

David E. Cunningham
Veto Players and Civil War Duration
Dissertation Precis

My dissertation, “Veto Players and Civil War Duration” examines why some civil wars are resolved quickly and others are not. There is large variation in the duration of civil wars: some wars last a few days, others continue for decades without resolution. The existing literature has generally viewed this variation as the result of information asymmetries, commitment problems, and the costliness of war. All of these factors are important. However, that literature has missed a key determinant of the duration of civil war because it has assumed that wars are two-party conflicts fought between the state and one rebel group. This assumption is problematic, however, for two reasons. Empirically, we know that many civil wars such as those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Liberia and Colombia contain more than two parties. Theoretically, conflicts are substantially harder to resolve through negotiation when there are more combatants that can block agreement (veto players). In fact, strategies commonly used by international actors to respond to internal conflicts can actually make multi-party conflicts harder to resolve.

I argue that civil wars with multiple veto players will be more resistant to resolution for four reasons. First, in multi-party conflicts there is a smaller range of agreements that all parties prefer to continued warfare. Second, information asymmetries are more acute in multiparty conflicts because it is harder for combatants to use the battlefield to make more realistic assessments of their probability of winning the conflict. Third, in multiparty negotiations each actor has an incentive to hold out at the negotiating table to try to get the best deal. Fourth, shifting alliances between parties prevent the emergence of negotiating blocks that can make negotiation easier.

The dissertation contains two empirical tests of this veto player approach. First, I conduct a quantitative analysis of the effect of number of actors on the duration of all civil wars begun since 1945 using a new dataset containing data on all combatants involved in civil war. This analysis reveals a strong correlation between the number of players and civil war duration. This finding is robust to the inclusion of control variables and to different measurements of the types of players involved in a civil war. Second, I use comparative case studies (based on a most similar case design) of civil war negotiations in Rwanda (1990-1994) and Burundi (1993-ongoing) to test whether the correlation found in the quantitative analysis is driven by the specific mechanisms identified in the theory. These case studies show that combatants in Rwanda were more open to negotiation, better able to use the battlefield to adjust their demands, less likely to walk away from the negotiating table and were better able to reach a mutually acceptable agreement than in Burundi.

The analysis in this dissertation proceeds through five chapters. The first, introductory, chapter presents the empirical puzzle being examined: variation in the duration of civil wars. I argue that, for both theoretical and practical reasons, duration is an important and understudied topic. I survey existing approaches to the duration of civil war and use that discussion to derive two hypotheses: civil wars will be shorter when the costs of war are higher and when commitment problems are lessened. I show how my argument presents an advance on those existing approaches and describe the statistical and qualitative analysis that will be used to evaluate this approach.

The second chapter presents the theoretical argument for why civil wars with multiple veto players are longer. It begins with a discussion of current bargaining and war literature to situate the model in this dissertation in context. I argue that we can conceptualize civil war as a bargaining process over

policy and this conceptualization allows us to use a veto player framework to analyze civil war negotiations. I present three necessary and sufficient conditions for these parties to be veto players: they must have preferences that are at least somewhat separate from all other combatants (autonomy), they must be cohesive enough to stick to a coherent set of demands at the negotiating table (cohesive), and they must be strong enough to continue the war unilaterally in the face of agreement by all other parties (viability). All of the above builds to the main part of the chapter, which is the presentation of a theoretical model of multi-party bargaining. I argue that civil wars are longer when there are multiple parties involved due to the problems of shrinking of the bargaining range, information asymmetries, incentives to hold out, and shifting alliances described earlier. This discussion leads to one main hypothesis: the more veto players there are in the civil war, the longer the duration of the conflict will be. I derive two additional hypotheses that flow from the theoretical model. First, civil wars will be longer when veto players have more extreme preferences, because more extreme preferences over the outcome of conflict shrink the size of the bargaining range further. Second, conflicts will be longer when the non-state veto players are stronger relative to the state because stronger veto players can hold out at the negotiating table longer and avoid defeat by the state.

