

Democracy and Civil War



A soldier stands over weapons seized from suspected members of Al Shabaab, Mogadishu, Somalia. UN Photo/Stuart Price

Civil war and internal violence can be devastating for the affected country. In order to prevent violent conflict we need to have a better understanding of what drives it. With regard to this, one aspect of the problem is the link between democracy and civil war. This policy brief presents the key findings of two V-Dem working papers on this subject. Working Paper 34 uses V-Dem data to re-investigate the relationship between democracy and civil war. Working Paper 32 sheds light on the importance of holding regular elections in order to prevent internal conflict and civil war.

Civil War and Democracy – Prior Research

A number of scholars have investigated the link between democracy and civil war (Glenditsch and Hegre 2014, Hegre 2014 and Vreeland 2008). Many scholars, such as Hegre et al. (2001) have found that in partially democratized regimes civil war is more likely to take place than in autocracies or democratic regimes. This finding is known as the inverted U-shape relationship between democracy and civil war. A possible reason for this relationship could be that partially democratized regimes lack steering capacity. They allow opposition movements but at the same time lack the capacity to address citizens' grievances effectively, which leads to a higher risk of internal conflicts. Conversely, autocracies achieve stability through repression and democracies the same through political inclusion (WP 34: 4).

KEY FINDINGS

- V – Dem research suggests that clean elections are correlated with a lower probability of civil war onset.
- Initial improvements in freedom of expression and freedom of association seem to increase the probability of civil war, but this probability decreases as such freedoms further improve (inverse U-shape relationship).
- Consistent time intervals between legislative elections may reduce the potential for armed conflict.

The authors of WP 34 identify theoretical and empirical problems with previous studies, such as for example reversed causality or biased data (WP34: 6). They use the disaggregated V-Dem indices to address these issues (WP34: 6).

The Components of Democracy and Civil War

V-Dem data allows disaggregation of the concept of democracy into sub-components. The V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index is the main index used in WP 34. This index is composed of several lower-level indices such as clean elections, freedom of association and freedom of expression (Figure 1). By disaggregating the index, the authors are able to investigate how the relationship between democracy and civil war looks for different components of democracy. This helps to identify which component of democracy drives the previously found U-shape relationship between democracy and civil war (WP 34: 6).

The results of the regression analysis - including relevant controls - show an inverted U-shape relationship between the freedoms of association and expression and the probability of civil war onset (Figure 2). However, clean elections – as an important aspect of democracy - shows a negative linear relationship to the probability of civil war onset. These results indicate that the cleaner the elections, the lower the probability of civil war onset. Hence, the results of WP 34 are more specific than earlier research

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY INDEX

Suffrage

Clean Elections

Freedom of Association

Freedom of Expression

Elected executive (de jure)

Figure 1. Components of the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (based on WP 34: 8)

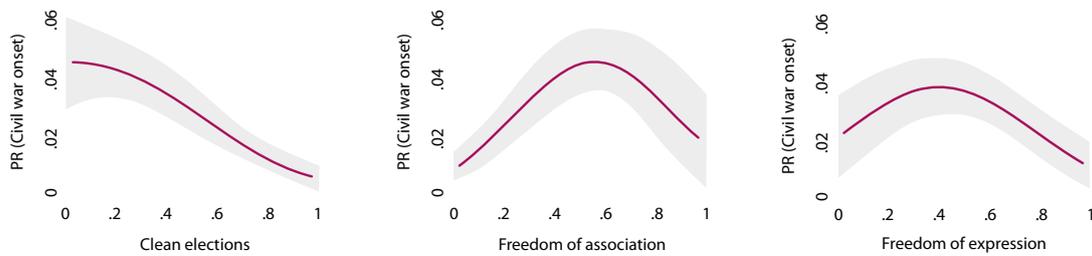


Figure 2. The relationship between the different components of electoral democracy and civil war onset (Source: WP 34: 10)

insofar as they demonstrate that improving the quality of elections seems to consistently lower the probability of civil war and does not exhibit the inverted U-Shape relationship of other components of democracy.

The Importance of Regular Elections

WP 32 further investigates the relationship between the electoral core of democracy and civil war onset. More specifically, WP 32 focuses on the effect of the regular occurrence of elections on civil war. The authors, Wilson and Lindberg (WP 32: 9), suggest that elections have to be held regularly in order to ensure political stability, because they are a way to deal with uncertainty.

According to this notion, the holding of regular elections in the past indicates to key actors that elections will continue to take place at predictable intervals. Regular elections should therefore increase the willingness of the losing party to accept their defeat, because they can hope to win in the next electoral cycle. Such expectations might reduce the

potential for armed conflicts (WP 32: 5-7).

Using V-Dem data in a logistic regression analysis, WP 32 authors find mixed support for these arguments. Their findings suggest that the regular recurrence of elections matters for political stability in the case of legislative but not executive elections. Consistent intervals of legislative elections are associated with a lower probability of internal armed conflict.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Improving election quality might be a way to prevent armed conflict.
- The promotion of the repeated and regular recurrence of legislative elections is important because such consistency may reduce the risk of civil war.

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V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



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