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Suthan Krishnarajan, Jørgen Møller,  
Lasse Lykke Rørbæk and  
Svend-Erik Skaaning

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Please address comments and/or queries for information to:

V-Dem Institute  
Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg  
Sprängkullsgatan 19, PO Box 711  
SE 40530 Gothenburg  
Sweden  
E-mail: [contact@v-dem.net](mailto:contact@v-dem.net)

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# Democracy, Democratization, and Civil War\*

Suthan Krishnarajan  
PhD scholar  
Aarhus University

Jørgen Møller  
Professor, PhD  
Aarhus University

Lasse Lykke Rørbæk  
Assistant Professor  
Aarhus University

Svend-Erik Skaaning  
Professor, PhD  
Aarhus University

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## **Abstract**

An influential body of scholarship has associated both democracy and democratization with civil war. Important findings include the so-called inverted U-shaped relationship between democracy-levels and civil war onset and that propensity for democratic openings to spark internal violence. However, most of these findings have been challenged, particularly by scholars pointing to problems with the aggregate nature of the analyses and the data sources used. Against this background, we enlist new, fine-grained data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. We discuss how the new data can be used to disaggregate regime variables in order to better understand the causal dynamics that link the regime form and regime change to civil war onset, if any. Guided by these considerations, we use the new data to reassess the ‘inverted U-curve’. Our analysis shows that this relationship is driven by ‘liberal’ aspects of democracy such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech rather than by the ‘electoral core’ of democracy. The relationship between clean elections and civil war onset is approximately linearly decreasing, and at the indicator level of the clean elections attribute we find several different patterns.

## Introduction

In *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Michael Mann (2005) disturbingly claimed that the democratization processes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had paved the way for large-scale ethnic cleansing. Mann's book may be said to reflect a more general shift in the literature on democracy and democratization. The 1990s had been democracy's *Belle Époque*, both on the ground and within academia. After a somewhat slow beginning in Southern Europe and Latin America, democracy in this decade spread like wildfire, accompanied by high hopes for progress in terms of peace, freedom, and prosperity (Møller & Skaaning 2013). Alas, the enthusiasm was not to last, neither on the ground nor within academia. The first decades of the 2000s have seen a widespread pessimism about the auspicious effects of democracy and democratization.

Most importantly for our purposes, an influential research agenda has associated partially democratized regimes and democratization with civil war (see Hegre 2014; Gleditsch & Hegre 2014). At first sight, the notion that intermediate levels of democracy and the process of democratization spark internal conflict seems counterintuitive. Popular discontent should decrease with the level of democracy because political discrimination decreases and public goods provision increases (Buono de Mesquita et al. 2003). Furthermore, democracy is normally construed as a method for solving societal conflicts in a peaceful way. For instance, scholars have argued that democracy allows effective bargaining among social groups, reduces commitment problems, and instills decisions with legitimacy (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Przeworski 2010). The notion that partial democracy and democratization might trigger internal conflicts is therefore a bold theoretical conjecture with high empirical relevance.

In what follows, we first review this literature, singling out arguments for and against intermediate level of democracy and changes in the direction of democracy being conducive to civil war. We then enlist new data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project to shed light on selected prior findings. More generally, we discuss how these new data can be used to carry out more systematic appraisals of the relationship between democracy levels and democratization on the one hand and civil war on the other.

## I. The case against democracy

The arguments for why democracy may spur internal conflict relate to both the absolute level of democracy and to changes in the direction of democracy. With respect to the first issue, a number of scholars have identified a curve-linear relationship where the risk of civil war onset increases at lower rungs of the ladder of democracy but decreases at higher rungs (e.g., Muller & Weede 1990; Hegre et al. 2001). This has been termed the “inverted U-curve” as the likelihood of civil war onset is higher for partially democratized regimes (aka. anocracies or hybrid regimes) situated in the middle of the regime spectrum than for either genuine autocracies or genuine democracies.

