

Determinants of Ethnic Violence: A Comparative Analysis of Worldwide Ethnic Rebellions

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Abstract: Ethnic conflicts have been the predominant form of collective violence in the post-Cold War period. Nevertheless, there is little, if any, agreement on the causes of ethnic conflict. This article subjects the predominant theories of ethnic conflict to empirical testing. It, first, conceptualizes and extracts the major explanatory factors out of predominant theories of ethnic conflict. Then, it operationalizes such causal factors and transforms them into measurable indicators. Finally, it tests the explanatory power of the theories of ethnic conflict by using the data from *Minorities at Risk Project*. According to the findings, greater levels of political discrimination, and more recent and greater losses of political autonomy are expected to lead to higher levels of ethnic rebellion. Overall, the results indicate that ethnic rebellion is a political matter. Therefore, we can conclude that ethnic violence is not the fate of some countries, but susceptible to political engineering to a great extent.

Keywords: ethnic politics, ethnic conflict, collective violence, ethnic groups, political exclusion

Özet: Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde kolektif şiddetin baskın yöntemi etnik çatışmalar olmuştur. Ancak etnik çatışmaların nedenleri konusunda halen bir fikir birliği sağlanmış değildir. Bu makale başlıca etnik çatışma teorilerini empirik teste tabi tutmaktadır. Makale öncelikle bu teorilerdeki başlıca açıklayıcı faktörleri seçip kavramsallaştırır. Bunun akabinde bu açıklayıcı faktörleri temsil eden kavramları değişkenlere, bu değişkenleri de ölçülebilir göstergelere dönüştürür. Son olarak *Minorities at Risk Project* verilerini kullanarak etnik çatışma teorilerinin açıklama gücünü test eder. Bulgulara göre, siyasi ayrımcılık ile yakın zamanlarda ve büyük ölçekli siyasi otonomi kaybı daha şiddetli etnik ayaklanmalara neden olmaktadır. Genel itibarıyla sonuçlar etnik çatışmanın siyasi bir mesele olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle etnik şiddetin birtakım ülkelerin kaderi olmadığı, bilakis büyük ölçüde siyasi tasarımlara duyarlı olduğu sonucuna varabiliriz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: etnik siyaset, etnik çatışma, kolektif şiddet, etnik gruplar, siyasi dışlayıcılık

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Introduction

What causes ethnic tensions to appear, escalate into violent conflict, and eventually into civil wars? As the inter-state wars have been in decline since the end of the Cold War, ethnic violence has been the predominant form of intra-state wars (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Many nation-states have been transformed into ethnic sub-states which were ruled by ethnic elites and, in some extreme cases, by war lords. Nevertheless, the rise of ethnicity in the political realm does not signal intra-state anarchy or violence in a majority of the cases. Some countries could successfully absorb the rise of ethnic politics with no or little harm to their political stability. The rise of indigenous political parties and their taking over of political power for the first time in Latin American modern history is the major recent exemplar of such a peaceful transformation in the political repertoire. Ethnic tensions do not even make to the front pages of some countries' agendas. Nevertheless, in some others, they lead to -using Hobbes's famous dictum- solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish circumstances in the form of prolonged civil wars. Then the question becomes, what causes this variation in the outcome with regards to ethnic politics: violent ethnic rebellions and the rest (i.e., peaceful ethnic politics and non-ethnic forms of political repertoires).

This paper aims at answering the question what causes ethnic rebellion. The theoretical scope of the paper consists of testing the predominant theories of ethnic conflict. The empirical scope of the paper includes data on worldwide ethnic minorities (to be precise, *minorities at risk*) in the first decade of the post-Cold War era.² The paper uses Minorities at Risk (MAR) database (Phase 3) to test the major theories of ethnic conflict in a large-N context.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section II examines the predominant explanations of ethnic violence in the ethnic conflict literature. Section III subjects these predominant explanations into empirical test. This section, first, describes how this article operationalizes the predominant theories of ethnic violence. It provides measureable indicators of these theories and descriptive statistics of these indicators. Then, it tests the predominant theories of ethnic violence with an OLS regression model and discusses the main findings. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, and discusses the implications of these findings for future research.

