

Looking Beyond Borders: Identification, Information, and Ethnic Conflict Contagion*

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Abstract

Why are ethnic conflicts contagious to some countries but not to others? To date, this question has only been considered in relation to states that are geographically close to each other. This paper argues that ethnically discriminated groups can be inspired to take up arms against the government by observing struggles of ethnically discriminated groups in other countries. For such inspiration to take place, information about these struggles elsewhere is expected to be more important than geographic proximity per se. In a large-n country-level analysis, I find some empirical support for this expectation, particularly in relation with the availability of media sources as a factor increasing information about external events. An additional hypothesis (omitted from presentation here) that expects government repression to increase the likelihood of ethnic conflict contagion under this causal mechanism is not supported by the evidence.

1. Theory and selected hypothesis

If ethnic groups that are systematically discriminated against observe ethnically discriminated groups in other countries rebelling against the government, they become more aware of the severity of their own mistreatment (this draws on a more general argument by Kuran 1998). The more severe such groups perceive their discrimination, the higher they also expect the benefit to be gained from putting an end to it. As a result, a discriminated group's cost benefit calculation can change in favor of violent collective action. Even if this is not the case, other actors in societies where discriminated groups are present can expect this to be the case and conflict can erupt as a consequence of an escalation process (also see for example Kuran 1998 on this point). Thus I expect:

H: Ethnic conflicts involving ethnically discriminated groups in other countries J should increase the likelihood of ethnic conflict in a country i as a function of the number of ethnically discriminated groups in i.

This causal mechanism requires discriminated groups as well as other societal actors in i to be aware of armed conflicts discriminated groups in other states J engage in. Thus, the contagious effect of conflicts by discriminated groups should be increased by factors that increase the likelihood of people in a country i hearing about events in other countries J . I expect these factors to be

- the availability of media sources such as TV, radio and Internet in country i
- the freedom of the press in i (this factor is in fact expected to be necessary)
- the GDP per capita of country j
- the proximity of the capitals of i and j
- and, particularly, an index combining all these factors