Theoretically, this relationship is attributed to the lack of steering capacity in partially democratized regimes. Autocracies use repression and cooptation to keep a lid on opposition, whereas democracies deal with societal grievances through political inclusion and public goods provision (Svolik 2012; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Partially democratized regimes, the argument goes, are less effective in both respects. While they allow oppositional mobilization and expression to a higher extent than autocracies, they are ineffective in addressing popular frustrations and often too weak to crush even minor rebellions. Hence, grievances are not dealt with but opportunities for airing them are high (Hegre 2014, 163; Gleditsch & Hegre 2014, 146-7).

With respect to democratization, prior scholarship has demonstrated that changes in levels of democracy increase the likelihood of armed conflict (Cederman, Hug & Krebs 2010; Mansfield & Snyder 2012). Democratization can spur civil war in several ways. Invoking Huntington’s (1968) seminal work on political order, Mansfield & Snyder (1995, 2005) argue that democratization tends to create mass mobilization that weak institutions cannot channel. In this situation, elites are wont to drum up nationalist sentiments, something that increases the risk of both interstate war and intrastate conflict.

Other scholarship has focused more directly on the instability wrought by changes in political institutions (Gleditsch & Ruggeri 2010). The introduction of elections gives incumbents an incentive to use fraud and losers an avenue to dispute outcomes. This “sore loser” effect is likely to be aggravated in winner-takes-all systems where minority groups, which are bound to lose in democratic contest, may see fighting as their best chance for maintain or gaining power. On top of this, initial democratic reforms are normally only partial and therefore tend to create demand for more. If powerholders resist these demands, the result may be a descent into violence (Gleditsch & Hegre 2014, 149-150; see also Cederman,

Gleditsch & Hug 2013; Collier, Hoeffler & Söderbom 2008). To make matters worse, many countries contain latent social conflicts that have been suppressed by authoritarian control. Competitive politics often serve to politicize such conflicts, including most notoriously antagonisms revolving around ethnic divides (Eifert, Miguel & Posner 2010; Horowitz 1985). This cocktail is inherently conflict prone – and sometimes causes the onset of civil war.

## **II. Problems with prior research**

Although these claims have won wide acceptance, the literature contains a number of objections against the notion that democracy and democratization are conducive to armed conflict. First, confounding factors might affect both democratic institutions, changes in these, and the risk of civil war (Hegre 2014, 163; Gleditsch & Hegre 2014, 146). For instance, it might be political instability rather than specific regime characteristics that leads to conflict. Hybrid regimes can be seen as failed attempts to preserve power firmly in the hands of either the people or a strong, uncontested leader, and regime change per definition entails instability. In this situation, elections can serve as concession made because of the precarious position of the powers-that-be (Hegre 2014, 164-165). Next, socioeconomic development may drive both regime changes and conflict through, for example, its impact on inequality and the mobility of economic assets, both of which have been associated with regime change and internal conflict (see, e.g., Boix 2003; 2008). Finally, claims have been made to the effect that deeper historical processes centered on the distinction between inclusive and extractive political institutions create virtuous and vicious circles, respectively, which might affect both regime type and conflict propensity (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012).

Second, the inverted U-curve might reflect reverse causality as armed conflicts are apt to weaken state institutions, at least in the short run (Gleditsch & Hegre 2014, 147-48). Similar objections can be made against the democratization-conflict nexus. If Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) are correct that democratization is a concession elites give when they fear revolution, then it follows that democratization signals weakness – and, more generally, that democratization is endogenous to conflict.

Third, biases in our data sources might produce misleading conclusions. Most of the prominent statistical findings over the past decades are based on the well-known Polity index, which is a composite index (ranging from -10 to 10) that includes indicators related to the openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment, constraints on the chief executive, and the regulation and openness of political participation (Marshall, Gurr & Jaggers 2014). As

Vreeland (2008) has convincingly argued, the Polity index can create biased results in analyses of the relationship between democracy-levels, democratization, and civil war because two of its components, “Regulation of Participation” and “Competitiveness of Participation”, are expressly coded with reference to political violence. Indeed, it is exactly the middle values of these components that are “political violence-contaminated” (Vreeland 2008, 2).

