

SUMMARY

Why do some civil conflicts simmer at low-intensity, while others escalate to war? This paper challenges traditional approaches to the start of intrastate conflict by arguing the need to distinguish both theoretically and methodologically between the onset and escalation of civil conflict. **I develop a novel, strategic argument about two causal mechanisms that differentially drive low-intensity violence (LIV) versus full-blown war: the information environment and the types of rebel group in operation.** If this approach is correct, it forces a reexamination of the seminal findings in civil war literature by showing how failing to properly account for LIV when examining war has led to inaccurate results.

CONTRIBUTIONS

- Novel theoretical framework for understanding the interplay between LIV and war in sub-state conflict
- Identifies two mechanisms that differentially drive LIV, war: information environment and rebel group type
- Distinguishes bargaining environment, inter- vs intra-state conflict
- IDs issues with many classic findings on causes of civil conflict

THE THEORY

I argue that LIV and war are two qualitatively different stages of the same broader conflict process. Each stage affects the other, so we must consider them both when developing theoretical, empirical models.

Mechanisms

- *Information environment.* State-rebel bargaining before LIV is rare because **the information environment is initially so poor that states often do not even know the identity of their opponent.** Information gained through violence, so that bargaining more likely after LIV (to prevent escalation to war). **Information shift explains temporal variation; information gathering capacity explains cross-national variation.** Contrasts with interstate conflict, where ID of both sides is always known.
- *Group type.* Expectation of violence affects behavior. **While both “strong” and “weak” rebel groups exist in early conflict stages, weak groups get weeded out,** either by self-censoring or state violence. So, a state facing a group that has committed LIV (and is at risk of further escalation) is more likely facing a strong, resolved group.

Observable implication: presence of territorial base

One key factor related to both mechanisms is whether or not the opposition has a territorial base. I hypothesize that **an opposition group with a territorial base will have an increased probability of experiencing LIV, but if LIV occurs, the group will have a decreased probability of war.**

DATA

I focus on self-determination (SD) groups, drawing from the data in Cunningham 2013. The dataset includes any opposition movement vying for national SD between 1960-2015.

- Cleanest set of cases; most common type of civil war
- Unit of analysis: government-SD movement dyad-year (3898 obs.)
- DVs: LIV and War; IDV: territorial stronghold

	Observations by Outcome		
	No violence	LIV	War
Total Obs.	3165	743	189
Asia	875	379	73
Eastern Europe	469	35	14
Western Europe	885	32	1
Sub-Saharan Africa	558	168	55
Middle East and North Africa	150	125	43
Latin America	216	0	0

METHODS

International relations research has shown that logit/probit models cannot handle two-stage, sequential, strategic conflict processes. Following their example, I use a two-step **Heckman selection model** to control for LIV (>25 battle deaths/year) when testing for war (>1000 BDs/year).

- Step 1: estimate selection equation for model's first step (LIV)
- Step 2: Results from step 1 used to calculate correction factor
- Step 3: Using correction factor, estimate second stage (war)

Robustness check using multinomial logit yields consistent results.

To show the difference between my approach and existing findings, I also use the data to estimate logit and probit models of both LIV and war.

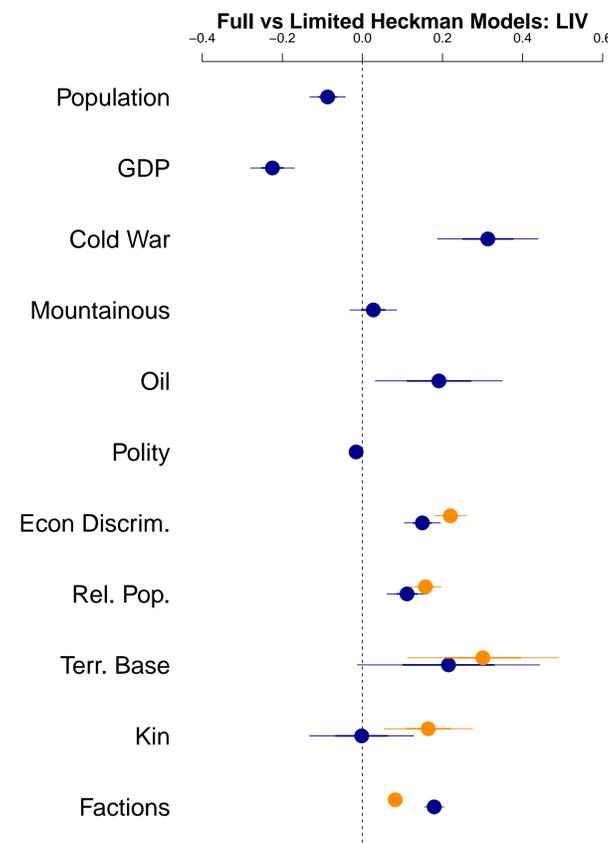
For all types of models, I use two categories of controls: state and group level.

- **State-level controls:** GDP per capita, Polity score, logged population, Cold War dummy, logged mountainous terrain, oil exporter dummy.
- **Group-level controls:** movement factionalization (LIV only), level of economic discrimination, relative population size, presence of kin in neighboring country

FINDINGS: LIV VS WAR

Stage 1: Low Intensity Violence

The first coefficient plot below shows the results from the first stage of two different Heckman selection models, one with all controls (blue) and one with a restricted set of controls (orange). The first stage is the equation for LIV.

