Why Civil Wars are Fought by Extremists:

Polarization, Abstention and the Cost of Participation

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Abstract

Why are civil wars fought by extremists rather than moderates? The median voter theorem holds that organizations contesting for power will shift to the center of the ideological spectrum to maximize their support. Such models assume that supporting means voting and that it is relatively costless. When it is costly for individuals to support organizations contesting for power, such as in civil war contexts, the central tendency is constrained by the cost of participation. In equilibrium, those to either extreme are more likely to participate, moderates tend to abstain. The range of moderates who abstain grows larger the more costly participation becomes. I develop a spatial model of participation that exhibits these features and discuss its implications in the case of the civil wars in Central American in the 1970s and 1980s and Syrian Civil War. In Central America, right and left wing forces fought civil wars and moderates were silenced by violence. When elections were held, moderate parties out-polled extremists. In Syria, a broad coalition of opposition groups initially opposed the regime through peaceful demonstrations, that were violently suppressed by the government side. The Free Syrian Army arose when government troops defected to the opposition, and it continued to pursue a moderate political course. However, as the fighting wore on it was eclipsed by Salafi jihadist groups such as the Al Nusra front and the Islamic State.

Civil wars are often fought by extremists. Many ideological civil wars of the 20th century, such as those in Latin America, pitted communists against right wing authoritarians, with centrist democrats weak or on the sidelines. Ethnic civil wars often pit secessionists against the state, with moderates content with autonomy poorly represented. During the civil war in Yugoslavia, for instance, extremist groups rapidly destroyed a multi-ethnic state and separated populations that had lived together, albeit with a certain level of friction, for decades.

At one level, it is not puzzling that extremists would fight civil wars. It is difficult to achieve extreme goals through normal democratic processes. The interests that benefit from the status quo are usually well mobilized and represented in existing institutions, which makes radical change difficult to implement. In some cases, such as the Nazis in Germany, extreme parties win elections and then can impose their agenda from the top down. But typically, if you want to impose radical change you have to fight and win power first. The more puzzling question is why are extremists not defeated by moderates? If moderates are more numerous and better represented in the institutions of society, they would seem to have almost insuperable advantages over extremists. Yet, in some cases there do not even seem to be important moderate players on the battlefield, and in others the moderates are weak and outfought by extremists of one stripe or another. This seems to go against the median voter theorem, which holds that there is a central tendency in politics, that drives groups competing for power to adopt centrist positions, in order to draw more support from the population (Black 1948). Something in civil wars seems to be countering this central tendency.

Two main sets of explanations for this pattern have been advanced. First, it may be that moderates actually support extremist groups in civil wars, despite or even because they are extreme. Moderates might support extremist groups because they are perceived to be less corrupt than the ruling elites, or than moderate rebel groups, if such exist. The extremist ideology, such as communism or Islamic fundamentalism, may serve as a signal that the group consists of true believers, who are sincerely fighting for their beliefs, and not to line their pockets once they win (Cammett & Luong 2014, Walter 2017). Alternatively, moderates may support extremists because they want to be represented in any subsequent bargaining by someone more extreme than themselves, in hopes that the resultant deal will more closely reflect their own preferences (Kedar 2005). In bargaining, it is widely believed that one should start from an extreme position and then compromise towards one's true preferences, rather than reveal one's true preferences at the outset. The logic of *outbidding* suggests that groups competing for power will actually be driven towards the extremes by these considerations, rather than towards the center (Bloom 2005).

A second explanation is that it is not domestic support that matters, but external support. Perhaps extremists are better at attracting external support than moderate groups. If there are powerful extremist states or diasporas willing to offer their support, this may be determinative in many cases. For instance, during the Cold War the U.S. and Soviet Union offered support to rebel groups and government counterinsurgents that helped define the terms of many civil wars (Kalyvas & Balcells 2010). In cases where this theory applies, extremist groups will prevail over moderate groups that have as much or even more domestic support, because of their advantages in securing international assistance (Toukan 2016).

While these explanations have some merit, I argue that an alternative mechanism may be at work, which causes moderates to drop out, or stop participating in politics once politics assumes the violent form of civil war. A basic fact about civil war is that it is costly to participate in one, much more costly than participating in normal democratic politics. In functioning democracies, mass participation usually consists of voting, and perhaps attending rallies or making campaign contributions. In civil wars, by contrast, supporting a combatant can mean offering them information, food or shelter, at the risk of retaliation from the other side, or actually joining up and fighting. These actions can result in great losses and even death. Of course, both moderates and extremists feel these costs, and so both have less incentive to participate in a civil war. Moderates, however, being caught between two competing groups, already have weak incentives to participate in the first place. Raise the cost of participation and they tend, more than extremists, to drop out. As I show below, in a simple spatial model of political competition, the more costly participation is, the more extreme the organizations vying for support will become, and the wider the range of moderates who will abstain and let the extremists fight it out. In this story, success for the extremists is driven by the cost of fighting, and the resultant tendency of the moderates to drop out and not support either side.

In what follows, I will briefly review the literature on spatial models of participation, polarization, and the role of ideology in civil wars. I then briefly discuss the logic of abstention, or why people should not participate if they are indifferent between the organizations competing for power. I then present a model of costly participation and illustrate the central result that the higher the cost of participation, the more extreme the groups

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contesting for power will become and the larger the range of moderates in the middle that will not participate. I conclude with a brief discussion of the civil wars in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s and the Syrian Civil War. In Central America, the civil wars pitted left wing guerrillas against right wing elements in the military and associated paramilitary organizations. In Syria, initial demonstrations in 2011 attracted widespread support and started with moderate demands for greater freedom and democratization. However, when the regime responded with violence, moderate participation began to dry up. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and related political groups, founded by Syrian Army deserters, initially promulgated a moderate platform in line with the demands of the demonstrators. However, the FSA rapidly lost ground to competing Islamist groups, most prominently the Al Nusra front, founded with aid from the precursor of the Islamic State in Iraq and affiliated with Al Qaida, and eventually to the Islamic State itself when it moved in to Syria in 2013. I argue that moderates were mostly demobilized and did not support extremist groups, contrary to the signaling/bargaining theory, and that outside aid, while important, was not decisive, in contrast to the external aid theory. In fact, external support for the moderate factions of the FSA dried up *because* their internal support had collapsed, and they were seen to be unable to retain control of resources that were given to them, in the face of raids by Islamist groups. Thus the demobilization of moderates was the key factor in the success of extremist factions in the Syrian civil war.

1 Participation, Polarization and Ideology in Civil Wars

It is widely recognized that political participation, even voting, is costly, and that therefore not everyone does it. However there is remarkably little consensus on what this fact implies for who abstains and what that does to the incentives of groups competing for power. The canonical spatial model of voting assumes that everyone votes, and shows that candidates face incentives to move to the position of the median voter, in order to split the vote equally with their competitor (Black 1948, Downs 1957). Moving away from the median voter's ideal point just allows the competitor to capture over 50% of the vote and therefore win the election. However, when one takes account of the fact that voting can be considered costly and the chance of being pivotal in a large election is negligible, it becomes difficult to understand why one would vote at all from a rationalist perspective. Riker & Ordeshook (1968) develop a "calculus of voting" with an eye towards explaining why people vote in mass elections despite the small chance of being influential, but fail to discuss who is more likely to abstain or why.