### **III. Disaggregating regime categories with new data**

As indicated by our review, the findings regarding the relationship between democracy and democratization, respectively, and civil war onset are inconclusive (see also Bartusevicius & Skaaning 2016; Cederman, Gleditsch & Hug 2013). To shed new light on the issue, recent studies have begun disaggregating the explanatory variable (Goldstone et al. 2010; see also Fjelde 2010). This is in line with the call by Gleditsch and Hegre (2014, 146) to unpack regime categories to investigate “how the specific characteristics of political institutions” affect conflict. Gleditsch and Hegre illustrate this by pointing out that the inverted U-curve is in itself a very poor – or at least overly general – measurement of the way political regimes affect conflict (Gleditsch & Hegre 2014, 148). Furthermore, by disaggregating characteristics of political regimes and looking into which specific institutions of democracy are actually driving the conflict potential that prior scholarship has identified, we might be able to work out empirical implications of competing theories, which right now – on the aggregate level – predict similar outcomes (Hegre 2014, 168).

The literature has already moved in this direction by, for example, using the disaggregated Polity-indicators rather than the general index. But to genuinely push this research agenda forward, we need more nuanced indicators of more particular aspects of political regimes. First, we need to make sure that the results are not driven by indicators being contaminated by political violence but we need to do this in a much more systematic way than Vreeland was able to with the Polity data. Second, we need to go to a level of disaggregation that allows us to probe the theoretical mechanisms that have been used to explain why partially democratized regimes and democratization, respectively, may increase the risk of conflict.

Fortunately, the V-Dem Project has recently released this kind of data. In what follows we use these new data to carry out a rather simple replication of the analysis of the inverted U-curve at different levels of aggregation. Our aim is to assess whether a similar pattern is produced when using different components and sub-components of democracy. Subsequently,

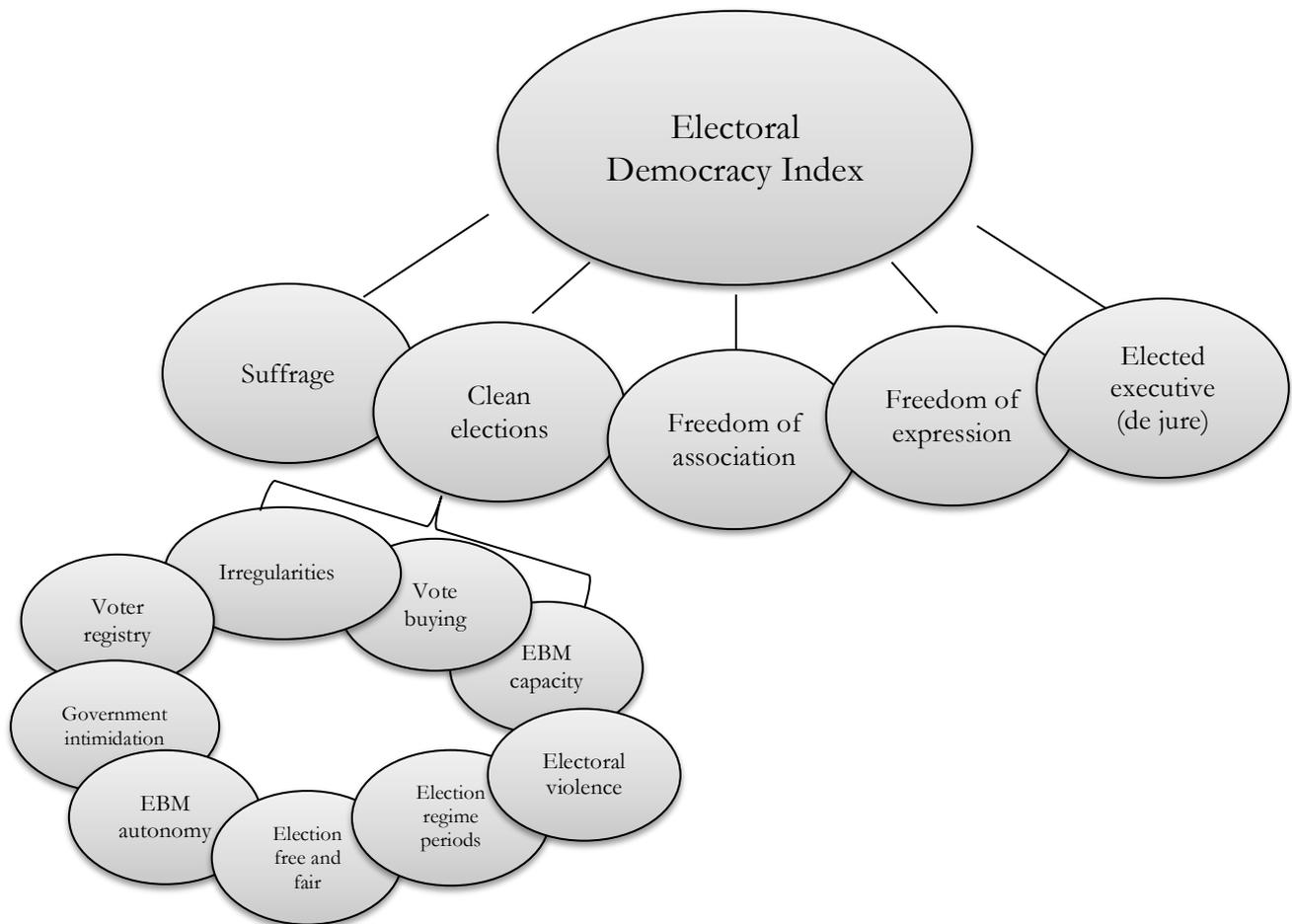
we discuss further possibilities this new dataset give scholars interested in investigating the relationship between democracy, democratization, and civil war onset.