² Since the variables examined in this article, when combined, have annual data from 1990 to 2000, the empirical scope of the article is limited with this time frame.

Predominant Theories of Ethnic Conflict

Defining the terms: Ethnic violence

Before an evaluation of the literature on ethnic violence, it is important to see what this literature is about, in this case, ethnic conflict or ethnic violence, as I use them interchangeably in this article.³ The ‘conflict’ part of the term is less problematic to have an agreed definition on. Conflict, for Horowitz (1985: 95) is “a struggle in which the aim is to gain objectives and simultaneously to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals.” In accordance with this definition, ethnic violence is measured by the number of casualties in ethnic conflicts.

The ‘ethnic’ part of the term ethnic conflict/violence is more problematic in the literature. I follow Chandra (2006) and define ethnic groups as cultural communities being constantly reproduced around a belief in shared lineage. Since this definition emphasizes ‘belief’ over objective attributes such as language or morphological features, it implies that individual members of ethnic groups can switch their ethnic identities and practices. Nevertheless, ethnic groups do not die out in short periods (possibly except for forced assimilation and more brutal forms of ethnic cleansing). As Barth (1996[1969]) suggests, distinct ethnic categories are maintained despite varying participation levels and membership statutes of individuals. The relative persistence of ethnic groups (partly due to the members’ low likelihood of ‘unbecoming’⁴) is an important aspect distinguishing ethnic groups from other social groups. Therefore, change of ethnic identity could be called a ‘constrained change’ (Chandra, 2006).

Theories of ethnic violence

Numerous researchers from a wide array of disciplines from political science to sociology as well as from outside of the academic circles have sought to find the causal factors and mechanisms leading to ethnic violence. The theories that have been developed in this search can be classified in a number of ways. One major division can be made regarding the level of analysis where the major causal factors are sought. While some of these factors are macro-level factors, some are at the meso or micro levels. The macro level consists of the factors that are

³ While scholars such as Varshney (2001, pp. 365-6) object such a conflation of the terms ‘violence’ and ‘conflict’ in the literature for rightful reasons, I follow the mainstream literature for the sake of conceptual resonance and familiarity.

⁴For a discussion of the impossibility of ‘unbecoming’, see Gil-White (1999, p. 808). Yet, he also acknowledges the possibility of ‘boundary change’ in the long term (1999, p. 813).

environmental in the sense of being independent of and external to the respective agents' actions at a given point in time. On the macro scale, ethnic fragmentation, historical facts and myths, cultural frames, structures (distribution of attributes such as power and resources between units or actors in a given system), demographic attributes (e.g., population size, territorial concentration), and geographical factors (e.g., terrain, distance between the ethnic heartland and the political center of the country) are the major environmental, macro-level explanatory factors. Micro-level explanations are often, if not always, limited to individual decisions and experiences (individual perceptions, interpretations, expectations, and motives) which may well interact with macro-level factors. Political institutions and social networks are often referred as meso-level factors for the reason that they form the context for the process of interaction between the macro- and micro-level entities.⁵ This paper conflates institutions with the macro-level factors, because institutions are external to, independent from, and, hence, environmental to respective agents at time-1 in relation to their action at time-2 in accordance with Archer's (1982; 1988; and 1995) *analytical dualism* approach.⁶

A second way of categorizing the literature can be considered in the context of causal mechanisms. As some researchers base their explanations on correlational analyses between the explanatory variables and the outcome to be explained, some others take a further step and analyze the causal mechanisms between the two. These mechanisms are mostly sought in a lower level of analysis. The effect of the major explanatory factor over social behavior (e.g., ethnic rebellion) is mediated in this lower level. Such mechanisms come in a variety of forms and contrasts such as the elite- vs. mass-based mechanisms and greed- vs. grievance-based mechanisms as well as in the form of eclectic theories that incorporate different mechanisms in a single theory. Some studies do not go back in their explanations to ontologically independent and temporarily preceding major causes, but they start their explanation from this second stage of mechanisms and processes. This line of arguments can be classified as causal frameworks rather than full-fledged causal theories. This sort of explanations give a 'how' answer by explaining how the outcome appears through all or some of the mentioned mechanisms. This article takes

⁵ For a discussion of meso-level analyses, see Lichbach (1998, p. 403) and Jepperson and Meyer(2011, p. 60).

