

# The World Cup and Interstate Conflict: Evidence from a Natural Experiment

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ABSTRACT. Although many believe that international sporting events encourage peace between countries, a number of scholars argue that they actually increase violence by inciting nationalistic aggression. To test this claim, I analyze a natural experiment that was created by the format of the World Cup qualification process from 1958-2010. Over this period, the procedures resulted in many countries barely qualifying or barely missing qualification. The idea is that it should be essentially random which of these countries went to the World Cup, since they were on the brink of qualifying and soccer is an inherently random sport. I find that the qualifiers experienced a significant spike in aggression during the World Cup year, indicating that international sporting events make conflict between countries more likely. The results hold under various robustness checks, and the estimated treatment effect is also much larger for countries where soccer is the most popular sport.

*“I am always amazed when I hear people saying that sport creates goodwill between the nations... At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare [played by countries] who work themselves into furies over these absurd contests, and seriously believe - at any rate for short periods - that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue.”*

— George Orwell, 1945

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International sporting events are global rituals of unprecedented scale. In 2010, about half the world watched the World Cup, with over 500 million tuning in to the championship game. The 2012 Olympics broke records for the most-watched television event in U.S. history, and more than a hundred heads of state or government went to see their national athletes compete in London. Rugby and cricket games also attract enormous international audiences. For instance, over one billion viewers watched a 2011 cricket match between India and Pakistan. Put simply, nothing captivates the world like pitting countries against each other in the competitive arena.

There is substantial disagreement about how these competitions affect interstate conflict. In fact, this question has led to one of the most controversial debates about international relations among policymakers and the media. The most popular view is that sports foster peace by teaching states fair play and providing an outlet for nationalistic aggression. This argument has been championed by many reporters, academics, world leaders, and international institutions.<sup>1</sup> However, others have contended that sports actually increase conflict between countries by inciting nationalism.<sup>2</sup> These critics point to cases like the 1969 Football War and the 2009 Egypt-Algeria World Cup Dispute as examples of how sports can lead to conflict at the international level.<sup>3</sup>

Resolving this debate is important for two reasons. First, policymakers frequently use sports to try to encourage peace at both the international and domestic level. These efforts could be counterproductive if competition on the playing field tends to increase tensions between the opposing sides. Second, this debate relates to an important question in international relations about whether nationalism and identity have an important effect on state

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1. Paul 2007; Cryer 2014; Morgenthau 1948; Georgiadis and Syrigos 2009; Bush 2002; Tony Blair 2005; Obama 2009; Rogge 2009; Blatter 2013; United Nations 2013.

2. Orwell 1945; Hoberman 2011; Kay 2013.

3. Hitchens 2010.

aggression that cannot be explained by strategic concerns.<sup>4</sup> If countries become more or less aggressive because of sporting events, then it would provide a clear example where the salience of national identities has an important impact on interstate conflict despite the constraints of strategic realities.

The ideal way to address this question would be to run an experiment where we randomly selected a large group of countries to attend a major international sporting event and randomly chose another large group to stay home. We could then track the aggression levels of the two groups before and after the event, much like we were medical researchers testing the effect of a drug through a randomized controlled trial. These experiments are the gold standard for establishing causal relationships in most scientific fields, so the results from this type of study could greatly improve our understanding of how sporting events influence international politics.

Although such a large-scale experiment has never been done, this paper analyzes a natural experiment that is very similar to the ideal study described above. This natural experiment was created by the format of the World Cup qualification process between 1958 and 2010. Over this period, many countries qualified for the World Cup by playing a round of games against other states and achieving a top position in the final standings. It is therefore possible to compare the group of countries that barely qualified to the group that barely missed. These countries went to the World Cup or stayed home based on small differences in their records after many games, so the data obtained by this procedure should be similar to what would be expected in a randomized experiment.

Using this approach, I construct a sample of countries that barely qualified or barely missed the World Cup. Specifically, I select pairs of countries where one country qualified

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4. Mearsheimer 1990, 20-21; Schrock-Jacobson 2012.

and the other missed, provided that they were separated by no more than two points in the standings and the qualifier scored at least five points. I made these design choices prior to collecting the data, believing that they would lead to a sufficiently large sample under which qualification was as-if random. In total, the sample consists of 142 countries, with 71 barely qualifying and 71 barely missing.

The results show that going to the World Cup increases aggression substantially. The countries that barely qualified experienced a significant spike in aggression during the World Cup year. The disputes that they started also tended to be much more violent than the disputes started by the non-qualifiers. The results hold under various robustness checks, and the estimated treatment effect is higher for countries where soccer is the most popular sport. Substantively, the estimates suggest that going to the World Cup increases state aggression by about two-fifths as much as a revolution does, and that it has roughly the same effect as electing a leader who is backed by the military.

