



Focus #1: Civil War Roots

Understanding why civil war ignites, and persists longer than seems rational, is crucial to designing strategies that reduce rather than exacerbate violence. This first issue brief explores why opposing sides resort to violence and refuse to compromise for peace. Subsequent briefs assess policy options to address these root causes. Rebels are commonly motivated by grievance but sometimes also by greed, and states are especially leery of compromises that risk territorial disintegration.

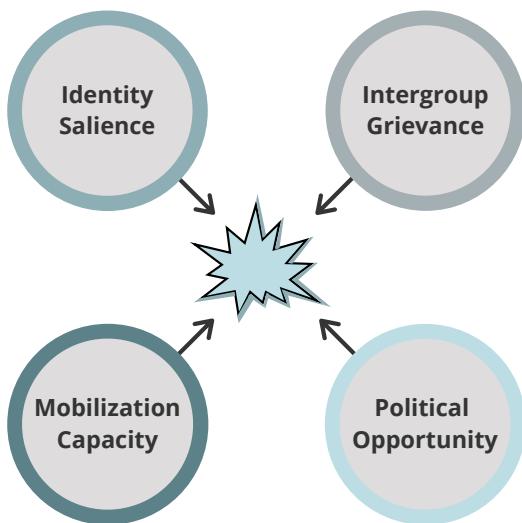
4 Causes of Rebellion

Gurr (2001) famously identified four main factors that foster rebellion: (1) salient ethnic identity distinct from the country's nationality; (2) grievance based on *perceived relative deprivation* – that is, obtaining less power or wealth than a group feels entitled to; (3) capacity to mobilize for collective forceful action; and (4) perceived opportunity for victory due to factors such as state weakness (Figure 1).

Key Points

- Civil war is most likely when large ethnic groups are excluded from political power, but less likely when different ethnic groups have some things in common – such as religion, economic class, or region.
- Rebels are sometimes motivated by greed – especially when the government is weak, natural resources can be stolen and sold, and the terrain provides natural defenses.
- Leaders resist compromise to end civil war because it could imply that past casualties and other sacrifices were meaningless.
- Civil wars now rarely end in victory but rather in negotiated agreement or frozen conflict, after which the fighting often recurs but typically at a lower level, so that repeated peacemaking may be necessary.

Figure 1. Gurr's Four Causes of Rebellion



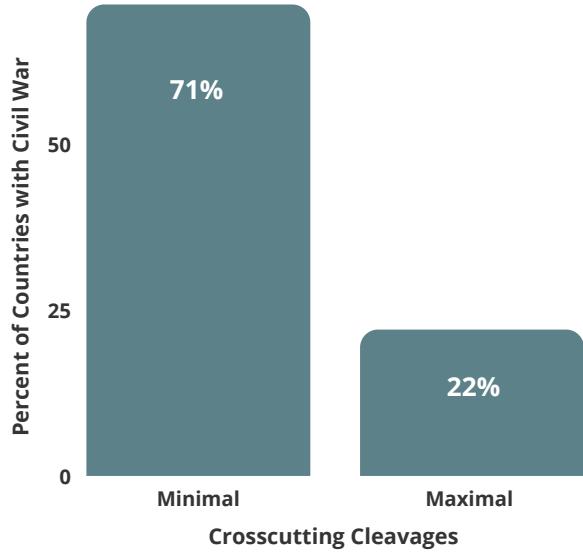
Recent research supports this theory and refutes previous skeptics. In the most rigorous study of grievance, Cederman, et al. (2010) confirm that rebellion is most likely when relatively large ethnic groups are excluded from political power. This is especially true if they have recently lost power, or previously engaged in violent conflict, both of which amplify grievance and identity salience.

However, identity salience is lower if groups have crosscutting cleavages – meaning ethnicity does not overlap with economic, religious, or regional differences. Such crosscutting inhibits rebel mobilization by shrinking the number of people who share identity-based grievance and thus can trust each other to coordinate an uprising.

Countries with low rather than high levels of ethnic crosscutting are three-and-a-half times more likely to suffer civil war, according to Gubler and Selway (2012), as illustrated in Figure 2. Some of this correlation may be due to reverse causation – because war erodes crosscutting cleavages – but high crosscutting likely also inhibits war.