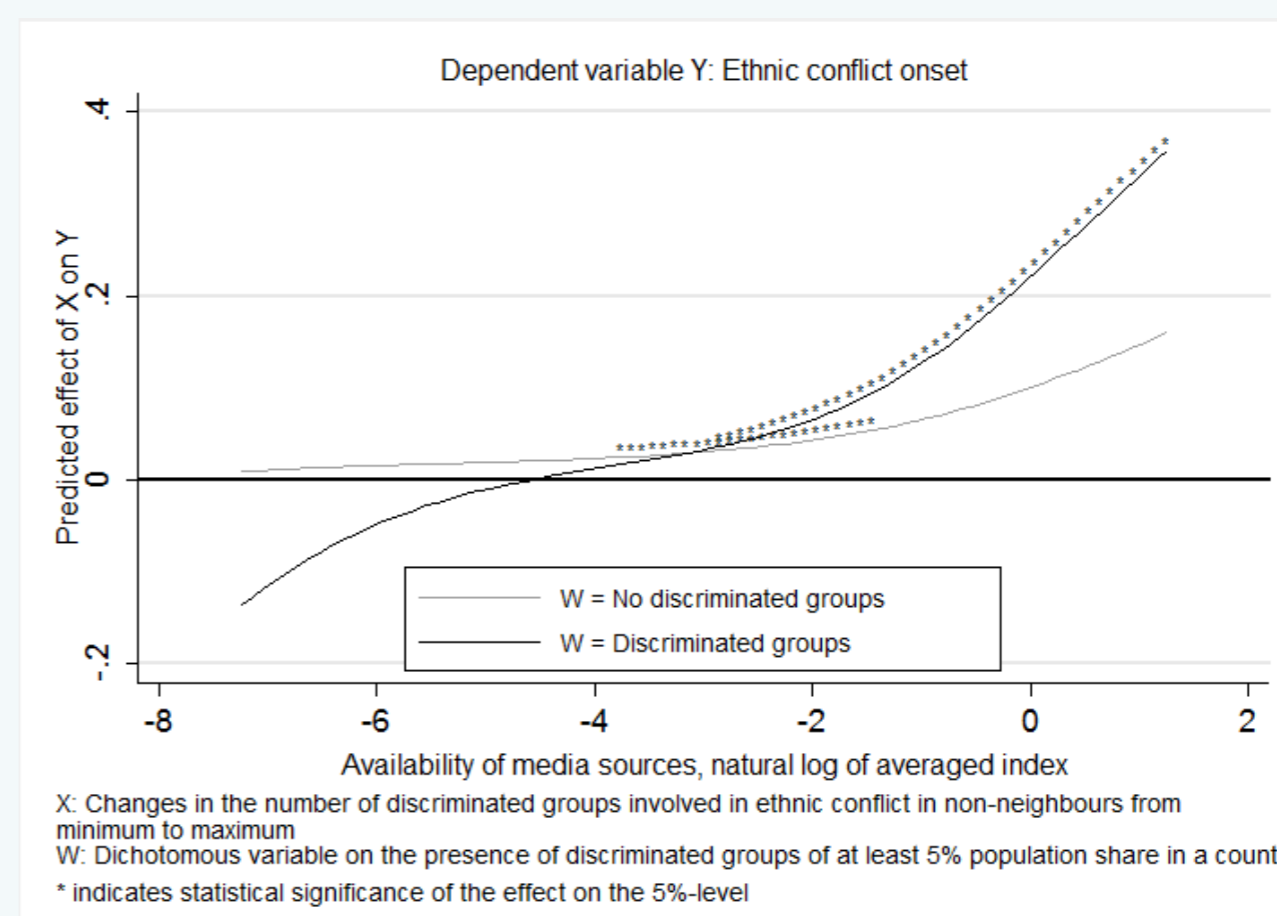
2. Methods

- Large-n quantitative approach using country-years between 1951 (1981) and 2004.
- Variables on the number of discriminated groups involved in ethnic conflict in other countries J that are not direct neighbours of i and the respective information factor are combined either multiplicatively or using a weights matrix approach before interacting them multiplicatively with the number of discriminated groups in a country i . All constitutive terms are time-lagged.
- These interaction terms are tested in separate rare events logistic regression models where the dependent variable measures the presence of ethnic conflict onset in a country i .
- Each regression model controls for whether at least one neighbour state experiences a civil conflict as well as for regime type and its squared term, oil production, total population and logged GDP.
- Peace year correction using cubic splines and country-clustered robust standard errors.

3. Empirical results

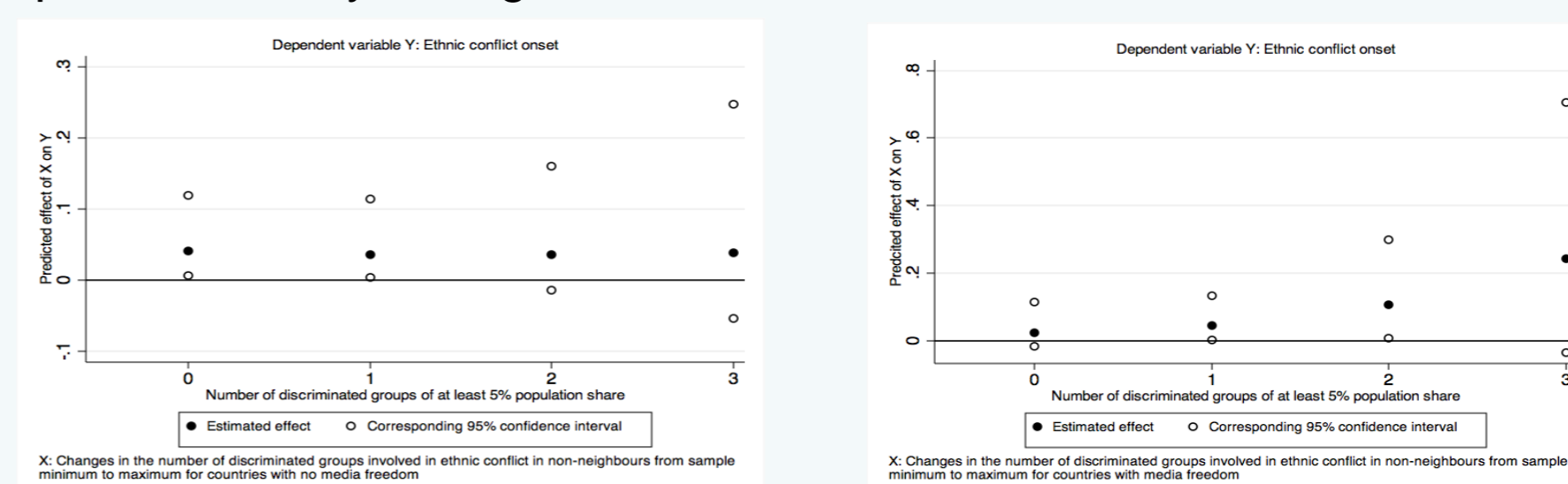
The impact of media availability on ethnic conflict contagion

Figure 1. Predicted effect of changes in the number of discriminated groups represented in ethnic conflict in all non-neighbour countries on the likelihood of ethnic conflict onset as media availability and the number of discriminated groups in a country change.



The impact of media freedom on ethnic conflict contagion

Figure 2. Predicted effect of changes in the number of discriminated groups represented in ethnic conflict in all non-neighbour countries on the likelihood of ethnic conflict onset as media freedom and the number of discriminated groups in a country change.



Graph 2.1 No media freedom

Graph 2.2 Media freedom

The impact of the conflict country's GDP on ethnic conflict contagion

Changes in GDP-weighted conflict involvements from minimum to maximum significantly increase the likelihood of ethnic conflict onset only in countries with less than two discriminated groups. The effect increases as group numbers increase but the substantial values as well as the differences are very small.

The impact of capital distance on ethnic conflict contagion

The effect of changes in conflict involvements weighted by capital distance from minimum to sample maximum decreases in size the more discriminated groups there are in a country and is significantly positive only in countries with less than two discriminated groups.

The impact of the information index on ethnic conflict contagion

Table 1. Predicted effect of changes in index-weighted conflict involvements from minimum to sample maximum as the number of discriminated groups changes.

Number of discriminated groups	Estimated effect	Lower bound	Upper bound
0	.0711853	-.0256006	.445367
1	.1892392	.005559	.6303785
2	.453294	-.0255182	.9473237
3	.6202558	-.342049	.9969584

4. Findings and conclusion

- Results suggest that, if a sufficient amount of information is present, the contagiousness of ethnic conflicts involving discriminated groups in other countries increases the more discriminated groups there are in a country.
- Media availability appears to play the biggest role for external information reaching a country.
- As the differences between estimates for different levels of information and different numbers of groups are not statistically significant, these conclusions cannot be drawn without a considerable amount of uncertainty.
- These findings imply that future conflict contagion research should no longer favour tests of geographic transmission channels at the expense of information and identification as potential factors driving contagion processes.

Reference:

Kuran, Timur. 1998. "Ethnic Dissimilation and Its International Diffusion." In *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict. Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, edited by David A. Lake, and Donald Rothchild, 35-60. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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