Hinich & Ordeshook (1969) discuss two different reasons for abstention. Individuals may not vote because no candidate is close enough to their ideal point, which they call "alienation." Or individuals may not vote because the candidates are too close to each other, which they call "cross pressures." They focus on alienation, and show that allowing for alienation in the model does not alter the tendency for a median position for the candidates. Palfrey & Rosenthal (1983) develop a model of participation in which there is a cost for voting. However, the alternatives are considered fixed, rather than endogenously determined,

and the supporters of each option have identical preferences, so extremism is ruled out by assumption.[1] Enelow and Hinich discuss abstention briefly in their textbook treatment of spatial theory, using the now standard term "indifference" for abstention due to candidates that are too close together, and illustrate that in equilibrium individuals will abstain who are located between the two candidates or too far away from either one (Enelow & Hinich 1984, 91). However, they do not derive any useful comparative statics on the relationship between the cost of voting, candidate positions and the level of abstention. Aldrich (1983) applies the spatial framework model to party activists, as opposed to voters. He presents conditions under which the more extreme an activist is the more likely he or she is to participate, however, he assumes that the party position is the mean of the activists ideal points rather than considering strategic candidates. He also does not consider the effect of changing the cost of participation on the level of extremism or the polarization of the parties.[2]

There is a substantial empirical literature on polarization in US politics, and it has become a major topic of debate (Green, Palmquist & Shickler 2004, Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2010, Abramowitz 2011, Hopkins & Sides 2015).[3] A central finding that is relevant here is that those who participate in ways that are more costly than just voting tend to be more extreme or partisan than the mass of voters (Abramowitz & Saunders 2008). Two groups in particular are especially important. *Party activists* do the work of the party,

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[1] In a subsequent paper, they return to the view that voting is irrational in a model in which, like the extension of the model below, there is uncertainty about who cares enough to participate (Palfrey & Rosenthal 1985).

[2] See Aldrich (1993) for a review of the rationalist turnout literature. Adams & Merrill III (2003) present a behavioral model of voting where voters have partisan loyalty as well as preferences about issue outcomes. They argue that when voters abstain from alienation candidates are drawn towards the center of their party's distribution of support, because straying too far from it in search of centrist voters will alienate the more numerous base voters. In the model below, I consider only abstention from indifference, and show that it produces a drive towards the extremes in the absence of partisan affiliations.

[3] For a review see Layman, Carsey & Horowitz (2006).

volunteering their time to man the phone banks, get out the vote, distribute literature, attend caucuses and conventions, etc. These activists are more ideologically extreme than the rank and file members (Layman, Carsey & Horowitz 2006, Abramowitz 2013), and that level of ideological extremism is increasing and an important factor in increasing polarization over time. A second important category are *donors*, who literally contribute in more costly ways than voting. Donors are also more extreme than rank and file members. Francia, Green, Herrnson, Powell & Wilcox (2005) shows that among individuals who contribute $200 or more to congressional campaigns, those who are more extreme in their ideology tend to contribute more frequently. Barber (2016) studied donors to US Senate campaigns and found that donors are more extreme than the partisans of the candidates that they contribute to, and that Senators more closely represent donor positions than those of their fellow partisans or voters. Even skeptics who think donors are not driving political polarization find an uptick in polarization among donors in the elections of the 2000s (La Raja & Wiltse 2012).[4]

Turning to the literature on civil war, polarization is often thought to cause or at least accompany the onset of civil war. As groups become more entrenched in incompatible positions, the likelihood of democratic breakdown increases. The approach of the US civil war saw increasing polarization on the issue of slavery (Kalmoe 2020). Some scholars argue that ethnic civil war can be caused by opportunistic leaders fomenting ethnic divisions by encouraging and publicising violence between ethnic groups (Gagnon 1994/95, de Figueiredo Jr. & Weingast 1999). Montalvo & Reynal-Querol (2005) find that a measure of societal ethnic polarization that represents how close the distribution of ethnic groups is to two equal sized

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[4]Question for the American Politics polarization literature, does it suppress turnout among moderates?

groups, is a significant predictor of civil war (see also (Reynal-Querol 2002)).[5]

Recently, scholars have begun to stress the utility of ideology in the civil war context. Sanin & Wood (2014) argue that ideology is instrumentally useful to rebel groups because it helps them socialize combatants, overcome collective action and principle agent problems, and generate popular support. However, they hold that ideologies are also genuinely held and can serve to constrain behavior, leading groups to treat civilians better than they otherwise would. Walter (2017) claims that extreme religious ideologies convey three advantages to organizations in civil wars. First, religious leaders can promise rewards in heaven to combatants as a form of selective incentive to overcome collective action problems. Second, extreme religious ideology enables leaders to select dedicated fighters and fighters to select dedicated leaders, resolving principle agent problems that would otherwise arise (Berman 2009). Third, extreme ideology allows followers in the general population to know that leaders will remain less corrupt after they seize power, so overcoming a commitment problem on the part of rebel leaders who face an incentive to enrich themselves after they win.[6] However, it remains uncertain to what extent moderate followers actually voluntarily support extremist leaders because of concerns about corruption, or for any other reason (Abrahms, Maynard & Thaler 2018).[7]

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[5]Other scholars have argued that ideology affects how rebel groups fight civil wars, in particular that more ideological groups commit fewer atrocities (Humphreys & Weinstein 2006, Weinstein 2007, Thaler 2012). This seems to hold up to a point, beyond which more extreme groups commit even more atrocities, for example, the Sendero Luminoso (Ron 2001) and Khmer Rouge.

[6]Walter presents her theory as one in which leaders strategically adopt ideologies, and claims that leaders have an incentive to feign adherence to extreme ideologies that they do not actually believe in. But if this were a viable strategy for leaders, it would negate the very screening mechanisms she focuses on. If moderate leaders could fool extreme followers and the general public then the principle agent and commitment problems Walter identifies would remain unsolved.Walter's theory is perhaps better seen as a possible explanation of why actual extremists are good at forming organizations to fight civil wars, rather than why moderates might want to pretend to be extremists.

[7]Some other works discussing ideology and civil war include (Ugarriza & Craig 2013, Costalli & Ruggeri

To sum up, the literature on abstention and polarization offers an important insight and an important finding. The insight is that individuals who are indifferent between the candidates or organizations vying for power are likely to abstain, because there's no reason to participate. If participation is even slightly costly and the options are indistinguishable, why participate? The finding is that those who participate in more costly ways in the political process, by being activists or donors, tend to be more ideologically extreme than those who participate in less costly ways, by voting, and those who do not participate at all. Extremists are willing to invest more to affect the political process than moderates. These ideas have relevance to the topic of extremism in the civil war context. Fighting in a civil war is a very costly form of political participation, so by analogy to party activism and campaign contributions, it should be preferentially engaged in by extremists. This may provide a simpler, more parsimonious explanation for the observation that extremist groups are often found fighting civil wars.

