Polarization and the Duration of Civil War, 1946-2002

Religious Polarization	-.1988 (.2621)
GDP _{natural log}	-.0626 (.1099)
Intervention	.7251 (.2154)**
Democracy	.3480 (.2762)
Constant	1.731 (.8168)*
Observations	107
R-Squared	0.1124

**p<.001; *p<.05. Standard errors in parentheses

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that religious polarization had a positive impact on the duration of a civil war. I considered a wide variety of angles in my review of prior research. I looked at particular case studies while analyzing previous trends that have been found in conflict as a whole, religion, and polarization. In addition, I drew attention to the relationship between ethnicity and religion, particularly the suggestion that there is an overlap present that is not always accounted for in research. I then provided information regarding the variables I chose to examine and the method I used to examine the relationship. Finally, I presented my findings based on my analysis.

With the data I had available, I came to the conclusion that the relationship between religious polarization and duration is negative and not particularly strong. The most important discovery is that this relationship is not significant, meaning there is a strong chance that this relationship does not exist at all. When it comes to the other variables examined, the one with the strongest impact on duration was intervention. Not only was it a strong, positive relationship, but it was extremely significant. In short, there is little chance that the relationship between intervention and duration is nonexistent.

Despite the lack of support for my hypothesis, I reached a better understanding of religious polarization in civil wars. The discovery of a negative relationship between the two variables suggests that a country experiencing polarization will endure a shorter civil war. But this must be taken with a grain of salt. The impact of religion, as my review of previous literature suggests, is extremely complicated and often blurs into areas of study such as ethnic divides. It is

hard to focus solely on religion, especially since the concept of religion is different based on who one talks to.

Discussion

The Lacina dataset was an extremely detailed and informative collection of data for a very long period of time. However, it was not compiled with the intention to understand how religion plays a role in conflict. It only had two variables for religion: religious fractionalization and religious polarization. This paper looked at polarization, but Lacina coded it as a dummy variable, which means the degree of polarization was not included. A conflict was considered polarized or it was not. In the future, I would want to run a similar model but with religious polarization as a continuous variable between 0 and 1 in order to account for the different levels of polarization that might exist within countries. Not every country experiences the same amount of polarization, therefore accounting for that should produce a more precise understanding of the relationship between religious polarization and duration.

I also believe that future studies should pay attention to the overlaps between religious and other identities. As noted previously many ethnic conflicts end up being religious conflicts as well, making it difficult to separate the two (Fox, 2004). I believe there is potential for overlaps in political identification and social identification as well that could help make our understanding of these relationships more legitimate. Individual case studies on conflicts originally deemed religious or ethnic in nature would be an excellent place to start in order to see these overlaps in action.

In the case of the Lacina dataset, the results for ethnic and religious polarization are different, as ethnic polarization had a large negative impact on conflict size while religious polarization did not (2006). This data would provide an excellent jumping off point for a collection of case studies considering the relationship between ethnicity and religion. Looking for religious divides in ethnic conflicts or vice versa would help with the study of individual conflicts and isolated trends while the ability to properly code conflicts as religious or ethnic and to properly differentiate between the two would help models be more accurate in their outputs. This type of study would not fall under the realm of political scientists, but an increased understanding would help future researchers isolate or highlight these relationships in studies on conflict and peacemaking.

Despite not being the focus of this paper, continued research into the impact of intervention on the duration of civil war would be very beneficial. Intervention was the only variable considered here that was statistically significant, with the likelihood of the null hypothesis being correct only being .01%, meaning that the presence of intervention in a conflict almost certainly plays a role in the duration. Further research on how religious polarization impacts other dependent variables would also be interesting and increase understanding of religious polarization in general. In particular, studying its impact on the severity of conflict would be nice alongside this study on duration.

This paper did not find much regarding a relationship between religious polarization and duration, but a larger understanding of the topic has been reached and this can serve as a jumping off point for future studies. By conducting more research and continuing to challenge findings, policy makers can accurately predict and account for the impact that religious polarization has on

the duration of civil war. Hopefully, policy makers will be able to prepare for and prevent conflict in the future, therefore, saving lives.

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