

## **The Urban Origins of Rebellion**

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The emphasis in recent decades on weak state capacity as an explanation of civil war detracts from an important fact: some of the deadliest and most protracted rebellions since WWII arose not where the state was weak, but rather in areas of significant state power. This study challenges the predominance-of-peripheral-conflict paradigm by disentangling rebel formation from civil war onset and emphasizing the urban origins of numerous rebel groups. Quantitative analyses show that three group types—military-, social interest-, and political party-based groups—are far more likely to form in large cities, especially the capital, and far less likely to form in the rural countryside. Case studies then illustrate the constraints and opportunities nascent rebel groups of each type face. This study advances the field's understanding of a surprisingly large number of violent rebellions that current mainstream approaches and the emphasis on weak states and conflict opportunities cannot effectively explain.

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## Introduction

Civil war is dangerous for rebels. Death counts run high, the rebels rarely defeat the incumbent regime, and conflict can result in massive human rights abuses (Lacina 2006; Valentino et al. 2004; Eck and Hultman 2007). Considering the high costs of challenging the typically stronger government, scholars theorize that rebel groups should form far from the government's reach, usually in a country's rural periphery, where they can offset these costs by building clandestine networks of supporters, choosing guerrilla tactics, and courting foreign sponsors (Parkinson 2013; Wesinten 2006; Salehyan et al. 2011). In rural areas, rebels can bide their time incubating, recruiting, and making important tactical decisions until the opportunity arises to wage an effective challenge to the government (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Larson and Lewis 2018; Nedal et al. 2020). Yet, new data on rebel group formation (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) suggests that *more than a third of all rebel groups form in large urban centers,<sup>1</sup> and nearly one fifth actually form in the capital*. For example, al-Shabaab formed in Mogadishu, the AIS and GIA formed in Algiers, and the Popular Front formed in Ouagadougou. This trend goes against research expectations, suggesting a key question: Why do so many rebel groups form in cities, especially in the capital, where the state is the strongest?

In answering this question, we first make a clear distinction between rebel *formation*—the initial founding and organization of the group—and civil war *onset*—when the group initially uses violence. Indeed, it is possible that groups may form in urban areas but will not initiate their first attack until they move to the countryside, as did, for instance, the National Resistance Army in Uganda (Weinstein 2006). Yet, as we discuss below, in focusing on formation we are able to shed new light on the *origins* of rebel groups, and especially on which groups are more likely to

be successful in initiating fighting, which is still a relatively little-studied area (see, e.g., Lewis 2020).

Focusing on formation, we draw from a burgeoning literature highlighting how political entrepreneurs are reliant on their pre-existing constituency networks to recruit and mobilize supporters and fighters (e.g., Larson and Lewis 2018; Staniland 2014; Sarbahi 2014; Weinstein 2006; Buhaug et al. 2009; Hendrix 2011). We then argue that where a group forms depends on the location of these constituency networks. Facing constraints on their ability to set up an effective campaign, rebels organize where their network is most densely concentrated because this is where the strongest demand for their political agenda and effective supply of resources, recruits, and support exists. Therefore, they organize in cities if urban constituents are the primary source of support and demand for their politics.

To develop this argument, we theorize directly on the political interests of various types of rebel organizations. We then rely on newly-released rebel data from the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset to specifically analyze, for the first time, the linkages hypothesized between urbanization and rebel group formation. Because these data are group specific and do not vary over time, the inference we can draw from these data about temporal patterns is limited. However, they allow us to test the probability that specific types of organizations—whose core supporters are urbanites—will indeed form in an urban location. Consistent with our expectations, we find that constituency groups interested in national security (e.g., militaries) and those already participating in local and national politics (e.g., political parties, social interest organizations) are most likely to form in urban centers, especially capital cities. We find that each of these groups also has a high *negative* probability of forming in rural areas. Moreover, considering these potential data limitations, we complement these statistical

global analyses with qualitative examinations to illustrate the linkages between each of the three specific group types we study here – military-, social interest-, and political party-based groups – using case-based evidence from three countries: Central African Republic, Uruguay, and Republic of Congo. Uncovering these patterns using our mixed-methodological approach helps explain how the urban-rural divide shapes civil war patterns (e.g., Goodwin 2001; Mkandawire 2002; Kalyvas 2004), an area about which we know relatively little. Indeed, while quantitative studies of civil war focus on the differences between ethnic and non-ethnic wars (e.g., Sambanis 2001) or secessions and revolutions (e.g., Fearon 2004), the urban versus rural cleavage within intrastate war is largely unexamined by these scholars. Thus, we highlight an important area ripe for further research.

Our theoretical argument also addresses concerns related to urban bias. Some studies argue that in focusing on urban elites as empirical sources, scholars underestimate the prevalence and impact of civil war in the periphery (e.g., Kalyvas 2004). Our focus on urban formation helps to address the sources of this bias by separating the motivations of elites to form in urban areas from the decision of urban elites to start a rebellion more broadly. In the former, the urban-centric focus is a feature, not a bug; the latter case is where there is a risk of underplaying the importance of rural areas and populations.

Importantly, we do not propose to explain civil war onset broadly—the conditions that can influence rebellion are abundant, and without being able to observe the “sunken ships” of groups that did not form, we are limited in our ability to make such inference in any case. City-formed groups may fight in either urban areas, or rural locations, as the group relocates to the countryside, where it then takes advantage of government weaknesses (Carter et al. 2019). For illustration, as Figure 1 in the next section shows, between 1993-2008 roughly 14% of civil war

fighting began in the capital, and about 8% of civil war fighting began in large cities. However, with some exceptions (e.g., Ross 2004), a distinction is rarely made between the conditions governing group formation and those shaping its contestation behavior as the conflict unfolds. Yet, for researchers and policymakers concerned with understanding and mitigating the risk of civil war, a better understanding of where and under what conditions a group is formed is crucial.

Similarly, we do not propose to make a causal claim about the relationship between a group's type and where it formed. Instead, our goal is to illustrate that political constraints are a key feature shaping rebel group formation and provide evidence in support of this claim. We show that—by deciding *where* the rebel group actually forms—political constraints often outweigh any possible advantages obtained by organizing in rural areas, at least initially. We additionally illustrate the usefulness of distinguishing between formation and contestation not only for research seeking to understand the causes of rebellion and how it unfolds, but also for policymaking, as—according to our theory—the recommendations for *preventing* a new rebellion are quite different from the recommendations for *mitigating* an ongoing one.

