Inside the Politics of Self-determination presentation for the Conflict Research Society, September 14, 2015

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Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the Conflict Research Society and the book award committee for recognizing Inside the Politics of Self-determination. This is my first book, and this project has been a big part of my life for the past decade.

My underlying interest in the politics of self-determination actually began much earlier for me not all that far from here. As an undergrad studying Shakespeare for the summer almost 20 years ago I had some interesting conversations with people about British identity, and the role of Scottish nationalism. I returned to the states to write a thesis on the Scottish devolution process, specifically on the failure of the 1979 bid for autonomy and the success of the 1997 referendum.

One of the things I found particularly interesting about the Scottish case was the diversity of opinion over self-rule, both in 1979 and 1997. And of course, this remains today.

The other striking thing about the politics surrounding Scottish nationalism for me was the apparent willingness of the British government to make concessions, and the process through which that has happened. I’ll return to these two issues – diversity of preferences and state responses, but first I want to highlight the larger context of self-determination that spurred this initial interest into the book you see today.

Global trends on self-determination

What is self-determination politics? I refer to the political processes surrounding groups (typically ethno-nationalist) that make claims for greater autonomy or independence. Although many people tend to consider this issue of national self-determination as primarily a domestic problem, or the purview of comparative politics, it remains to me one of the most interesting international politics challenges today.

Three things combined to get us to the contemporary state of the world with respect to self-determination. First, the development of the existing state system prized actors with a territorially based national identity. Second, the process of decolonization
recognized a right of collective “peoples” to self-rule and freedom from foreign domination. Finally, new states are still emerging, as the recent successful secession of South Sudan demonstrates.

These factors have combined to create a world in which many peoples with distinct national character aspire to statehood, or at the very least, feel legitimately entitled to a measure of self-governance. This has resulted in a steady upward trend in the number of groups seeking self-determination over the past 50 years. Moreover, this is also a global phenomenon. Disputes over self-determination occur in all regions, in all regime types, and in both rich and poor countries.

The puzzle of understanding accommodation

While these groups emerge to make demands for self-determination all around the world, there is a great deal of variation in how states respond. In light of my early work on Scottish devolution, my initial perspective on trying to understand self-determination politics centered on accommodation.

How common was it? How did it happen? Why do states treat different groups differently? Were nationalist groups always split on the issue like the Scottish were and remain today?

To answer these questions, I needed to understand more generally how states are responding to challenges over self-determination. To do so, I created a global dataset of accommodation, which forms the basis to the empirical analysis in the book.

I started by researching all instances of states openly making concessions to groups seeking self-determination all around the world since 1960. I found over 200 instances of accommodation. Concessions to self-determination groups appear fairly common and occur in a number of contexts. Such accommodation covers a variety of issues—including political process, economic power, security and culture.

Examining these concessions, we find that about 75% include power transfers over some policy area, about 30% actually create new governance structures such as regional parliament, and about 21% can be considered “cultural” (dealing primarily with language use).

Who gets these concessions? About 30% of self-determination groups never received concessions, 34% of groups received one concession, and 36% of groups received more than one, as governments try to manage on-going disputes through accommodation.
Accommodation is done in many different ways, often involving somewhat complex political processes. About 31% of concessions that were made were legislated and about 23% involved a change to the state’s constitution. This suggests that many instances of accommodation are not just governments trying to quickly placate groups, but appear to be substantial concessions.

The role of internal diversity and the challenges of diversity for analysts

There is clear variation in accommodation, both in what groups get, and how they get it. A key question in the book is why?

This is not easily explained by what groups ask for, or even whether groups challenge the state with violence. The central theoretical argument I make in the book is that internal diversity matters greatly for understanding when and how accommodation is made and its consequences for conflict processes and mobilization around self-determination.

Internal division clearly matters when we see referenda and corresponding campaigns within the groups. The Scots are a case you are all familiar with. The depth of division among Scots emerged as a surprise to many during the campaign. In 2003, Corsicans in France faced a similar choice about greater autonomy, and were split about as evenly as you can be, with the autonomy referendum rejected 51% to 49%.

But internal divisions matter even beyond these referenda because they structure the landscape in which states deal with self-determination claims. Diversity within self-determination groups has two key consequences for self-determination politics, and in particular for how states deal with these groups.

First, diverse groups create uncertainty over what the population actually wants. This is clearly demonstrated with a split referenda. However, in many other cases, it’s a matter of having many competing organizations making disparate claims about what the group needs, wants, or would settle for. Sometimes these preferences range from maintaining the status quo to complete independence as we saw in East Timor.

Second, when groups are internally divided, it can be difficult for any particular individual or organization to make a credible promise on the group’s behalf. This is sometimes talked about as the ability of an individual or organization to “deliver” their population. The ability of someone to make credible promises on the group’s behalf matter greatly for states. If states try to resolve or ameliorate disputes with accommodation, they need to assess the chance that concessions will improve the
situation rather than aggravate it. Many states fear that accommodation will lead to stronger challenges in the future over the same issue. This has been the topic of much research on federalism and decentralization more generally.

Both uncertainty about the preferences of a self-determination group and concerns about whether the group can make credible promises influence how states and self-determination groups interact. With respect to accommodation, these dynamics create incentives for states to use concessions strategically. States can pick from among possible bargaining partners to pursue settlement. States have strong incentives to try to use limited concessions to see what the group wants and what they might be willing to settle for. Moreover, states have few incentives to try for more extensive settlement of self-determination disputes when facing a diverse movement because of the high chance that some organizations will reject settlement and continue to challenge the state.

