

How Does Ethnic Rebellion Start?

Comparative Political Studies
2017, Vol. 50(10) 1420–1450
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0010414016672235
journals.sagepub.com/home/cps



Janet I. Lewis¹

Abstract

Because insurgent group formation typically occurs in secrecy and in poorly monitored areas, the empirical record on conflicts' start is spare and systematically omits rebels who fail before committing substantial violence. This article argues that this presents a fundamental challenge for the study of conflict onset and demonstrates the theoretical and empirical problems it causes in studying a controversial relationship: how ethnicity influences armed conflicts' start. Unusual evidence on all armed groups that formed in Uganda since 1986 indicates that ethnic mobilization was unimportant to the *initial* formation of rebel groups—but mattered *after* nascent groups had already formed. Contrasting evidence from Uganda with a prominent argument that ethnic marginalization induces rebellion shows why lack of evidence about how insurgencies begin can lead to broader inferential pitfalls.

Keywords

conflict processes, civil war, insurgency, ethnicity and politics, African politics

Recognition that most post–World War II political violence occurs within states—between states and organized nonstate actors—has motivated an expansive body of research on intrastate conflict onset. However, although such work probes the “outbreak,” “sources,” and “origins” of such conflict, the inherent challenges of studying secretive events in poorly monitored

¹U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD, USA

Corresponding Author:

Janet I. Lewis, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, U.S. Naval Academy, 589 McNair Road, Annapolis, MD 21402, USA.
Email: janetilewis@gmail.com

areas mean that this literature rarely uses systematic evidence about how violence initially *begins*.

As a result, most recent work omits rebel groups that initiate violence but then end before substantial violence occurs. Yet, as this article shows, ample evidence indicates that such early-failed groups are quite common in weak states, even if few facts are systematically recorded about them. Because building and testing informative theories of civil conflict onset require an unbiased record of how rebel groups form—for all attempted rebel groups, not just those that go on to commit substantial violence—this difficulty in capturing the full range of rebel group starts is a fundamental problem for the study of conflict onset.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate this problem and the theoretical and inferential issues it causes in an enduring debate: whether and how ethnic identities influence the initiation of internal armed conflict. The majority of civil wars since 1946 have involved actors who identify along ethnic lines, yet considerable debate continues about precisely why this is the case (Walter & Denny, 2014). Because systematic omission of early-failed rebellions creates a selection problem, existing studies may in some cases mistakenly conclude that ethnic group mobilization drives the *emergence* of violence, when in fact, ethnic mobilization is causally relevant *after*, and is possibly *due to*, the initial stages of violence. This article conceptualizes the start of an armed conflict as occurring when a rebel group forms, that is, when a group forms a nascent organization and begins using violence to challenge the authority of the incumbent government.¹ I operationalize this concept by counting groups as having formed if they had a discernable command and control structure, and had committed or clearly planned to commit at least one act of violence against the state.

Understanding the direction and sequence of this relationship between ethnicity and initial violence is far from trivial. Better understanding of these early stages of conflict promises to clarify how it may be averted before substantial violence and its attendant humanitarian costs occur. Moreover, different interpretations of this relationship support divergent theoretical conceptualizations of how conflict emerges. I argue that at least one ambiguity that cannot be resolved without richer evidence is the conditions under which armed conflict begins like a social movement, with mobilization of large groups of civilians *leading to* rebel group formation, versus those when mobilization occurs *after* a small core of rebel entrepreneurs form a clandestine group and initiate violence. The former pathway suggests an important potential role for ethnic animosities held prior to rebel group formation. The latter, although not precluding the relevance of ethnic tension, allows for more complex ways for ethnic identity to serve as a technology that aids the *escalation* of violence.

To demonstrate these problems, the article uses new evidence that is unusual in capturing all rebel groups that formed in a particular time in place. Drawing on extensive fieldwork throughout Uganda, I identify all rebel groups that formed there since 1986—more than half of which are missing from standard data sets because they failed early. Although a cursory look at Uganda’s “big” insurgencies could lead one to conclude that groundswells of ethnic mobilization led to the formation of rebel groups there, I show that when looking at the full range of rebel group starts, patterns of rebel initiation there are not consistent with this account. Instead, the ethnic make-up of the population *where nascent rebel groups had already formed* is associated with whether those nascent rebellions became viable challengers to a state; rebel groups that formed in ethnically homogeneous areas were more likely to succeed in becoming viable groups than those that formed in more heterogeneous areas. Furthermore, examples from fieldwork suggest that narratives of ethnic marginalization can emerge out of the early phases of violence. When taken together, these observations suggest that in the absence of detailed information about rebel group formation and early-failed groups, retrospective analysis may conclude that previously held ethnic animosity led rebellion to start, even if ethnicity in fact played a more subtle, later role in conflict escalation.² Moreover, this suggests that analyses that study only larger, more persistent rebel groups—as does most research relying on standard conflict data sets—may be more likely to include rebellions that coincide with well-established ethnic narratives, and omit those that do not.

To illustrate how this selection problem may affect broader conflict analyses, this article contrasts these findings from Uganda, as well as qualitative evidence from other cases, with a prominent 2010 study titled “Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?” (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min [CWM], 2010). Using their global data set that seeks to capture all politically relevant ethnic groups, and using a commonly used measure of conflict onset, this groundbreaking study found strong support for its argument that ethnic groups initiate rebellions when and where they are marginalized from central power. Using evidence from Uganda, this article shows why omissions of early-failed rebel groups may help to drive the strength of this finding.

This article advances knowledge about internal armed conflict and ethnicity in three ways. First, it demonstrates that an incomplete picture of rebel emergence underpins dominant understandings of civil conflict onset, especially regarding civilians’ role in that process. Better data from local sources are needed to bring the picture into focus—particularly for the rural, weak state environments where insurgencies are most likely to form yet information is most difficult to collect. The conclusion briefly highlights promising new data-collection initiatives that aim to do so. Second, this article indicates

the need for more careful theorizing and analysis about the microfoundations of rebel group formation, especially on which stage(s) in a conflict's early phases ethnicity matters, and why. Finally, it adds to a growing body of work suggesting the need to revisit influential results in the large- n conflict onset literature with more fine-grained data (e.g., Bazzi & Blattman, 2014; Hegre & Sambanis, 2006).

Measuring the Start of Conflict

Of all articles about civil conflict onset³ published in 10 major political science journals since 2003, more than 80% rely on at least one of what Bazzi and Blattman (2014) call the “four major datasets” (p. 8) on internal warfare: the Correlates of War (COW) data set (Sarkees & Wayman, 2010)⁴; James Fearon and David Laitin's (2003) data set; Nicholas Sambanis's (2004) data set; and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset (UCDP/PRIO ACD; Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002; Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015).⁵ The data sets have thus been a highly valuable public good for researchers, allowing for a rapid expansion of knowledge about empirical patterns of conflict.

However, widespread reliance on these data sets also means that this literature's findings are largely based on a particular conceptualization, shared by the data sets and based on thresholds of violence, of what counts as a conflict's start and which conflicts should be counted in the first place. None of these data sets aims to identify the initial formation of new rebel groups; instead, they capture dates after which thresholds of violence were surpassed in a given conflict between a government and one or (more commonly) several nonstate actors. For example, COW, Fearon and Laitin (2003), and Sambanis (2004) all use fairly large battle-death thresholds (respectively 1,000 over 1 year, 100 over 1 year, and 1,000 over 3 years) to determine the start of the civil war, and thus intentionally code the start of *large-scale* violence, not the initial emergence of violence.⁶

Of course, the correlates of large-scale violence onset are a reasonable analytic target. However, such a target should be theoretically decoupled from the start of conflict, especially because such large-scale violence typically occurs well after a rebel group has formed and violence begins. For example, Joseph Kony's notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) formed and began committing violence in Uganda in 1988,⁷ but it does not enter the COW data set until 1994, the Sambanis data set until 1990, and the Fearon and Laitin data set until 1993. Although more fine-grained UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database does record a date for the first battle-related death

of a given conflict episode, and indeed accurately codes the LRA's start as 1988, it often imprecisely measures when distinct rebel groups begin; each episode is typically broadly conceived, capturing a decades-long period of contestation between a government and numerous, separate rebel groups, which form at different points in distinct regions of a country over the episode.⁸

Another consequence of these data sets' use of recorded battle-death thresholds as the primary inclusion criterion is that they exclude rebellions that failed before surpassing these thresholds. Scholars using these data to examine civil conflict onset may reason that this omission is acceptable or preferable because they wish to study the onset of only major conflicts. The adequacy of this rationale, naturally, depends on the aim of the study. However, for studies seeking to understand the *emergence* of violent activity, excluding low levels of conflict introduces a selection problem. Given the inherent challenges of documenting phenomena that occur in information-poor environments, it is extraordinarily difficult to tally how commonly rebellions begin but then disband before expanding into organizations capable of large-scale destruction. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain the severity of the selection problem with much precision. Yet, there is ample reason to believe this phenomenon is quite common.