⁶ The question of the formation and transition of political institutions is a different question and may require a meso-level analysis, but the question for this paper is not the cause, but the effect of political institutions.

mechanisms such as relative deprivation⁷(Gurr, 1970) and frameworks such as the amalgamation of opportunity structures, resources, cultural frames (McAdam, et al.: 1996) as needing to be complemented by ontologically independent, temporarily preceding causal factors. Such factors shape the depth and width of the sense of deprivation as well as the range of opportunities or cultural repertoires.

A final division of the literature can be done by looking at the question of agency. Although this question might be understood as in the contrast of free will vs. determinism on philosophical grounds, it is understood here in a less substantial context as in ‘who acts?’. Who rebels?: individuals or collectivities/groups; elites or the masses? In this regard, a study may explain just the aggregate outcome (e.g., the incidence of ethnic conflict) or the individual action (e.g., joining an ethnic rebellion group). The individualist accounts often exclusively focus on two classes (more precisely, aggregates) of individuals: the elites or the masses. While the former often appears in rational choice models in explaining self-seeking behavior of ethnic and state elites who pursue material gains, the latter often appears in culturalist/ideational accounts that appeal to ‘higher’ goals such as self-realization and self-esteem.

In the light of these classifications of the ethnic conflict literature, a number of macro-level factors, ideational or material, can be listed. These factors, allegedly, explain and predict ethnic violence levels. The nature of ethnicity and ethnic relations, specifically, levels of ethnic polarization and fluidity vs. strictness of ethnic identification (Madrid, 2009), ethnic group size (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), structural attributes (distribution of resources, power, and/or security between given collective agencies) (Posen, 1993; Snyder & Jervis, 1999) are all seen as significant environmental or macro factors in shaping ethnic violence.

A major macro causal factor is ethnic diversity per se. The classical works such as those of Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) and Horowitz (1985) on ethnic conflict saw endemic pathologies of multi-ethnic states leading to ethnic conflict. In such analyses, ethnic violence becomes more likely to appear and more extreme as ethnic fragmentation and polarization increase. Furthermore, conflicts stemming from incompatible ethnic identities and aspirations lead to the most unwelcome outcome, because “identity conflict poses the most difficult type of conflict”

⁷ While relative deprivation is a mechanism, it forms a full-fledged theory when combined with the causes of (the sense of) relative deprivation such as economic disparity or political exclusion. Gurr also explains such ‘causes’ of relative deprivation in his own analyses.

(Offe, 1998, p. 120) whereby the members of a party aims for the absence, isolation, or full assimilation of the other party in grievance-based explanations. In such conflict processes, ethnic actors define ‘the other’ with respect to the ‘self’ often with exaggerated accounts of ethnic differences, and see ‘the other’ as the enemy to be destroyed.

Another macro-level factor is the socio-economic structures. For Boone (2003), the structures and relations of property, production, and political authority enable or constrain and incentivize or dis-incentivize state and regional (ethnic) political elites. Particularly ‘decades-long land tensions’ break out into violence and fuel ethnic conflict in response to such social structural factors (p. 221). Such material structural analyses conclude that it would be “misleading to cast ethnicity as a purely cultural or ideational variable” (Boone, 2003, pp. 349, n.31).

Physical proximity to the center, terrain of the ethnic heartland, and territorial concentration of the group are all other macro-level factors that are argued to be mediator variables that affect ethnic violence outcome via (dis-)incentivizing and enabling/constraining behavior. Territorial concentration is perhaps the most discussed one in this group of factors. For Laitin (2007, p. 19), “the more the groups are settled in a single region of the country, the more likely they will be in rebellion against the state.” Territorial concentration is also argued as a causal factor of secessionism besides ethnic violence. For Bunce (1999, p. 139), “national minorities within a state, particularly when they are geographically compressed, are potentially secessionist”.

