Introduction

This chapter looks at the literature on recruitment in civil war and considers conditions under which civilians opt to participate in armed forces. It begins by highlighting differences between collective action in civil war and outside of civil war. As the “contentious politics” thesis argues, civil war may be considered a continuation of low-level or nonviolent conflict. There are indeed models that connect low-intensity contention with civil war. Dynamics of large-scale armed conflict, in this sense, may be captured by concepts used in studies of collective action in contexts broader than civil war. However, this study would benefit from studies noting the peculiarity of civil war, because components such as armed groups and fragmented sovereignty, which cannot be dismissed in an exploration of combatant recruitment in civil war, uniquely influence civil-military relations.

To base my argument on civil war literature, two theories are most germane: organization theories and theories of control. Given the diversity of armed groups’ mobilization strategies, organization theories of recruitment examine why individual groups undertake particular strategies. These theories reveal how the choice of strategy determines who participates in the action, yet questions remain unanswered: “Why does a single group adopt not only one measure but also combine multiple strategies in their mobilization efforts?” and “Why are the participants recruited differently across regions?” To explore these points, the diversity in recruitment strategies must be framed
to capture the spectrum of positive and negative incentives. Although theories of control provide the basis for answers to these questions by focusing on the association between territorial control and civilian collaboration with armed groups, their implications are still bound by the assumption that all armed groups are the same and that civilians are apolitical in the context of civil war. This chapter offers a view that moves beyond the limitations of the existing literature by disaggregating civilian patterns of behavior.

Collective Action and Sociopolitical Movements in Civil War

Constraints to Participate (Costs of Nonparticipation)

Even assuming popular support, mobilization in civil war is contingent on how successfully belligerent groups can solve the collective action problem. In other words, armed groups must convince civilians to accept the potential for private risks and losses from fighting or punishment for participation. Therefore, the collective action problem in civil war can be translated into the idea that, no matter how much one may despise the opponent, a civilian will be better off abstaining from collective activities when non-cooperators become dominant in society, with the ultimate result being that no one will participate in collective action under these circumstances (i.e., the paradox of revolution).

The civil war collective action may be similar to that identified in orthodox sociopolitical movements. For instance, although group size is considered to be negatively associated with the likelihood of collective action, a threshold of a certain number of participants will actually lower the costs of mobilizing other followers because some will be encouraged by a critical mass of existing members and their commitment and willingness to cooperate (i.e., the bandwagon effect). The assurance that there are many other participants can be guaranteed by informal contract through communal conventions, leaders or political entrepreneurs, and group norms.

Collective action in civil war, however, differs significantly from that in other situations. Not only does the success of civil war collective action seem independent of any single person’s contribution, but also the benefits are uncertain because the chances of success are low and offer no assurance that civil war will bring about substantial improvement to the status quo. The idea that there is no guarantee of improvement is significant because failure to organize rebel groups does not