## **Rebel Formation**

Extant research often focuses on civil war onset—the period in which an opposition group decides to use violence against the incumbent regime and becomes a “rebel group” (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Koren and Sarbahi 2018; Larson and Lewis 2018). As a result, an emphasis is placed on issues that facilitate *fighting*, such as low coercive and institutional state capacity (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; Carter et al. 2019), availability of natural resources and funding (e.g., Ross 2004; Weinstein 2006; Salehyan et al. 2011), geographic features (e.g., Buhaug et al. 2009), and grievances against the state (e.g., Goodwin 2001; Ugarriza and Craig

2013). Yet, violence on its own often fails to produce the concessions that the group desires (Fortna 2015), and hence explains only part of the rebellion puzzle. As a result, scholars began to pay more attention to the role of social bases in facilitating rebellion and promoting rebel mobilization (Staniland 2014; Sarbahi 2014; Weinstein 2006). But we are still missing an effective understanding of some of the exact conditions of *where and when* social base matters, especially such backed by a systematic, quantitative comparison on a global scale.

As research on social origins shows, to survive and be successful, the group needs to build and maintain a network of supporters (Staniland 2014; Sarbahi 2014; Weinstein 2006). These supporters provide resources, information, and fighters. Groups that successfully cultivate and mobilize a civilian support base are more successful in achieving concessions from the government than are other groups because they are able to transform these provisions into a greater level of sustained strength (Cunningham et al. 2009).

Thus, a key prerequisite to violent contestation begins in a period in which politically active individuals unite to form political opposition groups in order to challenge the policy position of the government. Formation requires these political entrepreneurs to identify each other, recruit new members (either voluntarily or using coercion), organize participants, and find funding for the group. Our focus is on identifying where these nascent groups decide to engage in this formation process.

In the early stages of formation, political entrepreneurs tend to operate within preexisting constituency networks. In some cases, these constituencies are composed of an ethnic (e.g., CNDD in Burundi) or a religious (e.g., al-Mahdi Army in Iraq) social group; in others, such constituencies are economic- or class-related (e.g., Communist Party of the Philippines). And in others, the political entrepreneur exists within the current military structure (e.g., AFRC in Sierra

Leone). To form a group successfully in any of these environments, the nascent leader must craft a political message that touches on that constituency's shared grievance or ideology (Ugarriza and Craig 2013). Not all messages are successful, and their merits are hotly debated within the constituency. For example, before war against Ethiopia, the Tigray deliberated between competing would-be leaders offering different visions of how the group should best confront the government and for which specific goals (Berhe 2004). As constituency members respond favorably to an individual's message, an organized network begins to form around the rising leader. This organization then serves as the core support for the leader in establishing political machinery connecting the core to a broader range of supporters, as the opposition group expands.

Such networks are hence crucial to the viability of rebellion. Since much of the group's work is clandestine, rebels rely heavily on the information provided by their network to choose trustworthy recruits with necessary skills (Weinstein 2006; Forney 2015). Indeed, a key condition for machine politics to be successful is the organization's ability to deeply penetrate their support networks and clearly monitor the behavior of their supporters (Staniland 2014; Larson and Lewis 2018). The need for political organizations to invest, build, and maintain organizational infrastructure, and rebel groups' capacity to build up such infrastructure among their densest network and core constituency, suggests that rebel group formation should "map" according to these features.

This leads to the key expectation underlying our theory: *rebel groups are most likely to form where their core constituency group is the densest*. To do so, rebels must take into account the physical location of their greatest and densest support populations rather than follow the simple opportunistic incentive of always favoring the periphery, far from the government's

reach. Rebel organizations that develop out of urban-based constituencies will have a strong incentive to form in cities, all else equal.

### **Theoretical Implications for Urban Formation**

Our theory shifts focus away from government capacity vis-à-vis the group during the rebels' *formation*. Instead, we posit that groups will form in those areas inhabited by their core constituents. Urban constituents are often more concerned with issues of industrialization and social programs, as well as political exclusion (e.g., Wallace 2013). Rural constituents, in contrast, are often concerned more with issues such as taxation, avoiding predation, and ensuring food security (e.g., Mkandawire 2002; Weinstein 2006). If these preferences cannot be adequately addressed in peaceful ways, a space opens for a rebel group that offers to advance these preferred policies by challenging the state to form at the location where demand for such policies is the greatest.

Because much of the current research on civil war focuses on rebel formation in the rural periphery (Carter et al. 2019; Nedal et al. 2020), we focus on groups whose political features suggest they should buck this trend and form *away from* domestic rural locations, in urban areas. Drawing on theories of urban politics (e.g., Wallace 2013; Koren and Sarbahi 2018), we argue that urban constituencies are most likely to support those groups whose purported policies—and political survival—is most directly tied to their own interest. Moreover, of these urban areas, capitals provide an especially relevant subset of locations where urban rebels will have a responsive and large potential constituency. At its most basic level, our argument does not favor capital formation of these groups, compared to other urban cities. Instead, the fact that many of these groups tend to form in the capital, specifically, is a function of human, political, and social



geography. Capitals are often where the largest national barracks and most important universities are located, and where political parties arise as to make the greatest impact (Koren 2017). As such, we dedicate one of our analyses below specifically to capitals, and another one to all relevant cities, as to explore if any identified impacts of our theory are capital-specific.

We posit that three dimensions best capture urban constituents' interests. First, groups that are based around the state's security interests are more likely to be concentrated in major cities than rurally. Typically, governments attempt to secure their survival through arming against domestic and international threats (Harkness 2018). They therefore build a military apparatus that works as the most effective defense against attacks directed at the regime. Given the military's intimate tie to the regime, military headquarters are primarily located in a country's capital so that there can be quick communication between the government and military elites and, if needed, the military can make a last stand against any encroachment.

The military's interests do not solely mirror those of the regime, though. Instead, the military is a complex bureaucracy that possesses its own goals and preferences for how the country should attempt to guard against domestic and international threat (De Bruin 2020). When the regime's preferences begin to diverge from those of the military leadership, segments of the military may oppose the government's policies. These factions claim to represent the true interests of the military against the erstwhile politicians. Not only is the military's top command often located in the capital,<sup>2</sup> but also are large numbers of rank-and-file troops—and it is often junior and noncommissioned officers that lead military revolts (e.g., Singh 2014). Rebel groups that form from factions within the state's military apparatus are hence likely to rise out of these urban settings. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, military factions gave rise to rebellions in

large cities across the globe, including Bangui, Central African Republic; Freetown, Sierra Leone; Maseru, Lesotho; and N'Djamena, Chad, to name only a few.