In the next section, I briefly outline the rationale behind rational abstention, before proceeding on to the model.
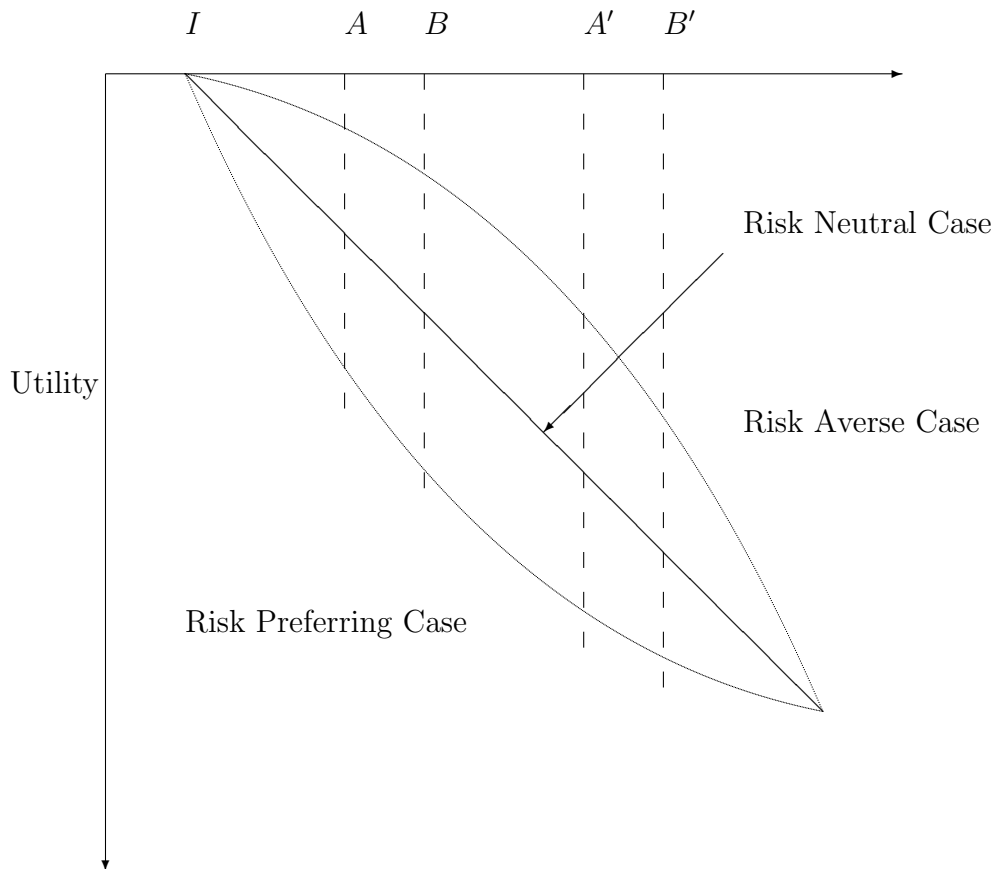
2 Rational Abstention

As mentioned above, Enelow & Hinich (1984) introduce the now standard distinction between abstention due to alienation, in which the candidates are both too far away, and

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2015, Matanock & Staniland 2018). For conceptuatlizatons of the degree of civilian support for rebellion, see Petersen (2001) and Flanigan (2006).

Figure 1: Risk Attitudes and Abstention

$$I \qquad A \quad B \qquad A' \quad B'$$

Utility

Risk Neutral Case

Risk Averse Case

Risk Preferring Case

abstention due to indifference, in which the candidates produce very similar utility for the voter. However, all rational abstention is based on indifference, and what is called alienation is actually a form of indifference based upon utility functions with a specific shape.

Within the rationalist, consequentialist framework, the utility of participating should depend on the comparison between two candidates. Consider the example illustrated in Figure 1. An individual with an ideal point at I may have three utility functions, risk neutral, risk averse, or risk preferring. The individual evaluates two sets of options, A and B, which are relatively close to I, and A' and B' which are farther away. The distance between A and B is assumed to be the same as the distance between A' and B'. With risk

neutral preferences, the utility difference between the A and B is the same as that between A' and B', despite the fact that A' and B' are farther away. If the individual finds it worthwhile to participate to help A beat B, she should also be willing to participate to help A' defeat B'. So there is no possibility of abstention due to alienation with risk neutral preferences.

With risk averse preferences, the further away the options get the greater will be the utility difference between them, so the gap between A' and B' is even greater than that between A and B. In that case abstention from alienation is even less rational, since the farther away the options are the more the individual cares about the difference between them. That is, if the individual is willing to help A defeat B, she should be even more eager to help A' beat B', since it matters all the more to her because A' and B' are farther away than A and B.

Only if the individual has risk acceptant preferences will the difference in utility between two options diminish the farther away they get from the individual. In that case, one could say that the individual would be rational to abstain if two candidates are far away, but the logic is one of indifference rather than "alienation." With a risk preferring utility function, an individual will care less about the difference between two options the farther away they are.

A fourth possibility is that the utility functions are bell shaped: risk averse over near outcomes and risk acceptant over far ones. With bell shaped utility functions, abstention can occur both both in the center and to the extremes, in both cases because of indifference. I will adopt this assumption because it produces rational abstention in the extremes, which