Chapter three presents the statistical test of these hypotheses, as well as the competing hypotheses presented in chapter one. I describe the dataset used and provide an in-depth discussion of the way veto players was measured. In order to create a measure of number of veto players, I collected data on all actors in civil war and code whether they meet the criteria of autonomy, viability, and coherence described above. The quantitative tests show strong support for the veto player approach. Higher numbers of veto players are associated with longer civil wars in every test, and this result holds when controlling for any other factors that could potentially be associated with both veto players and duration. The results show that adding an additional veto player to the conflict reduces the likelihood of a war ending in any given month by 0.65%, a substantial decrease given that the baseline probability of it ending is quite low. These findings are robust to the inclusion of variables measuring commitment problems and the costs of war and to an independent measure of number of participants to conflict. The analysis also shows that commitment problems are statistically associated with civil war duration but does not show support for costs of war approaches.

Since statistical analysis can only establish correlation, and not causation, I conduct comparative case studies of negotiations in Rwanda and Burundi to examine this relationship further. Those cases are ideal tests because they are as similar as possible on all key indicators except the number of veto players, with the Rwandan conflict being two-party and the Burundian conflict containing at least four veto players.

In chapter four, I conduct detailed analysis of negotiations in Rwanda and Burundi to test predictions arising from the veto player approach developed in chapter two. That analysis shows that the parties in Rwanda were more able to use their performance on the battlefield to adjust their demands at the negotiating table, that combatants in Burundi were more likely to hold out and not participate in negotiations, and that shifting alliances among groups on different issue areas has been and remains a significant barrier to a negotiated peace in Burundi. The combined effect of greater information asymmetries, parties holding out and refusing to negotiate, and shifting alliances has been that despite a nearly decade-long peace process, a comprehensive agreement among all combatants to the Burundian conflict has proven elusive. In Rwanda, meanwhile, the two combatants came to the negotiating table quite early and over a thirteen-month period were able to sign a comprehensive peace agreement. Although this peace agreement broke down nine months

later in the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide, this breakdown does not contradict the predictions of the veto player approach. The argument in this dissertation is that it should be easier for combatants in two-party conflicts to reach an agreement that could be self-enforcing. I argue that the breakdown of the Rwandan peace accords was not due to a fundamental flaw in the negotiation processes, but rather due to three factors external to the negotiation process.

In the final chapter I conclude by briefly restating the main argument and discussing the results of the statistical and qualitative analyses. I discuss how this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of civil war negotiations, as well as to our understanding of international politics more broadly. I suggest implications of this analysis for practitioners and policymakers seeking to find ways to respond to long-running internal conflicts. The veto player approach developed in this project suggests that several of the methods currently used to respond to internal conflicts may actually make multi-party conflicts harder to resolve. For example, in several contemporary conflict resolution efforts there has been a trend toward including all politically relevant actors at the negotiating table. This approach can serve to increase the number of veto players present, making reaching agreement among the main combatants more difficult, and can lead to conflicts being more intractable. Additionally, attempts to “expand the pie” by offering public goods in return for peace can actually make groups less likely to sign because it increases the incentives they have to hold out. I argue that international actors interested in responding to internal conflicts should try to reduce the number of actors that can block agreement, focus on reaching a deal between the main combatants first and then integrate smaller armed groups and unarmed organizations, and should use targeted carrots and sticks to induce hold-outs to lay down their arms. Each of these implications flows directly from abandoning the assumption that conflicts are two-party and examining systematically the way the number of actors that can block settlement affects the bargaining environment.

In this dissertation I seek to advance our understanding of the determinants of civil war duration by abandoning the assumption that conflicts are two-party and explicitly modeling the effect of multiple parties on civil war negotiation. Examining the effect of multiple parties is important because an increasing number of civil wars are multi-party and because multi-party conflicts generate significantly different dynamics than the two-party conflicts normally examined. The dissertation presents a clear theoretical framework for examining the effects of multiple parties on the duration of civil war. I test this framework empirically using statistical analysis and intensive case studies. The empirical tests provide strong support for the veto player approach. The dissertation shows that assuming all civil wars are two-party has hindered our ability to fully understand the duration of these conflicts and to design successful responses to them.