## **The V-Dem data**

V-Dem is a large-scale data collection effort that includes more than 350 new, disaggregated indicators. The dataset covers most sovereign and semi-sovereign polities from 1900 until today, and the data capture various conceptions of democracy and their components in a detailed fashion. About half of the indicators, typically of a more factual nature, have been coded by research assistants. The other half, typically of a more evaluative nature, are assigned scores on the basis of expert surveys, normally five country experts per indicator. The expert assessments are combined into point estimates with uncertainty levels. This is done through the employment of a sophisticated Bayesian item response measurement model that takes into account varying levels of reliability, bias, and standards (“thresholds”) among coders (Coppedge et al. 2016a).

In what follows, we concentrate on the data pertaining to the V-Dem electoral democracy index (see Teorell et al. 2016). This index is based on Dahl’s (1998) seminal conception of polyarchy, and as illustrated in Figure 1 it subsumes the following five attributes: clean elections, elected executive, suffrage, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. The measurement of these five attributes – or indices – aggregates the scores of no less than 38 indicators. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 1, the clean elections index alone is based on nine indicators (more on this below).

**Figure 1: Disaggregation of Electoral democracy index**



Note: EMB is an abbreviation for “election management body”.

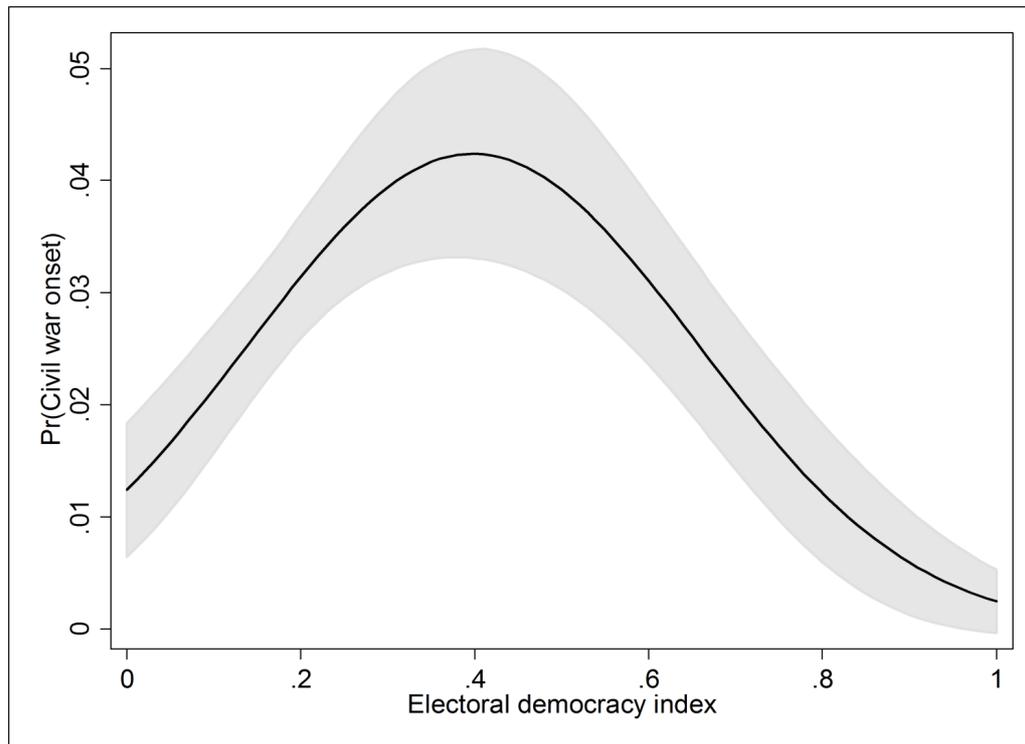
## Empirical analysis

We have put together a simple statistical model that includes the most basic confounders of civil war onset identified in the literature: GDP per capita (logged, from the Maddison Database; Bolt & van Zanden 2014), population size (logged, from Haber & Menaldo 2011), and prior war (time polynomials capturing peace years). Civil war onset is measured using the Uppsala/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset (v. 3.0; Gleditsch et al., 2002). This dataset includes every armed conflict between a government and a rebel organization known to have caused at least 25 annual battle-related deaths in the period 1946-2014.<sup>1</sup> When we regress the V-Dem electoral democracy index against civil war onset for the period 1946-2010, we get the results reported in Figure 2.

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<sup>1</sup> The onset variable indicates the year in which an armed conflict started, and observations with ongoing conflict are dropped.

**Figure 2: The probability of civil war onset at different levels of electoral democracy**



Note: The figure reports margins based on logistic regression. GDP per capita (logged), population size (logged), and prior war (peace-year polynomials) are included as control variables. The shaded area indicates the 90% confidence interval.

As Figure 2 shows, at this level of aggregation the new data clearly corroborates the inverted U-curve relationship. However, the question is what drives the relationship between levels of electoral democracy and civil war onset? To get a better sense of this, we have run the same model with three of the attribute-level indices, namely clean election, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. The two remaining attribute-level indices, universal suffrage and elected executive, tend towards a bimodal distribution and therefore cannot explain – or be meaningfully used to assess – the inverted U-curve.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 3 shows that the freedom of association and freedom of expression attributes sustain the finding of partially democratized regimes being most conflict prone: It is the intermediate scores on these indices that display the highest probability of civil war onset. By contrast, the cleanness of elections is consistently associated with decreasing probabilities of conflict except for the lowest scores on the index. Thus, the inverted U-curve seems to be driven by partially granted freedom rights rather than the “electoral core” of democracy, here