Below, I present evidence that early-failed rebellion in Uganda has been much more common than standard data sets suggest. Considerable evidence from fragile states beyond Uganda suggests that the phenomenon of "small" rebel groups that never become substantial is quite widespread. Daniel Byman argues that "for every group that becomes an insurgency, dozens—or perhaps hundreds—fail" (Byman, 2007, p. 1). Dexter Filkins reported from Iraq in 2005,

Iraqi and American officials in Iraq say the single most important fact about the insurgency is that it consists not of a few groups but of dozens . . . Each is believed to have its own leader and is free to act on its own.⁹

In another example, although one usually associates recent conflict in Sri Lanka with the Tamil Tigers (also known as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, or the LTTE), there were several other rebel groups at the outset. Jeyarathnam Wilson (2000) states that there were 37 Tamil militant groups, but "only five were of significance" (p. 126). The Tamil Tigers survived the longest and caused the most casualties; therefore, historians and other analysts have painstakingly retraced their trajectory, but smaller Sri Lankan groups remain obscure. For similar reasons, in major comparative, within-country studies of rebellion, data limitations force scholars to caveat that they study

only the “major” or “key” groups (Goodwin, 2001; Staniland, 2014). In his seminal work, Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1993) explains, “. . . (G)uerilla movements appeared throughout Latin America in the 1960s, but most died an early death . . . failures left but few traces on the historical record, too few for the close analysis required here” (p. 16).¹⁰

Unfortunately, these problems are most severe where news media are least likely to be present, as authors of standard data sets acknowledge.¹¹ It is also well-documented that media accounts are significantly more likely to capture large, highly public events like protests than small attacks, and to undercount violent deaths (e.g., Hug, 2003).¹² In sum, the places where factors predominate that make insurgent groups most likely to form—weakly monitored, scantily institutionalized territories—are also the areas where our data sets are least likely to capture them.

What are the implications of these omissions for the state of knowledge on civil conflict onset? First, it means we have a deficit of knowledge about how rebellions begin, which limits the ability of scholars to build theories of conflict onset on empirically informed foundations. Although such data sets continue to be enormously useful for answering questions about a broad range of questions about armed conflict—such as aspects of its conduct, escalation, duration, and end—they should be used with caution in attempting to make inferences about its start.

Second, and critically for assessing existing findings about conflict onset, this omission makes it impossible to distinguish whether studies using these data sets have identified the correlates of *initial* organized violence or the correlates of a conflict’s escalation, once a rebel group has formed and committed initial acts of violence, to the point of substantial violence. I argue below that this distinction can make a crucial difference in our theoretical foundations about the armed groups that bring about civil wars.

Conflict Onset, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Role of “the People”

Although the problem delineated above of opaque causal sequencing could in principle affect several findings about the drivers of civil conflict onset, it is most likely to affect findings about factors that are potentially endogenous to the initial phases of conflict. Given recent findings that the salience of ethnic identity and narratives about ethnic marginalization are responsive to political dynamics in general (e.g., Bates, 1983; Kasfir, 1979; Posner, 2005) and violent conflict in particular (e.g., Brubaker, 2002; Christia, 2012; Kalyvas, 2008; Valentino, 2004), there is good reason to believe that the initial phases

of rebellion activate or strengthen ethnic identities. Understanding the influence of ethnicity on armed conflict's start, and vice versa, thus requires a great deal of care.

Recent social science research on ethnicity and conflict has generally proceeded in two waves.¹³ The first wave used county-level data and cast doubt on the importance of ethnic mobilization in influencing the likelihood of armed conflict, finding little evidence that various ethnic demographic constellations were correlated with civil war onset (e.g., Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Goldstone et al., 2010). More recently, a second wave revitalized theories of ethnically motivated rebellion. Using new subnational data that enable disaggregated analyses, several of these studies have found a statistically significant relationship between civil conflict onset and within-country, ethnic group-level variables—particularly exclusion from a central government, economic inequality between ethnic groups, and ethnic group geographic concentration (e.g., Cederman, Weidmann, & Gleditsch, 2011; Østby, 2008; Toft, 2002, 2003; Wimmer, Cederman, & Min, 2009).

An additional, subtler difference between these waves is that their theoretical stances tend to rely on different conceptualizations of how armed conflict begins. In particular, they differ importantly about *role of the noncombatant population where these rebellions form*. The recent wave of research arguing in favor of the importance of preexisting ethnic group-level grievances draws on social mobilization theory (e.g., Gurr, 1970; Horowitz, 2000; Tilly, 1978) and envisions high levels of motivation and antigovernment sentiment in the local population as a prerequisite for rebellion to begin. For example, Wimmer (2002) explains that violence occurs when “. . . a fight erupts over which ‘people’ the state should belong to. . . . Sometimes this contest for the control of the state escalates into ethno-nationalist civil wars. . . .” (p. 91). Similarly, CWM (2010) conceive of conflict as occurring when “ethnonationalist mobilization turns violent” (p. 92). The main underlying claim is that the more people in an area who are motivated to rebel, and the more deeply held their frustrations are, the more likely that this sentiment will then boil over into violence. If a particular ethnically delineated “people” have similar preferences, then as a group, they will rebel.

However, the prior wave tended to put forth a different model of conflict emergence in which these actors—the population outside the inner core of the rebel vanguard, who serve as potential supporters or recruits—are less central. Insurgency conceived of in this manner does not require an already widespread movement or mobilized group with similar, concentrated preferences; instead, new rebel organizations start based on the motives and actions

of just a few entrepreneurs in violence. Exemplifying this perspective, James Fearon and David Laitin argue,

Surely ethnic antagonisms . . . often motivate rebels and their supporters. But such broad factors are too common to distinguish the cases where civil war breaks out. Also, because insurgency can be successfully practiced by small numbers of rebels under the right conditions, *civil war may require only a small number with intense grievances to get going*. (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 76, emphasis added)

This conceptualization has more in common with that of Mueller (2000) and the economics literature on insurrections (e.g., Collier, 2000; Grossman, 1991), which characterizes rebellion as an elite-level struggle for status, spoils, and powers of extraction. Rebel entrepreneurs may make use of and even sometimes be involved in generating local narratives of grievance once their rebellion is underway, to justify their cause and to influence a potentially large source of followers.¹⁴ By this account, ethnicity can play a subtle role as a technology of coordination, helping incipient rebels secure local support as they attempt to expand their rebellion.

In sum, these two families of explanation for conflict onset represent distinct conceptualizations of how internal armed conflict begins. In one, armed conflict begins like a large protest movement, and ethnicity's role in mobilizing support of large groups of people occurs *before* violence breaks out. In the other, rebellion begins with a small group of individuals and ethnicity's role in mobilization is unimportant until *after* the group has formed. The latter does not preclude the importance of ethnicity to conflict escalation, as the salience of ethnic identity and/or marginalization can help groups, once formed, gain the capacity to sustain themselves—for example, through motivating foot soldiers to join.

This discussion highlights the importance of theoretical and empirical clarity in distinguishing the determinants of rebel initiation from the determinants of whether rebellions, once initiated, survive long enough to become viable challengers to a central government—and thus more likely to be counted in commonly used data sets. The drivers of these distinct phases cannot be assessed with existing data sets as they offer little systematic information about how rebellions begin. Scrutiny of the initial stages of insurgency, therefore, promises to provide not only a corrective to the empirical record but also clarification of the conditions under which of two competing theoretical conceptualizations of how rebellions begin find empirical support. I show below that evidence from Uganda since 1986 indicates that rebel groups there were started by small groups of people, prior to major mobilization efforts, and that

ethnicity appeared to play a larger role in nascent rebel groups' ability to gain traction in a population than in initial rebel group formation.

Rebel Group Formation and Ethnicity in Uganda

Uganda—a country that endured extensive internal warfare until a decade ago, and is located in one of today's most conflict-affected regions¹⁵—offers a rare opportunity to examine rebel formation and ethnicity in comparative perspective. Several distinct rebel groups launched there in recent decades, and an amnesty law protecting former rebels who disavow violence, combined with a generally peaceful and open recent political environment, make it possible for former rebels, citizens, and government agents to recount their experiences with candor. This research environment made it possible to collect basic descriptive information about all rebel groups that formed in Uganda since 1986, and to retrace in detail several previously undocumented insurgencies from their inception—including those that are omitted from standard data sets because they failed early.