Second, and similar to military-faction based organizations, groups that focus on social interests are also more likely to favor urban areas rather than the periphery. While social interests abound, we focus on the examples of economic and educational issues, which share a similar logic and hence suggest the underlying constituent group demands are similar – to transfer the *social* sphere of the state. Cities are a country's economic hubs. Industry tends to cluster in urban areas and enjoys an endogenous relationship with the growth of the city (Venables 1996). Industry provides jobs, attracting individuals to move to the city. As the city's population grows, it attracts more industries seeking to capitalize on the preexisting infrastructure and labor base. As industrial capacities grow, however, divisions between owners and workers often expand. Unions then form to press for change in favor of the workers (e.g., Bain and Price 1980). Unions are hence political organizations whose main constituencies are industrial laborers and professionals (e.g., medical personnel, teachers, bank employees), who overwhelmingly reside in urban settings.

Similarly, cities are the educational hub of a country (e.g., Knight 2013). Universities provide social mobility opportunities that attract individuals to move to the city. At universities, students encounter new—sometimes revolutionary—ideas. The university structure allows the students to meet, express their views, and organize in pursuit of their ideals. When these ideas are in contrast with current government policy, the students can draw on their university-based organization to challenge the regime. Some student groups are thus ultimately political organizations who find their main constituents in urban areas. For example, the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), which fought the Pakistani government in the early 1990s, began as a

student organization—the All Pakistan Muttahidda Students Organization (APMSO)—at Karachi University, which promoted Mohajir identity and ran the student government. The APMSO used the university organizations to attract participants, debate policy points, and build a hierarchy that was then transitioned to wage fighting against the government (Gayer 2007).

Accordingly, union- and student-based organizations, which we call *social-interest-based*, rely primarily on urban constituents. Major universities are often located in national capitals, meaning that—as was the case with military faction-based groups—capitals are especially susceptible to student mobilization, radicalization, and militarization. Similarly, major labor unions are likely to operate in administrative capitals, at least in some capacity, where strikes are most likely to generate impact and secure state concessions.

Third, we posit that preexisting (both legal and illegal) political parties are more likely to form rebel organizations in urban areas. Certainly, parties can represent urban or rural interests. However, to effectively serve their constituents, all aspiring parties must relocate to cities, especially national or district/province capitals, because it is in these locations where politics occur. Accordingly, any aspiring political party must develop some degree of machinery that allows it to conduct politics and mobilize potential voters. Especially in developing regions and quasi-democracies, urban voters have overall greater influence on the electoral process compared with rural voters, which means that the support of the former is more important, both for the regime in power and for any party that might seek to challenge it (Majumdar et al. 2004; Wallace 2013).

The necessity to concentrate in the (capital) city in order to participate in the political process also means that if peaceful politics fail—for instance, the regime illegalizes all opposition parties, or the party in question purports a revolutionary ideology that is incongruent

with the regime's (e.g., communist, extreme Islamist)—a competing party may choose to use violence to frame itself as an alternative for the regime (Goodwin 2001). The most effective means of achieving this goal is for the party to rely on its political machinery and networks to mobilize urban supporters to its cause. This is true even for parties-turn-rebel-groups that end up relocating to the countryside in order to increase their numbers and muster resources. The Armed Islamic Group in Algeria (GIA), for example, “began to organize in 1992, after a military intervention put an end to an electoral process that had promised to bring to power the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front)... a number of groups and personalities opted to stay outside of the FIS largely because they did not believe that an Islamic state could be established through elections and democracy” (Hafez 2000, 573). The GIA organized and formed in the capital, Algiers, and subsequently—through providing a religiously-motivated alternative to the state—incorporated multiple armed Islamic groups from different parts of the country under its umbrella (Hafez 2000, 576-578).

Before proceeding to derive and test relevant research hypotheses, we want to reiterate again that the fact that whether a group might *form* in a given area does not mean it would necessarily *fight* in this location. This is indeed illustrated in Figure 1, which shows that between 1993 and 2008,<sup>3</sup> only 14% of civil war fighting began in the capital, and about 8% of civil war fighting began in large cities (50,000 or more residents), even though according to the FORGE dataset, a third of all rebel groups form in large urban centers, and nearly one fifth formed in the capital. An explanation for this trend is that many groups that form in the capital or in a large city do not start their fighting there, while some groups that form in rural areas might actually conduct their first attack on the capital. Figure 1 therefore illustrates the importance of distinguishing between where a group forms and where it fights. Moreover, if the distinctions we

make between these three group types are indeed correct, we should see timing differences between formation and onset, even if fighting, when it happens, arises within the city.

**[Insert Figure 1 about here]**

**Figure 1:** Ratio of rebellions that began in cities and in the capital, 1993-2008

For instance, for military-faction-based groups, taking too much time between deciding to oust the regime and acting on this decision will likely make such plots widely known within and outside their barracks' confines, with potentially swift and deadly repercussions. Military groups also do not have the benefit of pursuing less violent alternatives first, making the precipitous use of violence the most viable decision (Harkness 2018; De Bruin 2020). Such groups also have an immediate access to a large number of trained recruits and—potentially—weapons and equipment, meaning there is less need for an incubation period. Accordingly, the time passed between formation and onset for these groups should be relatively short.

In contrast, party- and social-interest-based movements might require more time before physically attacking the government. First, such groups might still choose to pursue less violent alternatives initially, implementing violence only as last resort after exhausting the alternatives (Valentino et al. 2004). Second, unlike military-faction-based groups, these two group types rarely have a large supply of military-trained recruits or equipment, forcing them to build these capacities up from scratch, using their effective and dense local support networks (Weinstein 2006).

For illustration, we combined the dates of formation for each rebel group in the three relevant categories from the FORGE dataset (discussed in detail below) with the onset dates of their respective rebellion from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict

Database, and plotted the average time passed (in years) from formation to onset for each category (with 95% confidence intervals) in Figure 2. As this plot shows, military-faction-based groups fight their first battle of the rebellion a little over six months after formation, on average. In contrast, social-interest-based groups take nearly 7 years to fight their first battle after formation, while political-party-based groups take about 3.5 years, on average.

**[Insert Figure 2 about here]**

**Figure 2:** Years between group formation and rebellion onset for military-faction-, social-interest-, and political-party-based groups.

Given the expected centrality of cities, and especially the capital (as we discussed above), to the formation of the three group types discussed above, we derive and test the following two related expectations:

***Hypothesis 1:** Military-faction-, social-interest-, and political-party-based groups are each more likely to form in urban rather than rural areas.*

***Hypothesis 2:** Military-faction-, social-interest-, and political-party-based groups are each more likely to form in the capital compared with other locations.*

### **Cross-Sectional Analysis**

We test our hypotheses on a sample of all rebel groups formed between 1941 and 2011, a total of 380 groups.<sup>4</sup> To identify these groups, we rely on information from the Foundations of

Rebel Group Emergence Dataset (FORGE) (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020), which codes every group that has been involved in a civil war, as indicated by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset as a conflict with at least 25 combatant casualties (Pettersen et al. 2019; Gleditsch et al. 2002).

