Democracy and Civil War:
A Note on the Democratic Peace Proposition

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ABSTRACT: Democracies may not fight each other, but do they fight themselves? Despite the need to better understand internal wars, empirical investigations of the democratic peace have focused on international war between democracies. We test the effect of regime type on civil wars, a class of events that is widely overlooked in the study of conflict. We find that regime type strongly affects civil war participation.
INTRODUCTION
Democracies may not fight each other, but do they fight themselves? Despite the need to better understand internal wars, empirical investigations of the democratic peace have focused on international war between democracies. We test the effect of regime type on civil wars, a class of events that is widely overlooked in the study of conflict. We find that regime type strongly affects civil war participation.

CIVIL WARS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE
Although it is well documented that democracies generally engage in international warfare as often as autocracies, the former tend not to fight amongst themselves (see for instance: Doyle, 1986; Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Maoz and Russett, 1992; and Bremer, 1992).¹ One major explanation for this finding emphasizes the role of democratic norms in encouraging peaceful resolution of disputes in democratic dyads (Russett, 1993; Dixon, 1993). The other focuses on how democratic institutions constrain political leaders (Morgan and Campbell, 1991; Morgan and Schwebach, 1992).

Yet little work has been done evaluating the validity of the democratic peace proposition on different classes of events.² Civil wars provide independent data on which to test the validity of the democratic peace proposition. Furthermore, civil wars have become one of the main threats to security and order on the national and global levels. Bloody conflicts in places as different as Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Burundi, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka, to name but a few, have highlighted the importance of studying civil wars. They are far more frequent than interstate wars, involving both a major loss of life and a major transformation of the state itself (Vasquez, 1993, p.53; Licklider, 1993, p.19). In fact, civil war’s effects on a polity parallel the system-transforming effects of global war (Rasler and Thompson, 1989, p.226, fn.17; Waterman, 1993, p.298). Additionally, studies have shown that polities that experience internal war are more likely to engage in international warfare in subsequent years than those that do not (Maoz, 1989; Walt, 1992). Furthermore, countries which experience internal wars are more likely to engage in genocidal practices than those that do not (Krain, 1995). Nevertheless, civil wars are generally ignored by those who study peace and conflict “for reasons that are not altogether clear” (Licklider, 1995, p.6). The democratic peace proposition should be generalizable to state behavior in civil wars as well as interstate wars. In finding that democracies do not kill their own people, Rummel (1995) has established a direct link between regime type and large scale internal conflict. In an article relating domestic and international warfare, Starr notes that if the "basic components of conflict are similar, so are the processes by which conflict develops" (Starr, 1994, p.495). The same mechanisms govern states’ domestic and international war/peace decisions.

Furthermore, in analyzing how different types of democracies affect domestic conflict behavior, comparativists begin by assuming that democracies are more pacific in their internal relations (Powell, 1982; Lijphart, 1984; and Shugart and Carey, 1992). For example, Powell argues that democratic participation and responsiveness makes resolution of conflict without violence possible (Powell, 1982, pp.154). This is precisely the argument made about the role of democratic norms and institutions in mitigating international warfare in democratic dyads. In discussing how regime type affects participation and
contestation within the state structure, Dahl concludes that "it seems reasonably evident that different regimes do have different consequences" (Dahl, 1971, p.30). Thus, democratic norms and institutions should operate to mitigate major conflict situations in domestic as well as in international interactions. Therefore, we hypothesize:

\[ H_1: \text{ Democracies should experience fewer years of civil war than non-democracies.} \]

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

To determine whether regime type and civil wars are related, we use the chi-square test of independence in conjunction with contingency tables. We employ the following data:

**CIVIL WARS.**

We employ the number of civil war years in the system from 1816 to 1992 as our measure of internal conflict. The population of civil war years comes from Singer and Small’s (1994) *Correlates of War* data set, which codes all civil wars from 1816 to 1992. 150 civil wars occurred in the period we examine. A civil war is defined as an internal war in which "(a) military action was involved, (b) the national government at the time was actively involved, (c) effective resistance (as measured by the ratio of fatalities of the weaker to the stronger forces) occurred on both sides and (d) at least 1,000 battle deaths resulted during the civil war" (Singer and Small, 1994).

**REGIME TYPE.**

We use one of Jaggers and Gurr’s (1996) *Polity III* measures of regime type, an ordinally scaled measure of democracy ranging from zero to ten. Jaggers and Gurr (1986) report regime types from 1800 to 1994. We dichotomize democracies, with states scoring six or greater on the eleven point *Polity III* scale coded as democracies, and all states scoring below six coded as non-democracies. While this threshold is often used in studies of democracy and conflict (Modelski and Perry, 1991; Bremer, 1992), others have employed a more conservative cut point. We use the more liberal threshold because it biases against the hypothesis that democracies are less prone to internal wars than are other states. In addition, we choose not to restrict our list of democratic states to established democracies only. If, as Mansfield and Snyder (1995) suggest, “new democracies” are war prone, then by including them in our sample, we bias against our hypothesis. Our final data set consists of 10203 civil war years between 1816 and 1992.

**RESULTS**

The chi-square test supports our hypothesis that democracies engage in fewer civil war years than non-democracies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil War Years</th>
<th>Type of Regime</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Democracy</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Civil War</td>
<td>6788 (69.9)</td>
<td>2917 (30.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>399 (80.1)</td>
<td>99 (19.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7187 (70.4)</td>
<td>3016 (29.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows the observed number of civil war years by regime type, given that there were 498 total civil war years between 1816 and 1992. The chi-square test of independence shows that regime type and civil war years are significantly related ($\chi^2 = 23.56, p < 0.01$). Based on the data, we would expect to observe 147 years of civil wars in democracies. We observe 99 actual years of civil war in democratic polities, significantly less than the expected cell count. In addition, twenty percent of all civil war years (99 total years) involve democracies.