This data-collection effort entailed 14 months of fieldwork in 20 districts of Uganda from August 2007 to January 2011. To identify all rebel groups that had formed in Uganda, I first developed an inclusive list of potential rebel groups using a Uganda Amnesty Commission database of all rebels who had received amnesty from the government (which included the rebel group affiliation of each former rebel), a complete set of all Ugandan newspaper articles I collected about armed conflict there starting in January 1986, and meetings with leadership of Uganda's Chieftancy of Military Intelligence, who worked with their staff to arrive at list of all Ugandan rebel groups since 1986. However, rebel groups that were solely rumored or announced to capture attention, but never truly organized or committed violence—known in Uganda as “briefcase” groups—were relatively common during this period. Thus, this initial list warranted scrutiny.

To determine whether each potential group met this study's inclusion criteria—at a minimum, an organization formed with a discernable command and control structure, and that had committed, or planned to commit,¹⁶ at least one act of violence against the state¹⁷—I analyzed the set of newspaper articles described above to ascertain whether an act of violence could be attributed to the group. In addition, I conducted dozens of interviews in communities where rebels had purportedly formed with local journalists, former rebel leaders, and individuals who had served as government officials in those localities when rebels had reportedly formed.¹⁸

To learn more detail about each rebel group—particularly the circumstances of their formation such as motives behind and beliefs about early acts

of violence and interactions with civilians—I interviewed more than 170 former rebels, government officials including civil servants, military, and intelligence agents who had served where rebels formed, civilians who lived near nascent rebel bases, and Ugandan journalists, academics, and other conflict experts. I also conducted 14 focus groups with civilians who lived near initial rebel bases. The online appendix further details the fieldwork procedures and key coding decisions.

I focus on the period since 1986 because this year represents a critical turning point in Uganda's history; from this point forward, several national-level political factors vary little if at all. Prior to 1986, Uganda had suffered from 15 years of relative chaos and state decay under Idi Amin and others, followed by a civil war known as the Bush War. In January 1986, Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM)¹⁹ seized control of what was arguably a failed state. From then on, Museveni and the NRM have maintained control of Uganda's central government—but after a brief period of peace, starting in August 1986, it also faced several armed challengers, all of which had the stated goal of overtaking the government. None of these rebel groups was based in the same district of Uganda at the same time, or engaged in substantial collaboration with or violent contestation against one another. None was initially sponsored by an external group or state, or used natural resource rents to fund their start-up costs. All used classic insurgency tactics.

Uganda's ethnic politics are notoriously complex, as is its history of conflict, but a common trope exists about its ethno-politics and their relationship to the country's recent history of violent conflict. According to this narrative, highly simplified here due to space limitations, Uganda's political dramas have played out along a north-south divide that represents a boundary between the country's two very distinct ethno-linguistic families: There are several Bantu-language ethnic groups in the south, and several Nilotic and Luo-speaking groups in the north. Since independence in 1962, various groupings of northerners dominated the central government until 1986, when a rebel alliance of groups from Western and Central Uganda (both considered part of the country's "south") seized control of the state. Since that time, this coalition has governed Uganda and marginalized the north, which rebelled in frustration at this loss of power. By this account, the LRA, a rebel group from Uganda's north that became one of the most violent and enduring rebel groups in Africa, simply represents a perverse outgrowth of Northern Uganda's frustration and marginalization. Indeed, most data sets generally reflect this narrative; for example, the LRA is the only post-1986 Ugandan rebel group listed in the COW data set, Fearon and Laitin (2003), and Sambanis (2004).

However, based on the sources and procedures described above, I count as many as 15 additional, distinct rebel groups. These groups are listed in Table 1. The finer grained UCDP/PRIODATA Armed Conflict Dataset captures only seven of these groups.

Analysis of these groups offers a rare window into rebel group formation, allowing us to distinguish which of the theoretical accounts above better capture how rebellions formed in Uganda since 1986. All of these groups had the initial stated goal of overthrowing the state, and all began as small, clandestine organizations, typically led by a small cadre of leaders of roughly two to five people. The men²⁰ who initiated rebel groups in Uganda were political entrepreneurs of a sort. Most were in their late 20s, 30s, or 40s when they decided to form a rebel group and were reasonably well-educated. Their reported motives for rebelling were somewhat mixed, but most were similar to that of one former rebel leader who said, “We felt that unless we fought, we wouldn’t be recognized.”²¹ Another explained that he knew he was taking a risk by launching a rebellion, but he calculated that “if we fail, at least the government will take us seriously.”²²

Several interviews of former rebel leaders indicated that when initially forming their group, their focus was not on mobilizing a broad swathe of the local population, as this may have led to detection by the government—rather, they were concerned with maintaining the population’s silence. For example, of the initial months of his insurgency, a former rebel leader explained, “We had to maintain secrecy, so we only relied on the most reliable people. We kept the group intentionally small... We needed to start as a small, core group, and then slowly enlarge.”²³

When asked about the initial stages of rebel group formation in their communities, civilians did not typically describe large rallies or a strong, widely held pro-rebellion sentiment in their communities. Rather, they usually stressed the ambiguity they perceived about the situation, the government’s intentions, and whether the aspiring rebels would bring positive developments to their community. For example, a man who served as a local leader in Eastern Uganda when a rebel group formed there in the late 1980s explained that when word of a new rebellion there began to spread, “It was a state of fear and uncertainty.”²⁴

Even in the case of the LRA’s rise, civilian accounts of the period when they first learned of the LRA did not emphasize strong ill will toward the fledgling NRM government. Instead, civilians in villages near the LRA’s early bases indicated skepticism and uncertainty about the wisdom of rebellion, but also that the LRA’s small band of early followers “seemed like good people”²⁵ who “gave people hope.”²⁶ One local official recounted that early on in the LRA rebellion, leader Joseph Kony “took care of people” by buying

Table 1. Ugandan Rebel Groups Since 1986.

Region	Group name ^a	Dates in which group operated on Ugandan territory	Leaders
Eastern	Force Obote Back Again (FOBA)	1987-1990	Nelson Omwero, Charles Korokoto
	Uganda People’s Army (UPA) ^b	1987-1992	“Hitler” Eregu, Musa Ecweru, Nathan Okurut
Western	National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU)	1987-1991	Amon Bazira
	Allied Democratic Force (ADF) ^b	1994-2004	Jamil Muqu
	People’s Redemption Army (PRA)	2001-2005	Unknown ^c
Northern	Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA)	1986-1988	Odong Latek
	Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) ^b	1986-1987	Alice Lakwena
	Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) ^b	1988-2005	Joseph Kony
	Ninth of October Movement (NOM)	1988-1990	Dan Opito
	Citizens Army for Multiparty Politics (CAMP)	1999	Smith Opon Acak
West Nile	West Nile Bank Front (WNBF)	1988, 1994-1997	Juma Oris
	Uganda National Resistance Front II (UNRF II)	1997-2002	Ali Bamuze
	National Freedom Army (NFA)	1997-2002	Mohammed Kiggundu
Central	National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	1989-1993	Sam Luwero
	Uganda Democratic Alliance (UDA)	1994-1996	Herbert Itongwa
	Uganda Federal Democratic Front (UFDF)	1996	Kisule

Source. Uganda Chieftancy for Military Intelligence (CMI), Uganda Amnesty Commission data, newspaper articles, and interviews.

^aGroup names were often ambiguous or misreported in newspapers, and sometimes changed over the course of a rebellion. The names here reflect what was the most commonly used name to refer to a particular armed group that operated in a given region under a particular group of leaders.

^bIndicates that this rebel group became a viable threat to the Ugandan government.

^cSeveral Ugandan military and intelligence officials stated that Samson Mande was the leader of the PRA. Mande has denied any involvement in the PRA and lives in exile.

back cattle that a neighboring tribe had stolen.²⁷ The horrific violence that the LRA committed later against civilians was absent in the initial months of the

LRA. Instead, their violence predominantly targeted agents of the state and appears to have been aimed at, or at least had the effect of, enhancing local civilians' confidence in the rebels. Several of these focus group members indicated that they had initially believed that—despite being a small, lightly armed group in the initial months²⁸—the LRA could overthrow the NRM government.