Braithwaite and Cunningham provide the city, town, or village of the group's initial formation.<sup>5</sup> From this information, we independently code four different dependent variables (DVs) to test our hypotheses. Each DV corresponds to a different type of formation location. Our four DVs hence code whether a group was formed (i) in the country's capital, (ii) in a large city,<sup>6</sup> or (iii) in a rural area, (=1) or not (=0).<sup>7</sup> Approximately 17% of the rebel organizations in our data were formed in the capital and 36% were formed in a large city.<sup>8</sup> Accounting for groups that formed in large cities, as well as groups that formed abroad (about 20% of the sample), about 45% of our sample consist of groups that were formed in domestic rural (i.e., non-urbanized) areas.

Correspondingly, we also code three explanatory variables using information from FORGE. First, we create an indicator measuring if a given rebel group was originally organized by a military faction (=1) or not (=0).<sup>9</sup> Second, we create a variable for whether the rebels originated in a social interest group, i.e., a labor union or a youth movement (=1) or not (=0). Finally, we create an indicator of whether a given rebel group originated in a political party (=1) or not (=0). Approximately 13% of the rebel organizations in our 380-group dataset originated in a military faction, about 7% were formed by social interest organizations, and about 20% were founded by political parties.<sup>10</sup>

Considering that reliance on “kitchen sink” models can generate inferential biases, especially in time-constant data such as the ones used here (Schrodt 2014), we include controls

for only the most important confounders discussed in extant research. First, building on research highlighting the role of ethnic ties in rebel formation (e.g., Cederman et al. 2010), as well as our previous discussion about these groups as a potential confounder, we create a control for whether a given rebel group represented an ethnic community (=1) or not (=0) (from Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) (about 50% of the groups in our 380 group sample). Second, considering the role of relative strength and the effect opportunity is hypothesized to have on the probability of rebel formation, we include an indicator of each group's relative strength vis-à-vis the government (from Cunningham et al. 2009). Summary statistics for all variables are reported in Table A1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

Because our dependent variables are all binary, we rely on logistic regression, where each independent variable's coefficient represents the (log) odds of the DV taking a value of =1 if the independent variable of interest is also =1. To account for country specific heterogeneities, considering that some countries contain more than one group, all our standard errors are clustered by country.

Table 1 reports the estimates from three logit models, each designed to test the impact of our independent variables on the DV. Considering that our data are rebel-group constant (i.e., do not vary over time), these models are unsuitable for identifying a causal relationship between a group's type and formation location, but they are nevertheless helpful in identifying descriptive relationships in the data. As such, there is value in these exercises for the purpose of illustrating the viability of an argument, especially when combined with qualitative evidence from specific cases, as we do below (see, e.g., Seawright and Gerring 2008).

With this caveat in mind, the results broadly confirm our research hypotheses. Rebel groups that originated in the military, social interest organizations, and political parties were all



statistically (to at least the  $p < .1$  level) likely to be formed in a large city and/or (to at least the  $p < .05$  level) in the capital. Moreover, rebel groups that originated in a military faction were also statistically (to the  $p < .01$  level) unlikely to form in rural areas. Our Social Interest and Political Party indicators also have a similar negative effect, which—although not statistically significant—is in the expected direction. Importantly, the results are not due to having an ethnic base (as Ethnic Group has a positive and statistically significant effect on the probability of forming in rural area and a negative and statistically significant influence on the probability of forming in urban locations) or group capacity (which has no statistically-robust effects). Overall, then, Table 1 confirms our theoretical expectations and research hypotheses.

**Table 1:** Logit model estimates of rebel group formation location

**[Insert Table 1 about here]**

Next, we assess the *substantive* effect of each of our explanatory variables on each of our DVs of interest. To this end, Figure 3 plots the average first difference change in predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals in bars) in our models when each of our three DVs takes a value of  $Y=1$  as each of our main explanatory variables—Military Faction, Social Interest, and Political Party—is changed from  $X=0$  to  $X=1$ , holding all other variables at their modes (for dichotomous variables) or medians (for ordinal variables).

The plot on the upper left shows the first difference change in the probability of a group being formed in the capital. Here, we see that Military Faction has—on average—the greatest increase in predicted probability (~37%) of being formed in the capital, followed by Social Interest (~23%) and Political Parties (~19%). Moving to the upper right plot, the results remain largely unchanged when large cities are concerned, with Military Faction again showing the

greatest increase—on average—in the predicted probability of being formed in a large city (~40%), followed—this time—by Political Party (~22%), and Social Interest (~19%). Finally, the bottom plot reports the predicted change in the probability of each of our rebel group types being formed in a rural area. In line with our theory, none of our urban constituency groups have a positive probability of being formed in a rural area. Rather, on average, Military Factions have a -25% decrease in the predicted probability of being formed rurally, followed by Social Interest with a -13% decrease and Political Parties, with an average decrease of -9% in said probability. The substantive impacts derived from our models hence provide additional support for our theoretical expectations by showing that the effects predicted based on our theory are not only statistically significant, but also quite sizable.

To further illustrate our findings' viability, we conduct a battery of sensitivity analyses to show our findings are robust to a host of potential confounders, specification, and modeling choices. First, recall that we did not include many controls in the models in Table 1 because we wanted to avoid potential biases due to the inclusion of a large number of controls. To this end, Table 2 adds country-level controls for population and GDP per capita (at the time of group formation; both from Gleditsch 2002), area covered with mountains, and ethnic and religious fractionalization to account for the possible role of state capacity and other factors that might affect the probability of fighting (all three controls from Fearon and Laitin 2003). As Table 2 illustrates, our findings are robust to the inclusion of these controls, even though we lose 43 observations due to missing information on some of these controls.

