Inherited Privileges and Coercive Repertoires: How Rebel Origins Shape Civilian Abuse

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Abstract

Why do some rebel groups employ a wider range of human rights violations against civilians than others? Existing scholarship emphasizes wartime dynamics and battlefield incentives, paying less attention to organizational foundations established before conflict. This study examines how rebel origins shape the breadth of civilian abuse, drawing on Rebel Human Rights Violations, and the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence datasets, covering 182 rebel groups from 1990 to 2011. The findings show that groups originating from civil society organizations employ significantly narrower violation repertoires than groups with militarized origins, with expected repertoires approximately 42 to 45 percent smaller. The broader community-embedded category and parentless origins exhibit negative but statistically insignificant associations, although groups without an identified predecessor or community base record substantially fewer violation types. The civil society finding persists when examining aggregate severity and average reported frequency. These results highlight the importance of organizational inheritance in explaining variation in rebel coercive repertoires.

Keywords. human rights violations; civil war; armed conflict; armed groups; wartime restraint; organizational foundations

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Introduction

Why do some rebel groups employ a wide range of human rights violations against civilians while others exercise remarkable restraint? Consider Sierra Leone's civil war, where the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) fought under nearly identical conditions of state weakness and military contestation. The RUF employed widespread mutilation and sexual violence (Hoover Green, 2016), while the CDF engaged in lower levels of civilian victimization (Conibere et al., 2004). This divergence is not unique to Sierra Leone. Across civil conflicts, groups like the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the RUF engage in murder, rape, abduction, and systematic property destruction (Walsh et al., 2024; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2017), while others, including the Fretilin movement in East Timor and the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, refrained almost entirely from targeting civilians, directing their violence exclusively at military opponents (Aspinall, 2009; Taylor, 1999).

These contrasts are not isolated anomalies, and they trigger questions about why some armed organizations employ diverse forms of civilian abuse while others adopt more restricted patterns of violence. Evidence from the Rebel Human Rights Violations (RHRV) dataset reveals that this variation extends across civil conflicts worldwide. Between 1990 and 2018, rebel groups committed at least one form of human rights violation in more than half of the dyad-years covered by the dataset, yet the range of violations differed considerably across organizations (Walsh et al., 2024). This variation is also evident even among groups operating within the same conflict. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, eight of the fourteen rebel groups that fought the government between 1990 and 2018 had no documented violations, two systematically committed only one type of violation, and four systematically engaged in multiple types (Walsh et al., 2024, 486). This variation suggests that understanding civilian abuse requires examining not only whether rebel groups commit vi-

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olations or how frequently they do so, but also the range of abusive practices they employ. A group that combines killings, torture, sexual violence, forced recruitment, and property destruction exhibits a broader coercive repertoire than one that engages exclusively in killings, even if both inflict comparable levels of harm. Sustaining or refraining from multiple forms of abuse is apparently not without some organizational capabilities, personnel, and established routines. Explaining variation in repertoire breadth therefore requires examining not only the incentives rebels face during conflict but also the organizational foundations that shape the coercive practices available to them.

Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017) conceptualize patterns of violence as multidimensional, encompassing variation in repertoire, targeting, frequency, and technique, and caution against reducing these dimensions to a single measure of violence. Building on this framework, I examine repertoire breadth as a distinct dimension of rebel behavior, defined as the number of different types of human rights violations a rebel group commits in a given year. This approach captures variation in the diversity of coercive practices employed by rebel organizations, independently of how frequently any particular violation occurs.

Existing scholarship has made important progress in explaining rebel violence against civilians (Weinstein, 2007; Kalyvas, 2006; Hultman, 2009; Stanton, 2016). Rationalist accounts emphasize how territorial control, information about civilian loyalties, and battlefield incentives shape patterns of violence (Kalyvas, 2006; Fjelde and Hultman, 2014), while organizational explanations highlight the importance of resource endowments, recruitment practices, socialization, and internal discipline (Weinstein, 2007; Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016). However, less attention has been paid to how the organizational characteristics that rebels inherit before entering armed conflict shape the breadth of their civilian abuse repertoires. Rebel groups do not necessarily emerge as organizational blank slates. Some develop from preexisting organizations with established structures, networks, and expertise, while others form without compara-

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ble organizational inheritance (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Although these differences in organizational origins have been recognized, their implications for the range of human rights violations that rebel groups employ remain insufficiently understood.

I address this question by arguing that the organizational origins of rebel groups, meaning the preexisting organizations and founding processes through which they emerge, supply pre-conflict privileges and constraints that shape the breadth of their human rights violation repertoires (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024; Bauer and Cunningham, 2026). Groups that emerge from militarized parent organizations inherit personnel experienced in armed operations, established coercive routines, and structures that facilitate the coordination of multiple forms of abuse (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). Groups that emerge from civil society organizations and political parties instead inherit community relationships, political networks, and traditions of collective mobilization, which make civilian cooperation, recruitment, and legitimacy costly to jeopardize and thereby discourage diverse coercive practices. Groups without identifiable parent organizations face a different constraint, since they lack comparable inherited personnel, routines, and organizational infrastructure and must develop the capabilities needed to coordinate and sustain multiple forms of abuse during conflict.

Understanding how foundational origins shape the breadth of rebel violence matters for both theory and practice. Theoretically, this study shifts attention from wartime dynamics to pre-conflict foundations, identifying origins as a missing explanatory factor that conditions not only whether groups abuse civilians but how broadly and diversely they do so. A group with a wide coercive repertoire poses a different kind of threat to civilians than one with a narrow range of tactics, and information about a group's origins may help policymakers and humanitarian actors anticipate where broad abuse is most likely. The paper proceeds by reviewing existing research, presenting the theoretical argument, describing the research design, analyzing the results,

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and concluding with implications and directions for future research.

Rebel Groups and Civilian Abuse in Civil War.

The concept of human rights spans legal, moral, and political dimensions, and violations by non-state actors include practices such as murder, kidnapping, torture, and political imprisonment that contravene internationally recognized standards (Walsh et al., 2024; Hafner-Burton, 2014; Donnelly, 2013; Sikkink, 2011; Jo, 2015; Cingranelli and Filippov, 2018). Although debates persist over whether human rights practices have improved over time (Fariss, 2014, 2019; Cingranelli and Filippov, 2018), research on rebel groups shows no uniform pattern, with violations escalating for some groups and declining for others (Walsh et al., 2024, 486). While a focus on the aggregate trends offers its own theoretical implications, understanding the variation poses a greater theoretical challenge for scholarship and policy discovery.

One of the enduring features of civil conflict is the victimization of civilians by rebel groups (Eck and Hultman, 2007). Existing research offers several explanations for why rebel groups abuse civilians. One prominent approach focuses on the strategic conditions of conflict (Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Valentino, 2005; Hultman, 2007). These studies generally argue that patterns of violence depend on the strategic relationship between armed groups, civilians, and their opponents. Kalyvas (2006), for example, shows how territorial control and information about civilian loyalties shape decisions about whom armed actors target. Ottmann (2017) finds that civilian victimization is more common where rebel constituencies are highly fractionalized and polarized, while Balcells (2010) shows that direct violence against civilians is more common in areas where prewar political competition between rival factions was closest, with wartime dynamics shaping later patterns of violence once fighting begins. Similarly, Fjelde and Hultman (2014) find that armed actors are more likely to target civilians in areas associated with an opponent's ethnic constituency. Strategic considerations can also

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encourage restraint. Rebel groups may avoid civilian abuse when restraint helps them gain domestic legitimacy or international support (Stanton, 2016).

Also, more prominently, another body of research focuses on rebels' resources and organizational characteristics. Weinstein (2007) argues that access to lootable resources and external funding can reduce rebels' dependence on local communities and attract opportunistic recruits, increasing the likelihood of civilian abuse. Similarly, Salehyan et al. (2014) shows that foreign sponsorship can reduce rebel dependence on civilians and that multiple external sponsors can weaken oversight of rebel behavior. Other studies emphasize differences in organizational strength and internal control. Stronger rebel organizations may have greater capacity to provide benefits and protection to civilians rather than relying on coercion, while weaker organizations may resort more heavily to violence (M Wood, 2010). Internal institutions also matter. Political education and mechanisms for controlling fighters can encourage restraint, while pressures associated with maintaining cohesion and recruiting fighters can contribute to civilian abuse (Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016). More broadly, rebel organizations are shaped by their leaders, relationships with external rebel supporters, and the regional environments in which they operate (Acosta et al., 2023; Clapham, 1998; Doctor and Willingham, 2022; Reno, 2011).

Although these theoretical traditions illuminate important mechanisms, they largely examine how organizational characteristics and strategic capabilities shape rebel behavior during conflict without explaining where these attributes originate. Strategic accounts emphasize territorial control, civilian loyalties, and battlefield incentives (Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Ottmann, 2017; Valentino, 2005; Hultman, 2007), while organizational explanations focus on resources, recruitment, and internal discipline (Weinstein, 2007; M Wood, 2010; Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016). But these war capabilities do not emerge from a vacuum. Rebel groups enter conflict with different organizational foundations. Some inherit coercive routines, community networks, and established infrastructure, (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024; Bauer and Cunningham,

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2026), while others must develop these capabilities during war. These differences in foundational privileges suggest that wartime conditions alone may not explain variation in coercive repertoires, as inherited organizational characteristics can also shape the breadth of civilian abuse. These approaches, thus, leave open where the organizational characteristics they emphasize come from. In this study, I trace them to rebel groups' origins, arguing that the preexisting organizations and founding processes through which groups emerge provide preconflict privileges and constraints that shape not only whether groups abuse civilians but how broadly they do so.