Figure 2: The Issue Space and Utility Function
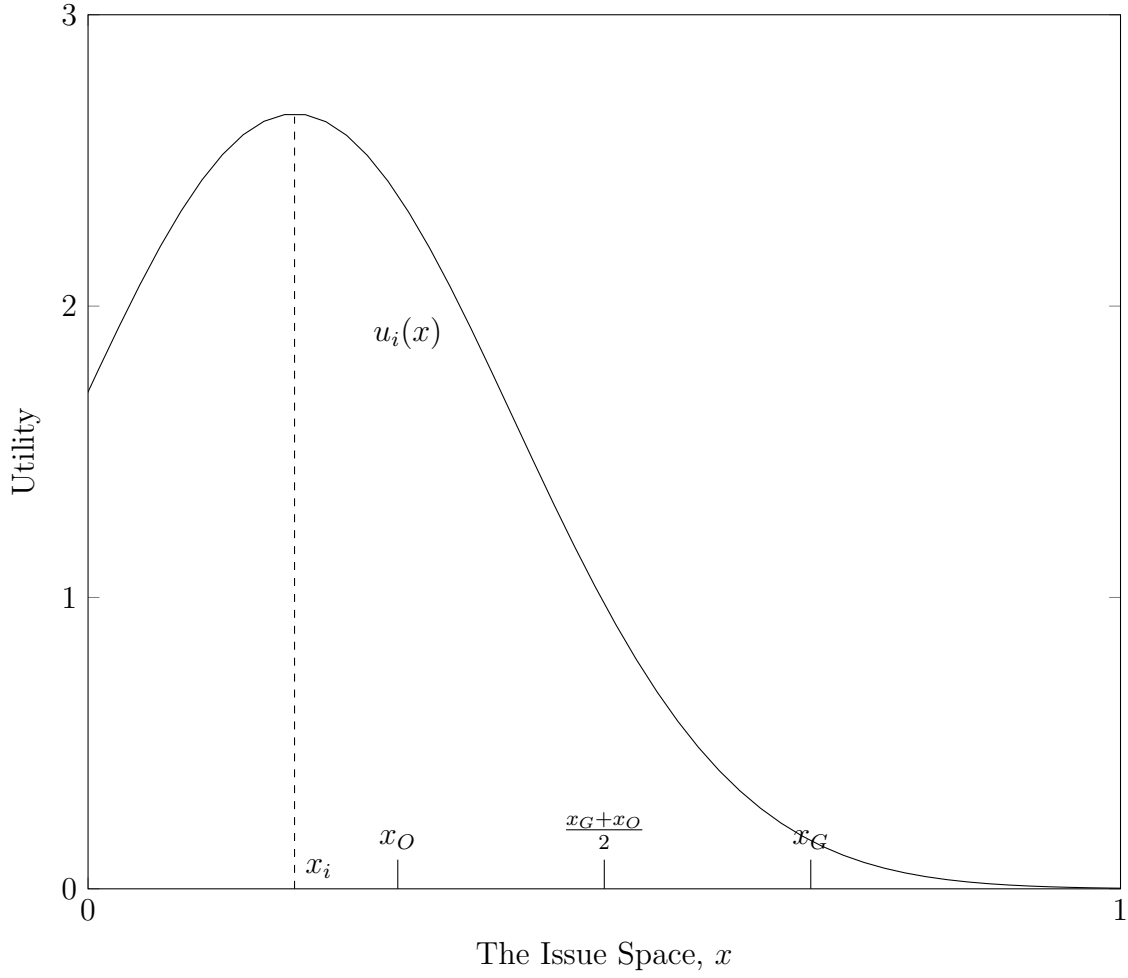
goes against my thesis, and so forms a hard test. As we shall see, there remains an incentive

to move outward as the cost of participation mounts.

3   The Model

Consider a policy space consisting of the unit interval $X = [0, 1]$, as illustrated in Figure 2.

There are n individuals, where n is odd, whose ideal points, x_i, are evenly spaced over the

interval, at $0, \frac{1}{n-1}, \frac{2}{n-1} \ldots \frac{n-2}{n-1}$ and 1. Each individual i has an ideal point in the issue space, x_i and preferences over the outcome selected, $u_i(x)$. I assume that the farther away an outcome is the less an individual likes it, and that the function is symmetrical about it's maximum. In addition, the utility function is bell shaped, so that it is risk averse near the maximum, but risk acceptant past a certain point. The figure illustrates a sample utility function based on a normal density centered on $x_i = 0.2$.

There are two organizations competing for power, the government and the opposition. The government's ideal point in the issue space is assumed to be located to the right of center, at $x_G \in [0.5, 1]$.[8] The opposition chooses an issue location x_O. Since the government is to the right of center, the opposition will have at least as many potential supporters if they locate to the left of the government as they would if they located to the right, so I will focus on equilibria in which the opposition is on the left, $x_O < x_G$.[9] Given their preferences, the individuals will prefer the side that is nearest to their ideal point. This implies that, if $x_O < x_G$, individuals with ideal points from 0 to $\frac{x_O + x_G}{2}$ are potential opposition supporters, in that they want the opposition to win, and individuals with ideal points from $\frac{x_O + x_G}{2}$ to 1 are potential government supporters, because they prefer the government to win. If we denote the number of supporters on the opposition side s_O and on the government side s_G,

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[8]I assume that the government's ideal point is fixed and not subject to choice on the part of the government. In reality, of course, governments can shade their policy positions in response political competition. However, the focus here will be on tracing the influence of the government's ideal point on other variables, such as the incidence of civil war, the policy position of the opposition and their level of support, so it will simplify the analysis to consider it as exogenous.

[9]Posit that the opposition locates δ away from the government. On the left, the opposition would have $\frac{x_G + x_G - \delta}{2}$, or $x_G - \frac{1}{2}\delta$ potential supporters and on the right they would have $1 - \frac{x_G + x_G + \delta}{2}$ or $\frac{2 - 2x_G - \delta}{2}$ or $1 - x_G - \frac{1}{2}\delta$, which is smaller if $x_G > \frac{1}{2}$, that is, when the government is to the right of center.

then the maximum possible number of supporters on each side is the following

$$\overline{s_O} = \left\lfloor \frac{x_O + x_G}{2}(n-1) \right\rfloor + 1 \tag{1}$$

$$\overline{s_G} = \left\lfloor \left(1 - \frac{x_O + x_G}{2}\right)(n-1) \right\rfloor + 1 \tag{2}$$

The government sets the cost of political participation borne by opposition supporters, denoted c_O. That cost can be low, c_O^l or high, c_O^h, so $c \in \{c_O^l, c_O^h\}$ where $0 < c_O^l < c_O^h$. The low cost option represents normal democratic political competition such as voting, canvassing, campaign contributions, etc. The high cost option represents repression and civil war, where the government suppresses normal political activity and attacks political opponents, so political participation involves exposure to violence. Of course, the opposition may retaliate by attacking government supporters, so the cost of participation may go up for them as well. However, for simplicity I will leave this factor aside for now.[10] For the government, choosing a high cost of participation, c_O^h, comes at a cost $k > 0$, so the government also finds civil war to be more costly than normal democratic politics.

The number of individuals who support each organization determines how likely it is to win (or retain) power. In the literature on spatial models of voting the usual assumption is some form of majority rule: the organization with the most supporters wins for sure. However, for most forms of participation, such as donating money and volunteering, not to mention fighting in a civil war, there is no magic about the 50% threshold, or any other particular number. Rather, the chance of victory responds more smoothly to the number of

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[10]In the R program that calculates the equilibrium values one can raise the government participators cost of participation at will.

supporters in the population. Accordingly, I adopt the usual ratio contest success function

in which the probability that each side wins depends on their share of the total number

of participators (Skaperdas 1996). The likelihood that the opposition prevails is defined as

$\frac{s_O}{s_O+s_G+I}$ and the likelihood that the government wins is $\frac{s_G+I}{s_O+s_G+I}$, where $I > 0$ represents

the incumbency advantage enjoyed by the government. Note, if s_O and s_G are both equal

to zero, that is, none of the individuals participates, government remains in power for sure

due to the incumbency advantage. For the opposition to dislodge the government, therefore,

they must generate some support among the individuals.

The sequence of moves in the game is as follows. First, the government sets the cost of

participation, choosing c^l or c^h. Next, the opposition chooses their location, x_O. Finally, the

individuals decide whether to support the opposition, the government, or to abstain.