**Table 2:** Logit model estimates of rebel group formation location – extended controls

**[Insert Table 2 about here]**

The rest of our robustness models are discussed in detail in the Supplemental Appendix due to space constraints, and include: (i) removing the Ethnic Group and Relative Strength controls; (ii) using different thresholds to dichotomize our Large City DV; (iii) using country fixed effects, to account for all country-specific factors that are constant over time; (iv) disaggregating Social Interest to its constituent categories; (v) adding controls for secessionist and inclusionary agendas and political ideology; (vi) accounting for endogeneity in the Political Party variable using a two-step probit model with a lagged party illegalization instrument; (vii) a multinomial logit model with a modified DV to account for IIA violations; and (viii) a multivariate probit model that accounts for mutual dependence between the different DVs. Crucially, our findings are reasonably robust to these different models for Hypothesis H1 and hold in every case for Hypothesis H2, suggesting our theory cannot be immediately rejected.<sup>11</sup>

**[Insert Figure 3 about here]**

**Figure 3:** First difference change in the probability of group formation location by group type

### **Illustrative Examples**

Considering the potential problems of drawing inference from group-constant data, in addition to these statistical tests, we also conduct qualitative analysis of three particular cases designed to test the linkages between urban formation and each of our group types. Here, we focused specifically on the role of a capital city. Accordingly, these cases were selected using the “most-typical” criterion (see Seawright and Gerring 2008, 297), identifying a rebel formation scenario that corresponds to each of our three constituent categories (military, social base, and political party). Here, we wanted to make sure first not to include cases where a group had more

than one potential constituent population, which allows us to identify the specific impact of the capital on each group type and constituency. Additionally, we wanted to ensure that we only capture formation in capital cities. Finally, we wanted to ensure that any effects we identify in a capital are not due to variation across small and large cities by focusing on cities of roughly the same order of magnitude in size (0.5-1.5 million individuals). Accordingly, we select the Central African Republic for a military group (capital: Bangui), Paraguay for a social-interest group (capital: Asunción), and the Republic of Congo for political party groups (capital: Brazzaville).

### *Military-based Groups: Central African Republic's Coups*

The Central African Republic's (CAR) capital city is Bangui. Like most counties, CAR headquarters its armed forces in the capital. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, CAR experienced a series of interlocking coups and mutinies in Bangui that eventually led to the ousting of President Ange-Felix Patassé. Here, we focus on three events—in 1996, 2001, and 2002. We discuss these attacks because while the motive for each was very different, the logic of rebel formation is similar in each, and is also in line with our theoretical expectations regarding military-faction-based group formation.

In 1996, roughly 200 soldiers challenged Patassé's regime in Bangui. These soldiers, angered over not being paid their wages, demanded the president's resignation. From their barracks in Bangui, the troops attacked the presidential guard and forces loyal to Patassé. Eventually, France intervened to suppress the rebellion. The mutineers, defeated, returned to their barracks and Patassé granted them amnesty (NYT 1996). However, violence between various factions of the military and Patassé's loyalists continued in Bangui until 1997, when the sides signed the Bangui Agreements and received peacekeeping support (HRW 2007). In 2001,

dissatisfied soldiers again launched attacks from their barracks in Bangui (CNN 2001). Here, the coup's motivation was ethnic grievance, rather than missed pay, as Yakoma soldiers attempted to oust Patassé for mistreatment of their kin group, nationally. Patassé defeated the coup and increased repression of the Yakoma (New Humanitarian 2001). Meanwhile, Patassé accused Army Chief of Staff, François Bozizé, of supporting the coup. In response, Bozizé rallied troops loyal to him and attempted to oust Patassé in Bangui. Bozizé failed and fled to Chad (HRW 2007).

Patterns in each of these rebellions help support our argument and both Hypotheses 1 and 2. Members of the military initiated fighting in each case. Furthermore, these rebellions all formed in the capital city of Bangui, where the “constituency” of likeminded comrades are housed as well as the state's seat of power, rather than seeking to build strength and support outside the regime's stronghold before fighting. In line with Figure 1, in each case, the period between the formation of a rebel conspiracy and attacks was very short. In each case, fighting begins as a reaction to a specific, and different, grievance. In 1996, for instance, only 200 of CAR's 5,000 soldiers rebelled, despite widespread pay shortages. Similarly, the Yakoma soldiers did not attempt to mobilize their ethnic kin living in a region east of the capital before attacking in 2001. Lastly, Bozizé reacted immediately to Patassé's challenge—mobilizing supporters in the capital to oust the president, rather than building support elsewhere before fighting. Each of these cases points to a grievance motivating rebel formation, but with fighting occurring where the core supporters were concentrated—directly from the doorways of their barracks.

In this case, the opportunity logic of rural rebellion is not key to the groups' formation. However, it is more crucial once contestation begins. After some of these rebel groups formed in the capital, they relocated to the countryside to stay away of government's reach. Once Bozizé

retreated to Chad, he and his fighters began to seek further opportunities to wage war. They moved their operations away from CAR—their home country—and into the periphery of a neighboring country: Chad. There they began to recruit fighters locally (HRW 2007). This strategy eventually proved successful for Bozizé, as he and his fighters ousted Patassé in 2003. The evidence in this case hence points toward an interesting intersection where the group is formed based on urban constituencies, but then the weak-state logic as the conflict unfolds. Thus, formation and contestation may follow different logics.

### *Social Interest-based Rebellions: The Tupamaros in Uruguay*

Uruguay's Tupamaros (formally, Movimiento de Liberación Nacional – Tupamaros) are a useful illustration of how a rebel group with a social movement base arises in an urban area. The group was formed in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital, in the mid-1960s. It was “born from the fusion of a militant cane workers' union, known as UTA, with a confederacy of left-wing militias known as the Coordinador” (Brum 2014, 391). The Tupamaros' campaign involved kidnapping, terrorist attacks, and later attacks against military forces, and took place mostly, although not only, in urban areas (Brum 2014; Waldman 2011). Indeed, although the Tupamaros took inspiration from other successful Latin American rebel leaders such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, their methods and tactics actually served as motivation for later European terrorist groups such as the Provisional IRA and the German Red Army Faction (Brum 2014, 387).

Uruguay is a small country, and its population is heavily concentrated in Montevideo, which provides one explanation why urban denizens provided most of the group's constituents. As such, the Tupamaros's origin and ties to urban areas are in line with both Hypotheses 1 and 2. First, the organization originated with social movements, especially those representing sectors

affected by poor economic circumstances. Local industries failed to compete with international ones, and as capital left the country, social security systems broke down, putting pressures on labor unions and agricultural workers' unions to mobilize, enabling radical left political leaders to capitalize on the discontent among these supporters (Waldman 2011, 719-720).