Rebels also described using the early phases of violence to shape local civilians' perceptions about the rebellion. One rebel leader explained that although he was uncertain early on about whether his group could succeed in overtaking the government, they “misled the public” by spreading propaganda locally indicating that they had the military strength to do so. They also aimed to score early victories by attacking “easy” targets, such as remote, small police detachments.²⁹

Interestingly, it also appears that antigovernment narratives sometimes emerged *after* rebellions were well underway,³⁰ and that in some cases, rebels played a role in shaping those narratives. For example, in Teso, a highly ethnically homogeneous area where the Iteso people are concentrated, villagers and other observers commonly cite the devastating cattle raids in the late 1980s by the neighboring Karamojong ethnic group as an explanation for why the Iteso disliked the NRM government and supported the Uganda People's Army (UPA) rebels; they resented the government's negligence in failing to protect their cattle.³¹ Some believe that government forces were complicit in the cattle thefts due to hatred or disrespect of the Iteso people. However, upon close scrutiny, it appears that the most severe cattle raids to hit Teso did not occur until several months *after* the UPA rebel group had already formed and initiated violence against state targets, such as nearby police barracks. In fact, in one interview, a UPA rebel leader suggested that the UPA was aware that the cattle raiding could help their cause, and indicated that “his men” were involved in some of the raids.³² Anthropological work on Teso also indicates the political uses of—and the limited evidence of—the narrative that the NRM aided the cattle raids in Teso (Buckley-Zistel, 2008, pp. 101-104). At a minimum, such works along with the interview evidence indicates the plausibility that beliefs among the Iteso about the government's role in the cattle raiding emerged out of the initial months of insurgency and served the interests of the incipient UPA rebel group (Buckley-Zistel, 2008; Jones, 2008). The UPA went on to present a fierce challenge to the Ugandan government.

However, most of the other Ugandan rebel groups failed before gaining the capacity to commit substantial violence. Only four of the 16 groups became a viable threat to the Ugandan government, which I operationalize as occurring if the group was able to maintain a base on Ugandan soil of at least

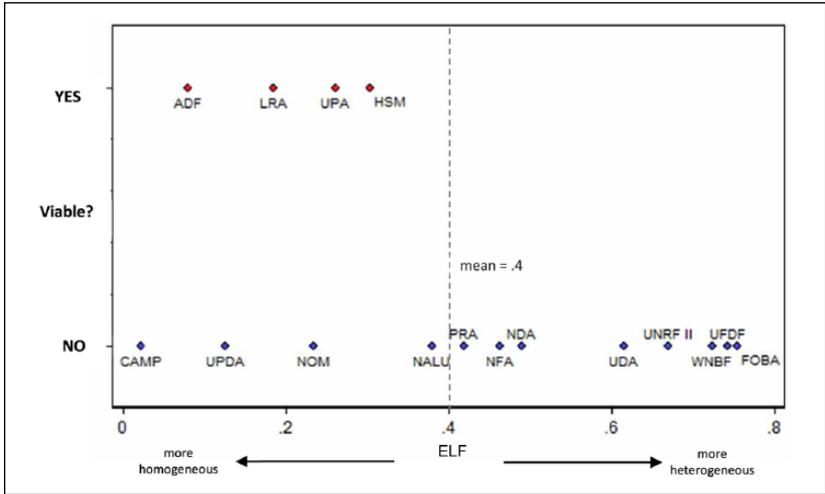


Figure 1. Scatterplot of local ethnic diversity and rebel viability.

ADF = Allied Democratic Force; LRA = Lord's Resistance Army; UPA = Uganda People's Army; HSM = Holy Spirit Movement; CAMP = Citizens Army for Multiparty Politics; UPDA = Uganda People's Democratic Army; NOM = Ninth of October Movement; NALU = National Army for the Liberation of Uganda; PRA = People's Redemption Army; NFA = National Freedom Army; NDA = National Democratic Alliance; UDA = Uganda Democratic Alliance; UNRF II = Uganda National Resistance Front II; UDFD = Uganda Federal Democratic Front; WNBF = West Nile Bank Front; FOBA = Force Obote Back Again; ELF = Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization.

roughly 100 people for at least 3 months.³³ What, if anything, was the role of ethnicity in this process of initial rebel formation and early failure? Given that most theories of ethnic rebellion assume that an area must be ethnically homogeneous for ethnic identity to drive rebellion, Figure 1 examines the relationship between the extent of ethnic homogeneity (measured by Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization [ELF] score³⁴) of the civilian population in the area where each rebel group initially formed, and whether or not the group became viable.³⁵ Ethnic demographic data come from Uganda's 1991 census, collected by the Government of Uganda in January 1991.

Figure 1 indicates two key points: First, rebel groups initially formed in both highly ethnically homogeneous and highly ethnically heterogeneous areas, and in areas in between. Eight rebel groups formed in homogeneous areas (below the mean for the 16 cases) and eight formed in heterogeneous areas (above the mean). In other words, for these cases, there is no systematic relationship between ethnic demographic concentration and initial

rebel group formation, contrary to what we would expect to find in the data if ethnic mobilization leads to initial rebellion onset. Second, only groups that formed in homogeneous areas became viable. The 12 groups that did not become viable take a value of zero and are distributed across the range of ELF scores for the rebel groups (between .02 and .75), whereas the ELF scores of groups that became viable are all below the mean and median of ELF scores (.40 and .39, respectively). A simple difference of means test finds that attempted rebellions that failed to become viable had an average ELF score of .47, whereas those that succeeded had an average ELF score of .20. On average, more homogeneous areas (which have a lower ELF score) were thus more likely to spawn viable rebel groups.³⁶

In sum, interview evidence from key conflict actors as well as the ethnic demographics of areas where rebels formed in Uganda suggests that rebel formation there has been more consistent with the conceptualization of conflict onset posited by Fearon and Laitin than that of others. Also, although ethnic mobilization appears *not* to have influenced initial rebel group formation, ethnic homogeneity in areas where groups form is correlated with whether already formed groups became viable—and thus became well-documented and well-known insurgencies. It stands to reason that nascent rebels may be better able to use violence to generate support for their cause in contexts of ethnic homogeneity than those of heterogeneity. These findings are consistent with those who have linked ethnic mobilization to conflict escalation dynamics (Eck, 2009), but not with studies arguing that it influences conflict initiation.

Crucially, this suggests that the systematic omissions of early-failed rebel groups described above are at the root of this confusion. If it is true that rebel groups that form in ethnically homogeneous areas are more likely to become viable—as I have shown above to be the case in Uganda—then those rebel groups are substantially more likely to be captured in existing conflict data sets than groups that form in ethnically heterogeneous areas. Indeed, all of the post-1986 Ugandan rebel groups that formed in ethnically homogeneous areas are counted in the Armed Conflict Dataset, whereas only two out of eight groups that formed in heterogeneous areas are included, likely because those that fail early received little news coverage. In other words, this analysis indicates that a consequential selection problem may be creating confusion in our understanding of ethnicity's relationship to how armed conflict begins. To illustrate this issue and its importance more concretely, and its potential relevance beyond Uganda, I turn to CWM's (2010) analysis of ethnic group mobilization and rebellion.

Revisiting CWM (2010)

CWM posit “a direct relationship between the degree of state power (held by an ethnic group) and the likelihood that an armed rebellion will be instigated in the name of that group” (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010, p. 9).³⁷ This finding has reinvigorated research on how ethnic group-level grievances lead to rebellion. For example, building on their findings, Roessler (2011) argue, “The key downside of exclusion, especially when it is carried out along ethnic lines, is that it tends to facilitate insurgency formation” (p. 315).

CWM’s data are organized by ethnic group and seek to include “all politically relevant ethnic groups” in a given country each year. They built a list of politically relevant ethnic groups in each country over time, and coded the “status” of each politically relevant ethnic group in several categories to capture how well they were (or were not) represented in the central government. For their core analyses, they collapse these categories into a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the group is excluded (if the group is “powerless” or “discriminated” against) or not excluded (if the group is “irrelevant” or part of the governing coalition). CWM explain that their approach “conceives of ethnic politics as the struggle over control of the state between various ethnically defined organizations and their constituencies” (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010, p. 7).

Examining the portion of CWM’s data on conflict in Uganda from 1986 to 2005, summarized in Table 2, their predicted pattern is borne out. These data show that two northern groups were discriminated against, whereas three southern groups were part of the central government either as a junior or a senior partner in the governing coalition. According to their data, just one “ethnic rebellion” formed during this period, and it occurred in the name of one³⁸ of the discriminated-against northern groups. These data are thus consistent with the common narrative of ethno-politics and conflict in Uganda delineated above.