3.1   Equilibrium

An equilibrium in the game consists of a choice by the government of the cost of participation,

a choice by the opposition of their policy position, conditional on the cost of participation,

and a decision rule for the individuals, conditional on the cost of participation and the

opposition's policy choice.

In games of this kind, there are often multiple equilibria. I focus on the equilibrium in

which the individuals who participate care more about the outcome than those who do not.

Once the ideal points, x_O and x_G, are set, we can solve for how much each individual prefers

their favored side over the other, as shown in Figure 3. On the left, in blue, is the utility for the opposition minus that for the government, as evaluated by the opposition supporters. On the right, in red, is the utility for the government minus that of the opposition, from the perspective of the government supporters. Those individuals who care most about the outcome are slightly more extreme than their favored side. Extremists and moderates care less about the outcome.

We can rank the individuals on each side by how much they care about the outcome. I focus on equilibria where the participators are distinguished from the non-participators by a cutoff point on this ranking, so the participators care more about the outcome than the non-participators. These cutoff points are illustrated by the horizontal lines in the figure, a blue line for the opposition and a red line for the government supporters. Those individuals with utility differences above the lines, between the corresponding dotted lines, participate, otherwise they abstain. As the figure shows, some extremists on both sides abstain, as do some moderates in the middle. In an equilibrium, the participator who cares least about the outcome must nonetheless prefer to participate, and the non-participator who cares most about the outcome must wish to not participate. If we rank the individuals by their utility difference, let p_O be the marginal participator for the opposition and $p_O + 1$ be the marginal non-participator, with p_G and $p_G + 1$ being the marginal individuals on the government side.

First consider the condition for participators. If there are s_O opposition supporters and s_G government supporters who participate, the payoff for participating for the marginal

Figure 3: The Utility Difference Between the Opposition and Government
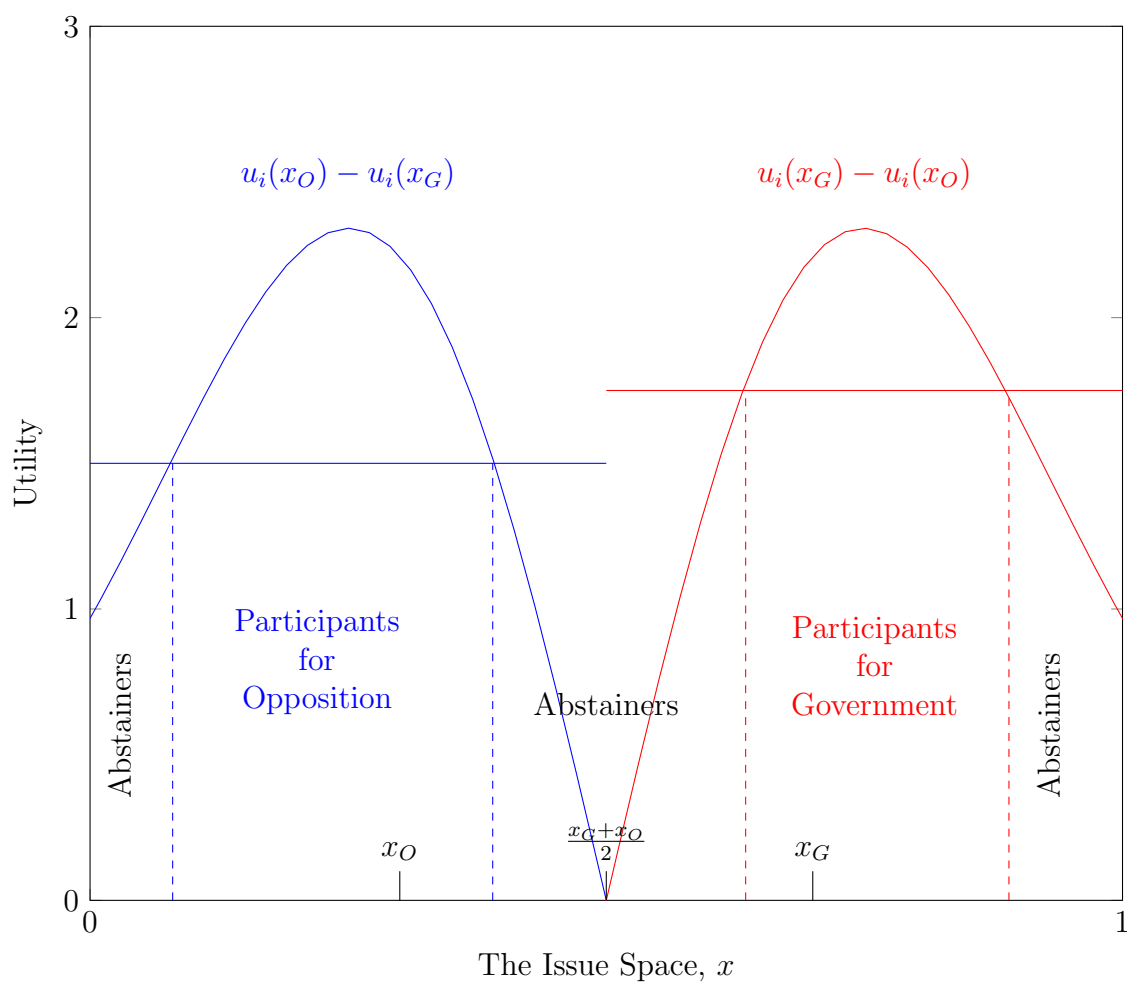
opposition supporter will be

$$\frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I} u_{p_O}(x_O) + \left(1 - \frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I}\right) u_{p_O}(x_G) - c$$

If the marginal opposition supporter did not participate, the chance of the opposition wining would go down to $\frac{s_O - 1}{s_O - 1 + s_G + I}$ but the cost of participation is saved. The payoff is therefore the following.

$$\frac{s_O - 1}{s_O - 1 + s_G + I} u_{p_O}(x_O) + \left(1 - \frac{s_O - 1}{s_O - 1 + s_G + I}\right) u_{p_O}(x_G)$$

The payoff for participating minus the payoff from not participating must be positive, which leads to the following constraint.

$$\left(\frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I} - \frac{s_O - 1}{s_O - 1 + s_G + I}\right) (u_{p_O}(x_O) - u_{p_O}(x_G)) > c \tag{3}$$

This is the difference in the probability in winning times the difference in the utility between the two outcomes, which must be greater than the cost of participation.