Not all macro factors are material though. Besides primordial bonds, numerous cultural, ideological, and/or ideational notions are often argued to shape ethnic identification, consciousness, solidarity, and in turn, ethnic violence. Besides clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1993) kind of relatively primordialist arguments, Smith’s (1991) seminal work on national identity emphasizes the role of ethno-symbolic elements on the relations between the majority and minority communities. Such symbolic and ideational factors could lead to altruistic individual behavior for the sake of the group interests as seen in the suicide attack cases. Following Weber’s distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality, Varshney (2003) argues that group interests can drive individual behavior even with high costs upon the individuals themselves. Such an account can still be seen as rational in the minimal sense of the term as in ends-means compatibility. In a more micro side of the ideational factors, De Vos (1983) points out the emotional and irrational aspects of ethnic behavior and argues that merely

economic theories of ethnic politics fail to explain the ethnic phenomena. Hence, such approaches connect the macro symbols of ethnic identity that are possessed over generations to the individual emotions, perceptions, cognition, and motives.⁸

A major institutional factor to explain ethno-political mobilization is the degree of institutionalization. Since Huntington's (1968) seminal book, it has often been argued that transitional periods with a political gap (between the level of mobilization and the level of institutionalization) create numerous political problems. In his discussion of democratization and ethnic conflict relationship, Snyder (2000) argues that the lack of institutionalization in transitory times enables elites to pursue their greed by using the ethnic card to mobilize the electoral support they need. Such transitory times are allegedly susceptible to ethnic violence. In other words, instability begets instability, or in this case, violence begets violence. Therefore, by extending the institutional arguments above, it can be suggested that the pre-existing circumstances of ethnic relations should be taken into consideration in predicting ethnic violence outcomes in the future.

Empirical Test of Predominant Theories of Ethnic Violence

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics below illustrate the determinants of ethnic violence. The section on descriptive statistics provides summary statistics for the dependent and major explanatory variables that are discussed in the ethnic conflict literature as well as in my regression model for the time period from 1990 to 2003.⁹ The section on regression analysis includes analyses of the determinants of ethnic violence. By incorporating the relevant causal variables of the ethnic conflict literature, this section enables me to test the contemporary predominant theories of ethnic violence.

Descriptive statistics

⁸ On the psychological reasons of ethnic behavior including minimization of intra-group differences and maximization of inter-group differences, and establishing group goals, see Tajfel, et al., 1971; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; and Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963.

⁹ Many of the variables used in the OLS regression model, as illustrated in Table 2, are coded from 1990 to 2003. Nevertheless, since there is not available data for some variables after 2000, the regression analysis covers the period until 2000.

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the regression model in search of the determinants of ethnic violence from 1990 to 2003. The dependent variable of this research is ethnic rebellion. It is named REB by the MAR database and ranges from 0 to 7 with a mean of 0.89 and a standard deviation of 1.87. According to the MAR coding, the levels of REB are, in order, none reported, political banditry, campaigns of terrorism, local rebellion, small-scale guerrilla activity, intermediate guerrilla activity, large-scale guerrilla activity, and protracted civil war. This article treats this variation from 0 to 7 in a continuous and linear form from the lowest to the highest value of ethnic rebellion.

Regime type is measured by the Polity scores for each ‘host’ country and called POLITY by the MAR. The POLITY scores range from -10 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic) with a mean of 1.91 and standard deviation of 6.50 for the specified time period.

Group’s population ratio to the country population is coded by the MAR and named GPRO. Since such data is calculated primarily based on national census data, MAR does not have information in a number of years. Since population data does not vary dramatically from one year to another, I interpolated the data linearly for the years between two available population data points, and, hence, produced annual data from 1990 to 2003. I also multiplied the data by 100 in order to produce percentage scores. Since the MAR data takes ‘minorities at risk’ to its center, ethnic groups that are called ‘minority’ are not necessarily numerically in minority, but simply ‘at risk’ (e.g., excluded, repressed, and discriminated against). The group population ratio variable values range from 0.04 to 90 with a mean of 12.21 and a standard deviation of 15.31.