Rebel Group Foundations and Conflict Dynamics

Insurgent groups rarely emerge in a vacuum. Over 95 percent of rebel groups active during intrastate conflicts included in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict Database obtained their initial membership from some form of preexisting named organization or, at the very least, from an identifiable ethnic or refugee community (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). This initial membership matters because the organizations and communities from which rebel groups emerge can influence their subsequent behavior during armed conflict. Research on rebel group formation and fragmentation demonstrates that these processes have important implications for conflict dynamics (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2013; Doctor, 2020). A related literature on the micro-foundations of rebellion emphasizes how rebels' social connections to civilian populations shape their organizational development and wartime behavior (Weinstein, 2007; Reno, 2007; Staniland, 2014; Parkinson, 2013; Sarbahi, 2014; Lewis, 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2018). These connections can facilitate recruitment, resource mobilization, and local cooperation, helping rebel groups sustain prolonged conflicts and, in some circumstances, survive counterinsurgency efforts. However, rebels' relationships with local communities may be shaped not only by geographical proximity or interactions during conflict but also by the organizational and social foundations from which they emerge (Braithwaite and Cunningham,

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2020).

Recent scholarship extends this organizational inheritance perspective to the tactical choices rebel groups make during armed conflict. Bauer and Cunningham (2026) argue that parent organizations transmit personnel, organizational routines, and behavioral norms that influence the tactics available to and subsequently employed by their rebel successors. They find that groups originating from nonviolent organizations are more likely to employ nonviolent tactics alongside armed struggle and tend to adopt these tactics earlier than groups with other organizational predecessors. Their findings demonstrate that the transition to armed rebellion does not necessarily eliminate organizational practices and behavioral orientations developed before the onset of conflict. Instead, these inherited characteristics can continue to shape how rebel groups pursue their objectives. Research on Colombia similarly traces armed groups' repertoires of terrorism to organizational identities shaped by their histories, ideologies, leadership, and connections to organized crime (Feldmann, 2024).

However, organizational inheritance does not just enable certain practices; it can also constrain them. While inherited capabilities may facilitate coercion, established relationships and resource dependencies may discourage abuses that threaten civilian cooperation. These competing influences help explain why rebel groups, despite their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians (Slim, 2007), vary in the breadth of their human rights violations. Some employ relatively narrow coercive repertoires, while others engage in multiple forms of abuse. Examining their organizational origins therefore helps explain how inherited capabilities and social relationships jointly shape the range of violations rebel groups commit.

Theory and Hypotheses

The founding conditions can leave lasting organizational legacies (Braithwaite et al., 2026; Bauer and Cunningham, 2026). For instance, Lemke and Carter (2016) show that

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the circumstances surrounding the formation of sovereign states influence their subsequent participation and success in wars. Similarly, rebel groups can inherit resources, relationships, and experiences from the organizations that precede them (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). As Bauer and Cunningham (2026) argue, parent organizations transmit personnel, organizational routines, and behavioral norms that shape the tactics successor groups adopt. Building on this insight, I argue that such inheritances also shape the breadth of coercive practices rebel groups employ against civilians.

What rebel groups carry into war shapes what they can do once fighting begins. Rebels' organizational resources, social networks, and ties to civilians affect how they recruit, mobilize support, sustain rebellion, and withstand counterinsurgency (Weinstein, 2007; Reno, 2007; Staniland, 2014; Parkinson, 2013; Sarbahi, 2014; Lewis, 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2018). Prior ties to local communities, developed through founding organizations, can also shape a group's capacity to deliver services and maintain political institutions (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Stewart, 2018). Existing research already recognizes the importance of prewar organizational conditions. For instance, Sarbahi (2014) traces rebel embeddedness to prewar political processes and institutions. Building on these insights, I argue that understanding how organizational capacity and community embeddedness shape rebel behavior also requires examining how groups acquire these attributes. Rebel origins are particularly important because predecessor organizations can provide resources, capabilities, and social relationships that persist after the transition to armed conflict (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024; Bauer and Cunningham, 2026).

The central argument is that rebel groups' organizational origins shape both the organizational capacity and community ties they carry into conflict. Groups emerging from civil society organizations may inherit organizational routines and norms developed through prior collective action, alongside established relationships with civilian constituencies (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024; Bauer and Cunningham, 2026).

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Groups emerging from preexisting armed organizations inherit a different set of potential advantages, including experienced personnel, weapons, military training, and knowledge of arms procurement. For instance, the founding core of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army included disaffected Sudanese military personnel, while al-Shabaab emerged from the Islamic Courts Union following its defeat in 2006 (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024).

These inherited capabilities may, however, diminish through personnel turnover, battlefield losses, and organizational fragmentation. Meanwhile, this situation differs for parentless groups, which lack an identifiable organizational predecessor from which to inherit established resources, organizational routines, or community relationships from the outset. This absence of inherited structures is not, however, without a bearing on their conflict trajectory and civilian relationships. Although parentless groups may subsequently acquire these attributes, they must do so through processes other than inheritance from a predecessor organization.

H1: Parentless Groups and Human Rights Abuses

Some rebel groups form without an identifiable formal organizational predecessor. Unlike groups emerging from political parties, civil society organizations, or preexisting armed organizations, they cannot inherit the structures, personnel, and resources accumulated within such institutions. Consequently, they may enter conflict without the established mobilization networks, communication systems, and organizational routines that predecessor organizations can provide (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). Parentless groups therefore bear a greater burden of developing the organizational infrastructure necessary to sustain rebellion.

Why should differences in organizational inheritance matter for human rights abuses? I argue that committing violence is not the same as sustaining a broad repertoire of violence. A rebel group does not need an elaborate organizational structure to kill civilians, destroy property, or abduct individuals. But carrying out several different

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forms of abuse requires more than the ability to commit individual acts of violence. Detaining civilians, for example, requires guards and places to hold them. Forced recruitment requires identifying potential recruits, capturing them, and preventing them from escaping. Restricting civilian movement requires monitoring and enforcement, while organized displacement requires coordinating coercion across communities. A group that engages in several of these practices must therefore have the personnel, resources, and organizational arrangements to carry them out at the same time. This is where organizational inheritance matters. Groups that emerge from established organizations can draw on existing personnel, logistical networks, and organizational routines to support these activities. Groups without such predecessors must build much of this capacity while also fighting the government and sustaining their rebellion. This does not mean that parentless groups cannot commit serious abuses. Rather, the argument is that the absence of inherited organizational structures makes it more difficult to sustain several different forms of civilian abuse, even when a group is capable of committing violence.

Parentless groups do not all start from the same position. Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020) distinguish a narrow conception of parentlessness, in which a group has neither a formal parent organization nor an identifiable community underlying its initial membership, from a broader one that also includes groups formed from refugee or ethnic communities with no organization representing them. I argue this difference matters for rebel-civilian relationships because groups in the second category can still draw on interpersonal ties and a pool of potential recruits, though not on the structures and experience of a formal parent (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). Palipehutu formed among Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024), the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée drew much of its early membership from Guineans in exile, and the Kuki National Front mobilized from the Kuki ethnic community in India (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Groups with neither a predecessor nor a community base are the most com-

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pletely parentless.

I do not argue that parentless groups permanently lack organizational capacity. Capacity can be built after formation, but building an organization at war is not the same as inheriting one. Parentless groups must recruit and train personnel, set up chains of command, and create communication, logistics, and routines while still fighting, whereas groups with established predecessors start with more of this in place and can turn it to new wartime tasks at once. Bauer and Cunningham (2026, 312) apply similar reasoning to nonviolent tactics, arguing that groups with nonviolent parents can adopt these tactics earlier in a conflict because they arrive with the personnel, routines, and norms for them and need not build that capacity once fighting has begun. So, these initial advantages can persist because building organizational capacity requires personnel, resources, and attention that must also be devoted to fighting and sustaining the rebellion. Parentless groups may therefore be capable of killing, torturing, or abducting civilians yet find it harder to sustain a broad repertoire of abuse at once. These constraints should be greatest for groups with neither a formal predecessor nor an identifiable community base. Groups rooted in refugee or ethnic communities may overcome some of these limitations through existing social ties and recruitment networks, but such resources do not necessarily provide the organizational structures needed to sustain a broad repertoire of violations.

The Kamajors of Sierra Leone show how the lack of a parent organization can narrow a group's abuse repertoire without preventing serious violence. The group grew out of local hunting traditions and community ties. Hunters supplied knowledge of the terrain, and chiefdom authorities helped mobilize and select recruits, but recruits received no rigorous conventional training (Alie, 2005). These foundations supplied fighters but not the organization to sustain many forms of abuse. Alie describes the Kamajors as "a people on the move" who lacked the means to keep prisoners of war (Alie, 2005, 62). If anything demonstrates the lack of organizational capacity that can prevent groups from sustaining a broad repertoire of coercive practices, it is the Kama-

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jors' inability to hold prisoners despite their capacity to mobilize fighters and engage in violence.