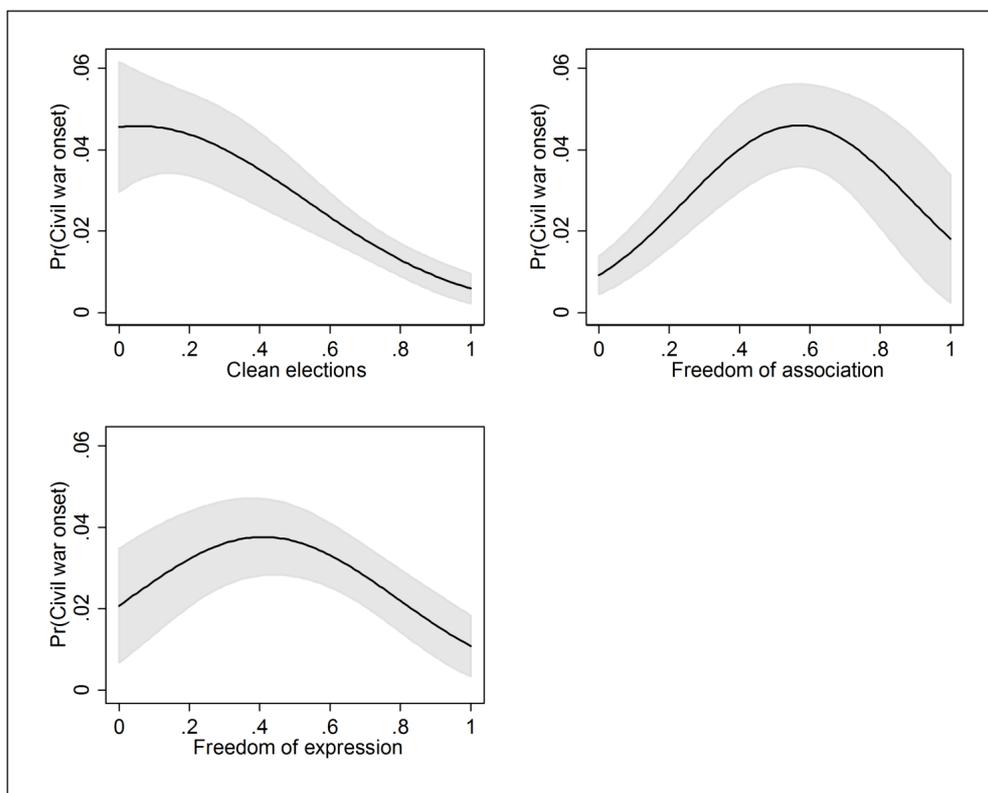
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<sup>2</sup> The bimodal distributions reflect that fulfillment of the formal requirements for having an elected executive or universal suffrage is very much an ‘either-or’ question in the post-WWII period that we investigate.

measured by the attribute of clean elections. This finding is interesting because it indicates that it is liberal rather than electoral aspects of democracy that underpins the inverted U-curve relationship.

Interestingly, this is the case even though two of the nine clean elections-indicators (electoral violence and government intimidation) capture the presence of violence, meaning that one could potentially run into the same problem of ‘tautology’ that Vreeland (2008) has identified regarding analyses relying on the Polity index. On the contrary, the indices of freedom of association and freedom of expression, where the reverse U-curve manifested itself, do not contain such violence-contaminated indicators. This seems puzzling, and we therefore pursue the analysis down to the indicator level for the clean elections index. This also serves to show some of the possibilities of using the V-Dem data. Notice in this connection that an advantage of going to the indicator level is that we can assign substantial meaning to the different scores, something that is not possible at the higher levels of measurement employed in Figures 2 and 3, where a particular aggregate score can reflect very different combinations of indicator scores.

**Figure 3: The probability of civil war onset at different levels of the electoral democracy attributes**



Note: The figure reports margins based on logistic regression. GDP per capita (logged), population size (logged), and prior war (peace-year polynomials) are included as control variables. Each model also controls for the four remaining attribute-level indices of electoral democracy as illustrated in Figure 1. The shaded area indicates the 90% confidence interval.

Figure 4 reports results for seven out of nine of the clean elections indicators.<sup>3</sup> The figure shows that two of the clean election indicators (electoral violence and government intimidation) produce an inverted U-curve, while three others (voter registry, EMB autonomy,<sup>4</sup> and election irregularities) produce a very flat curve. Finally, two of the indicators behave quite differently from the rest. Vote buying produces a flat but negative linear relationship, and EMB capacity is approximately convex, meaning that the likelihood of civil war onset decreases more with the first improvements in the capacity of election management bodies. The most interesting thing here is that the indicators displaying the inverted U-curve are exactly those contaminated by violence. If we put these aside on the basis of Vreeland's (2008) objection, there is no evidence of electoral aspects of democracy producing anything like an inverted U-curve relationship.