Second, the group drew strong support from students, academics, and the educated classes. Originally relying primarily on legal actions, the Tupamaros shifted their tactics toward illicit activities (e.g., robbing a casino and redistributing the money to employees) and finally violence as these options were exhausted or illegalized (Brum 2014). This led to the group's formation in 1966 under the convictions "that only a socialist revolution in the Marxist sense of the term would resolve the country's structural problems; and that the ruling class, the 'Oligarchy,' would not peacefully give in and abandon power but had to be compelled to do so by force" (Waldman 2011, 720). Yet, this was not a case of political parties seeking revolution, as several militarist factions representing the socialist and communist parties existed prior to the Tupamaros. Rather, it was sectors of the urban classes—those most affected by the economic downturn—that were especially motivated, in particular "bank employees, teachers, high school students, and university students sympathized with the Tupamaros's attacks against state officials and institutions and often openly applauded them" (Waldman 2011, 721).

Third, in line with our key claim, the Tupamaros were founded where their network of supporters was the densest, that is in Montevideo. Again, recruits and supporters were not the classic radical activists of leftist political parties, but rather unionized middleclass labor, and included "medical doctors, educators, engineers, dentists, bankers, priests, soldiers, government bureaucrats, journalists, and more" (Brum 2014, 396). Indeed, the Tupamaros rebellion failed

largely because some of its actions in 1970 economically affected and alienated large parts of its network (Brum 2014, 397).

Interestingly, the Tupamaros represent one example of a group where both formation and onset took place primarily in the capital. This fact provides additional illustration to the interesting fork-in-the-road groups faced between choosing to fight in urban areas or relocate to the countryside as the conflict unfolds.

### *Political Party-based Groups: The Case of Congo*

In 1992, the Republic of Congo held its first democratic election. Pascal Lissouba and his Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS) party won the presidency. Despite electoral victory, however, Lissouba failed to capture support from the army or the country's former allies. Distrusting the army, Lissouba rallied his supporters into a personal security force, through which he intended to retain power of Brazzaville and the rest of Congo (Englebert and Ron 2004).

Bernard Kolelas also ran in the 1992 election, finishing second. Kolelas had long been active in Congolese politics. Having completed schooling in Brazzaville, Kolelas stayed in the capital and worked in government in the 1960s (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1997). However, in 1978, Kolelas was arrested for helping plan a coup. When released two years later, Kolelas continued his political maneuvering in Brazzaville, and eventually formed the Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integral Development (MCDDI). The MCDDI was based in Brazzaville, but drew support from the Pool Department (New Humanitarian 2005). After losing the election in 1992, Kolelas sensed the military's instability and feared Lissouba's extra-legal formation of his



reserve présidentielle (later called the Aubevillois or Cocoye). In response, Kolelas transformed his Brazzaville-based political party, forming it into an armed opposition group, which he called the Ninjas.

The Ninjas soon waged war on Lissouba's government. In 1993, after forming his own personal security force, Lissouba dissolved parliament and called new elections. When the MCDDI polled poorly in the first round, Kolelas claimed fraud. He boycotted the election and called for civil disobedience. Lissouba responded by ordering the Aubevillois to oust Kolelas from the capital. The fighting lasted nearly a year and killed over 2,000 people before Lissouba and Kolelas signed a ceasefire (Englebert and Ron 2004).

Patterns in the Ninjas' formation and fighting help support our argument and illustrate the lineages between political-party-based groups and urban areas. Importantly, the Ninjas formed from Kolelas' MCDDI party. While the party primarily drew supporters from the Pool Department (a province in the southern part of the state), its headquarters was in Brazzaville. The location of the party's leadership and political machinery thus led the Ninjas to form in Brazzaville instead of Pool. This formation decision highlights the logic of political origins relative to opportunity for two reasons.

First, without the help of the military, Lissouba's government struggled to project power outside the capital. In line with extant research, this should mean that the Ninjas will take advantage of these power asymmetries and form deep within the Pool Department, which was not the case, as Kolelas' decision meant the Ninjas formed right where the government could wage an effective fight against it. Second, originally the Ninjas were not strong enough to pose significant challenge to the regime: The Ninjas were the weakest armed force in Brazzaville, behind Former-President Denis Sassou Nguesso's Cobra militia, the military, and Lissouba's

Aubevillois militia. Clearly, Kolelas acted in complete opposition to the predictions of the weak-state argument proponents, which would expect him to build up his support in the periphery before moving to Brazzaville.

Interestingly, while the Ninja's origin is in line with our argument concerning a logic of rebel formation, their later movements are also in line with traditional weak-state-based claims. After the ceasefire with Lissouba's forces, the Ninjas remained in Brazzaville, as Kolelas became mayor of the capital. In 1997, as a new election loomed, Sassou announced his intention to run. Lissouba attempted to prevent Sassou from campaigning, leading to war between the Aubevillois and Cobra militias. While Kolelas remained neutral for most of the war, he and the Ninja ultimately backed Lissouba and were defeated. Upon defeat, the Ninjas took shelter in the peripheral area of Pool, where they sought to attract new recruits and rearm before again challenging the new Sassou regime. The Ninjas then fought their way from the periphery back to the capital (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999). These behaviors fit well with the weak-state logic, as the weaker opposition mobilizes in the periphery before challenging the capital.

## **Conclusion**

Our study has several important implications. First, it suggests that future work seeking to understand rebel formation and civil war should give close consideration to the political motivations of rebel organizations. More than looking only at grievances that might affect mobilization or focusing on the locations within the state where the government is weakest, research will benefit from exploring the intersection between the two. This also means taking an added step beyond our findings—which, similarly to past research (e.g. Weinstein 2006;

Parkinson 2013; Stanliand 2014), relate to groups that already made the decision to form—to look at how these dynamics affects the decision of group to form in the first place.

Our focus on the motivations of elites to organize in cities also helps in elucidating when urban-centric analyses should focus on urban elites vs. when such focus can lead to inferential biases (Kalyvas 2004). Aggrieved or otherwise motivated populations can provide support for rebels. Where these populations are dense, the opportunity arises for entrepreneurial leaders who seek to challenge the regime to take advantage of these connections and networks of support and establish an illegal, armed political organization that represents these people (e.g., Larson and Lewis 2018). This finding can also explain why weak states experience rebellions but do so in areas of state power (Dolan et al. 2018; Koren and Sarbahi 2018). Weak states are more likely to experience domestic competition over political power or access to resources and lack the capacity to address grievances peacefully (Goodwin 2001). Yet, conflict over such fracture lines will often arise in these countries exactly where the state is strong because this is where relevant populations that support the rebels reside. This logic suggests that scholars should take further care in distinguishing rebel formation from their contestation with the government. Furthermore, our study only focuses on which types of constituencies are most likely to exist in cities and thus give rise to armed groups in these locations. In distinguishing formation from contestation, we suggest that a fruitful avenue of future research would be to clarify which types of groups should emerge in the periphery—which types of constituencies are most likely to be rural across time and space?