Palipehutu in Burundi shows the same pattern over a longer span. A rebel group drew on an established community while its armed capacity was still being built. Founded in 1980 in the Mishamo refugee camp in Tanzania (Van Acker, 2016, 23), the movement initially recruited among Hutu refugees and the diaspora and, according to a founding member, received a share of refugees' harvests (Alfieri, 2016, 175, 176). Its armed wing was established in 1983, and by the late 1980s the movement had begun developing clandestine recruitment networks inside Burundi. Militants also received military training in Tanzanian refugee camps, and by 1993 Palipehutu had assembled a substantial number of trained fighters (Alfieri, 2016, 175, 179, 180, 181). In short, its refugee community provided an initial base for recruitment and resources, while the armed wing and its networks inside Burundi took shape over the following decade (Alfieri, 2016, 175, 179, 181).

There is, however, a competing expectation. Groups without inherited command structures may also struggle to maintain discipline, and weak internal control can lead to greater civilian abuse (Weinstein, 2007; Hoover Green, 2016). From this perspective, parentless groups might be expected to commit more abuses, not fewer. But the ability to control fighters is different from the capacity to carry out different forms of violence. Discipline affects whether fighters refrain from abuses they are capable of committing, while organizational capacity affects the range of coercive practices a group can sustain. Poor discipline may lead to more frequent killings, looting, or other opportunistic abuses without necessarily expanding the range of violations a group employs. Practices such as detention, forced recruitment, restrictions on movement, and organized displacement require personnel, coordination, and resources that groups without established predecessors must develop themselves. I therefore expect the constraints imposed by limited organizational capacity to outweigh the effects of weak discipline on the breadth of civilian abuse. This leads to the following hypothesis:

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H1: Parentless groups are more likely to have a narrower repertoire of human rights violations than rebel organizations with militarized origins.

H2: Community Embeddedness and Human Rights Abuses

Parent organizations differ in what they pass on. Braithwaite and Cunningham (2024) identify two endowments, community ties and military expertise. Groups that emerge from civil society organizations, such as trade unions, religious groups, student organizations, and non-party political movements, inherit the first. These parents give rebels "ready-made channels of access into their communities" and spare them the effort of identifying sympathizers or coercing skeptics (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1698, 1699). They also pass on routines and norms. Organizations rely on a predefined repertoire of action, and groups with nonviolent parents inherit routines and norms rooted in nonviolence (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 311, 312). Armed parents meanwhile transmit military expertise instead. I extend this logic to the treatment of civilians. Community ties give civil society groups less reason to rely on coercion, and routines and norms built around mobilization, not force, leave them less equipped to sustain it.

Civil society origins can restrain coercion through two pathways. The first is organizational inheritance. Organizations solve problems with a predefined repertoire of action, and civil society parents build theirs around mobilizing and informing civilians (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 311). Thus, their successors inherit the personnel, routines, and norms of that repertoire (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 311, 312), but not the combat experience and access to weapons and bases that armed parents supply (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1693). Groups that emerge from armed parents begin with that endowment and can field a wider range of coercive practices from the outset. Groups with only civil society parents can still use violence, but they have greater organizational and operational constraints which constrain how they employ violence. These early organizational inheritances are apparent in the development

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processes of ETA in Spain and the Oromo Liberation Front in Ethiopia. For example, the Basque group ETA drew a central part of its initial membership from EKIN, a student group whose newsletter and leafleting carried over into the new organization. Its first assembly in 1962 deemed propaganda its most urgent task, and it organized itself into publications, study groups, and propaganda alongside military action, initially concentrating on propaganda and sabotage (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 311). The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in Ethiopia inherited personnel and norms. Its parent, the Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association, mobilized Oromos through rallies and community activities and admitted non-Oromo members. After the association was banned and its leaders were jailed and executed, members took up arms and founded the OLF (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 312–313). In both cases, the armed group began with the routines and members of a mobilizing organization, not with an armed apparatus.

The second pathway through which civil society origin groups might exercise restraint and have a narrower repertoire of violence is community embeddedness. Inherited ties are an asset only while the group maintains them, and a broad repertoire of coercion puts them at risk. Civil society groups draw recruits, information, and resources from communities with which they share deep and sustained ties (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1693, 1698–1699). So, practices such as detention, forced recruitment, movement restrictions, and organized displacement impose different burdens on civilians. As violations escalate, rebels risk harming more people within the communities on which they depend, potentially weakening the relationships that sustain their rebellion. Rebels who rely on civilians for resources, information, and recruits have incentives to cultivate quasi-voluntary compliance and limit civilian victimization (Stewart and Liou, 2017), whereas groups with lootable resources or a foreign backer rely less on civilians and are more likely to turn to predation (Weinstein, 2007; Salehyan et al., 2014). These community ties do not necessarily prevent abuse. Rather, it tends to raise the cost of breadth of violations. Groups that inherit strong

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community ties from their parent organization may still engage in civilian abuse, but expanding their repertoire of violations risks undermining the relationships on which they depend.

Community embeddedness might also produce accountability. (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 311–312) argue that organizational origins can transmit personnel, routines, and behavioral norms into armed groups, shaping the tactics leaders view as feasible and appropriate. Extending this logic, groups emerging from locally embedded civic organizations may remain accountable to communities through kinship ties, local leadership, and shared expectations. Inherited participatory or nonviolent norms may further discourage indiscriminate abuse by imposing reputational and relational costs on commanders and fighters. Such groups may therefore face stronger social pressures against broad coercion than those without comparable community ties.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) reveals how community ties inherited from parent organization may encourage restraint. Its parent, the Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association, operated under the motto "love your brothers as you love yourself," and its members funded schools and bridges for their communities (Dugassa, 2008, 117). The OLF cultivated "both a robust military force and strong ties to the civilian population" (Stewart and Liou, 2017, 284). With no foreign sponsor and no natural resource revenue, it depended on the Oromo for support (Stewart and Liou, 2017, 284, 289). In the territory it controlled, it built education and healthcare institutions and semidemocratic civil-military bodies organized around the concept of gada (Stewart and Liou, 2017, 284). Although it regularly caused up to 1,000 battle deaths a year, the OLF rarely engaged in direct violence against civilians (Stewart and Liou, 2017, 284).

Similarly, the Front for the Restoration of Democracy (FRUD) in Djibouti benefited from the preexisting organizations it emerged from. With foundations in the Djibouti Patriotic Resistance Front, Action for the Revision of Order in Djibouti, and the Front for the Restoration of Right and Equality, these established networks gave

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FRUD "ready-made channels of access into their communities," allowing it to continue mobilizing personnel and resources even after French observers were deployed to restrict the movement of foreign fighters and supplies across the border (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1698–1699). Beyond providing an organizational advantage, these inherited relationships may also have encouraged restraint in the use of violence against civilians. Because FRUD depended on these networks for recruits and resources, maintaining access to these communities may have made expanding the range of civilian abuses more costly, encouraging the group to limit the types of violations it employed.

Political parties are a second source of community embeddedness. Groups that emerge from parties can inherit ties built through campaigning and representation, having advocated for resources and served as a mouthpiece for supporters' concerns, and these ties can give rebels access to people and information (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1699). These ties can provide ready-made bases of support that reduce reliance on coercion for recruitment, resource extraction, and information gathering (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024; Sarbahi, 2014). Political parties, too, may build experience in peaceful mobilization before any armed phase begins. Rhodesia's National Democratic Party, for instance, organized mass demonstrations against white minority rule before the state banned it in 1961 (Bauer and Cunningham, 2026, 313); see also Gwakuba Ndlovu (2015). From this logic, party-based groups can therefore be expected to have a similar effect on civilians as civil-society-rooted groups.

Fretilin in East Timor and the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) in Burundi illustrate how party origins can be associated with a narrow repertoire. Fretilin originated from the Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT), inheriting organizational foundations built through social and political mobilization before the transition to armed struggle. The group expanded its base through literacy campaigns, cooperative agriculture, and participatory governance (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Timor-Leste, 2005; Taylor, 1999; Bermeo, 2022).

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Similarly, the CNDD grew out of FRODEBU, the Front for Democracy in Burundi, a party embedded in Burundian political life through electoral competition and participation (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Burihabwa and Curtis, 2019). Both groups entered armed conflict carrying the organizational legacy of their political origins, including established civilian relationships and legitimacy structures built through sustained engagement with civilian populations. These inherited relationships provided organizational resources that remained valuable during conflict, creating incentives to avoid practices that could undermine civilian cooperation and support. Their conflict records are consistent with this expectation. Fretilin recorded zero violations across all three of its observed conflict years, while CNDD recorded displacement in a single year and zero violations in all others (Walsh et al., 2024). For Fretilin specifically, avoiding civilian violence was an important organizational strength (Bermeo, 2022, p. 172).