Greed hypotheses argue that some rebels are motivated by wealth and power even in the absence of identity-based grievance. If so, rebellion would require only two of Gurr's four factors – political opportunity and mobilization capacity. Quantitative studies suggest that rebellion is indeed more likely in weak states, especially if they have natural resources that can be easily exploited – such as minerals, timber, and illicit drugs – and rough terrain inaccessible to government forces (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier, et al., 2009).

Figure 2. Crosscutting Cleavages & Civil War



Source: Olivia Hay, based on Gubler and Selway (2012), for years 1945–99.

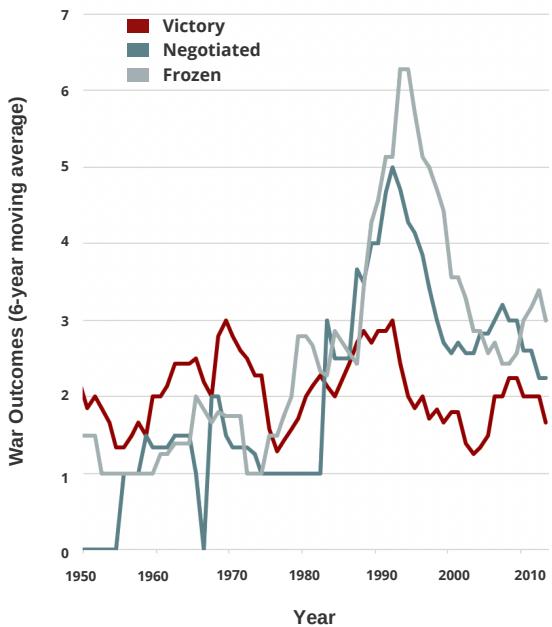
Note: Crosscutting minimal is low ethnic-crosscutting with all three: income, geography, and religion. Maximal is high ethnic-crosscutting with all three.

Obstacles to Peace

Regardless of how civil wars start, greed also may become an obstacle to ending them, because certain actors benefit from ongoing violence, as Keen (2000) explains. Prolonged fighting makes it easier for warlords and states to exploit labor and natural resources, and to profit from the distribution of humanitarian aid. Accordingly, peacemakers must design strategies that address this *political economy of civil war*.

Human psychology and domestic political factors also perpetuate civil wars. For example, combatants' past sacrifices – including leaving their families, living in harsh conditions, suffering injuries, and losing comrades – make it hard for them to consider compromise even when it would offer a better outcome (Zartman, 2000).

Figure 3. Dramatic Change in Civil War Outcomes



Source: Olivia Hay, based on Merz (2012) and UCDP data on internal armed conflict and internationalized internal conflict, for years 1950–2013.

Relatedly, political leaders who started a civil war worry that any outcome short of victory might spotlight their initial error of judgment, exposing them to retribution from constituents (Ikole, 1991). Secessionist civil wars are difficult to end because regionally concentrated rebels can mobilize more easily, and states fear that concessions would risk territorial disintegration. Governments are especially reluctant to compromise with such a movement if the state also faces other potential secessionist regions, according to Walter (2003).

In recent decades, the typical path of civil wars has changed dramatically, as documented by Merz (2012). Victory by one side, which used to be the most common outcome, is now less common than negotiated agreement (peace deal or ceasefire), and the most common outcome is *frozen conflict* in which violence wanes without agreement or victory (Figure 3). This has both good and bad consequences, as recent civil wars are considerably shorter but more likely to lapse back into violence within five years because they lack a decisive victory.

A silver lining is that renewed fighting tends to be less violent. War that recurs following a negotiated agreement is on average less than one-fifth as deadly per year as the preceding round of violence. Renewal of fighting is most likely in frozen conflicts, but the death rate in such recurrences is also the lowest on average. Together, this evidence suggests that civil wars are becoming less deadly – possibly due to increased international conflict management and fewer proxy wars after the Cold War. However, it also means that repeated rounds of peacemaking may be required to end civil wars durably.