Second, there are policy implications. Our findings suggest a more complex picture of the origins of rebel groups, as they highlight a new set of “risk cases” where policymakers should look when trying to identify and mitigate the potential for rebellion. If, as we argue, rebel

organizations arise in response to political demand for their services, then more focus should be placed on specific urban populations that are most likely to actively support a violent opposition group, or at least highly approve of its action. We showed that illegalized political parties are suspect, as well as concentrated military compounds and affected social groups. Each of these venues provides rebel leaders with strong incentives to capitalize on their capacities. Providing alternatives to violent politics—e.g., by promoting peaceful civil disobedience within the bounds of the law or via addressing the grievances of these specific high-risk groups—can help mitigate the possibility of rebellion. Supplying effective politics, in other words, is not only the problem, but also one possible solution.

For policymakers who want to *prevent* civil war, understanding where and why armed non-state actors form is essential. Questions and theories about rebel movement (conflict duration, fighting severity, civilian victimization, outcome, etc.) only become of interest once the group forms. If formation is limited, then so is war. We also note, however, that we believe that the location of rebel formation—and thus the location of the rebels' key constituents—has implications for issues related to conflict duration, fighting severity, civilian victimization, outcome, etc. For example, the government's use of civilian victimization may increase when fighting rebels who draw from an urban-base, since more of the population is located in a single, easy-to-target location. Or, rebels that originate in the capital may be more successful than other groups because they have already reached the heart of the government's zone of control. We thus encourage future scholars to more fully unpack how rebel formation influences the other stages of war.

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**Table 1:** Logit model estimates of rebel group formation location

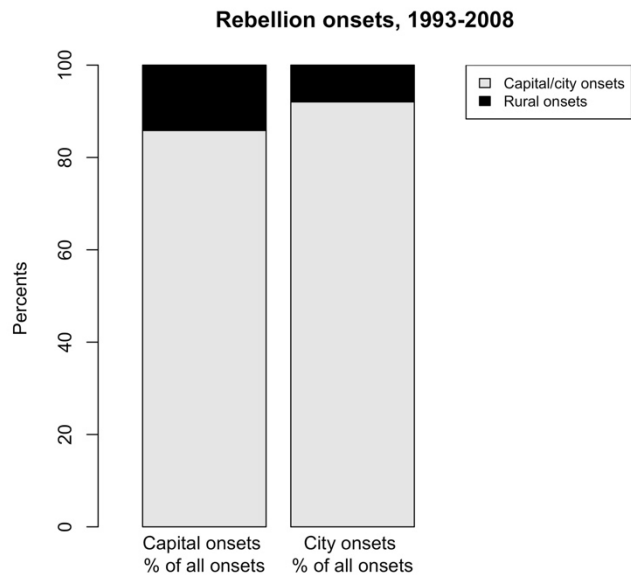
	<b>Capital</b>	<b>Large city</b>	<b>Rural</b>
<i>Military faction</i>	2.228*** (0.405)	1.730*** (0.370)	-1.199*** (0.409)
<i>Social interest</i>	1.435** (0.541)	0.813* (0.454)	-0.571 (0.464)
<i>Political party</i>	1.376*** (0.362)	0.947*** (0.283)	-0.369 (0.282)
<i>Ethnic group</i>	-0.683* (0.361)	-0.525** (0.248)	0.609*** (0.228)
<i>Relative strength</i>	0.210 (0.190)	0.024 (0.152)	-0.049 (0.147)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.289*** (0.443)	-0.236 (0.368)	-0.998*** (0.379)
AIC	269.50	439.91	492.02
N		378	

Note: Coefficients are reported with standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

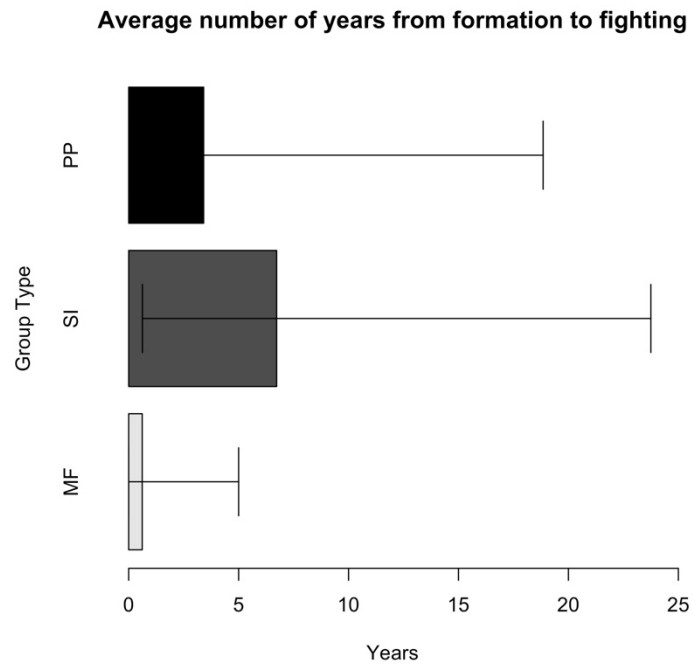
**Table 2:** Logit model estimates of rebel group formation location – extended controls

	<b>Capital</b>	<b>Large city</b>	<b>Rural</b>
<i>Military faction</i>	2.194*** (0.437)	1.873*** (0.404)	-0.952*** (0.420)
<i>Social interest</i>	1.729** (0.623)	0.999* (0.512)	-0.483 (0.519)
<i>Political party</i>	1.354*** (0.416)	0.828** (0.323)	-0.319 (0.316)
<i>Ethnic group</i>	-0.910** (0.408)	-0.636** (0.282)	0.681*** (0.258)
<i>Relative strength</i>	0.021 (0.215)	0.098 (0.181)	0.019 (0.169)
<i>Population (log)</i>	-0.526*** (0.177)	0.006 (0.108)	0.275*** (0.103)
<i>GDP PC (log)</i>	0.198 (0.206)	0.548*** (0.154)	-0.285* (0.146)
<i>% Mountain</i>	0.004 (0.008)	-0.003 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)
<i>Ethnic frac.</i>	-1.119 (0.787)	-0.972 (0.635)	0.489 (0.615)
<i>Religious frac.</i>	0.887 (0.930)	-0.310 (0.738)	-0.229 (0.702)
<i>Constant</i>	1.782 (2.376)	-4.423*** (1.606)	-1.116 (1.506)
AIC	236.22	372.07	428.795
N		335	