Table 2. Nineteenth Century Civil War Years and Regime Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil War Years</th>
<th>Non-Democracy</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Civil War</td>
<td>2166 (84.5%)</td>
<td>396 (15.5%)</td>
<td>2562 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>103 (90.3%)</td>
<td>11 (9.7%)</td>
<td>114 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2269 (65.3%)</td>
<td>407 (34.7%)</td>
<td>2676 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are row percentages. Chi squared = 2.85; $p = 0.09$.

Table 3. Twentieth Century Civil War Years and Regime Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil War Years</th>
<th>Non-Democracy</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Civil War</td>
<td>4622 (64.7%)</td>
<td>2521 (35.3%)</td>
<td>7143 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>296 (77.1%)</td>
<td>88 (22.9%)</td>
<td>384 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4918 (65.3%)</td>
<td>2609 (34.7%)</td>
<td>7527 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are row percentages. Chi squared = 24.65; $p < 0.01$.

We also control for period effects in order to test the robustness of our results. We first break up the period under examination by century. We report these results in Tables 2 and 3. Despite the fact that regime type and civil war years are more strongly related in the twentieth century ($\chi^2 = 24.65, p < 0.01$) than the nineteenth century ($\chi^2 = 2.85, p = 0.09$), we nevertheless reject null hypothesis that regime type and civil war years are independent, irrespective of century.

Table 4. Pre-Cold War Civil War Years and Regime Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil War Years</th>
<th>Non-Democracy</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Civil War</td>
<td>3605 (76.4%)</td>
<td>1114 (23.6%)</td>
<td>4719 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>151 (89.4%)</td>
<td>18 (10.6%)</td>
<td>169 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3756 (76.8%)</td>
<td>1132 (23.2%)</td>
<td>4888 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are row percentages.
Chi squared = 15.39; $p < 0.01$.

Farber and Gowa (1995) argue that the democratic peace is a cold war phenomenon. We test this hypothesis on internal wars in Tables 4 and 5. We find that the cold war does not affect the hypothesized relationship between regime type and civil war.\(^9\)

### Table 5. Cold War Civil War Years and Regime Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil War Years</th>
<th>Type of Regime</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Democracy</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Civil War</td>
<td>3002 (65.1)</td>
<td>1612 (34.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>215 (77.3)</td>
<td>63 (22.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3217 (65.8)</td>
<td>1675 (34.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are row percentages.

Chi squared = 17.55; $p < 0.01$.

While two democracies have never clashed in international warfare (Ray, 1993; 1995), civil war is not totally absent in democracies. However, we find that regime type powerfully affects civil war participation. Democracies experience significantly fewer civil war years than their non-democratic counterparts. This result is consistent with the democratic peace finding.

### CONCLUSION

Our preliminary test confirms the proposition that different regime types have different consequences for internal conflict. Specifically, we find that non-democracies are more civil war prone than democracies, even when controlling for period effects. In addition, this study demonstrates the value of applying the democratic peace proposition to the study of conflict other than interstate wars or disputes. Our project has proved to be a valuable testing ground for a proposition which has been examined all too often with the same data. Future work should continue this research strategy, refocusing its efforts on civil wars, as well as other types of intra-state conflict, in testing theories of conflict and conflict resolution.

### NOTES

1. This is not to say that democracies are inherently more pacific, as some have argued (Kant, 1983 [1795]; Rummel, 1983). In fact, “the evidence shows that the proportional frequency of war involvement in democratic states has not been greater than for nondemocratic states” (Levy, 1989, p.270; see also Small and Singer, 1976; Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Bremer, 1992). Democracies also initiate wars (Chan, 1984; Weede, 1984) and militarized interstate disputes (Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Maoz and Russett, 1993) as often as authoritarian regimes.

2. Such work that has focused on militarized interstate disputes (Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Maoz and Russett, 1993; Bremer, 1993), crises (Siverson and Miller, 1991), and state-sponsored mass murder (Rummel, 1994; 1995; and Krain, 1995).
3. On the appropriateness of the chi-square statistic for this type of analysis, see Beck and Tucker (1996).

4. We consistently use the Singer and Small (1994) coding despite some question regarding its validity and completeness. For example, the 1876 civil war in the United States can alternatively be viewed as a war between two sovereign states. Nevertheless, we include this observation because it biases against our hypothesis. Additionally, Mason (1996) suggests that the Singer and Small (1994) civil war list is incomplete. Licklider (1995) and others have begun to address these concerns, but such efforts do not cover years before 1945. The range of our study precludes the use of such updated lists. Nevertheless, we do advocate the development of a more complete civil war data set.

5. We also ran the analysis using Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore’s (1989) Polity II data set. The results are nearly identical, and are therefore not presented here.

6. An alternate measure of democracy is the Polity III democracy measure minus the autocracy measure (Jaggers and Gurr, 1995). Using the new measure with the standard threshold of six biases the results in favor of our hypothesis, so it is inappropriate. Since no adequate threshold has been established for this new measure, we do not employ it here.


8. Quantitative analyses supporting the democratic peace (with regards to interstate wars) are particularly convincing because (a) they find significantly less wars occurring than are expected, and (b) these results are highly statistically significant. For more on the appropriate use of contingency tables and chi-square tests on independence in this area, see Thompson and Tucker (forthcoming).

9. We do not report similar analyses for the post-cold war era due to the paucity of the data (only three years). Nevertheless, chi-square test for the post-cold war period fits the pattern presented in Tables 2 through 5 ($\chi^2 = 4.62, p = 0.03$).

REFERENCES


Ray, James Lee (1993). “War Between Democracies: Rare, or Nonexistent?” *International
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