Group’s territorial concentration is called GROUPCON by the MAR and range from 0 to 3 with a mean of 2.10 and a standard deviation of 1.10. The levels of this range are, in order, widely dispersed, primarily urban or minority in one region, majority in one region and others dispersed, and concentrated in one region.

The MAR project provides data to measure ethnic differences of the respective minority groups from the majority based on the differences of language, customs, beliefs, and race. The resulting aggregate data is called ETHDIFXX and, for the specified time period, ranges from 0 to 11 with a mean of 5.73 and a standard deviation of 2.66.

Lost autonomy is a good proxy variable to measure and represent historical grievances resulting from the loss of former privileged status. The MAR project calls lost autonomy variable

AUTLOST. The scores range from 0 to 7 based on the magnitude and time of the loss. The scores have a mean of 1.10 and standard deviation of 1.05.

The MAR database measures political discrimination –called POLDIS- on a scale from 0 to 4. The levels are, in order, no discrimination, neglect and no remedial policies, social exclusion and neutral policy, and exclusion and repressive policy. The mean score for POLDIS is 1.83 with a standard deviation of 1.54 for the specified time period.

Kin groups in power variable is called GC11 by the MAR and range from 0 –kin group has no access to political power- to 4 –kin group dominates state power. The scores have a mean of 2.71 with a standard deviation of 1.05 for the time period under scrutiny.

The minority group’s economic difference from the majority is called ECDIFFXX by the MAR. The scores range from -2 to 4 and are, in order, advantaged, some advantages, no socially significant differences, slight differentials, substantial differentials, major differentials, and extreme differentials. The scores have a mean of 1.70 with a standard deviation of 1.96.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Dependent variable</i>				
Ethnic rebellion	0-7	0.89	1.87	3896
<i>Predictors</i>				
Regime type (Polity score)	-10-10	1.91	6.50	2850
Group population ratio	0.04-90	12.21	15.31	4380
Geographical concentration	0-3	2.10	1.10	4408
Ethnic differences	0-11	5.73	2.66	3402
Lost autonomy	0-7	1.10	1.05	4382
Political discrimination	0-4	1.83	1.54	4097
Kin groups in power	0-4	2.71	1.05	2697
Economic difference	-2-4	1.70	1.96	4103

Inferential statistics

Given that the dependent variable (ethnic rebellion) has a range from 0 to 7, respectively, indicating the lowest and highest scores, I treat ethnic rebellion scores as continuous numerical values. I employ an ordinary least squares regression model to test the predominant theories of ethnic violence (or ethnic rebellion). OLS models are the standard approach to analyze the relationship between a continuous dependent variable and a set of predictor variables. The OLS model tests the explanatory power of the major predictors used in the ethnic conflict literature to explain ethnic rebellion. The regression coefficients with standard deviations (in parentheses) are illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF WORLDWIDE ETHNIC REBELLION (1990-2000)

Lagged DV (1 year)	0.736*** (0.014)
Regime type (Polity score)	-0.010* (0.004)
Group population ratio	0.003* (0.002)
Geographical concentration	0.050* (0.025)
Ethnic differences	-0.017 (0.011)
Lost autonomy	0.148*** (0.031)
Political discrimination	0.132*** (0.018)
Kin groups in power	-0.094*** (0.025)
Economic differences	-0.019 (0.015)
<i>Constant</i>	0.113 (0.123)
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	0.658
<i>Observations</i>	1997

Notes: ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05 (two sided tests).

Standard errors can be seen in parentheses.