Now consider the marginal non-participator, $p_O + 1$. The payoff for not participating is

$$\frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I} u_{p_O+1}(x_O) + \left(1 - \frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I}\right) u_{p_O+1}(x_G)$$

Switching to participate would increase the likelihood of the opposition winning at the cost

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of participation, as follows.

$$\frac{s_O + 1}{s_O + 1 + s_G + I} u_{p_O+1}(x_O) + \left(1 - \frac{s_O + 1}{s_O + 1 + s_G + I}\right) u_{p_O+1}(x_G) - c$$

For non-participation to beat participation, the following must hold.

$$\left(\frac{s_O + 1}{s_O + 1 + s_G + I} - \frac{s_O}{s_O + s_G + I}\right)(u_{p_O+1}(x_O) - u_{p_O+1}(x_G)) < c \tag{4}$$

A similar pair of equations can be derived for the government supporters,

$$\left(\frac{s_G + I}{s_O + s_G + I} - \frac{s_G + I - 1}{s_O + s_G + I - 1}\right)(u_{p_G}(x_G) - u_{p_G}(x_O)) > c \tag{5}$$

$$\left(\frac{s_G + I + 1}{s_O + s_G + I + 1} - \frac{s_G + I}{s_O + s_G + I}\right)(u_{p_G+1}(x_G) - u_{p_G+1}(x_O)) < c \tag{6}$$

To be an equilibrium, the levels of support, s_O and s_G must satisfy conditions 3-6. Call these equilibrium levels of support s_O^* and s_G^*. With these in hand we can identify the participators for each side, by going down the ranking of how much their supporters care about the outcome, until we get to the s_O^{*th} and the s_G^{*th}. We can then identify the left most and right most participator for each side, and the range of participators between them. In addition, knowing the level of support for a given value of the opposition's policy position, x_O, we can then optimize over the possible range of x_O, that is, between 0 and x_G, for the level that gives the maximum chance of winning, denoted x_O^*.

Figure 4: Equilibrium Participation, Moderate Government

Low Cost of Participation

High Cost of Participation

The Individual Ideal Points
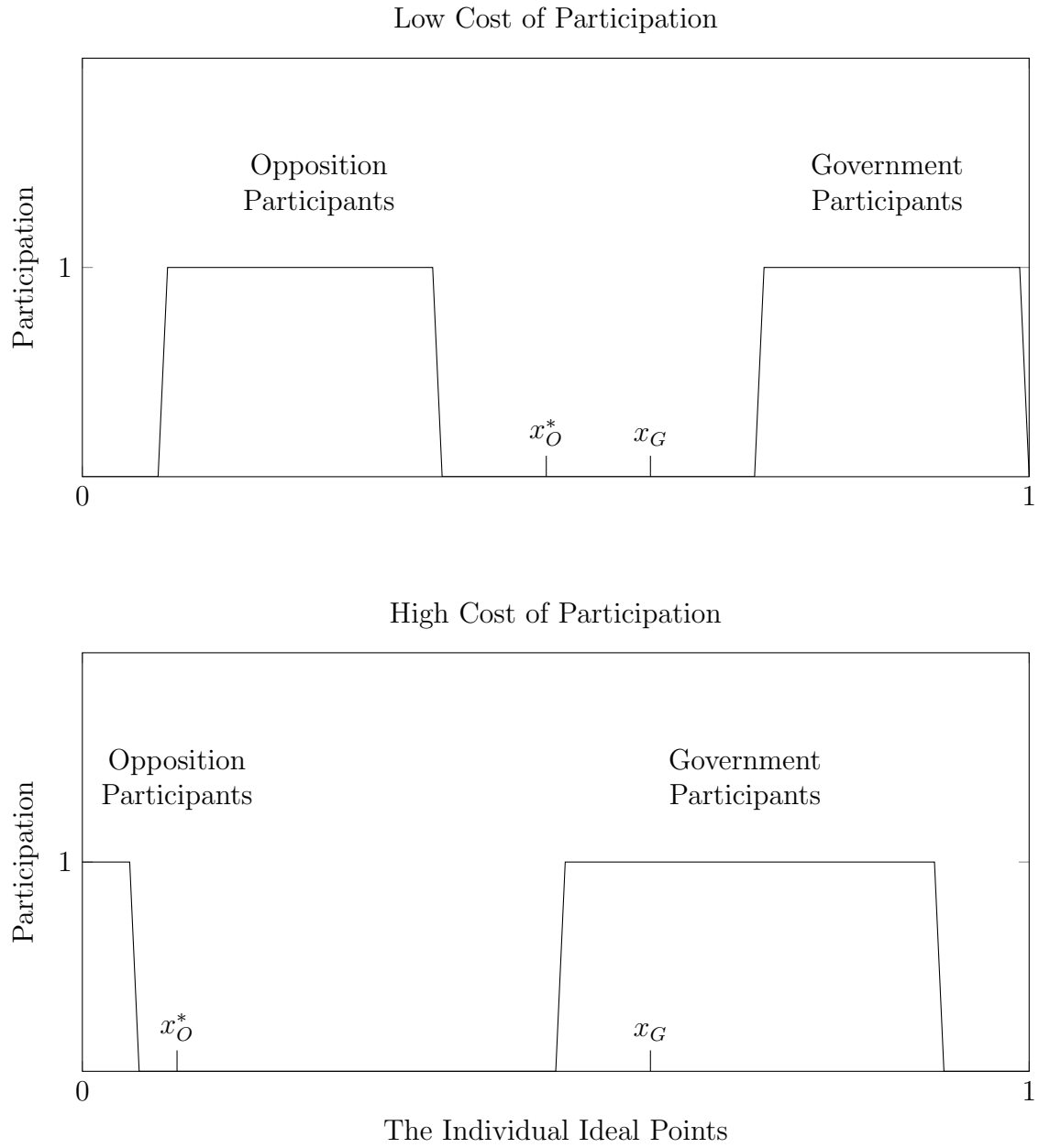
An example of the equilibrium is shown in Figure 4.[11] The government has a relatively moderate ideal point, at $x_G = 0.6$. The cost of participation for the government supporters is $c_G = 0.002$. In the top panel of the figure, this is also the cost for the opposition supporters, so participation is widespread. The opposition locates fairly close to the center, at $x_O^* = 0.49$. Some left extremists and a range in the middle abstain. The opposition has a chance of winning of about 50%.

In the bottom panel, the government has raised the cost of participation to 0.02, or ten fold. This represents repression designed to prevent normal participation by opposition supporters, leaving them no choice but to participate in much more costly ways. Three effects are apparent. First, the range of opposition supporters declines steeply. Second, a much larger range of moderates drops out and does not participate. Third, the opposition shifts its position to the extreme, choosing $x_O^* = 0.1$. The opposition has shifted from a broad coalition supporting a centrist candidate to a narrow band of extremists supporting an extreme organization. The opposition's chance of winning has gone down correspondingly, to only 13%.

In Figure 5, I illustrate a case with a more extreme government, with $x_G = 0.75$. In this case, with low costs of participation, the opposition locates at $x_O^* = 0.53$, near the center, and amasses a centrist coalition that will win with a 59% probability. If the government resorts to repression, however, the opposition moves leftwards to $x_O^* = 0.27$ and has only a 16% chance of winning. Raising the costs of participation shifts the opposition further to the left, reducing their participation.

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[11]The examples were generated by an R file which is available upon request.