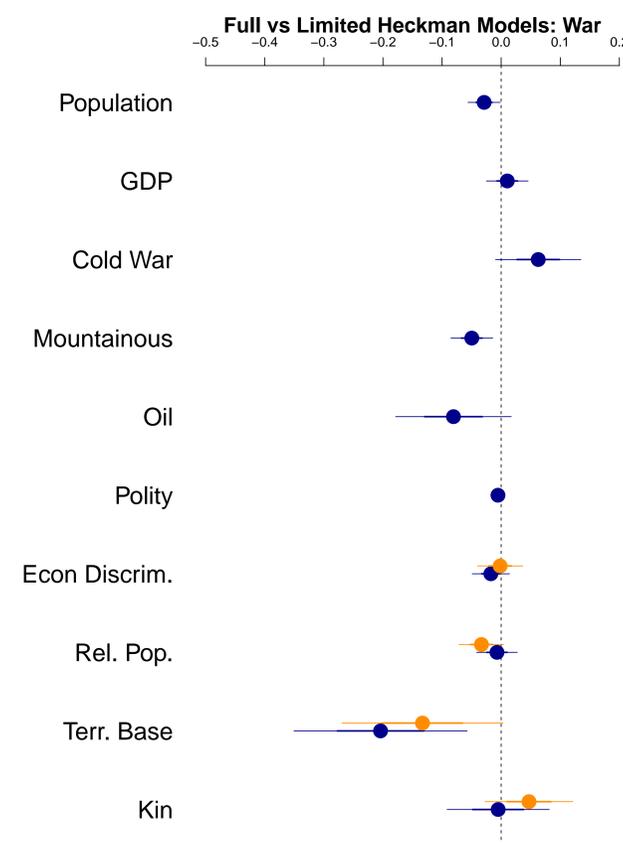


Items of note:

- Territorial base variable is positive and statistically significant. Groups with territorial bases are, all else equal, more likely to experience LIV.
- Most other variables perform consistently with existing research.
- There is an extra variable in the selection equation, the control for group factionalization. This is 1) methodological - to meet model requirements; and 2) theoretical - research connections factionalization to LIV, not war.

Stage 2: War

The second coefficient plot, in the right column, provides the results from the second stage of both Heckman selection models. Again, the model with all controls is depicted in blue, while the more limited model is in orange. This stage is the equation for war.



Items of note:

- Territorial base is negative and statistically significant.
- In general, many variables change signs from the LIV equation to the war equation. This confirms that we must control for LIV when assessing probability of war and shows that mechanisms affect each stage differently.
- Many of the controls do not perform consistently with existing research. For example, GDP and polity become negative. (For one-to-one comparison, see subsequent panel.)

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXISTING FINDINGS

Testing for causes of war without controlling for LIV leads to the following issues (Reed 2000, 2002):

- **selection bias,**
- **incorrect coefficient signs,**
- **underestimated standard errors,**
- **incorrect statistical significance**

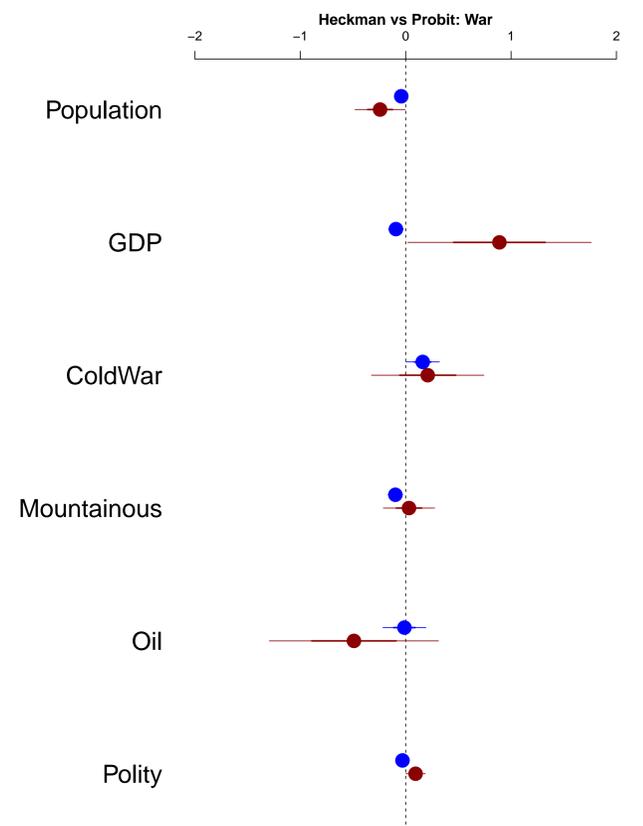
Put more simply, what we expect to increase the probability of war might actually decrease it.

Why? Simple logit models cannot capture strategic interdependence and cannot handle censored DVs or selection effects (Signorino 1999; Smith 1998, 1999).

This means many of the seminal findings in civil war literature are likely mis- or under- specified.

COMPARING PROBIT VS HSM

I use the same set of variables to compare probit models of LIV, war to HSM. Results are identical at the LIV stage (as expected), but findings differ starkly at the war stage, shown below. **The HSM shows that GDP per capita, democracy negatively correlated with LIV, but positively correlated with war.**



Note that the Heckman coefficients are shown in dark red, while the probit model coefficients are shown in blue.

CONCLUSIONS

- Theoretically, LIV and war are distinct but interconnected. Both are affected by mechanisms for the information environment and the type of opposition group that is operating.
- Statistical results provide strong support for hypothesis. Future research will aim to gather data to test mechanisms more directly.
- Many existing finds about civil conflict causes need to be reexamined. I have shown, for example, that states with high GDP per capita are less likely to experience LIV, but if they do, they are in fact more likely to escalate to war.