Table 2 presented the results of the OLS regression analysis. As the table indicates, a one unit increase in the previous year's ethnic rebellion score is expected to increase the current year's ethnic rebellion score by 0.74 units. A one unit increase in the Polity score decreases the ethnic rebellion score by 0.01 units. A one percent increase in the group's population ratio to the country population is expected to increase ethnic rebellion score slightly, by 0.003 units. A one unit increase in the territorial concentration of the group is expected to increase ethnic rebellion score by 0.05 units. In contrast to the primordialist assumptions that see ethnic violence as a natural outgrowth of different ethnic characters, ethnic differences do not make a statistically significant effect on ethnic rebellion. Other factors held constant, a one unit increase in the lost autonomy index increases the ethnic rebellion score by 0.15 units. A one unit increase in the political discrimination against the group increases the ethnic rebellion score by 0.13 units. A one unit increase in the kindred group's political power status is expected to decrease ethnic rebellion score by 0.09 units. In contrast to the economy-based explanations such as economic deprivation, economic differences do not make a statistically significant effect on ethnic rebellion.

The large-N results indicate that regime type, group population ratio, group's geographical concentration, lost autonomy, political discrimination, and kindred group's political power status are significant predictors of ethnic rebellion. Since the MAR data has a time component and observations are not independent of the previous year's values, one year lagged dependent variable is included in the model and proved to be statistically significant. Ethnic differences and economic differences do not make statistically significant effects. The overall model shows a significant improvement over the null model based on the adjusted R^2 value of 0.658.

In terms of coefficient magnitudes (in comparison to the variables' score ranges), lagged ethnic rebellion, lost autonomy, and political discrimination outstand as the most effective factors in predicting ethnic rebellion. Since ethnic rebellions often escalate in extended periods of time, it is no surprise to see that an ethnic rebellion score for a particular year can be a good predictor of the ethnic rebellion score for the following year. The predictive capacity of the lost autonomy variable is in line with the theories resting on historical grievances. Hence, it can be concluded that the greater the magnitude of the political autonomy loss and the fresher (more recent) the memory is, ethnic rebellion is more likely to emerge. Even a more interesting finding of the paper

is on the effect of political discrimination. Even when the Polity score is controlled, political discrimination increases the ethnic rebellion score. This finding suggests that being more or less democratic is not the only question we should consider in predicting ethnic rebellion levels. An equally, if not more important, question is to what extent the respective minority group is discriminated. One particular explanation for such a finding lies on the conceptual distinction between the two indicators of democracy or political inclusion. Whereas Polity scores are aggregate national scores, political discrimination is limited in scope with the respective ethnic group for which we predict the ethnic rebellion score.

Conclusion

The primary goal and mission of this article is theory testing rather than generating a new theory. The article analyzed the predominant theories of ethnic conflict and tested the major arguments in a large-N context. First, the article extracted measurable indicators from out of such (meta-) theories. These theories are narrowed down to the causal factors such as regime type, group's population ratio to the host country population, group's territorial concentration, ethnic differences between the minority group and the majority society, history of political autonomy loss, political discrimination against the group, kindred group's political power status, and economic differences between the minority group and the majority society. Then, the article operationalized the indicators by using the MAR database with certain modifications such as data interpolation. Finally, the paper applied an OLS regression model to see the explanatory power of these theories and presented the findings.

The results confirm certain theories given the available evidence, while they falsify some others. Accordingly, the greatest explanatory potential lies in the approaches employing political discrimination and history of political autonomy loss. Greater levels of political discrimination, and more recent and greater losses of political autonomy are expected to lead to higher levels of ethnic rebellion. According to the regression results, economic and ethnic differences between the minority ethnic group and the majority do not make a statistically significant effect on ethnic rebellion, other factors being held constant. Overall, the results indicate that ethnic rebellion is a political matter. Therefore, we can conclude that ethnic violence is more volatile and more susceptible to political engineering than we generally think. Ethnic rebellions can be resolved via

politics, but they are also susceptible to political manipulation. Therefore, politics provides both risks and opportunities for the future projection of ethnic politics.

This paper, as highlighted above, does not attempt to generate an original theory of ethnic conflict, but limits its theoretical scope with theory testing. Further work on ethnic violence can gain a great explanatory leverage by (a) focusing on neglected and omitted variables and dimensions of ethnic violence in the ethnic conflict literature; (b) elaborating on specific causal mechanisms that connect political discrimination and political autonomy loss variables to the ethnic rebellion outcome; and (c) integrating the question of ethnic rebellion in a complementary way to the broader analytical framework of ethnic politics.

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