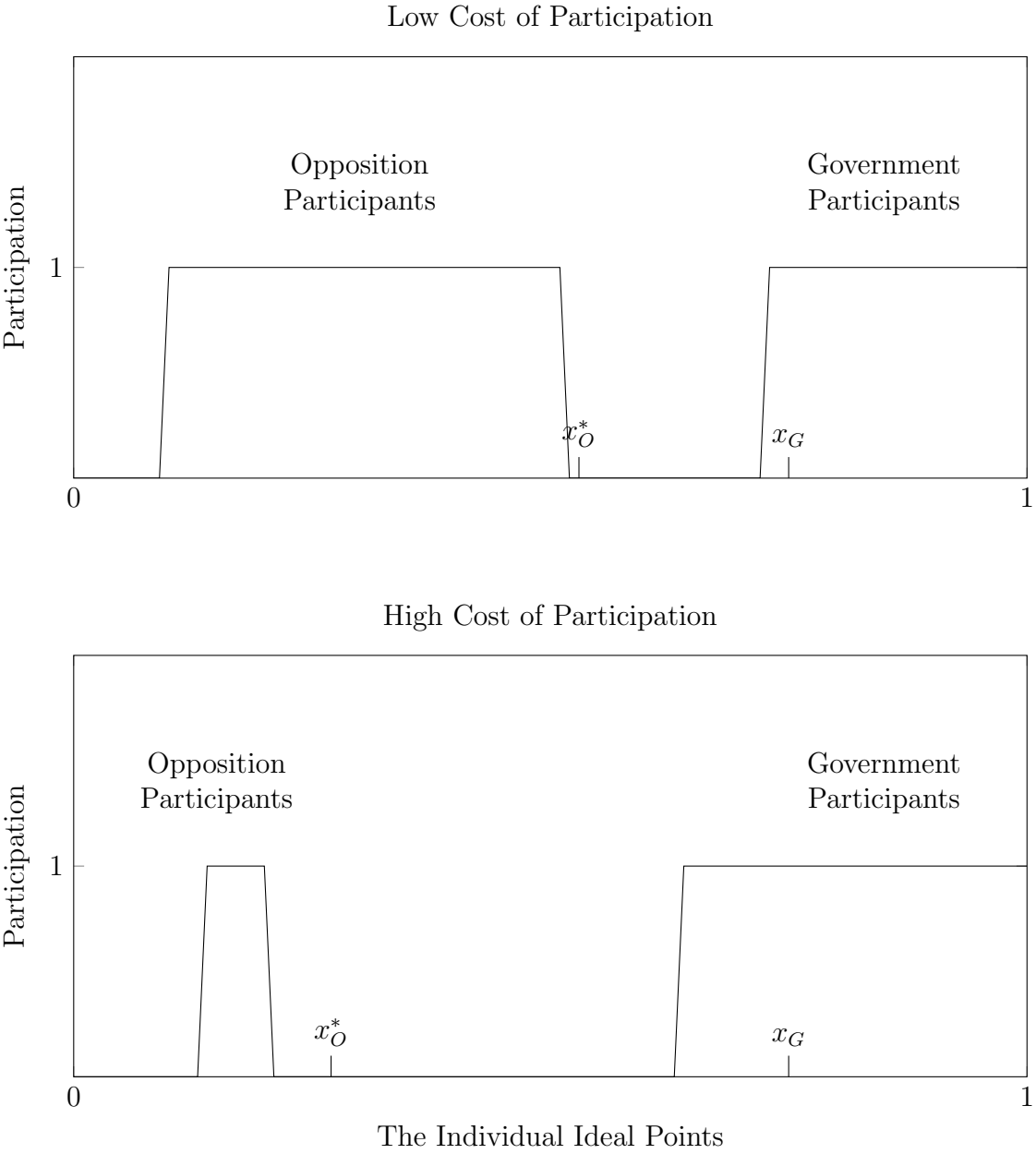Figure 5: Equilibrium Participation, Extreme Government

Low Cost of Participation

High Cost of Participation

Table 1: Equilibrium Quantities

	Moderate Government		Extreme Government	
	Low Cost Case	High Cost Case	Low Cost Case	High Cost Case
Opposition Supporters' Cost of Participation, c_O^l, c_O^h	0.002	0.02	0.002	0.02
Government Supporters' Cost of Participation, c_G	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002
Government Position, x_G	0.6	0.6	0.75	0.75
Equilibrium Opposition Position, x_O^*	0.49	0.1	0.53	0.27
Equilibrium Opposition Support, s_O^*	29	6	42	7
Equilibrium Government Support, s_G^*	28	40	28	37
Incumbency Advantage, I	1	1	1	1
Opposition Probability of Winning	0.5	0.13	0.59	0.16

Table 1 shows the values of the important equilibrium quantities behind Figure 4 and Figure 5.[12]

Finally, consider the government's choice. The government chooses between high and low costs of participation. The government cares about its chance of winning denoted Prob(GovWin). Raising the opposition's cost of participation increases its chance of winning, but at a cost. If the following condition holds,

$$\text{Prob(GovWin}|c_O^h) - \text{Prob(GovWin}|c_O^l) > k \tag{7}$$

the government will impose high costs of participation. Otherwise, the government will set

[12]The standard deviation of the utility functions is 0.3.

low costs.

I summarize the implications of the model in three results. The first outlines the nature of the equilibrium in the game, who participates and who abstains.

Result 1 *In a competition for support between the opposition and government when individuals find it costly to participate, the opposition locates at a distance from the government position. Individuals in a band near the two sides' ideal points are most likely to participate. Extremists on either side may or may not participate. Individuals between the two sides do not participate.*

The second result deals with the relationship between the cost of participation and the polarization between the sides.

Result 2 *The more costly participation is for the opposition supporters, the more extreme the opposition will become and the larger the range of moderates in the center who do not participate.*

The final result address the government's decision.

Result 3 *The government is more likely to increase the cost of opposition participation the more extreme it is, because it's chance of winning an election against a broad coalition is lower than its chance of winning a civil war against an extremist opposition.*

These results provide clear theoretical support for the insight and findings of the literature

on polarization and abstention discussed above. Moderates, those located between the two contestants, find participation not worth the costs, and so abstain. Those who participate in more costly ways, such as through campaign contributions, volunteer activism, or participation in civil conflict, tend to be more extreme than those who just vote. In the next section I will discuss the implications for these results in the context of the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s and the Syrian Civil War.

4   Empirical Discussion

Extremism is widespread in civil war. Some theorists, such as Walter (2017), argue that extremists actually draw substantial support from moderates, which helps explain their success. The model presented above, by contrast, suggests that extremists prevail in civil war contexts because moderates stop participating when the cost of participation grows too great. The key empirical question to investigate in deciding between the theories, then, is whether moderates continue to participate in support of extremist groups or whether they drop out when politics turns violent. I will discuss two cases, the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s and the Syrian Civil War.