> **H2 (Community Embeddedness):** Rebel groups whose origins provide deeper community ties will employ a narrower repertoire of human rights violations than groups whose origins provide military expertise and coercive capacity.
>
> **H2a (Civil Society Origins):** Rebel groups that emerge from civil society organizations will employ a narrower repertoire of human rights violations than groups with any other origin.

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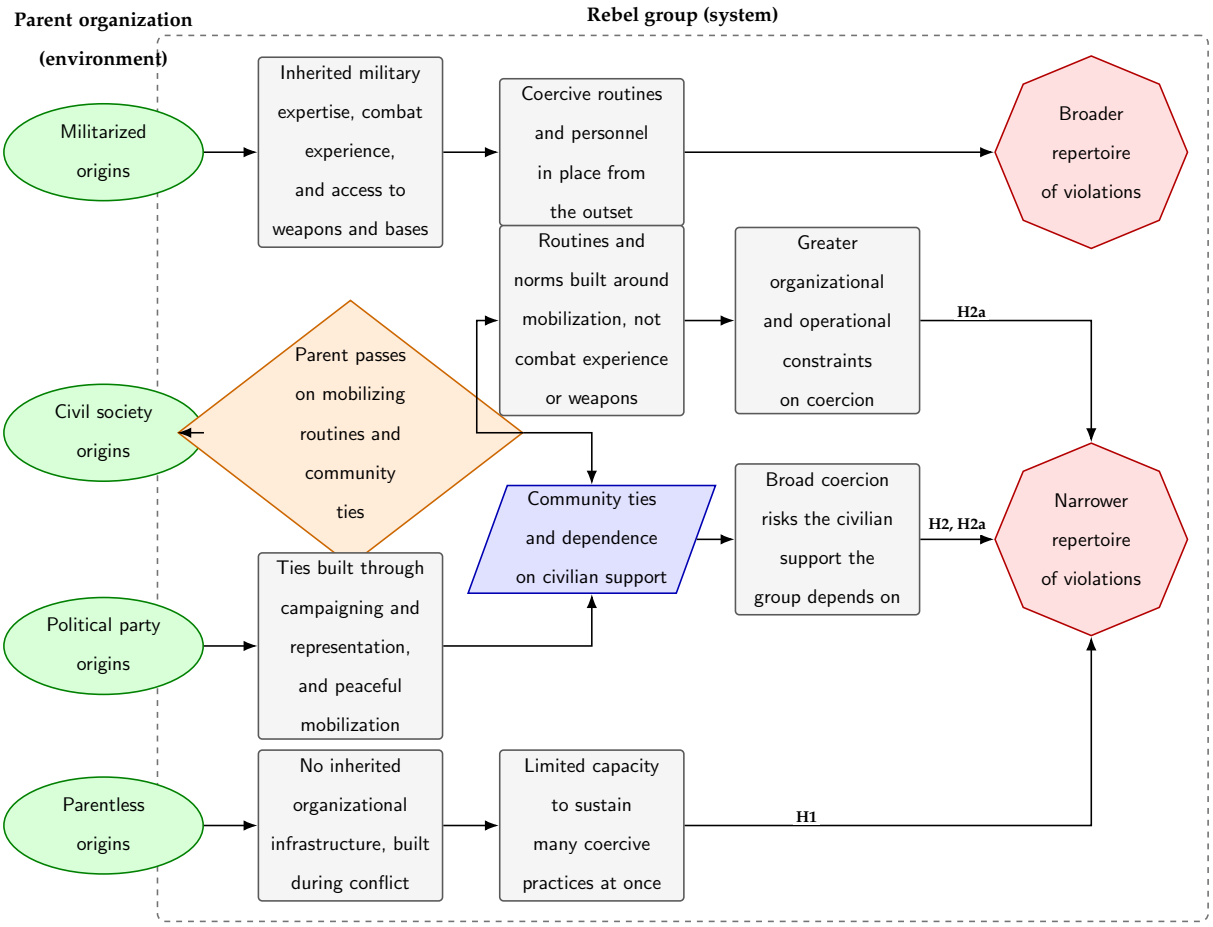


Figure 1: Organizational Origins and the Breadth of Violation Repertoires. The diagram illustrates the proposed mechanisms through which rebel organizational origins shape inherited capabilities, routines, and community ties, thereby influencing the range of coercive practices groups can sustain during conflict. Arrows represent theoretical expectations, with labels identifying the corresponding hypotheses. The figure follows the systemist approach (James, 2019, 2023).

Alt text: Flow diagram linking four parent organization types to the violation repertoire. Militarized origins lead to a broader repertoire. Civil society, political party, and parentless origins lead to a narrower one, through community ties or limited capacity (H1, H2, H2a).

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Research Design

To test the hypotheses on how rebel groups' organizational origins shape their conduct toward civilian populations, I use the Rebel Human Rights Violations dataset (Walsh et al., 2024) to construct the dependent variable. The dataset codes eight categories of non-combat violations by rebel groups from 1990 to 2018, namely arbitrary killing, forced detention and disappearance, torture, property destruction, forcible recruitment, sexual violence, forced displacement, and movement restriction. The unit of analysis is the rebel group-year. Although a group's organizational origin is fixed at formation, its repertoire of abuses is not, and it can change from one year of conflict to the next. The group-year structure preserves this variation and lets me account for conflict conditions that also change annually. A group-level analysis would collapse the variation into a single measure and obscure changes in rebel behavior over time. This study is, thus, restricted to 1990–2011, which yields 750 group-years for 182 rebel groups because the FORGE dataset covers groups active through 2011.

Dependent Variable

The primary dependent variable is the Violation Repertoire Score, a count of the distinct violation categories a rebel group employs in a given year, ranging from 0 to 8. I code violations from the U.S. State Department's human rights reports, which holds the source constant across groups and years. The RHRV dataset codes each violation type from 0 (no evidence or allegation) to 2 (frequent or systematic) (Walsh et al., 2024).[1] I treat any non-zero level as an instance of that violation, so each of the eight types contributes 1 if the group engaged in it in a given year and 0 otherwise, and the types are summed. This fits the argument, which concerns how many forms of coercion a group employs. Militarized origins should widen the repertoire by sup-

[1] A 1 indicates occasional or infrequent violations. Where reports give numbers rather than these terms, a 2 requires 50 or more victims of that violation and a 1 designates 1 to 49 victims (RHRV codebook).

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plying the capacity and the habits to coerce in many ways at once, while community ties should narrow it by raising the cost of coercing the people a group depends on. A count of types captures both expectations, which a binary indicator of any violation or the severity of a single category would not. I estimate the outcome with negative binomial regression to account for overdispersion in the count.[2]

Independent Variables

The primary explanatory variables capture the organizational origins of rebel groups using the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). I classify groups whose origins fall in a single category into three mutually exclusive types, with militarized origins as the reference category in all specifications.

Militarized groups emerged from a preexisting armed organization, the current or former armed forces of the country, or a foreign organization (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024, 1703). Parentless groups emerged without an identifiable parent organization, including groups with no organization or community underlying their initial membership and groups constituted from a specific refugee population or domestic ethnic community but not from a formal organization within it (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020).

Community-embedded groups emerged from civil society organizations or political parties, following Braithwaite and Cunningham (2024)'s conceptualization of community ties. Civil society origins include political movements, student or youth groups, labor unions, and religious organizations (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). I code Community Embedded as 1 for groups whose only origin is a civil society organization or political party. To test the civil society hypothesis, I also construct Civil

[2]The violation repertoire score is overdispersed, with a variance of 5.554 compared with a mean of 2.115. A formal overdispersion test rejects the Poisson assumption of equidispersion ($z = 11.83$, $p < 0.001$), while the negative binomial model provides a substantially better fit than the Poisson model (AIC = 2744.20 versus 2932.75).

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Society Origin, coded 1 for groups whose only origin is a civil society organization and 0 for all other single-origin groups.

Control Variables

I include controls for features of the group, the country, and the conflict that may shape both a group's origins and its violation repertoire. From the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013), I include rebel strength, external rebel support, and territorial control. Rebel strength is a five-point ordinal scale of the group's military strength relative to the government, ranging from 1 (much weaker) to 5 (much stronger), with 3 indicating parity. Rebel support is coded 0 when the dataset records no support, 1 when support is alleged, and 2 when it is explicit. Territorial control is coded 1 when the group controls territory and 0 otherwise. I also include conflict duration, measured as the number of years since the start of the group's conflict spell in the same dataset. To control for whether the group was founded around a specific political ideology, I use the ideology variable from FORGE (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). This is a binary measurement that takes the value of 1 if the rebel group founded with a specific political ideology and 0 otherwise.

At the country level, I control for economic development with the natural log of GDP per capita in constant 2015 U.S. dollars from the World Development Indicators, linearly interpolated within country between observed years, and for democratic governance with the standardized V-Dem electoral democracy (polyarchy) index (Coppedge et al., 2024). At the conflict level, I include conflict intensity from the UCDP Dyadic Conflict Dataset, espoused by the RHRV data (Walsh et al., 2024), coded 1 for conflicts with 25 to 999 battle-related deaths in the year and 2 for conflicts with at least 1,000, to account for the possibility that more intense conflicts produce broader patterns of civilian abuse independently of group origins.