CWM’s data for Uganda during this period are consistent with their primary argument about ethnic exclusion and rebellion, as none of the three groups that are coded as being a partner (junior or senior) in the central government rebelled. In other words, if their data set had only included Uganda since 1986, CWM’s coding strategy would have led them to similar findings that they produced using their global data set. They find broad, highly statistically significant support for this argument using their entire data set of more than 22,000 observations of ethnic group years, leading to the conclusion that they “are able to establish an unequivocal relationship between the degree of [an ethnic group’s] access to state power and the likelihood of armed rebellion” (p. 30).

However, reconsidering this analysis with more fine-grained evidence about rebel groups and ethnic groups from Uganda indicates a different

Table 2. Summary of CWM's (2010) Uganda Conflict Data (1986-2005).

	Ethnic group	Marginalized? (CWM's coding)	Rebelled?
Northern	Langi/Acholi	Y (Discriminated)	Y (Onset in 1987)
	Teso	Y (Discriminated)	N
Southern	Baganda	N (Junior Partner)	N
	Basoga	N (Junior Partner)	N
	South-Westerners	N (Senior Partner)	N
	(Ankole, Banyoro, and Toro, plus Banyarwanda from 1986 to 1989 only)		

Data come from CWM's (2010) replication data set. Note that this is a simplified depiction of their data as they structure the data set as a cross-sectional time series so that the ethnic group year is the unit of analysis; they, in fact, have 116 observations for Uganda. Their only occurrence of ethnic conflict onset during this period is in 1987. None of the groups changed status between 1986 and 2005, with one exception: the Banyarwanda. CWM code them as part of the South-Westerner category from 1986 to 1989, and are a Senior Partner, but they are coded as a separate group from 1990 to 2005, and are Excluded. In neither case are they coded as part of an ethnic rebellion; I exclude them here for simplicity and because they were part of the South-Western category when the rebellion occurred. CWM = Cederman, Wimmer, and Min.

picture of ethnicity's role in conflict onset there. My fieldwork in Uganda suggests that CWM's approach overlooks several cases of rebellion, including several by groups that were not excluded from executive power. Recall from the prior section why the omission of early-failed rebels can lead to the undercounting of rebel groups that did not coincide with well-established ethnic narratives. In addition, census data from Uganda suggest that CWM also omitted several ethnic groups from their analysis that were arguably politically relevant, and could have—and sometimes did—serve as the basis for an initial core of rebel leaders.

The enterprise of coding all relevant ethnic groups in most countries is highly ambitious, and, as CWM note, fraught with issues of historical interpretation and judgment. To arrive at the list of ethnic groups that serves as their unit of analysis (specifically, their observations are the ethnic group year), CWM asked expert coders to identify all “politically relevant ethnic groups” for their Ethnic Power Relations data set. Wimmer describes their primary criterion for political relevance as follows: “We . . . assume that ethnic categories become politically relevant as soon as there is a minimal degree of political mobilization or intentional political discrimination along ethnic

lines” (Wimmer 2002, p.261). This concept of coding politically relevant ethnic groups follows Posner (2004), which develops a new index of politically relevant ethnic groups to determine the effect of ethnic diversity on economic growth. Posner argues that his approach suits his substantive application as there is no strong reason to believe that economic policy debates heighten ethnic identification. However, in the case of conflict initiation, because conflict likely does heighten ethnic salience *after* rebellion has begun, it is easy to mistakenly identify “politically relevant groups” post hoc as those that were mobilized *because of* conflict, not as a precursor to conflict.³⁹

Because grievances are likely amplified by violence during the initial phases of rebellion, grievances that emerge due to conflict in such areas are likely to be captured in conflict histories, sometimes as the reason for the rebellion in the first place. As I showed above, this is the case in Uganda. Because rebellions that started in areas that were not highly ethnically homogeneous did not become viable, grievances that may have fueled these failed rebellions are rarely registered in conflict histories. These patterns, taken together and alongside the observation that existing work tends not to measure precisely when rebel groups form, indicate the difficulty of distinguishing in retrospect between local grievances that existed before rebel group formation from those that emerged out of rebellion.

In an effort to illustrate this problem concretely, I reconstruct CWM’s data set for Uganda since 1986—but instead of limiting my list of ethnic groups to a retrospective judgment of political salience, I use all ethnic groups listed in the 1991 Ugandan census that constituted at least 1% of the Ugandan population. Although this means that several small ethnic groups are included, given that several rebel leaders were members of small ethnic groups and that individuals from small ethnic groups held positions in the cabinet, I see no compelling reason to exclude them.⁴⁰ In addition, to avoid post hoc coding of whether groups were excluded from power—susceptible to conflation with distrustful actions that arise out of violence—I use a direct, quantitative measure of a given group’s proportion of total cabinet seats. This reconstructed data set is in Table 3, with groups in ascending order by status, measured as the difference between a group’s population share and its share of cabinet seats.

The most revealing column of Table 3 is the “Status” column; the generally small magnitudes of the numbers in the column suggest that *no group appears to be markedly underrepresented*. Therefore, evidence is rather weak for the conventional wisdom reflected in CWM’s data that Northern Ugandan ethnic groups were underrepresented in the central government when the LRA and other rebellions formed; the margin by which northern groups were underrepresented is quite small. Furthermore, no group is overwhelmingly overrepresented except for the Baganda, which—contrary to

Table 3. Recoding of Uganda Conflict Data (1986-2005).

Ethnic group (all groups listed in 1991 census with more than 1% of the population)	Region (W)est, (N)orth, (E)ast, or (C)entral Uganda	Population ^a share (% of total population)	Representation ^a (% of cabinet seats in 1988)	Status (difference between representation and population share)	Rebelled? (had a leader in a rebel group)
Banyankole/Bahima	W	9.9	6.5	-3.4	Y
Iteso	E	6.0	3.2	-2.8	Y
Langi	N	5.9	3.2	-2.7	Y
Alur/lonam	N	2.4	0	-2.4	N
Bakonjo	W	2.2	0	-2.2	Y
Karimojong/Dodoth/Tepeth/Suk	E	2.1	0	-2.1	N
Basoga	E	8.2	6.5	-1.7	N
Bagwere	E	1.7	0	-1.7	N
Banyole	E	1.4	0	-1.4	N
Acholi/Labwor	N	4.4	3.2	-1.2	Y
Lugbara/Aringa	N	3.5	3.2	-0.3	Y
Banyoro/Bagungu	W	3.0	3.2	+0.2	N
Batoro/Batuku/Basongora	W	2.9	3.2	+0.3	N
Banyarwanda	W	2.0	3.2	+1.2	N
Bakiga	W	8.3	9.7	+1.4	N
Badama/Japadhola	E	1.5	3.2	+1.7	Y
Bagisu/Bamasaba	E	4.5	6.5	+2	N
Samia	E	1.1	3.2	+2.1	Y
Madi	N	1.1	3.3	+2.2	N
Baganda	C	18.1	35.5	+17.4	Y

Source. Representation data come from Lindemann (2011), Table 2; population data come from the 1991 Uganda census; rebellion data come from a variety of sources, primarily newspaper articles, Uganda Amnesty Commission data, and interviews with Ugandan government officials and former rebels. ^aThese columns total to 90% and 97%, respectively, and are less than 100 because of the groups that constitute less than 1% of the population, which are not shown here.

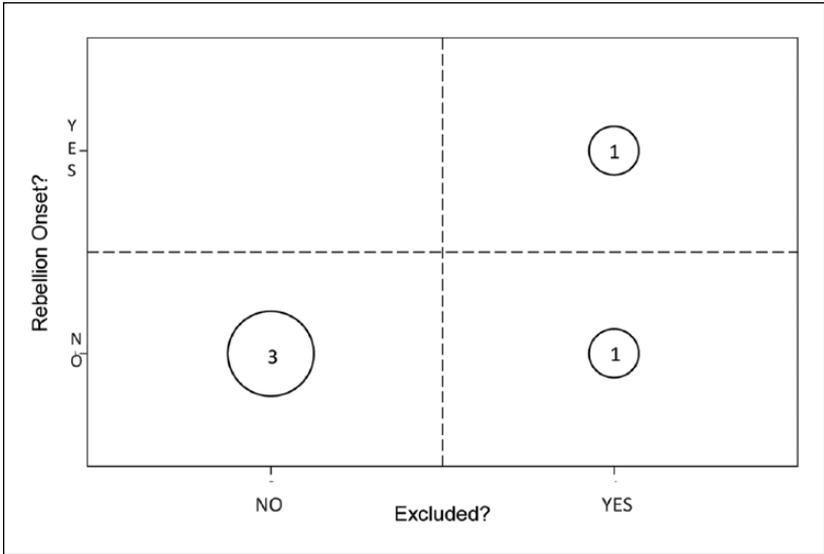


Figure 2. Cederman, Wimmer, and Min’s (2010) evidence: Two-by-two schematic of their Uganda data (post 1986). Circle size is proportional to the number of ethnic groups in the quadrant.