4.1   The Central American Civil Wars of the 1980s

The civil wars in Central America of the 1970s and 1980s were largely fought by communist guerrillas and far right land owners and their allies in the military. Centrist parties fielded no

paramilitary forces of their own, and their supporters for the most part ceased to participate when threatened by extremists on either side. I briefly discuss the cases of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

In El Salvador, for instance, the extremely skewed distribution of land pitted a small landowning elite against a large population of rural poor. Efforts to peacefully mobilize on the part of labor unions and peasant associations were ruthlessly suppressed by right wing death squads organized by figures such as Roberto D'Aubuisson. Efforts at land reform in 1980 were thwarted and the country plunged into civil war. Moderate leaders such as Archbishop Oscar Romero were assassinated, and widespread massacres were carried out in the countryside. The Christian Democratic leader, Jose Napoleon Duarte, won the presidential election against D'Aubuisson's ARENA party in 1984 and violence against civilians declined markedly, but did not cease, as it proved difficult to gain control over extremist elements in the military. In 1988, a somewhat moderated ARENA party led by Alfredo Christiani won elections, the FMLN launched a new offensive and deaths spiked up once more. However, the end of the Cold War and a rough stalemate at the military level favored peace talks and negotiations eventually succeeded in 1992 (Wood 2003, 20-30).

The story is similar in Guatemala. Since a failed left wing coup in 1960, right wing military leaders controlled Guatemala through the 1970s. A rural insurgency in the 1960s was crushed with widespread violence against civilians, which also served to keep moderate political participation minimal. In the late 1970s, a new guerrilla organization developed, the EGP, which rapidly gained about 5,000 fighters. The guerrillas quickly became a serious threat to the regime, which responded with a campaign of mass killing to "drain the sea"

so the guerrillas could be isolated and defeated (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay 2004) Military leaders, Romeo Lucas, Efrain Rios Montt and Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores led the country in this most bloody phase of the civil war and approximately 75,000 were killed (Valentino 2004, 196-217). Elections were held in 1985 in which the Christian Democratic candidate, Vinicio Cerezo, won. However, he was unable to rein in the extremist elements in the military. Another centrist party won in 1990, and began to consolidate control over the military. Peace negotiations ended the conflict in 1996.

The Nicaraguan case was similar, except that the FSLN, or Sandinistas, were able to overthrow the right wing Somoza regime in 1979, making them the second, and last, successful communist guerrilla movement in the Western Hemisphere, after Cuba in 1959. The subsequent civil war pitted the regime against the "contras" composed for the most part of officers from the old Somozista military operating out of Honduras, and funded by the United States as part of the Cold War campaign against leftism in Latin America. One exception was Eden Pastora, leader of the southern contras operating out of Costa Rica. Pastora was a former Sandinista rebel who led the famous raid on the Congress in 1978. He later became disillusioned with the Ortega government and went back to the south to continue the struggle. Pastora can hardly be counted a moderate guerrilla leader, however, since he criticize the Sandinista government as being insufficiently revolutionary. He has since returned to peaceful political life in Nicaragua.

These three cases display a similar pattern. Extremists on right and left fought civil wars while moderate voices were stilled by violence. When elections were held, in some cases under international pressure, moderate parties such as the Christian Democrats did well, and

extremists parties such as El Salvador's ARENA moderated in order to become competitive. The Sandinistas also lost the first competitive election they held, in 1990. When moderates were able to consolidate control over right wing forces in the military, peace deals were negotiated and the civil wars brought to a conclusion.

4.2   The Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War starting in 2011 is a hard case for the model. Unlike the Central American cases which featured a relatively simple left-right ideological dimension, the Syrian case has multiple identity groups and potential social divisions. Nonetheless, I think the theory outlined above sheds some light on the evolution of the war in Syria.

For our purposes, two Syrian population groups are central, the Alawites, adhering to a form of Shiite Islam, in the north west, the Sunni Arabs, making up over 70% of the population.[13] The regime of Bashar al Assad, and that of his father before him, was heavily dependent on support from the Alawite community, which generated discontent among the majority Sunni population. In 2011, influenced by the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, protests began calling for increased political liberalization, human rights and democracy. These demands were moderate in substance, but from the regime's perspective contained a potentially mortal threat. Given that the Alawites currently wielded influence far beyond their numbers in society, democracy in Syria would inevitably result in a transfer of power from the Alawites to parties representing the Sunni Arabs. At that

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[13]The Kurds in the north east are important to the conduct of the civil war but not to the issue of extremism.

point, given the non-existent institutions in Syrian political life, there would be no assurance against abuses of power, expropriations, oppression, or even killings by Sunni groups against a newly powerless Alawite minority.

The regime therefore attempted to buy off the opposition with cosmetic reforms and at the same time crack down on demonstrators with violence. As the level of regime violence escalated, peaceful protest was eventually shut down, but groups willing to use violence began to organize. On the regime side were the pro-government militias and eventually Hezbollah militants from Lebanon. On the Sunni side, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) arose from opposition activists bolstered by Sunni officers who defected from the Syrian army. The FSA is as close as one gets to a "moderate" rebel group, in the sense that their demands and ideology remained at least loosely democratic. However, the FSA quickly faced competition from an assortment of Islamist groups, most notably the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate, and eventually the Islamic State (Lister 2015). Both the FSA and more extremist groups received external funding. In 2013 the US launched operation Timber Sycamore, described as the largest covert aid program to a rebel group since the Afghan war of the 1980s. The Islamist groups received funding from financial networks in the Persian Gulf. Nonetheless, the Islamist groups outperformed the FSA, leading to concerns about whether it was wise to continue to ship weapons to them when they could find their way to more extreme groups. Eventually, it took a large scale US air campaign and close coordination with Kurdish and Arab forces in the north to defeat the Islamic State in 2018, and Islamist militias remain strong in the last remaining rebel redoubt as of this writing, in Idlib province.

Did the FSA suffer in relation to al Nusra and the IS because moderates supported the

latter rather than the former? There is little evidence to support this claim. Refugees and individuals liberated from Islamic State rule describe a police state ruled by terror and punctuated by frequent public executions (Samer 2017).[14] The IS did manage to revive the Syrian state in areas it controlled and even improve somewhat on public services.[15] However, given the general climate of violence, it is not clear that this translated into regime support of a genuine voluntary nature among the broader population. Ideological extremism may have helped the Islamic State maintain a capable bureaucracy, and thereby stable rule, but it is not clear that it earned them any real support.

5 Conclusion

Why do extremists fight civil wars? Participating in a civil war is a very costly form of political participation, and the more costly it is to participate, the more extreme one has to be to be willing to do so. In democracies, donors and party activists tend to be more extreme than the average supporter of a party. In non-democracies, where the normal avenues of participation have been shut off, only radicals care enough to risk participation. In civil wars, where the cost of participation can include possible torture and death, this tendency is magnified, and only the most extreme groups are willing to fight. In the stylized spatial model discussed above, as the cost of participation rises, the organizations vying for power become more extreme, as do the set of people still willing to participate in support

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[14]https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/26/the-raqqa-diaries-life-under-isis-rule-samer-mike-thomson-syria.

[15]Rukmini Callimachi, The ISIS Files, *New York Times*, April 4, 2018.

of them. When hostilities are ended and elections are held, these groups tend to fare poorly unless they moderate or form alliances with more moderate parties.

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