

**Summer Policy Research Grants, Building Undergraduate Student Research Experiences
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Title: *Tainting the Well or Priming the Pump? The Dynamics of Cooperation in Civil War*

Research question: How do disputants in civil wars learn from attempts at cooperative interactions during conflict? When do these interactions taint the well, making future negotiations difficult and prospects for long-term resolution slim? When do they prime the pump, preparing the disputants to engage in future negotiations and encouraging sustainable conflict resolution?

Project Overview: Over the past two decades, the dominant paradigm for understanding civil war resolution has been the bargaining model of war. Building upon canonical work by Fearon (1995) and Walter (2002), this framework suggests that combatants face two central barriers to conflict resolution. First, combatants are unable to credibly promise to uphold the terms of peace because transitioning from civil war to domestic peace requires demobilization and disarmament, processes which leave former combatants vulnerable to attack and exploitation (Toft 2009; Walter 2002). Second, combatants have private information about their own capabilities and resolve, with incentives to lie about that information. This makes it difficult for combatants to reach agreement to end a conflict, as neither is certain what the other is willing to accept.

Our project challenges the basic logic underlying this vast body of research, arguing that common articulations and applications of the commitment and private information problems are incomplete. Specifically, previous research treats the negotiations that lead to settlement agreements as isolated events rather than the culmination of an iterative process of cooperation during conflict. As a result, these theories implicitly assume that prior attempts at cooperation have no impact on the content or outcome of a peace process. In contrast, we argue that past cooperative interactions (ceasefires, negotiations, mediations, and attempts at all three) critically influence future interactions as combatants learn about each other, build trust, or break trust.

By conceptualizing conflict resolution as an iterative process, we develop an understanding of *how* past interactions influence future opportunities for cooperation and settlement. This is absent from previous research, given its tendency to treat negotiations as independent events. Our project, in contrast, will address questions about how learning and trust-building/breaking occurs over time. Does priming the pump happen slowly? Can a few sincere attempts at cooperation launch successful resolution efforts? Does one bad interaction taint the well? If so, how can the damage be mitigated? Our project will provide a theoretical framework for assessing how past interactions shape the prospects for future resolution efforts. We adopt a learning framework evaluating how disputants learn from their interactions with each other over time.

Role of Students: We currently have a list of potential cooperative events (drawn from the Global News Archive, a corpus of major world newspapers). Students would dig into the events, determine if they meet our criteria for inclusion, and then code various characteristics of the cooperation (actors involved, mode, substance of the cooperation, etc). There are coding protocols and training videos already prepared. Students would also meet regularly with me. These regular meetings would provide opportunities for the students to ask questions and discuss the conflicts they are studying. We are currently developing protocols for the next phase of coding and the students would provide input based on their case knowledge during these meetings as well.

Potential Impact: Calls for cooperation from either side in a civil war are often met with great fanfare in the media. Unfortunately, not all calls for cooperation are sincere or successful. For example, early ceasefires between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda quickly increased government distrust of the LRA. The LRA used these ceasefires to regroup and rearm, so that when the ceasefire was over the LRA was in a stronger position from which to launch new offensives. The ceasefires were not sincere efforts at cooperation, but a ruse to improve the LRA's military strength. This drastically impacted future opportunities for cooperation. The Ugandan government repeatedly rejected subsequent calls for negotiations, claiming the LRA was not interested in real compromise, and it took substantial international pressure to bring the combatants back to the negotiating table for the Juba Process in 2006. At Juba, the government repeatedly demanded that any agreement must require the rebels to reveal their weapons caches and announce their hiding places. These demands show that even a decade after the failed ceasefires, the government suspected the LRA was insincere. The LRA found these requirements unacceptable, and the peace process ultimately failed.

From a policy perspective, our research suggests that accounting for a given conflict's history of cooperation allows for more context-specific conflict management strategies that should be better suited to the needs, concerns, and obstacles a specific rebel group and government face. Existing research suggests that third-party security guarantees (e.g. peacekeepers) are essential to ensure lasting peace. Our research will instead show that the level of international involvement necessary to ensure peace varies from context to context. In Uganda, third-party security guarantees would surely have assisted as the distrust between parties was rooted in concerns about disarmament. Guarantees were not enough, however, as the distrust learned by the disputants through failed cooperation led to stringent demands by the government and Kony's refusal to attend talks. In other contexts, however, third-party security guarantees will not be as salient, as combatants will have built trust that diminishes fear. Understanding these differences will allow international actors to tailor their conflict management strategies to the specific needs of the combatants. Resources can be used to facilitate trust-building early in a peace process, which will then pay dividends in the form of reduced burden for the international community and greater autonomy for the combatants in implementing the peace in the long run.

Use of Funds: The funds will all be used to hire undergraduate students to assist in coding data.