Standard errors are clustered by rebel group to account for correlation across years within groups. All models include the full set of controls. As a robustness check, I use

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violation severity as an alternative dependent variable, summing the ordinal scores across the eight violation categories (range 0 to 16) to capture breadth and intensity together.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Violation Repertoire Score (0–8)	750	2.115	1.000	2.357	0	8
Any Violation (Binary)	750	0.621	1.000	0.485	0	1
Violation Severity (0–16)	750	3.459	1.500	4.325	0	16
Militarized Origin	750	0.600	1.000	0.490	0	1
Community-Embedded Origin	750	0.313	0.000	0.464	0	1
Civil Society Origin	750	0.156	0.000	0.363	0	1
Political Party Origin	750	0.157	0.000	0.364	0	1
Parentless Origin	750	0.087	0.000	0.282	0	1
Rebel Strength	750	1.672	2.000	0.634	1	4
Rebel Support (0–2)	750	0.968	1.000	0.906	0	2
Territorial Control	750	0.372	0.000	0.484	0	1
Ideology	750	0.799	1.000	0.401	0	1
Conflict Intensity (1–2)	750	1.152	1.000	0.359	1	2
Conflict Duration (years)	750	5.113	3.000	6.074	0	33
Democracy (V-Dem Polyarchy)	750	0.390	0.330	0.222	0.068	0.821
Log GDP per Capita	750	7.193	6.985	1.213	5.116	10.504

Note: Group-years, 1990–2011 (182 rebel groups). The origin categories are mutually exclusive; Community-Embedded combines Civil Society and Political Party origins.

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Results and Discussion

Parentless Origins and Violation Repertoire Breadth

Table 2 presents negative binomial regression results examining the relationship between parentless organizational origins and the Violation Repertoire Score across five specifications. In Models 1 through 3, I treat parentless groups as a single category, while disaggregating the broad parentless category in Models 4 and 5, distinguishing groups originating from ethnic or refugee communities from those without identified predecessor organizations. Militarized-origin groups serve as the reference category in every specification except for Model 3, which compares parentless groups with all other groups classified under a single organizational origin.

For hypothesis 1, I theorize that parentless rebel groups would exhibit narrower repertoires of human rights violations than groups with militarized origins and by extension those with parent organizations. However, results do not provide statistically significant support for this expectation when parentless groups are treated as a single category. In the bivariate specification (Model 1), parentless groups have an expected repertoire approximately 39% smaller than militarized-origin groups (IRR = 0.612, 95% CI [0.249, 1.50], $p = 0.285$). Introducing organizational and contextual controls produces a similar estimate (IRR = 0.634, 95% CI [0.299, 1.34], $p = 0.233$), while expanding the comparison category to include all other single-origin groups yields an incidence rate ratio of 0.697 (95% CI [0.333, 1.46], $p = 0.337$). While all the coefficients are consistently negative, none is statistically significant, providing insufficient evidence to support Hypothesis 1. The aggregate results, thus, do not establish that parentless groups systematically exhibit narrower violation repertoires than groups with organizational predecessors.

However, given the variation in the broad category of parentless groups, I further disaggregate these groups. These disaggregated specifications reveal considerable variation within the parentless category. Groups originating from ethnic or refugee

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communities exhibit repertoires that are statistically indistinguishable from those of militarized-origin groups, both without controls (IRR = 0.836, $p = 0.693$) and after accounting for organizational and contextual characteristics (IRR = 0.820, $p = 0.610$). The results are substantially different for groups without identified predecessor organizations. In the bivariate specification (Model 4), these groups exhibit approximately 89% fewer expected violation categories than militarized-origin groups (IRR = 0.108, 95% CI [0.036, 0.326], $p < 0.001$). The association remains substantial and statistically significant after introducing the full set of controls (IRR = 0.165, 95% CI [0.058, 0.467], $p < 0.001$), corresponding to approximately 84% fewer expected violation categories.[3]

The control variables exhibit relatively consistent patterns across the specifications. Rebel strength, conflict intensity, and conflict duration are positively and statistically significantly associated with repertoire breadth in every model that includes them, suggesting that stronger rebel organizations and those operating in more intense or prolonged conflicts tend to employ a wider range of civilian abuses. Meanwhile territorial control, democracy, economic conditions, and ideology generally do not exhibit statistically significant associations with repertoire breadth, while external rebel support is negatively associated with the outcome in some specifications but not others.

[3]A Wald test indicates that the coefficients for the two parentless subtypes differ significantly in Model 5 ($\chi^2(1) = 5.82$, $p = 0.016$). This association is observed among groups without an identified predecessor organization, a relatively small category comprising 20 group-years from 11 rebel groups.

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Table 2: Parentless Origins and the Violation Repertoire Score

	(1) Broad	(2) Broad	(3) Broad	(4) Split	(5) Split
Organizational Origins					
Parentless (Broad)	−0.491	−0.456	−0.361		
	(0.459)	(0.382)	(0.376)		
Ethnic or Refugee Community				−0.179	−0.199
				(0.454)	(0.390)
No Identified Predecessor				−2.225***	−1.804***
				(0.563)	(0.532)
Organizational Controls					
Rebel Strength		0.481***	0.564***		0.479***
		(0.099)	(0.100)		(0.101)
Territorial Control		0.326	0.226		0.330†
		(0.202)	(0.185)		(0.200)
Rebel Support		−0.152*	−0.057		−0.159*
		(0.076)	(0.078)		(0.074)
Ideology		0.090	0.039		0.030
		(0.238)	(0.230)		(0.232)
Contextual Controls					
Conflict Intensity		0.635***	0.695***		0.603***
		(0.168)	(0.143)		(0.149)
Conflict Duration		0.061***	0.040***		0.059***
		(0.013)	(0.010)		(0.012)
Log GDP per Capita		−0.042	0.014		−0.027
		(0.085)	(0.073)		(0.080)
Democracy		0.039	0.084		0.025
		(0.096)	(0.079)		(0.097)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Comparison Group	Militarized	Militarized	All Others	Militarized	Militarized
Observations	515	515	750	515	515
Rebel Groups	142	142	182	142	142

Note: Negative binomial coefficients with standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses. Models (1)–(3) use the broad parentless category; Models (4)–(5) distinguish ethnic/refugee origins from groups with no identified predecessor. Models (1), (2), (4) and (5) are restricted to militarized and parentless groups; Model (3) includes all groups with a single origin type. Model (1) and (4) exclude controls. Group-years, 1990–2011. $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

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Community Embeddedness, Civil Society, and Violation Repertoire Breadth

Table 3 presents the negative binomial regression results examining the relationship between community-embedded organizational origins and the breadth of human rights violations committed by rebel groups. Under hypothesis 2, I expect rebel groups originating from community-embedded organizations (including civil society organizations and political parties), to exhibit narrower violation repertoires than groups with militarized origins. Hypothesis 2a focuses specifically on civil society origins, predicting that groups emerging from such organizations will exhibit narrower repertoires than groups with other organizational origins. Models 1 and 2 examine the pooled community-embedded category, with militarized origins as the reference group and parentless groups included as a separate category. Model 1 estimates the bivariate relationship, while Model 2 includes organizational and contextual controls. Model 3 distinguishes civil society from political party origins, with militarized origins serving as the reference category. Model 4 compares civil society origins with all other organizational origins. Model 5 examines the breadth of violations among group-years in which at least one violation is recorded.

The results provide limited support for Hypothesis 2. In Model 1, community-embedded origins are negatively associated with the Violation Repertoire Score, although the relationship is not statistically significant (IRR = 0.833, $p = 0.479$). Introducing organizational and contextual controls in Model 2, though, produces a stronger negative association (IRR = 0.734, 95% CI [0.512, 1.05], $p = 0.093$), the model remains statistically insignificant at the 95% confidence interval threshold. Groups with community embeddedness advantage thus, exhibit approximately 27% fewer expected violation categories than militarized-origin groups, and statistically significant only at the 10% level.

The relatively weak association for the pooled category may reflect differences be-

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tween the civil society and party-based groups. I examine this theoretical possibility in Model 3 by distinguishing the two organizational backgrounds. Civil-society-origin groups exhibit approximately 45% fewer expected violation categories than militarized-origin groups (IRR = 0.549, 95% CI [0.353, 0.854], $p = 0.008$). Meanwhile, the estimated association for political party origins is considerably smaller and statistically insignificant (IRR = 0.909, 95% CI [0.617, 1.340], $p = 0.631$). From these findings, the negative association between community-embedded origins and repertoire breadth is more pronounced among groups originating from civil society organizations.

The results provide stronger support for Hypothesis 2a. In Model 4, rebel groups originating from civil society organizations exhibit approximately 42% fewer expected violation categories than groups with other organizational origins (IRR = 0.583, 95% CI [0.382, 0.889], $p = 0.012$). This estimate is similar to the association observed in Model 3, where parentless groups are included as a separate category rather than pooled with the comparison group. The consistency of these estimates suggests that the negative association between civil society origins and repertoire breadth is not dependent on how parentless origins are incorporated into the comparison.