CWM’s theoretical expectation—served as the ethnic base of three distinct attempted rebellions.

An additional pattern evident in Table 3 is that there is no clear positive relationship between status and initiating a rebellion. Although it is of course difficult to identify general relationships with so few observations, these data indicate that a weak relationship, if any, existed in Uganda’s recent history. The lack of a strong relationship can be seen more clearly by contrasting Figures 2 and 3, in which I simplify exclusion as a dichotomous variable, taking negative values for “status” as excluded and positive values as not excluded. This coding takes a generous approach to defining exclusion, because a group that is even just one percentage point underrepresented would be considered “excluded.”⁴¹ Figure 2 is a schematic of CWM’s post-1986 data on Uganda, also shown in Table 2, which support their core argument that nonexcluded groups do not rebel whereas excluded groups are more likely to rebel. In contrast, Figure 3 displays the data from Table 3, which suggests a weaker relationship, if any.

Are these issues relevant beyond Uganda? For reasons described above, the data needed to fully examine the extent of this problem in CWM’s data beyond Uganda are unavailable. Acquiring the needed data on *all* rebel

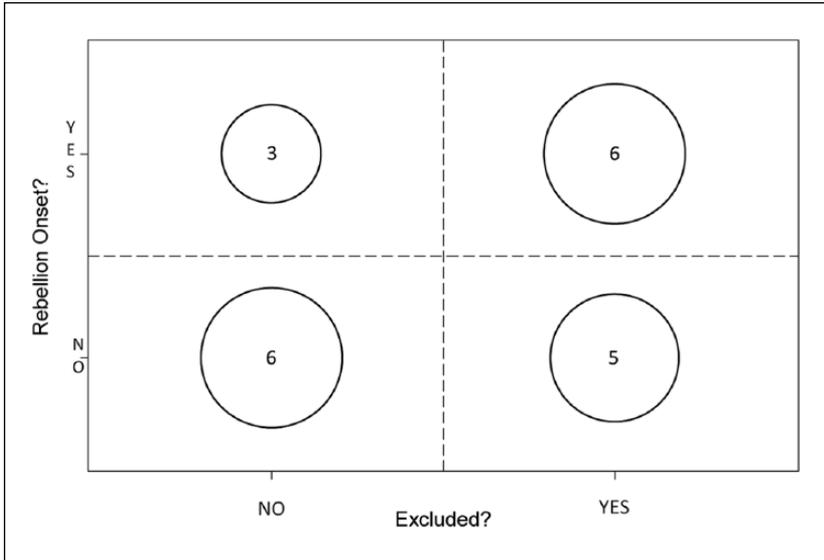


Figure 3. Figure 2 revisited, with improved data from Table 3. Circle size is proportional to the number of ethnic groups in the quadrant.

groups that formed, including groups that fail early, requires substantial time in numerous, remote localities of each country to gain highly local knowledge about conflict histories.

Still, the best evidence we do have—accounts from contemporary, qualitative reporting in fragile states—suggests that the phenomenon of “small” rebel groups that never become substantial is widespread, especially in weak states, and are omitted from major data sets. Recall that above, numerous explicit references of groups that failed too early to be explicitly named exist from Iraq, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Latin America, and beyond. In sub-Saharan Africa, examples abound. In 2011, United Nations reporting from the Central African Republic—in the lead up to the Séléka rebel overthrow of the government—suggests that “close to 10 rebel groups” operated there, although only one group is named.⁴² The fine-grained Armed Conflict Database records just two rebel groups there for the entire period between 2009 and 2013. Similarly, although Voice of America reporting from 2010 suggests that more than 17 armed groups existed in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Armed Conflict Database has no observations of rebel groups there in 2010.⁴³ In a less contemporary example, analysts tend to associate insurgency in Ethiopia with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which toppled the government in 1991. The TPLF began in the

1970s, when “many” other rebel groups also operated in Ethiopia (Berhe, 2004, p. 575). Today, little is documented about most of the other groups, which never grew to the strength of the TPLF; the Armed Conflict Database counts three groups during the 1970s.

To explore how these omissions may affect recent findings more broadly, in the online appendix, I conduct a simple procedure that approximates the following thought experiment: What results would CWM’s model have yielded if their broader data on exclusion and rebel onsets looked even slightly closer to what I found in Uganda? To do so, I use ethnicity data from Fearon (2003) to expand CWM’s data set for sub-Saharan Africa, and then use multiple imputation to address the resulting missingness on the independent and dependent variables. The aim of this exercise is to show that a few key assumptions underlying CWM’s data—which stem from a conceptualization of ethnicity and rebel group formation that is not consistent with unusually comprehensive evidence from Uganda—strongly influence their findings about the importance of ethnic exclusion in bringing about rebellion, at least for the sub-Saharan Africa subset of their global data.

Although the above analyses do not—and by design cannot—refute prior findings about the importance of ethnic marginalization to the process of internal conflict onset, they show the importance of bringing more complete data on rebel group formation to bear on our theories and analyses of conflict onset. They also demonstrate why future theories and empirical analyses should scrutinize the microfoundations of how rebellions start, disentangling ethnicity’s relevance to the initial start of organized violence from that of its escalation.

Conclusion

Because the initial phases of insurgency leave only a faint trace in news reports and the historical record, it is not possible to use standard data sets to distinguish whether factors impel the initial onset of organized violence in weak states, or whether they instead exacerbate conflicts that have already begun. Evidence from Uganda that is unusual in avoiding selection problems that affect prior work supports the latter interpretation. Although additional work will need to probe the external validity of these findings, they suggest that ethnic tensions that emerge *out of* the initial stages of violence can be just as important to generating subsequent organized violence as ethnic marginalization that existed *prior to* the start of violence—and that preexisting, ethnic marginalization from central power may not be a necessary condition for the emergence of what later becomes known as an ethnic rebellion.

These findings advance a long-standing debate about whether and how ethnicity drives the start of internal conflict. The importance of getting such

sequences right, however, extends beyond the study of ethnicity's influence on conflict, as related inferential problems affect other core findings of the civil conflict onset literature. For instance, prominent findings about the impact of economic shocks on conflict's start (Miguel, Sergenti, & Satyanath, 2004) rely on correctly measuring the sequence of the shocks and rebel group formation. Existing findings in this area have already been found to be sensitive to the use of different conflict data sets (Bazzi & Blattman, 2014).

The theoretical stakes here also go beyond the study of ethnicity's role in conflict, but rather have important implications for the broader role of civilians in conflict onset. Although classic counterinsurgency theories have long stressed the importance of civilians, as the discussion above indicates, the role of civilians in the start of armed groups remains ambiguous in existing theories of conflict onset. Future work should specify the conditions under which armed rebellions' start takes the form of a large, public protest—thus a classic case of collective action that requires large numbers of motivated people where the rebels form—versus conditions under which groups form as small, clandestine organizations, for which the role of local civilians is arguably underspecified in existing theories. Ethnicity may play different roles in each type of conflict onset.

Finally, these findings underscore the need for better evidence on the initial stages of insurgency. They provide support for those who have conveyed concern about conflict data quality and the risk of false negatives (Salehyan, 2015), and underscore the promise of new conflict event data-collection initiatives on conflict events that integrate more local sources (see especially Raleigh, Linke, Hegre, and Karlsen [2010] and Sundberg and Melander [2013]). Still, these event data sets are not likely to be a panacea in capturing conflict initiation in highly remote areas as they tend to rely on media coverage; for example, from August 2009 to December 31, 2010, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data identify 27 conflict-related events in a region of South Kivu, a remote area of Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), whereas using the crowdseeding technique of Van der Windt and Humphreys (2016), community members from 18 villages in this region identified 1,439 conflict events. Thus, supplementing event data sets with multiple local sources—using interviews, surveys, new technologies (as in Van der Windt and Humphreys [2016])⁴⁴ and local language newspapers in countries like Colombia where professionalized local news media and NGOs capture rich detail about conflict events (Zukerman-Daly, 2012)—holds the greatest promise in generating accurate knowledge about the microfoundations of conflict onset, especially in remote areas. Until researchers use data that measure all rebel groups that form in a given time and place, and until we collect sufficiently fine evidence to scrutinize the timing of the emergence of

ethnic grievances that are later used to explain rebellion, the nature and processes of how armed rebellions begin will remain obscure.