My global study demonstrates that more diverse groups are more likely to get accommodated than those that are more unified. In fact, the most internally divided groups are 5 times more likely to get accommodation. But the accommodation that these groups get is unlikely to totally resolve the dispute over self-determination and this has implications for the potential for violent conflict.

Consequences for understanding conflict and conflict amelioration

Divisions in self-determination groups also influence the ability of states and these groups to avoid civil war. More actors can make getting to any common agreement more difficult because of the uncertainty about what groups want and their trouble in making credible promises. Moreover, the incentives that governments have for selecting among competing organizations that represent divided self-determination movements, as well as to make minimal accommodations when they can, both create the potential for grievance within the self-determination group.

Those that oppose limited concessions can choose to challenge the state violently even if others agree to concessions made by the government. Infighting among group members also becomes more common as actors attempt to enforce unity within the group, or fight to be the dominant organization. These dynamics are evident in a number of disputes, such as the long running internal violence of the Tamil Tigers. Many organizations represented the Tamils in their struggle with the Sri Lankan state. Most of these had to contend with violence from both the state and the Tamil Tigers as they worked to establish and maintain local dominance.
Even when groups succeed, these challenges persist, as we see in South Sudan where violence continues after independence.

This may paint a somewhat bleak picture for divided self-determination groups, but I think it should not. Instead, understanding these complex dynamics should lead us to a more nuanced and cautious approach to evaluating success and failure of accommodation in self-determination disputes. Continued or low level violence does not necessarily signal failure or unresolvable conflict. There are clear reasons to expect that even when accommodation is having a positive effect, some dissent will emerge.

Internal divisions in states

Internal division does not only matter in self-determination group, but also within states. There is a tendency both to assume states do not want to give up power, and that they have clear, unified preferences on the issue of self-determination. Yet, divisions in opinions and preferences over self-determination are also quite common within states.

Returning to the Corsican case, the chance for greater autonomy was contingent on Socialists being in power rather than Republicans. And that divide harkens back to the French revolution. The Sri Lankan government suffered from similar differences that hampered attempts to accommodate the Tamils.

While divisions within states can prevent accommodation, they can also play a key role in making the state a credible bargaining partner. Unconstrained state leaders can easily accommodate self-determination groups, but they can renege on those concessions just as easily. Overcoming some internal dissent to accommodation within the state makes the process of accommodating self-determination groups more difficult, but also potentially more difficult to change, allowing greater trust from the group that concession will last. I also examine this empirically in the book, and find that states with some institutionalized divisions within them are more likely to make concessions over self-determination and to avoid civil war over the issue.

The missing peace: non-violence

A key missing peace in the study of self-determination thus far is a lack of focus on strategies of resistance. A great deal of attention gets directed at the most violent and intractable disputes, such as South Sudan or the Palestinian/Israeli disputes. Indeed, self-determination has become a central issue over which civil wars are fought. Moreover, despite global trends in mass non-violent campaigns, there is surprising lack of large-scale non-violent campaigns in self-determination disputes.
Only 6 groups used mass non-violent campaigns between 1900 and 2006. Yet there is actually a great deal of non-violent direct action in self-determination disputes. Less than 4% of groups seeking self-determination use non-violent campaigns, but about 75% of groups use non-violence in some way. Moreover, about 45% of organizations representing self-determination groups use non-violent strategies.

These strategies are used both in disputes characterized by violence, and those that remain relatively peaceful. Thus our initial categorization of some disputes as violent and some as peaceful or conventional is not necessary true. Moreover, self-determination groups employ a diverse set of non-violent strategies. Some use both violence and non-violence at the same time. Some appear to switch between the two. Some organizations use only one type of non-violent strategy, while others use a variety of actions.

Protests and demonstrations are the most common strategy used by self-determination groups. Yet many groups and organizations within them use others as well, including social and political noncooperation, non-violent intervention and economic non-cooperation.

What we do not yet know is in what contexts non-violence works for these groups. Moreover, there appears to be some interdependence among the strategies used within a single movement. It’s not yet clear whether we are seeing cooperation among organizations that use non-violence, or whether the competitive dynamics we often associate with violent organizations also play a role here. At this point, we have yet to thoroughly explore when and how non-violence might work in self-determination disputes, and how it might work in tandem with violent dissent.

Conclusion

A central implication of this work for social scientists is our need to focus on diversity. Without this, we miss actors that are critical to the phenomena we want to understand and we ignore particular strategies all together, like non-violent direct action, that may be overshadowed by violent conflict. This is critical for scholars doing quantitative work on conflict processes.

I would like to conclude with some questions. It is clear to me there is no global standard or norm about which groups will get their own state. It is hard to imagine that we will not see more, and possibility more violent, challenges over self-determination in the future. Yet, existing states have little incentive to create such standards.
One possibility is that a global norm emerges regarding secession, and that states respond through recognition. The fact that we have a number of de-facto states today suggests that recognition holds some power, but it is clearly not the final word on who acts as a state. One lingering normative question is what should or could constitute such a norm? Legal scholarship that came from the decolonization process centers on foreign domination.

But what is foreign? What is domination? Does repression or poor governance entitle people to leave their polity? Does the viability of the potential new state matter? South Sudan is a mess, but did it ever really look like it would be a stable state? Are people entitled to autonomy if not independence? Finally, to what degree do the wishes of a would-be rump state matter?

These remain central questions for international politics and ones that I believe will be consequential for decades to come.