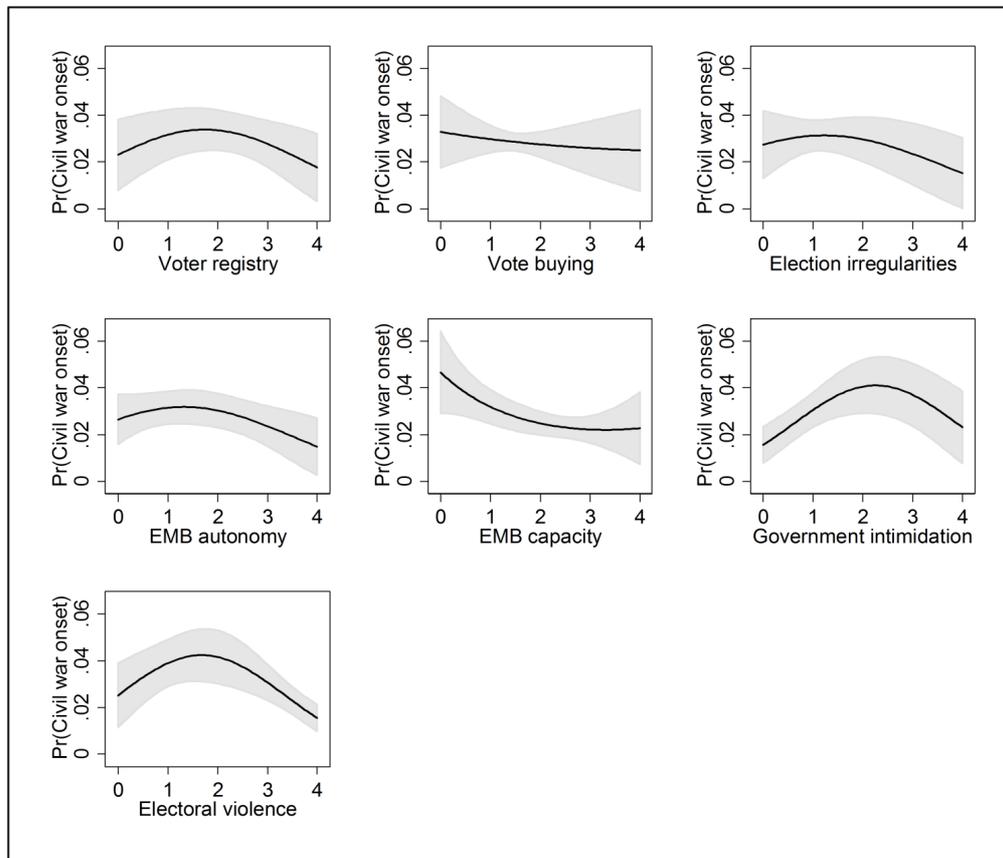
What can we say about the particular levels and conflict onset on the clean elections indicators? For the indicators producing a concave relationship, the risk of civil war onset generally seems to be the highest somewhere between the scores 1 and 2. If we take election irregularities as an example, the codebook descriptions of these scores are “non-systematic, but common” (the score 1) and “sporadic” (the score 2) irregularities. Concerning government intimidation, the risk of armed conflict is markedly higher at the score 2, indicating “non-systematic” intimidation of the opposition, compared to the score 1, indicating “systematic” intimidation of the opposition (Coppedge et al. 2016b).

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<sup>3</sup> One of the excluded indicators, free and fair elections is too general for our purpose, while the other, capturing electoral interruptions, is dichotomous.

<sup>4</sup> “EMB” is an abbreviation for electoral management body.

**Figure 4: The probability of civil war onset at different levels of the clean elections indicators**



Note: The figure reports margins based on logistic regression. GDP per capita (logged), population size (logged), and prior war (peace-year polynomials) are included as control variables. Each model also controls for the four remaining attribute-level indices of electoral democracy as well as the remaining clean election indicators (see Figure 1). The shared area indicates the 90% confidence interval. EMB is an abbreviation for “election management body”.