Author's Note

Any views expressed are the author's and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Naval Academy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Robert Bates, Evgeny Finkel, Nahomi Ichino, Stathis Kalyvas, Elena Llaudet, Sarah Parkinson, Gerald Tushabe, the Harvard Comparative Politics Workshop, and especially Michael Kellermann for helpful comments and discussion. Thanks to Ben Goodrich for excellent technical advice and Sean Reilly for research assistance. I gratefully acknowledge support for fieldwork from the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Science Foundation, and the Smith Richardson Foundation, as well as support for writing from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation; Yale University's Program on Order, Conflict and Violence; and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This conceptualization should capture a strong majority of civil war starts; Kalyvas and Balcells's (2010) data indicate that insurgency ("irregular warfare," or "symmetric nonconventional warfare") constituted 66% of large-scale civil wars between 1944 and 2005. The remaining civil wars in their data set took the form of conventional warfare, such as those fought between factions of a national military. This figure represents a lower bound on the portion of all civil conflicts that started with rebel group formation because these data include only cases of large-scale civil wars. It is likely that insurgency comprises a much larger portion of smaller scale, internal armed conflict.
2. I leave for future work developing and testing a more comprehensive theory of whether and how ethnicity can influence whether nascent rebels become viable groups.
3. I limit my discussion in this article to armed conflict between a state and at least one nonstate actor, originating from within and using violence against that state.

4. I cite here the most recent version of the Correlates of War data, Version 4. For additional information about the history of the project and coding decisions, see Singer and Small (1972, 1994).
5. This entailed identifying all articles from January 2003 through May 2015 in 10 journals that undertook quantitative empirical analysis of the onset, incidence, occurrence, or recurrence of civil war, internal armed conflict, rebellion, insurgency, or state-based ethnic conflict (not intraethnic conflict or riots). These 10 journals were *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Organization*, *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Politics*, and *World Politics*. Seventy-one out of 85 articles identified (83.5 %) relied on one of the four data sets discussed below for measuring the primary dependent variable. I count articles that use the Non-State Actor Dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch, & Salehyan, 2009) as relying on one of the four major data sets as the armed groups in their dyads are drawn directly from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset (UCDP/PRIODACD). I save discussion of conflict event data sets for the conclusion as they are not yet commonly used in studies of conflict onset.
6. See Sambanis (2004) for an extensive discussion of conflict data sets' coding rules and extensive critical analysis of how sensitive various findings are to those rules.
7. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) did not go by that name when it initially formed, but in 1988 Joseph Kony started a rebel group that became the LRA.
8. For example, all years of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are coded as a single conflict between the Israeli government on one side versus one other side comprised of various Palestinian violent groups such as Fatah, Hamas, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and “Palestinian insurgents.” All groups are coded with a single start date of May 15, 1948, the day after Israel declared itself an independent state. Although each rebel group is listed for only certain years, the codebook does not offer information about the criteria used to determine when rebels enter and exit the data set. Similarly, all “Kashmir insurgents”—different groups are not listed—operating from 1989 to 2008 are attributed to the start date of February 6, 1984, the date on which Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) rebels murdered an Indian diplomat in England. At least nine, and perhaps many more, armed groups operated in Kashmir since the mid-1980s (Staniland, 2010, p. 272).
9. Dexter Filkins, “Profusion of Rebel Groups Helps them Survive in Iraq.” *The New York Times* December 2, 2005.
10. It is noteworthy that this selection problem would not be a concern for studies of conflict emergence if early-failed rebellions were simply a different, unrelated type of conflict, and thus were not a precursor to medium- or large-scale armed conflict. Ironically, the absence of systematic data on the initial stages of conflict precludes direct assessment of this relationship. Yet, the evidence presented here indicates that at least for some portion of conflicts—particularly the many that

- start as clandestine, rural insurgencies—rebels aim to become the main opponent in a violent contestation with the state, and yet that only after a considerable period will more than 25 battle-related deaths be captured in news media.
11. For example, the 2006 codebook for the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset notes, “The bias produced by this approach [of using news media accounts] is against the inclusion of conflicts in the earlier decades and in the less-developed world” (p. 6).
 12. For related examples and discussion of how urban and other biases exacerbate these problems, see Kalyvas (2006, especially pp. 38-43).
 13. I borrow and simplify this analogy of “waves” to describe these sequential areas of work on ethnic conflict from Roessler (2011, pp. 1-2).
 14. On this point, see also King (2007), who submits that observers who reiterate violent entrepreneurs’ claims that a war is “ethnic” risk unwittingly propagating narratives of dubious accuracy.
 15. For example, 60% of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers deployed as of June 2015 were stationed in countries bordering or near Uganda: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, or Sudan.
 16. Only one group included in this analysis, the People’s Redemption Army (PRA), planned but did not commit violence against the state. The analysis here is not sensitive to dropping this group.
 17. I did not include groups that were factions or splinters of an original group unless the majority of the splinter group’s leadership, soldiers, and operational area were distinct from the original group. Only the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and Ugandan People’s Army (UPA) had what could be construed as splinter groups; none met these criteria.
 18. The only close calls in determining whether or not a rebel group had formed were the cases of the PRA, which I included, and an unnamed group led by Severino Lukoya, the father of HSM leader Alice Lakwena, which I did not include. I describe the logic and evidence behind these decisions in the online appendix; the findings presented here are not sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of either group.
 19. The rebel group Museveni led was called the National Resistance Army (NRA), which later named its political wing—now the government’s ruling party—the National Resistance Movement (NRM).
 20. All core leaders of these rebel groups were men, except for Alice Lakwena of HSM.
 21. Author’s interview with former rebel (Uganda National Resistance Front II [UNRF II]) leader, Yumbe, November 2009.
 22. Author’s interview with former rebel (National Freedom Army [NFA]) leader, Kampala, March 2009.
 23. Author’s interview with former rebel (UPA) leader, Soroti, June 2009.
 24. Author’s interview with local official, Tororo, July 2009.
 25. Focus group in village in Pader district, Laceyocot subcounty, December 2009.
 26. Focus group in village in Kitgum district, Mucwini subcounty, December 2009.

27. Author's interview with local official in Kitgum district, Mucwini subcounty, December 2009.
28. The LRA later received substantial funding and arms from the Government of Sudan, but not until the early 1990s.
29. Author's interview with former rebel (UPA) leader, Soroti, June 2009.
30. Several other works find that wartime experiences importantly shape civilians' preferences regarding the warring factions. See, in particular, Kalyvas (2006, pp. 111-114), on how civilian preferences arise out of the dynamics of violence in situations of internal war.
31. Cattle are an important source of material and symbolic wealth in certain areas of Uganda.
32. Author's interview with former rebel (UPA) leader, Soroti, June 2009.
33. The analyses that follow are not sensitive to these thresholds.
34. Similar results with respect to substantive and statistical significance are attained when using another common measure of local ethnic homogeneity: percentage of an area's population comprised by the largest ethnic group. Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization (ELF) scores are based on a decreasing transformation of the Herfindahl Index, which is calculated as follows: Given a population composed of $N \geq 2$ different ethnic groups, let p_n be the proportion of the population comprised by group p . The ELF index value is then calculated by $1 - \sum_{n=1}^N p_n^2$.
35. These areas are counties of Uganda where I identified (via interviews and Ugandan newspaper articles) that each rebel group initially operated for the purpose of (a) attempting to establish a base or (b) interacting with or seeking material support (money, food, or recruits) from civilians. For the period studied here, there were 163 counties in Uganda. The initial activities of four rebel groups were clearly associated with a single county, so the ELF score associated with those rebel groups corresponds to that county. For the seven rebel groups that initially spanned two, three, or in one case, four contiguous counties, the ELF is the aggregate score for those counties combined. For the remaining five groups, it was not possible to reliably discern precisely which counties they operated in during the initial stages. In those cases, I use the average ELF score for the three to five counties for which the best evidence suggests that the groups operated.
36. A one-tailed t test of the relationship is statistically significant (p value of .03).
37. These authors also conducted a country-level analysis and draw similar conclusions in Wimmer, Cederman, and Min (2009). I focus on the 2010 piece as it uses subnational data, and thus presents a more direct test of their theory.
38. They attribute this rebellion to the "Langi/Acholi." The LRA started in the Acholi region and later spread to Lango (the area where the Langi people live). The Ugandan census considers the Acholi and Langi to be distinct ethno-linguistic groups; each group lives in a distinct area of Northern Uganda, and is recognized by locals to be distinct groups, although their languages are generally mutually intelligible.
39. In other words, these coding rules are susceptible to the problem about which Laitin (2000) warns:

(T)he clear identification of ethnic groups as entities is often the result of their mobilization...But if ethnic mobilization becomes the criterion for ethnic groupness, there is a problem, as the value of the independent variable becomes dependent on the value of the dependent variable. (p. 142)

40. Furthermore, counting all groups that comprise more than 1% of the population is consistent with Fearon's (2003) approach to measuring socially relevant ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa.
41. Using a higher threshold to count groups as excluded would further attenuate any relationship between status and conflict.
42. "Central African Republic: Humanitarian Access Constraints" (as on February 11, 2011). United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) Relief Web. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/62D2497BC49550A4C125783200461DC4-map.pdf>
43. "DRC Rebel Groups to Form Coalition." Voice of America. April 8, 2010. <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/DRC-Rebel-Groups-to-Form-Coalition-90296912.html>
44. See also DaFoe and Lyall (2015) for an analysis of the promise and pitfalls of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for the study (and practice) of organized violence.

References

- Bates, R. H. (1983). Modernization, ethnic competition, and the rationality of politics in contemporary Africa. In D. Rothchild & V. A. Olunsorola (Eds.), *State versus ethnic claims: African policy dilemmas* (pp. 152-171). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Berhe, A. (2004). The origins of the Tigray people's liberation front. *African Affairs*, 103, 569-592.
- Bazzi, S., & Blattman, C. (2014). Economic shocks and conflict: The evidence from commodity prices. *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, 6(4), 1-38.
- Brubaker, R. (2002). Ethnicity without groups. *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 43, 163-189.
- Buckley-Zistel, S. (2008). *Conflict transformation and social change in Uganda: Remembering after violence*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Byman, D. (2007). *Understanding proto-insurgencies* (Occasional Papers, OP-178). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Cederman, L.-E., Weidmann, N., & Gleditsch, N. P. (2011). Horizontal inequalities and the ethno-nationalist war: A global comparison. *American Political Science Review*, 105, 478-495.
- Cederman, L.-E., Wimmer, A., & Min, B. (2010). Why do ethnic groups Rebel? New data and analysis. *World Politics*, 62(1), 87-119.
- Christia, F. (2012). *Alliance formation in civil wars*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

- Collier, P. (2000). Rebellion as a quasi-criminal activity. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44, 839-853.
- Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56, 563-595.
- Cunningham, D. E., Gleditsch, K. S., & Salehyan, I. (2009). It takes two: A dyadic analysis of civil war duration and outcome. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53, 570-597.
- DaFoe, A., & Lyall, J. (2015). From cell phones to conflict? Reflections on the emerging ICT-political conflict research agenda. *Journal of Peace Research*, 52, 401-413.
- Eck, K. (2009). From armed conflict to war: Ethnic mobilization and conflict intensification. *International Studies Quarterly*, 53, 369-388.
- Fearon, J. (2003). Ethnic and cultural diversity by country. *Journal of Economic Growth*, 8, 195-222.
- Fearon, J., & Laitin, D. (2003). Ethnicity, insurgency and civil war. *American Political Science Review*, 97, 75-90.
- Gleditsch, N. P., Wallensteen, P., Eriksson, M., Sollenberg, M., & Strand, H. (2002). Armed conflict 1946-2001: A new dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 39, 615-637.
- Goldstone, J. A., Bates, R. H., Epstein, D. L., Gurr, T. R., Lustik, M. B., Marshall, M. G., ... Woodward, M. (2010). A global model for forecasting political instability. *American Journal of Political Science*, 54, 190-208.
- Goodwin, J. (2001). *No other way out: States and revolutionary movements, 1945-1991*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Grossman, H. I. (1991). A general equilibrium model of insurrections. *American Economic Review*, 81, 912-921.
- Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hegre, H., & Sambanis, N. (2006). Sensitivity analysis of the empirical results on civil war onset. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50, 508-535.
- Horowitz, D. (2000). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hug, S. (2003). Selection bias in comparative research: The case of incomplete datasets. *Political Analysis*, 11, 255-274.
- Jones, B. (2008). *Beyond the state in rural Uganda*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kalyvas, S. N. (2008). Ethnic defection in civil war. *Comparative Political Studies*, 41, 1043-1068.
- Kalyvas, S. N., & Balcells, L. (2010). International system and technologies of rebellion: How the end of the cold war shaped internal conflict. *American Political Science Review*, 104, 415-429.
- Kasfir, N. (1979). Explaining ethnic political participation. *World Politics*, 31, 365-388.

- King, C. (2007). Scots to Chechens. *Harvard International Review*, 28. Retrieved from <http://hir.harvard.edu/ethnic-conflicts/scots-to-chechens/>
- Laitin, D. (2000). What is a Language Community? *American Journal of Political Science*, 44(1), 142-155.
- Lindemann, S. (2011). Just another change of the guard? Broad-based politics and civil war in Museveni's Uganda. *African Affairs*, 110, 387-416.
- Miguel, E., Sergenti, E., & Satyanath, S. (2004). Economic shocks and civil conflict: An instrumental variables approach. *Journal of Political Economy*, 112, 725-753.
- Mueller, J. (2000). The banality of "Ethnic War." *International Security*, 25, 42-70.
- Østby, G. (2008). Polarization, horizontal inequalities and violent civil conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*, 45, 143-162.
- Pettersson, T., & Wallensteen, P. (2015). Armed conflict, 1946–2005. *Journal of Peace Research*, 52, 536-550.
- Posner, D. N. (2004). Measuring ethnic fractionalization in Africa. *American Journal of Political Science*, 48, 849-863.
- Posner, D. N. (2005). *Institutions and ethnic politics in Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Raleigh, C., Linke, A., Hegre, H., & Karlsen, J. (2010). Introducing ACLED-armed location and event data. *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(5), 1-10.
- Roessler, P. (2011). The enemy within: Personal rule, coups, and civil war in Africa. *World Politics*, 63, 300-346.
- Salehyan, I. (2015). Best practices in the collection of conflict data. *Journal of Peace Research*, 52, 105-109.
- Sambanis, N. (2004). What is a civil war? Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48, 814-858.
- Sarkees, M. R., & Wayman, F. (2010). *Resort to war: 1816–2007*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Singer, J. D., & Small, M. (1972). *The wages of war, 1816-1965: A statistical handbook*. New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Singer, J. D., & Small, M. (1994). *Correlates of War project: International and civil war data, 1816–1992*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- Staniland, P. (2010). *Explaining cohesion, fragmentation, and control in insurgent groups* (PhD Dissertation). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Staniland, P. (2014). *Networks of rebellion: Explaining insurgent cohesion and collapse*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sundberg, R., & Melander, E. (2013). Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced event dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 50, 523-532.
- Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Toft, M. D. (2002). Indivisible territory, geographic concentration, and ethnic war. *Security Studies*, 12, 82-119.
- Toft, M. D. (2003). *The geography of ethnic violence: Identity, interests, and the indivisibility of territory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Valentino, B. A. (2004). *Final solutions: Mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Van der Windt, P., & Humphreys, M. (2016). Crowdsourcing conflict data. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60, 748-781.
- Walter, B. F., & Denny, E. K. (2014). Ethnicity and civil war. *Journal of Peace Research*, 51, 199-212.
- Wickham-Crowley, T. (1993). *Guerillas and revolution in Latin America: A comparative study of insurgents and regimes since 1956*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, A. J. (2000). *Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism: Its origins and development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Vancouver, Canada: University British Columbia Press.
- Wimmer, A. (2002). *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wimmer, A., Cederman, L.-E., & Min, B. (2009). Ethnic politics and armed conflict: A configurational analysis of a new global dataset. *American Sociological Review*, 74, 316-337.
- Zukerman-Daly, S. (2012). Organizational legacies of violence: Conditions favoring insurgency onset in Colombia, 1964-1984. *Journal of Peace Research*, 49, 473-491.

Author Biography

Janet Lewis is an assistant professor of political science at the US Naval Academy. Her research interests include civil war, insurgency, ethnic politics, and rural information networks, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa.