

Initiating Insurgency: Rebel Formation and Viability in Uganda

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Research Question

Why do some nascent rebel groups in weak states become **viable** challengers to a central government, while others fail in the initial stages?

Viable defined as a minimal threshold of challenging the central government’s authority:

- Maintain a base on the target country’s territory for a minimal period (3 months) with a minimally-sized force (100 troops).

Motivation

- The vast existing literature on conflict onset omits rebel groups that fail before committing significant violence.
- However, any incipient rebel group could become a major threat to stability. Thus it is crucial to understand the initial stages of insurgency – including why many groups fail.
- We need to build informed theory about these initial stages of rebellion.



Why Study this Topic in Uganda (1986-2006)?

- 16 rebel groups formed there since 1986; 12 became viable, 4 failed in the initial stages.
- Data limitations typically preclude study of the initial stages of rebellion, particularly for early-failed groups. But Uganda has a far-reaching amnesty law; thus, former insurgents who are still alive can discuss their experiences openly.

Data Sources

- Conducted over 230 interviews throughout Uganda with former rebel leaders, government military and intelligence officials, local officials, conflict experts, and civilians who resided where rebels formed.
- Collected complete set of Ugandan newspaper articles on armed conflict (1986 to 2002).
- Used Ugandan census and household survey data; secondary historical and anthropological sources.

Argument

The location of initial rebel formation is idiosyncratic; it is not related to factors commonly associated with conflict onset (e.g. presence of rough terrain, proximity to int’l borders, extent of local poverty.)

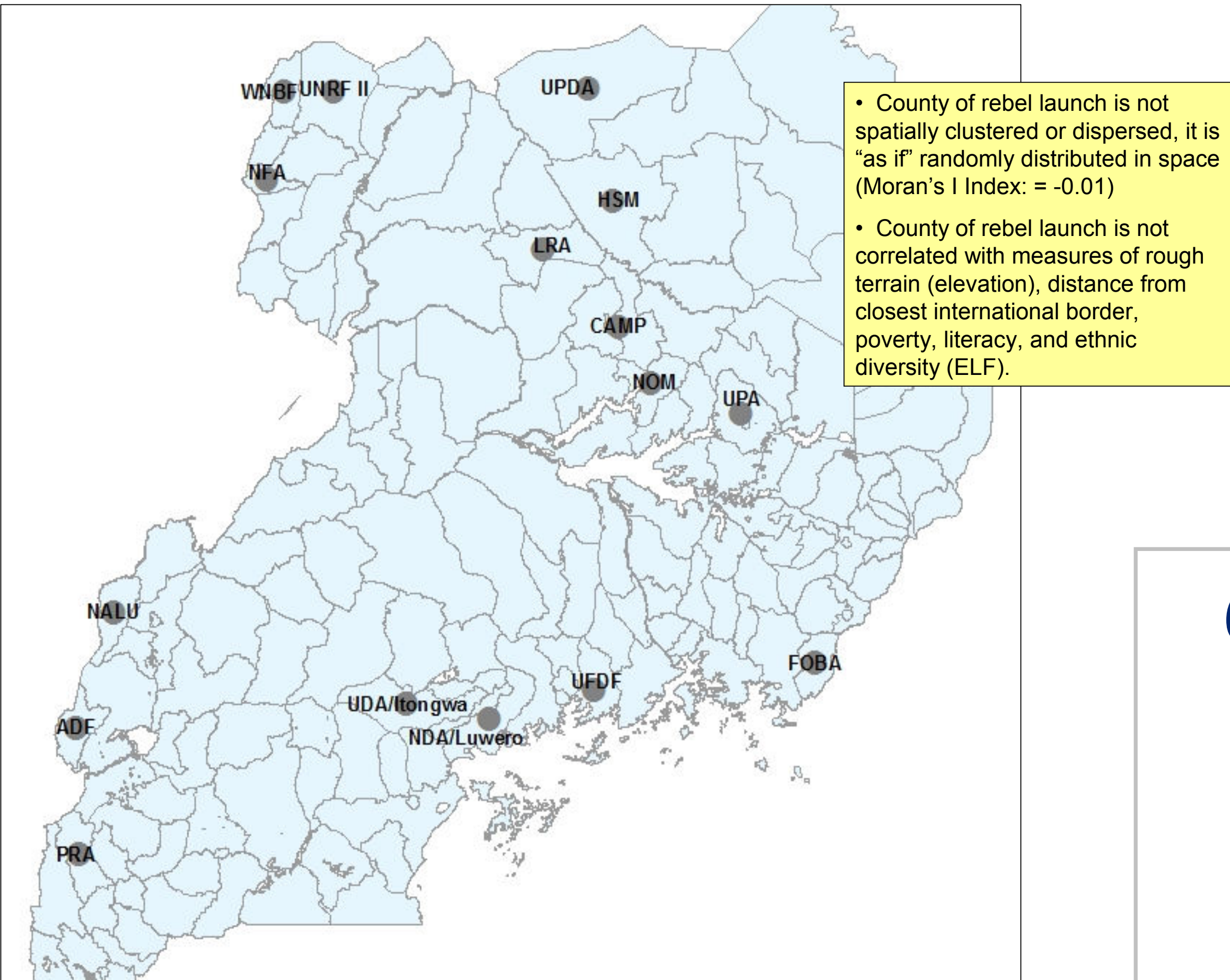
Civilian behavior – in particular, whether or not civilians provide information about nascent rebels to the government – determines whether nascent rebel groups become viable.

Civilians are more likely to support the rebels (by not providing information) if they *believe* that the rebels will be successful.

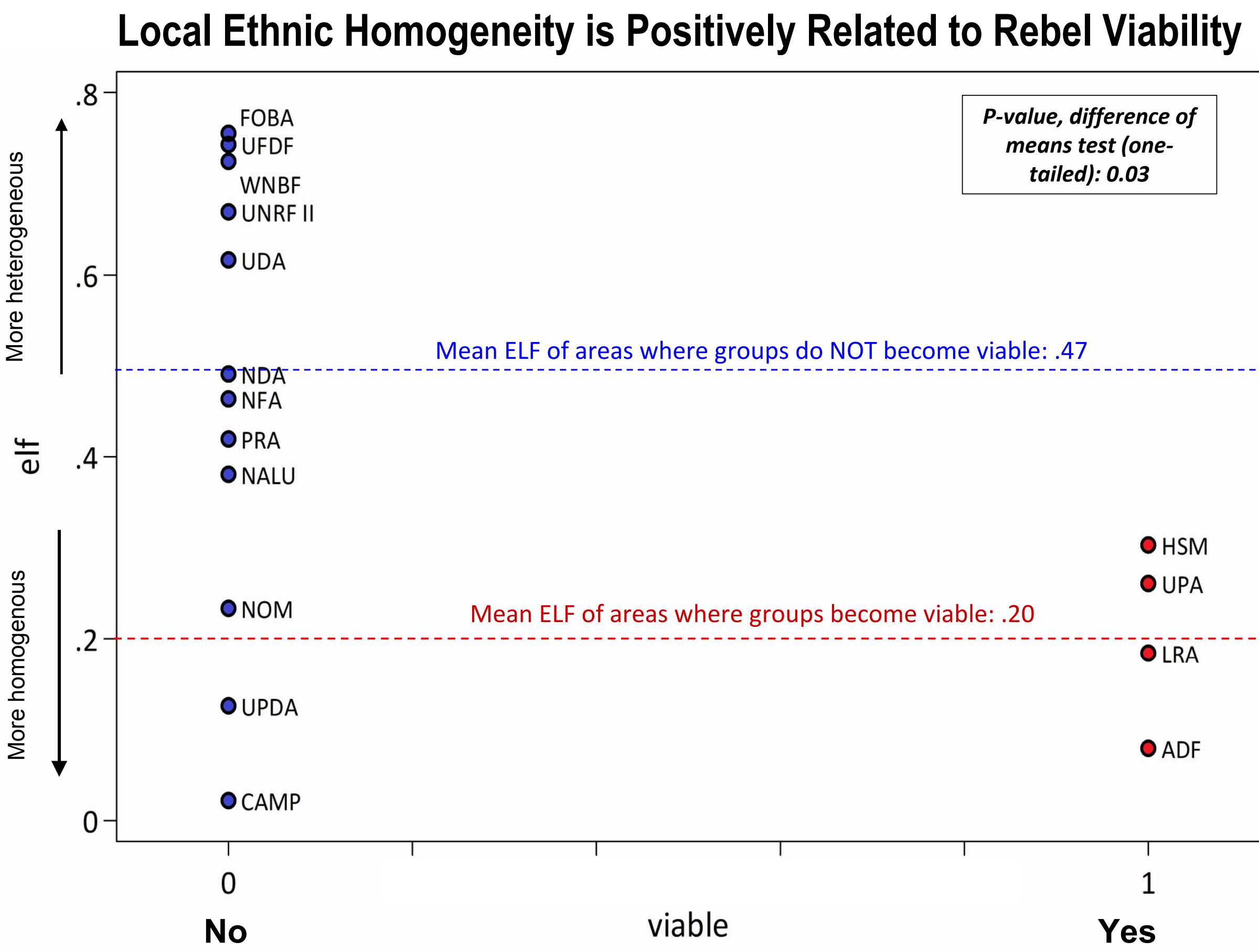
Because such beliefs are more likely to emerge in homogeneous areas, **rebel groups that launch in more ethnically homogeneous areas are more likely to become viable than those that launch in heterogeneous areas.**

Evidence, Part I: Where do Rebel Groups Form?

Map of Initial Rebel Launch, all 16 Ugandan rebel groups



Evidence, Part II: Among groups that formed, which became viable?



Evidence, Part III: Mechanisms

Selected Quotes From Homogeneous Areas:

- “People who are your relatives are more likely to believe in you. If the people hear from you that the rebels are tough, then they get interested.... It is important to create the impression of strength.”
- Rebel intelligence officer
- “Information leaks were very rare.”
- Government counterinsurgent

Selected Quotes From Heterogeneous Areas:

- “No one expected (the rebels) to last”
- Local official
- “It was difficult to keep secrets”
- Rebel leader

Conclusion

Ethnicity may impact conflict onset not by generating shared motivation to rebel, but because the structure of trusted, familial communication networks in homogeneous areas makes it easier for rebels to spread pro-rebel information.