One important question, however, is whether the narrower repertoires associated with civil society origins rests primarily on samples restricted to groups that have already committed violations. Model 5 addresses this question by restricting the analysis to the 466 group-years in which at least one violation is recorded and examining the number of additional violation categories beyond the first. Among these group-years, civil-society-origin groups exhibit approximately 48% fewer expected additional violation categories than militarized-origin groups (IRR = 0.522, 95% CI [0.316, 0.862], $p = 0.011$). This finding indicates that the negative association between civil society origins and repertoire breadth is not confined to differences in whether violations occur. It is also evident among group-years in which civilian abuse has already been recorded. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical expectation that organizational

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practices and community relationships inherited from civil society organizations may constrain the range of coercive practices rebel groups employ, even when they do not prevent violations altogether

Turning to the control variables, rebel strength, conflict intensity, and conflict duration are positively and statistically significantly associated with the Violation Repertoire Score across the models that include them. Stronger rebel groups and those operating in more intense or prolonged conflicts tend to exhibit broader repertoires of civilian abuse. Territorial control, rebel support, ideology, democracy, and economic development do not exhibit consistent statistically significant associations with repertoire breadth. Previous research suggests that some of these relationships are conditional. The location of rebel-held territory may shape incentives for restraint (Stewart and Liou, 2017), territorial control may moderate the relationship between battlefield losses and attacks on civilians (Wood, 2014), the consequences of rebel support may depend on the number and characteristics of sponsors (Salehyan et al., 2014), and different ideologies may encourage different strategies of violence (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014). Although the democracy estimate is not statistically significant, the positive direction matches findings that rebels commit more violence against civilians in democratic and semi-democratic settings (Eck and Hultman, 2007; Hultman, 2012). However, those studies examine the number of civilians killed rather than the broad repertoire of abuse examined in this study.

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Table 3: Community Embedded and Civil Society Origins and the Violation Repertoire Score

	H2: Community Embedded			**H2a: Civil Society**	
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
Organizational Origins					
Community Embedded	−0.182	−0.309†			
	(0.258)	(0.184)			
Civil Society			**−0.600****	**−0.540***	**−0.650***
			(**0.226**)	(**0.216**)	(**0.256**)
Political Party			−0.095		−0.049
			(0.198)		(0.124)
Parentless	−0.491	−0.435	−0.443		−0.085
	(0.459)	(0.391)	(0.388)		(0.293)
Organizational Controls					
Rebel Strength		**0.543*****	**0.525*****	**0.544*****	**0.422*****
		(**0.096**)	(**0.091**)	(**0.095**)	(**0.088**)
Territorial Control		0.248	0.223	0.227	0.099
		(0.176)	(0.166)	(0.165)	(0.160)
Rebel Support		−0.039	−0.042	−0.043	−0.028
		(0.078)	(0.072)	(0.073)	(0.065)
Ideology		0.084	0.063	0.043	−0.027
		(0.223)	(0.222)	(0.226)	(0.189)
Contextual Controls					
Conflict Intensity		**0.667*****	**0.693*****	**0.669*****	**0.447****
		(**0.148**)	(**0.147**)	(**0.135**)	(**0.137**)
Conflict Duration		**0.044*****	**0.042*****	**0.042*****	**0.037*****
		(**0.011**)	(**0.010**)	(**0.009**)	(**0.009**)
Log GDP per Capita		0.026	0.038	0.049	0.002
		(0.071)	(0.072)	(0.071)	(0.064)
Democracy		0.087	0.104	0.093	−0.103
		(0.075)	(0.074)	(0.077)	(0.075)
Outcome	Types	Types	Types	Types	Beyond First
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Comparison Group	Militarized	Militarized	Militarized	All Others	Militarized
Observations	750	750	750	750	466
Rebel Groups	182	182	182	182	109

Note: Negative binomial coefficients with standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses. $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Bold indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

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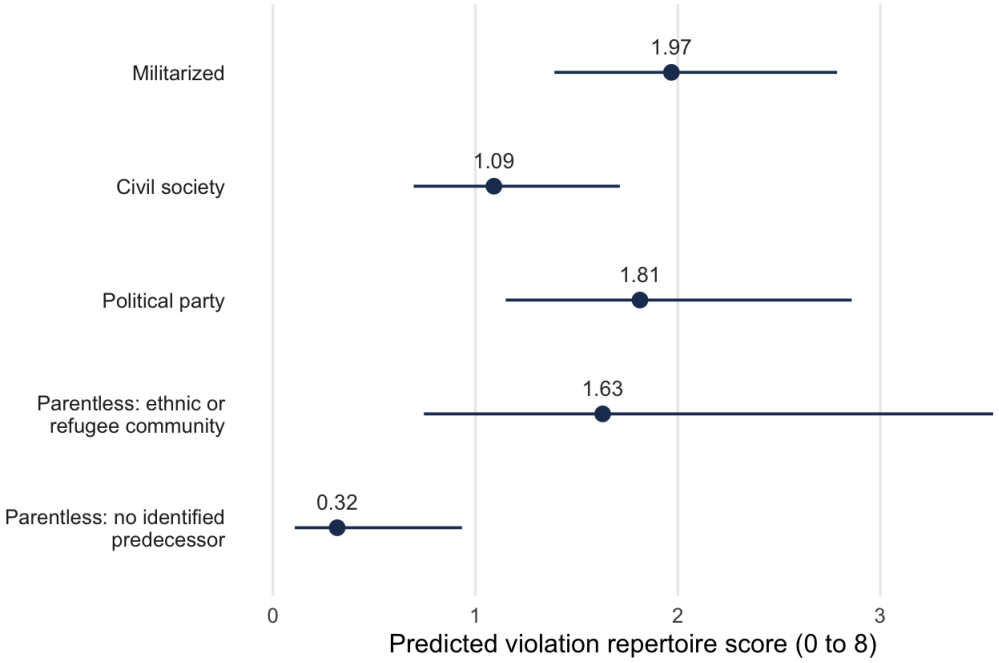


Figure 2: Predicted Violation Repertoire Score by Organizational Origin

Alt text: Predicted repertoire scores with 95 percent intervals. Militarized 1.97, civil society 1.09, political party 1.81, ethnic or refugee parentless 1.63, no identified predecessor 0.32.

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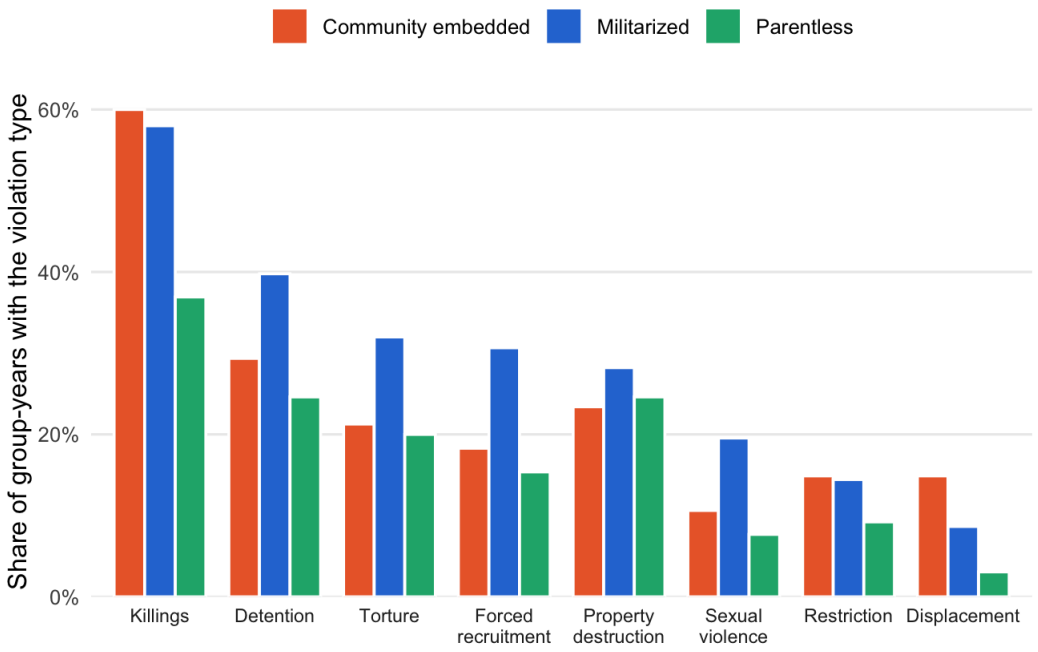


Figure 3: Violation Profile: Community Embedded, Militarized, and Parentless Origins

Alt text: Bar chart of the share of group-years with each of eight violation types for community embedded, militarized, and parentless groups. Killings are most common for all three. Parentless groups are lowest on most types.