The presented results show some of the potential that the new V-Dem data holds. We have run similar large-N analyses to assess the relationship between democratization and civil war onset. Generally speaking, these results go a long way towards corroborating Cederman, Hug, and Krebs’ (2010) finding that democratization is more conducive to civil war than autocratization. However, space limitation prevents us from presenting and interpreting these findings.<sup>5</sup> Instead, we end this piece by briefly discussing other ways the new data released by the V-Dem make it possible to further scholarship on the relationship between democracy and democratization, respectively, and civil war.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, we do not have space to explain the way we have modelled this, including the way to measure democratization and autocratization. However, interested readers can contact the authors to receive the results of these analyses.

## IV. The way forward

To get bang for the buck, the attempt to disaggregate the measurement of political regimes should be backed up by two other analytical moves. First, the existing literature has not adequately studied the specific conditions that could potentially moderate the democracy-conflict relationship. For example, democratization and the introduction of multiparty elections during an economic crisis could increase zero-sum conflicts and ethnic-divisionary sentiments much more than is the case during periods of rapid economic growth. Hence, democratization during economic downturns could enhance the risk of conflicts while democratization during periods of rapid economic growth may be much more peaceful. Other potential conditioning factors include levels of political or socio-economic exclusion and levels of state capacity (Cederman, Gleditsch & Buhaug 2013; Sobek 2010).

Second, we would do well to go historical in investigation of the relationship between democracy, democratization, and civil war. As Hegre (2014, 168) puts it, we need to analyze the dynamics between socio-economic processes, regime change, and conflict. This calls for analyses of longer time-series, and for historical investigations of critical events and periods.

On both account, the V-Dem data can assist us. The new dataset includes a number of other indicators that can be seen as specifications of potential conditioning factors. Coupled with additional new datasets on socio-economic factors, it should be possible to systematically inquire into the way the effects of regime characteristics on civil war onset are conditioned by other factors. With respect to historical investigations, the V-Dem data go back to 1900. It is therefore less vulnerable to the objection that the regime-conflict nexus may have been suppressed in certain periods, say during the Cold War (see Møller 2016). Furthermore, an offshoot of the V-Dem project, the so-called Historical V-Dem, is currently coding selected indicators all the way back to 1789. Once this dataset is available, it will open new possibilities for analyzing the way sequences of democratization and autocratization have historically affected the propensity for civil war. Here, we stand to benefit from the fact that very different sequences of democratization occurred in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Ziblatt 2006; Knutsen, Møller & Skaaning forthcoming). Historical analysis of these processes presents a way to address, *inter alia*, the issues raised in the “sequencing debate” about whether electoral democratization should be postponed until effective, political institutions have been constructed (see Mansfield & Snyder 2007; Carothers 2007).

## Conclusions

The new scholarship that has associated democracy and democratization with civil war onset is very relevant both theoretically and empirically. However, its findings have been challenged by a number of scholars, often with reference to the aggregate nature of the analyses and the poor quality of extant data for key variables. There seems to be an emerging consensus that it is necessary to enlist new data and to further disaggregate regime characteristics to genuinely probe these relationships. In this chapter, we have reviewed this literature and we have illustrated empirically how the new V-Dem data lends itself to heed these calls.

Doing so, we have shown that the so-called inverted U-curve relationship is much more pronounced for some attributes of democracy, say, freedom of speech and assembly, than for other attributes, say, clean elections. Furthermore, when we drill down to the indicator level of the electoral attribute, the relationship disappeared completely with exception of the few indicators contaminated by violence. A similar disaggregation could be done in analyses of the relationship between democratization and autocratization, respectively, and civil war onset. Furthermore, the new data lend itself both to more systematical analysis of the extent to which these relationships are conditioned by other factors and to historical investigation of processes of regime change, including the historical sequencing of regime characteristics.

Our review of the literature and the new data that we have presented show that democracy is not a magic wand – at least not in situations where a genuine fulfillment of democratic criteria is still beckoning. There is quite some evidence that partial democracy does sometime spark conflict. Does this mean that democracy has a dark side? In a sense, the answer to this question depends very much on the baseline. Democratization inherently has a violent potential in the sense that it can be seen as a means for deprived groups to get their say, and hence their piece of the pie. But well-functioning democracy is a means for peacefully solving social conflicts. This is the Janus-faced reality of the democratization-conflict nexus. The real-world relevance of this dilemma need hardly be stressed.

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