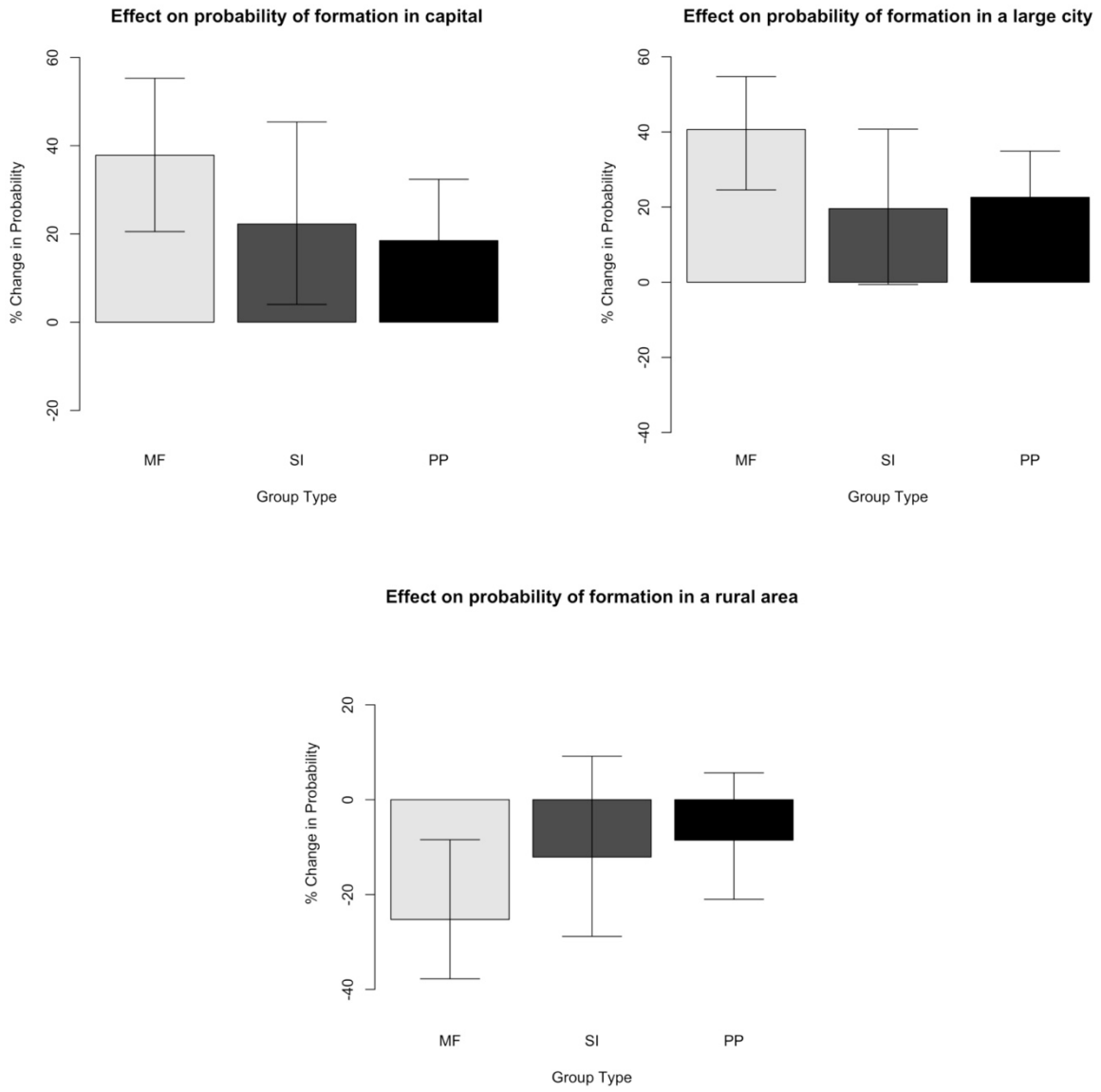
Note: Coefficients are reported with standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 1:** Ratio of rebellions that began in cities and in the capital, 1993-2008



**Figure 2:** Years between group formation and rebellion onset for military-faction-, social-interest-, and political-party-based groups.



**Figure 3:** First difference change in the probability of group formation location by group type

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<sup>1</sup> 50,000+ populations

<sup>2</sup> See Supplemental appendix

<sup>3</sup> The period for which information on local civil war spread and nighttime light emissions was available, considering we used nighttime light emissions to define a large-city threshold.

<sup>4</sup> Although the dataset contains 425 such organizations, we are unable to analyze all of them due to the lack of information on formation location. As far as we can tell from comparing these data with the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, this missingness is not systematic, meaning the data is likely missing (completely) at random. We lose an additional two observations in Table 1 below due to missing information on the other variables.

<sup>5</sup> FORGE provides some locations as the province, rather than a precise city or village. If we are unable to identify a more precise location, we treat this as rural, as any urban bias in the data would suggest that urban locations are more likely to be identified, which also helps to ensure that estimation biases, if any, will be toward rural rather than urban areas (i.e., toward rejecting our hypotheses). Observations with missing information above the province level were omitted from the sample.

<sup>6</sup> We use a threshold of 50,000 residents or more to define a large city, while reporting in the Supplemental Appendix a set of robustness models corresponding to higher and lower thresholds to show our results are not affected by our dichotomization threshold choice.

<sup>7</sup> A list of all primary and secondary sources used to code these variables is available upon request.

<sup>8</sup> Note that we include capitals in our large city category, assuming their size was 50,000 or more residents. This decision was based on the fact that the large city category “nests” the capital



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category, we believe that it allows us to capture the broader reasons large cities – including capitals – might be associated with formation risk, while focusing only on capitals allows us to capture the political, symbolic, and other factors specific to these locations. Also note that less than half of big cities were also capitals, suggesting this decision is unlikely to impact the results.

<sup>9</sup> Military-based rebels do not require a coup to have occurred and failed. While most of these cases are due to failed coups (72% of our cases according to Albrecht et al.’s 2021 CAM dataset), others are the result of the military joining another group (e.g., political parties or social groups, as was the case in the formation of the BRA in Papua New Guinea) to jointly create an armed opposition group to the government.

<sup>10</sup> FORGE codes each base from which a group draws. It is possible for a group to draw on more than one social base (see Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020:186). Our indicator variable captures if a rebel group draws from at least one of the base types on which we hypothesize.

<sup>11</sup> When we drop all military-based rebellions that formed as a result of a failed coup, the remaining cases lack a statistically significant relationship with urban formation (see Table A11, supplemental appendix). This result indicates that coup-based military groups are an important part of this process. It also illustrates that coup-based groups follow a similar formation to other rebel groups and are thus one form of the technology of rebellion (see Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).