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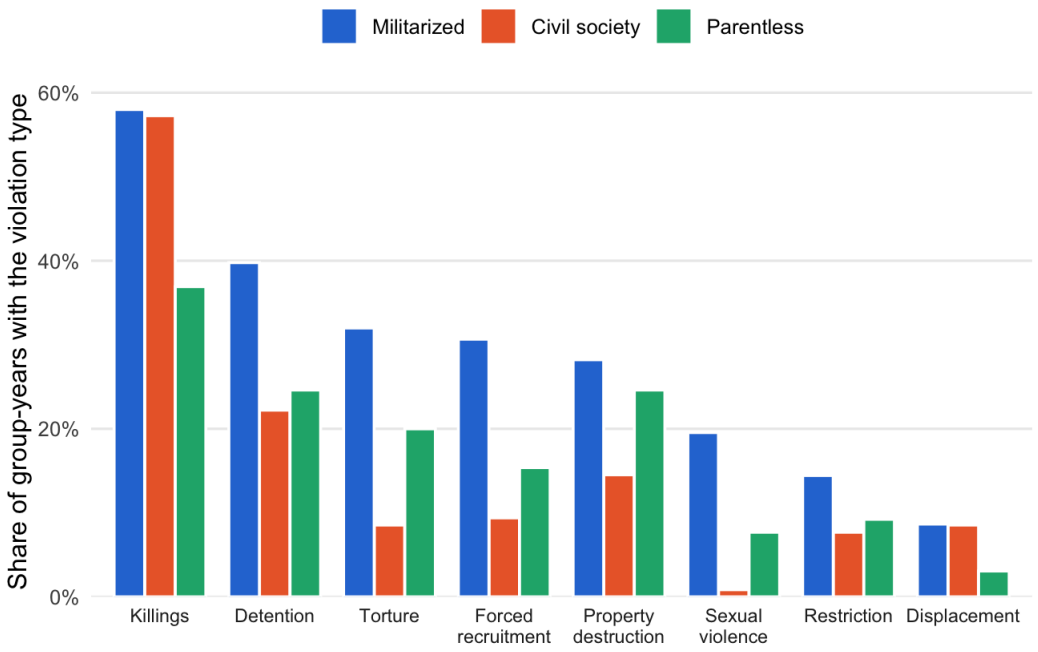


Figure 4: Violation Profile: Militarized, Civil Society, and Parentless Origins

Alt text: Bar chart of the share of group-years with each of eight violation types for militarized, civil society, and parentless groups. Killings are similar for militarized and civil society groups. Civil society groups are far lower on torture, recruitment, detention, and sexual violence.

Figure 2 converts the model estimates into predicted repertoire scores, with controls held at their sample means. Militarized groups are predicted to commit 1.97 violation types in a given year (95% CI [1.39, 2.79]). Civil society groups fall well below this baseline at 1.09 (95% CI [0.70, 1.71]), whereas political party groups (1.81) and groups formed from an ethnic or refugee community (1.63) stay close to it. Groups with no identified predecessor have the lowest predicted score (0.32, 95% CI [0.11, 0.93]), but that estimate rests on 20 group-years. The figure is descriptive of the model; the tests of these differences are in Tables 2 and 3.

Figure 3 shows that community-embedded groups have a lower recorded prevalence of most violation types than militarized groups, although the differences are generally smaller when civil society and political party origins are combined. Figure

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4 provides a clearer picture of these patterns. Civil society groups have nearly the same prevalence of recorded killings as militarized groups (57% versus 58% of group-years), but substantially lower prevalence of sexual violence (1% versus 20%), torture (9% versus 32%), forced recruitment (9% versus 31%), and detention (22% versus 40%). Parentless groups have lower recorded prevalence across all eight violation categories, including killings (37%).

Robustness Check

I conduct a robustness check to assess whether the findings are not just measurement driven. I re-estimate the main models using a Violation Severity Index in place of the Violation Repertoire Score. The index sums ordinal scores across the eight violation categories, with each category coded 0 if the violation was unreported, 1 if it occurred occasionally, and 2 if it occurred frequently, yielding a range from 0 to 16.Because the index combines how many types of violations a group commits with how often it commits them, I also examine intensity directly, using the average severity score across the violation types a group commits (1 = occasional, 2 = frequent) among group-years with at least one violation. This measure equals one plus the share of committed violation types that are frequent. Table 4 reports negative binomial models with controls and standard errors clustered by rebel group.

Civil society groups have significantly lower severity than all other origins (IRR = 0.525, 95% CI [0.330, 0.836], $p = 0.007$; Model 1), a reduction of roughly 48 percent, and than other parented origins, meaning militarized and political party groups (IRR = 0.492, 95% CI [0.315, 0.770], $p = 0.002$; Model 2), a reduction of roughly 51 percent. These magnitudes are comparable to, and slightly larger than, those in the repertoire models. Mean intensity is also lower for civil society groups, by about 0.20 points against all other origins ($p = 0.002$; Model 3) and 0.22 points against other parented origins ($p < 0.001$; Model 4), which corresponds to a share of frequent violation types

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roughly 20 percentage points lower. Thus, for both fewer types of violations, and how often they commit them given that a violation occurs, civil society groups significantly commit few of both.

The severity models for the remaining hypotheses produce the same conclusions as the repertoire models (Appendix Table 5). Parentless groups do not differ significantly from militarized groups (IRR = 0.547, 95% CI [0.229, 1.31], $p = 0.176$; Model 1). Disaggregating the parentless category, groups originating from ethnic or refugee communities are likewise not statistically distinguishable from militarized groups (IRR = 0.743, 95% CI [0.306, 1.81], $p = 0.512$), whereas groups with no identified predecessor exhibit substantially lower expected severity scores (IRR = 0.105, 95% CI [0.036, 0.308], $p < 0.001$; Model 2).[4] Community-embedded groups have lower expected severity scores than militarized groups, but the difference does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (IRR = 0.715, 95% CI [0.472, 1.08], $p = 0.112$; Model 3). In all, both the severity and intensity models further reinforce the main findings and suggest that they are not an artifact of counting violation types.

[4] As in the main analysis, this estimate rests on only 20 group-years from 11 groups.

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Table 4: Robustness Check: Civil Society Origins and Alternative Dependent Variables

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Severity Index (NB)		Mean Intensity (OLS)	
Organizational Origins				
Civil Society Origin	$-$**0.645****	$-$**0.709****	$-$**0.197****	$-$**0.222*****
	(0.238)	(0.228)	(0.062)	(0.060)
Organizational Controls				
Rebel Strength	**0.712*****	**0.663*****	0.091	0.079
	(0.118)	(0.127)	(0.065)	(0.068)
Territorial Control	0.178	0.182	$-$0.060	$-$0.047
	(0.200)	(0.217)	(0.068)	(0.073)
Rebel Support	$-$0.026	$-$0.016	0.039	0.038
	(0.086)	(0.084)	(0.031)	(0.032)
Ideology	0.011	$-$0.099	$-$0.025	$-$0.049
	(0.265)	(0.272)	(0.085)	(0.090)
Contextual Controls				
Conflict Intensity	**0.763*****	**0.701*****	**0.200****	**0.179****
	(0.163)	(0.154)	(0.061)	(0.063)
Conflict Duration	**0.050*****	**0.050*****	0.010†	0.010†
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Log GDP per Capita	0.067	0.072	0.009	0.014
	(0.083)	(0.091)	(0.026)	(0.027)
Democracy	0.080	0.098	$-$0.049	$-$0.043
	(0.086)	(0.086)	(0.037)	(0.038)
Observations	750	685	466	439
Rebel Groups	182	159	109	99

Note: Models 1–2 are negative binomial models of the Violation Severity Index. Models 3–4 are OLS models of mean intensity, the average severity score (1 = occasional, 2 = frequent) across the violation types a group commits, estimated on group-years with at least one violation. Rebel-group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Models 1 and 3 compare civil society with all other origins; Models 2 and 4 compare it with other parented origins. $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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Conclusion

Do the organizational origins of rebel groups shape how they treat civilian populations during conflict? This study argues that understanding variation in civilian abuse requires looking beyond wartime conditions to the organizational foundations established before rebellion begins. The organizations from which rebel groups emerge can confer resources, routines, and social relationships that shape the breadth of coercive practices they subsequently employ. Using group-year data on 182 rebel groups from 1990 to 2011, I find that organizational origins are associated with variation in the breadth of civilian abuse, although these relationships differ across origin types.

The clearest finding concerns civil society origins. Rebel groups emerging from civil society organizations employ significantly narrower repertoires of human rights violations than groups with militarized origins and other organizational backgrounds. Their expected repertoires are approximately 42–45% smaller, and the negative association persists when civilian abuse is measured using an aggregate severity index and when average reported frequency is examined among group-years with recorded violations. These findings are consistent with the argument that civil society organizations transmit nonviolent routines, behavioral norms, and community relationships that may constrain the expansion of coercive practices. Meanwhile, the broader community-embedded category, which also includes political party origins, exhibits a negative but statistically insignificant association with repertoire breadth at the conventional 5% threshold.

The findings for parentless origins are more limited. When treated as a single category, parentless groups do not differ significantly from militarized groups in their expected violation repertoires. Disaggregating this category, however, reveals that groups without an identified predecessor organization or community base record substantially fewer violation types. This finding is consistent with the expectation that limited inherited organizational infrastructure may constrain the capacity to sustain

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diverse coercive practices. Nevertheless, the estimate is based on only 20 group-years from 11 groups and should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

These findings have implications for understanding and monitoring civilian abuse during armed conflict. Organizational origins may provide humanitarian actors and policymakers with information about the coercive practices rebel groups are likely to employ. In particular, identifying whether groups emerge from civil society organizations or preexisting armed organizations may complement assessments based on battlefield conditions, organizational strength, and civilian relationships. Organizational origins should nevertheless be treated as one source of information rather than a substitute for monitoring groups' actual conduct and the conditions under which they operate.

In sum, this study contributes to the literature on rebel groups and civilian abuse (Weinstein, 2007; Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Fjelde and Hultman, 2014; Cohen, 2016; Wood et al., 2012) by examining organizational formation as a potential source of variation in coercive repertoires. Building on Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017), who conceptualize political violence as multidimensional and distinguish repertoire from other dimensions of violence, the analysis investigates why rebel groups differ in the range of human rights violations they employ. It also extends research on rebel organizational origins (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024; Bauer and Cunningham, 2026) by examining how inherited organizational characteristics are associated with subsequent civilian abuse. Organizational origins are, therefore, not merely historical background particularly because the resources, routines, and relationships associated with group formation may help provide crucial explanations for why some rebel organizations employ a broad or narrow repertoire of violations.

This study also opens avenues for future research. For instance, within-group variation may also explain differences in abuse repertoire, focusing on factors such as leadership, factional competition, or changes in organizational culture over time. Also, the

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timing of abuse may matter independently, meaning that the promptness of abuse and how quickly it escalates could also be examined by future studies.

Data availability statement

The data used in this article come from publicly available sources, cited in the research design section. The replication data and code needed to reproduce all results reported in the article and its online appendix will be deposited in a public repository upon acceptance.

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Appendix

This appendix reports three robustness checks. Appendix Table 5 re-estimates the main models using the Violation Severity Index in place of the Violation Repertoire Score. Appendix Table 6 reports the origin estimates with and without controls, and Appendix Table 7 compares Poisson and negative binomial estimates. In each of these cases, the results lead to the same conclusions as the main tables.

Table 5: Robustness Check: Alternative Dependent Variable (Violation Severity Index)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Violation Severity Index				
Organizational Origins					
Parentless Origin	−0.602		−0.577		
	(0.445)		(0.463)		
Ethnic/Refugee Community		−0.297			
		(0.453)			
No Identified Predecessor		**−2.251*****			
		(0.547)			
Community-Embedded Origin			−0.336		
			(0.212)		
Civil Society Origin				**−0.645****	**−0.709****
				(0.238)	(0.228)
Organizational Controls					
Rebel Strength	**0.615*****	**0.618*****	**0.711*****	**0.712*****	**0.663*****
	(0.124)	(0.127)	(0.119)	(0.118)	(0.127)
Territorial Control	0.333	0.328	0.197	0.178	0.182
	(0.250)	(0.246)	(0.211)	(0.200)	(0.217)
Rebel Support	**−0.182***	**−0.190***	−0.023	−0.026	−0.016
	(0.090)	(0.087)	(0.092)	(0.086)	(0.084)
Ideology	0.038	−0.037	0.092	0.011	−0.099
	(0.288)	(0.279)	(0.263)	(0.265)	(0.272)
Contextual Controls					
Conflict Intensity	**0.757*****	**0.702*****	**0.785*****	**0.763*****	**0.701*****
	(0.224)	(0.194)	(0.188)	(0.163)	(0.154)
Conflict Duration	**0.073*****	**0.072*****	**0.051*****	**0.050*****	**0.050*****
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Log GDP per Capita	−0.043	−0.029	0.033	0.067	0.072
	(0.099)	(0.093)	(0.081)	(0.083)	(0.091)
Democracy	0.031	0.017	0.062	0.080	0.098
	(0.109)	(0.110)	(0.084)	(0.086)	(0.086)
Observations	515	515	750	750	685
Rebel Groups	142	142	182	182	159

Note: Negative binomial models with rebel-group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Militarized groups are the reference in Models 1–3; Model 4 compares civil society with all other origins, and Model 5 with other parented origins. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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Table 6: Appendix: Origin Estimates With and Without Controls

	H1 Parentless (Militarized reference)		H2 Community embedded (Militarized reference)		H2a Civil society vs. all other origins		H2a Civil society vs. other parented origins	
	No controls Model 1	Full Model 2	No controls Model 3	Full Model 4	No controls Model 5	Full Model 6	No controls Model 7	Full Model 8
Organizational Origins								
Community-Embedded Origin			−0.182	−0.309†				
			(0.258)	(0.184)				
Parentless Origin	−0.491	−0.456	−0.491	−0.435				
	(0.459)	(0.382)	(0.459)	(0.391)				
Civil Society Origin					**−0.563***	**−0.540***	**−0.605***	**−0.585****
					(0.264)	(0.216)	(0.265)	(0.209)
Organizational Controls								
Rebel Strength		**0.481*****		**0.543*****		**0.544*****		**0.505*****
		(0.099)		(0.096)		(0.095)		(0.101)
Territorial Control		0.326		0.248		0.227		0.227
		(0.202)		(0.176)		(0.165)		(0.177)
Rebel Support		**−0.152***		−0.039		−0.043		−0.033
		(0.076)		(0.078)		(0.073)		(0.072)
Ideology		0.090		0.084		0.043		−0.056
		(0.238)		(0.223)		(0.226)		(0.230)
Contextual Controls								
Conflict Intensity		**0.635*****		**0.667*****		**0.669*****		**0.622*****
		(0.168)		(0.148)		(0.135)		(0.129)
Conflict Duration		**0.061*****		**0.044*****		**0.042*****		**0.043*****
		(0.013)		(0.011)		(0.009)		(0.009)
Log GDP per Capita		−0.042		0.026		0.049		0.051
		(0.085)		(0.071)		(0.071)		(0.078)
Democracy		0.039		0.087		0.093		0.104
		(0.096)		(0.075)		(0.077)		(0.078)
Observations	515	515	750	750	750	750	685	685
Rebel Groups	142	142	182	182	182	182	159	159

Note: Negative binomial models of the Violation Repertoire Score with rebel-group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Full-controls columns include all eight controls and correspond to the main tables. Models 1 and 2 include only parentless and militarized groups. $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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Table 7: Appendix: Poisson and Negative Binomial Estimates of Origin Effects

	H1 Parentless (Militarized reference)		H2 Community embedded (Militarized reference)		H2a Civil society vs. all other origins		H2a Civil society vs. other parented origins	
	Poisson Model 1	Neg. binomial Model 2	Poisson Model 3	Neg. binomial Model 4	Poisson Model 5	Neg. binomial Model 6	Poisson Model 7	Neg. binomial Model 8
Organizational Origins								
Community-Embedded Origin			$-0.310^{\dagger}$	$-0.309^{\dagger}$				
			(0.168)	(0.184)				
Parentless Origin	-0.397	-0.456	-0.359	-0.435				
	(0.347)	(0.382)	(0.359)	(0.391)				
Civil Society Origin					$\mathbf{-0.579}^{**}$	$\mathbf{-0.540}^{*}$	$\mathbf{-0.611}^{**}$	$\mathbf{-0.585}^{**}$
					(0.204)	(0.216)	(0.201)	(0.209)
Organizational Controls								
Rebel Strength	$\mathbf{0.415}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.481}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.457}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.543}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.459}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.544}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.431}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.505}^{***}$
	(0.096)	(0.099)	(0.089)	(0.096)	(0.086)	(0.095)	(0.094)	(0.101)
Territorial Control	0.242	0.326	0.242	0.248	0.208	0.227	0.212	0.227
	(0.197)	(0.202)	(0.168)	(0.176)	(0.161)	(0.165)	(0.172)	(0.177)
Rebel Support	$-0.128^{\dagger}$	$\mathbf{-0.152}^{*}$	-0.045	-0.039	-0.056	-0.043	-0.045	-0.033
	(0.067)	(0.076)	(0.069)	(0.078)	(0.064)	(0.073)	(0.065)	(0.072)
Ideology	0.105	0.090	0.072	0.084	0.069	0.043	-0.016	-0.056
	(0.228)	(0.238)	(0.210)	(0.223)	(0.211)	(0.226)	(0.219)	(0.230)
Contextual Controls								
Conflict Intensity	$\mathbf{0.605}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.635}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.619}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.667}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.627}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.669}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.586}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.622}^{***}$
	(0.152)	(0.168)	(0.137)	(0.148)	(0.131)	(0.135)	(0.126)	(0.129)
Conflict Duration	$\mathbf{0.052}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.061}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.045}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.044}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.043}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.042}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.043}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.043}^{***}$
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Log GDP per Capita	-0.056	-0.042	0.013	0.026	0.030	0.049	0.032	0.051
	(0.079)	(0.085)	(0.067)	(0.071)	(0.065)	(0.071)	(0.075)	(0.078)
Democracy	0.037	0.039	0.077	0.087	0.070	0.093	0.076	0.104
	(0.096)	(0.096)	(0.075)	(0.075)	(0.077)	(0.077)	(0.078)	(0.078)
Observations	515	515	750	750	750	750	685	685
Rebel Groups	142	142	182	182	182	182	159	159

Note: Models of the Violation Repertoire Score with all eight controls and rebel-group-clustered standard errors in parentheses. The negative binomial columns correspond to the main tables. Models 1 and 2 include only parentless and militarized groups. $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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