It is also possible to replicate the analysis using the FIFA regional soccer championships like the European Football Championship and the African Cup of Nations. In total, this new sample consists of 78 countries that barely made or barely missed their regional soccer tournaments produces. The qualifiers and non-qualifiers were again well-balanced on aggression levels prior to qualification, but the qualifiers became significantly more aggressive following qualification. The results from this analysis are available in the Online Appendix.

This paper proceeds as follows: I begin by describing my research design in more depth. Next, I present the results from the World Cup analysis. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of this study and consider some possible ways that sports could be used to encourage peace

in international relations, such as revising the rules so that countries are not competing head-to-head.

## DESIGN

**Strategy for Identifying the Causal Effect.** I estimate the impact of World Cup participation on state aggression by using a regression discontinuity design. This method has become an increasingly popular research technique in the social sciences over the last decade for its ability to identify causal effects (Broockman 2009; Dunning 2012; Samii 2013). It can be used when a treatment is given to units that surpass a certain cut-point in a scoring system. The idea is to compare the group of units that scored just above the cut-point to the group that scored just below it. For example, if there was a test where everyone who scored a 50% or higher received a scholarship, we could assess the impact of winning the scholarship by comparing people who scored 50% to people who scored 49%. As long as there is some randomness in the scoring process, it should be close to random who ended up on either side of the cut-point (Lee 2008). Thus, this method should produce the type of data that we would expect in a randomized experiment.

**Constructing the Treatment and Control Groups.** The World Cup takes place once every four years during the summer, with the qualification process ending the winter before. The first qualification round was held in 1934, and it has been in place ever since. The host country qualifies automatically, as did the winner of the previous World Cup up until 2010. All other countries have been required to play their way in. They do so in one of two ways: (1) by playing a round of games against some other countries in their region and earning a certain position in the standings or (2) by winning a play-in game or several playoff games. Either way, the format is set well in advance.

**Figure 1 Example of the Final Standings from a 1994 Qualification Round**

Rank	Country	Score	Qualified
1	Italy	16	Yes
2	Switzerland	15	Yes
3	Portugal	14	No
4	Scotland	11	No
5	Malta	4	No
6	Estonia	1	No

Note: The sample consists of pairs of countries like Switzerland and Portugal that barely made and barely missed qualification.

This study focuses on the standings format, comparing countries that barely made and barely missed qualification. Figure 1 provides an example of the final standings from a 1994 regional group in Europe. Due to this format, countries very close to the qualification cut-point went to the World Cup or stayed home based on small differences in their records after many games. Thus, qualification should be close to random for these countries, meaning that the group of countries that barely qualified should be similar to the group that barely missed. Moreover, we can check that the qualifiers and non-qualifiers are balanced to verify that the design worked.

The playoff format is less easy to exploit with regression discontinuity analysis. Countries make or miss the World Cup based on their performance in the final round, which could be correlated with other factors that are related to their likelihood of future aggression. This problem is particularly concerning because in the playoff format the last game is often played between countries from different regions that have large disparities in terms of GDP and population, along with many other factors. However, the findings in this study remain significant when close playoff games are included, so the results are the same whether the outcomes of these games are considered random or not.

Using data from the standings format from 1934-2010, I select pairs of countries that were separated by no more than two points in the standings, provided that the winner scored at least five points. These countries are listed in Table 1. There were seven pairs before 1958 where the winner scored less than five points. In these cases, the teams played only a small number of games, typically three or less each. Since the goal was to obtain two groups of countries that were assigned to treatment or control based on small differences in their records after many games, these countries were dropped from the analysis.

Seventeen of the 71 pairs tied in the standings. Nine of these ties were broken by a playoff game, seven were decided by looking at which country had the larger average margin of victory, and one was decided by which team scored more goals. I include these pairs in the analysis for two reasons. First, the playoff games were more like toss-ups because they were played between teams of comparable skill. Second, there are not strong reasons to believe that comparable teams would sort based on margin of victory or total goals scored. Nevertheless, the results remain significant whether ties are included or not.

Lastly, I had to remove pairs where one of the teams did not represent a country. I exclude Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales from this analysis, and I count England as Britain. I also exclude the Representation of Czechs and Slovaks, which was a union of players from the Czech Republic and Slovakia that played from 1992-93. No other changes were necessary.

**Measuring Aggression.** Similar to past studies (Gartzke 2007; Dafoe, Oneal, and Russett 2013), I measure aggression using the number of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) that a country initiates. These disputes are instances where states explicitly threaten, display, or use force against other countries (Ghosn, Palmer, Bremer 2004). This measure is commonly used in security studies, since wars happen too infrequently to be a useful

**Table 1 Countries That Barely Made and Barely Missed the World Cup**

Qualifier	Non-qualifier	Year	Qualifier	Non-qualifier	Year
Yugoslavia	Romania	1958	Tunisia	Egypt	1978
France	Belgium	1958	France	Ireland	1982
Austria	Netherlands	1958	Austria	Bulgaria	1982
Soviet Union	Poland	1958	Britain	Romania	1982
Hungary	Bulgaria	1958	Peru	Uruguay	1982
Britain	Ireland	1958	El Salvador	Mexico	1982
Paraguay	Uruguay	1958	New Zealand	China	1982
Argentina	Bolivia	1958	Portugal	Sweden	1986
Bulgaria	France	1962	Soviet Union	Switzerland	1986
Switzerland	Sweden	1962	Bulgaria	East Germany	1986
Portugal	Czechoslovakia	1966	Romania	Denmark	1990
Bulgaria	Belgium	1966	Austria	Turkey	1990
West Germany	Sweden	1966	Czechoslovakia	Portugal	1990
Chile	Ecuador	1966	United States	Trinidad	1990
Czechoslovakia	Hungary	1970	UAE	Qatar	1990
Romania	Greece	1970	Ireland	Denmark	1994
Bulgaria	Poland	1970	Switzerland	Portugal	1994
Italy	East Germany	1970	Bulgaria	France	1994
Sweden	France	1970	Netherlands	Britain	1994
Belgium	Yugoslavia	1970	Bolivia	Uruguay	1994
Peru	Bolivia	1970	Cameroon	Zimbabwe	1994
Morocco	Nigeria	1970	Nigeria	Ivory Coast	1994
Sweden	Austria	1974	Morocco	Zambia	1994
Netherlands	Belgium	1974	South Korea	Japan	1994
Yugoslavia	Spain	1974	Nigeria	Guinea	1998
East Germany	Romania	1974	Jamaica	Costa Rica	1998
Poland	Britain	1974	Chile	Peru	1998
Uruguay	Colombia	1974	Senegal	Morocco	2002
Argentina	Paraguay	1974	Nigeria	Liberia	2002
Haiti	Trinidad	1974	Ivory Coast	Cameroon	2006
Italy	Britain	1978	Tunisia	Morocco	2006
Austria	East Germany	1978	Togo	Senegal	2006
France	Bulgaria	1978	Angola	Nigeria	2006
Poland	Portugal	1978	Algeria	Egypt	2010
Sweden	Norway	1978	Nigeria	Tunisia	2010
Spain	Romania	1978			

measure in most statistical tests. While most MIDs are low-level and not very interesting in their own right, they are a good proxy for the likelihood of major interstate conflict. They are indicative of the foreign policy stance of a country and whether that country is willing to initiate conflicts with its rivals. I also show in the next section that the results remain significant for high-level disputes that involved a direct attack, clash, or the start of interstate war.

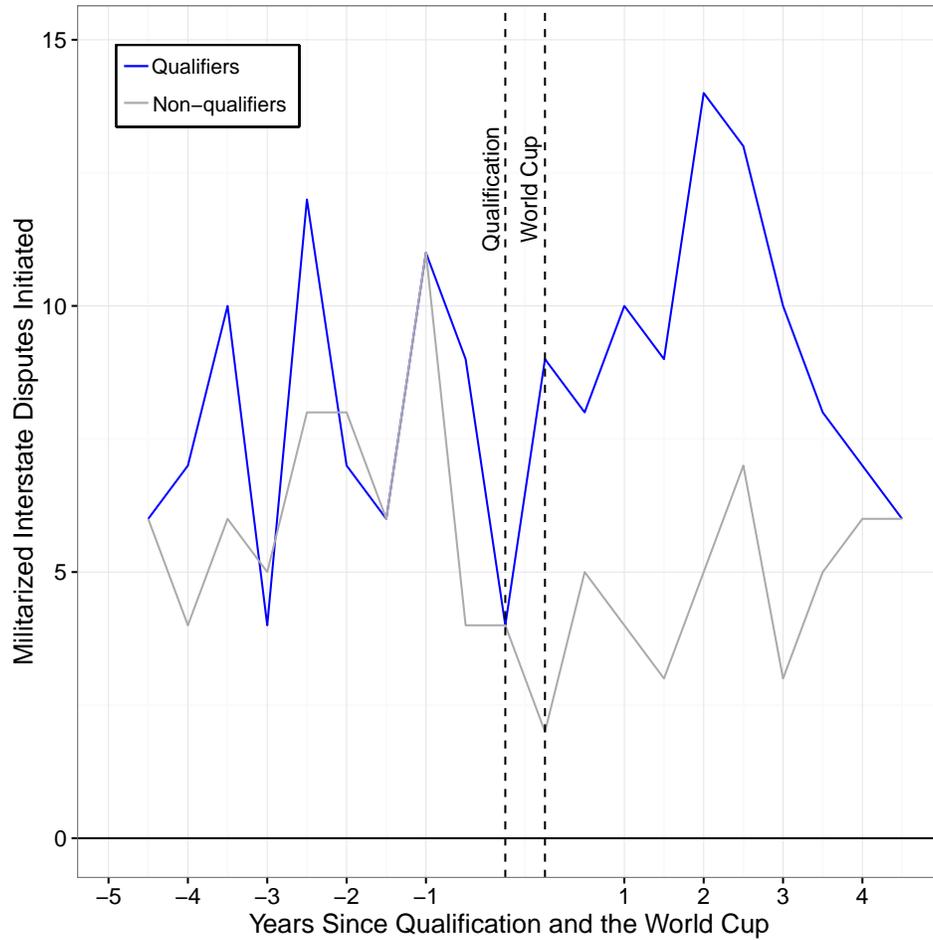
## FINDINGS

Figure 2 tracks the aggression levels for the two groups before and after qualification. Although the qualifiers and non-qualifiers were comparable beforehand, the story is much different afterward. In fact, the qualifiers became much more aggressive following qualification, and they remained so until about the second year after the tournament.

Note that the aggression levels of the two groups drop the year before qualification, and then the qualifiers spike while the non-qualifiers stay low. This trend is consistent with the theory that the World Cup causes conflict. Recall that four years before qualification, some of the countries from both groups went to the previous World Cup. These effects appear to wear off fully in the year before qualification. In fact, the countries that went to the previous World Cup were about 50% more aggressive in the years leading up to qualification than the countries that did not, although they were actually less aggressive prior to the previous World Cup.

The treatment effect seems to wear off after the second year following the World Cup. This trend may be partly explained by the durable effect of nationalism, but it is probably also partly explained by the fact that the qualifiers started many conflicts in the first two years that reoccur in the third year. In fact, roughly 50% of the disputes started by the qualifiers between Year 2 and Year 3 were against countries that they attacked at least

**Figure 2 Comparing Aggression Before and After the World Cup**



once since qualification. Put simply, when a group of countries experiences a large spike in aggression, it is likely to affect their aggression levels for several years, since some of the disputes that they start will make additional conflicts more likely in the near future. Thus, part of the longevity of the effect is likely explained by this feedback mechanism.

The qualifiers not only took military action more often than the non-qualifiers, but the actions they took tended to be more violent. The Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset

codes for the highest level of action taken by each country, with one being the threat to use force and 20 being the start of interstate war. In the two years after the World Cup, the median for the qualifiers was 15, whereas the median for the non-qualifiers was 11. Similarly, the qualifiers initiated seven disputes that resulted in fatalities, whereas the non-qualifiers initiated one. The Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset also codes for whether each dispute was intended to revise the status quo. In the two years following the World Cup, 72% of the disputes started by the qualifiers were revisionist, compared to only 54% for the non-qualifiers ( $p=0.001$ ).

Table 2 shows the estimated treatment effects for different subsets of the data. The results are significant at the 1% level for the entire sample. They are also significant at the 1% level for the subset of countries where soccer is the most popular sport. On the other hand, there was no change in aggression for the subset of countries where soccer is not the most popular sport. This group includes the United States, Japan, New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Jamaica, and Trinidad. Based on estimates from other studies (Lai and Slater 2006; Colgan 2010), these results suggest that the World Cup increases the state aggression about two-fifths as large as a revolution, and that it is comparable to electing a leader who is backed by the military.

Table 2 also shows that the findings remain significant under various robustness checks, including tests that are insensitive to outliers and linear regression that controls for baseline differences between the two groups. The results are also robust to changes in the design. For instance, the findings remain significant when the two-point regression discontinuity window is set at one point or three points, as well as when ties are dropped. The results are also insensitive to shifting the five-point minimum score requirement and adjusting the

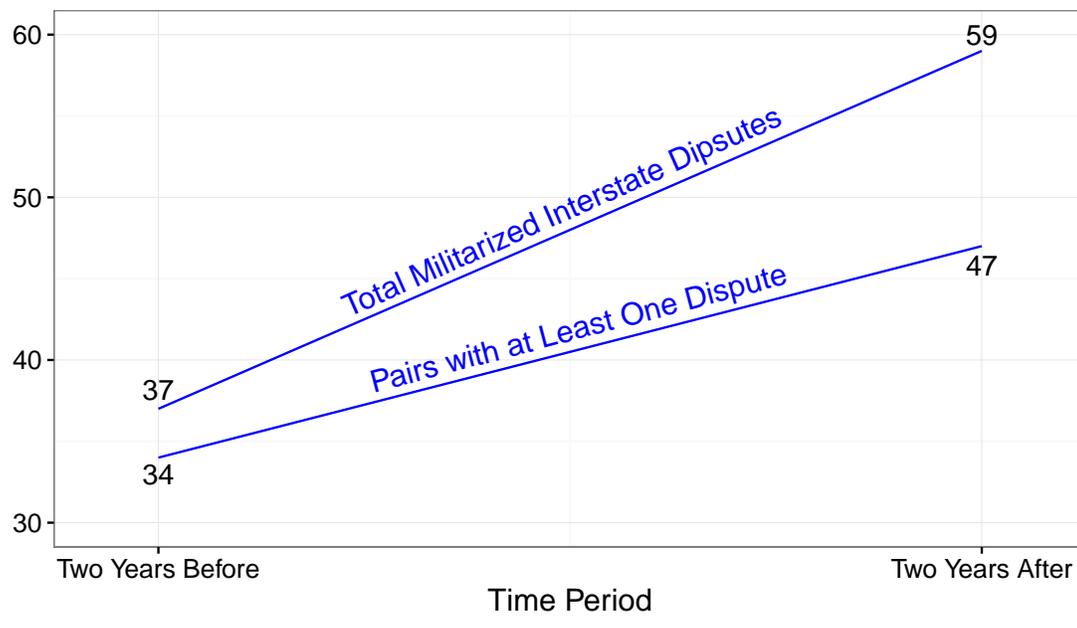
**Table 2 Estimating the Effect of the World Cup on State Aggression**

	Estimated Effect	p-value	n
<b>Entire Sample</b>	0.38**	0.006	142
<b>Sub-Groups</b>			
Countries Where Soccer Is the Most Popular Sport	0.41**	0.010	132
Countries Where Soccer Is Not the Most Popular Sport	0.00	NA	10
<b>Shifting the Regression Discontinuity Window</b>			
Countries That Qualified/Missed by One Point or Less	0.37*	0.023	92
Countries That Qualified/Missed by Three Points or Less	0.49**	0.002	162
Entire Sample (No Ties)	0.43*	0.010	102
<b>Other Statistical Tests</b>			
Linear Regression with All Control Variables	0.39**	0.005	142
Permutation Test	0.38**	0.007	142
Standard t-test (not Difference-in-Differences)	0.44*	0.012	142
<b>Tests that are Insensitive to Outliers</b>			
Signed-Rank Test	–	0.009	142
Dummy for Increase in Disputes Initiated	0.15**	0.004	142
Removing Great Powers	0.33*	0.018	139
<b>Other Outcomes</b>			
Revisionist Disputes Initiated	0.38**	0.001	142
Disputes Initiated That Involved the Use of Force	0.28*	0.028	142
Disputes Initiated That Involved a Direct Attack	0.23*	0.020	142

Note: Unless otherwise specified, the results for these tests are from two-tailed difference-in-differences t-tests comparing the change in aggression between the qualifier and non-qualifier groups. I define change in aggression as the difference in the number of militarized interstate disputes initiated between (1) the period ranging from qualification to the second year after the World Cup and (2) the period of the same length prior to qualification. I use these time intervals to account for conflicts that may have been caused by the residual effects of nationalism. Nevertheless, the estimates presented here are similar for other choices of interval length. See the supporting information for a full summary of the robustness of these results.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

**Figure 3 Conflict Between Countries That Played at the World Cup**



time interval used for these tests. A full summary of these results and other robustness checks is available in the Online Appendix.

Lastly, there is also some evidence that direct competition between countries at the World Cup increased the chances of conflict between them. The pairs of countries that played against each other found themselves on the opposite sides of military disputes 59 times in the two years following the World Cup, compared to only 37 times in the two years before it ( $n=758$ ,  $p=0.020$ ). The number of these pairs that had at least one military dispute jumped from 32 to 47 (38.2% increase). These results suggest that the World Cup increased the likelihood of conflict between the pairs of countries that competed head-to-head.

## DISCUSSION

While this study provides strong support for the theory that sports increase international conflict, it does not prove that sporting events always increase conflict. In fact, there are several important scope conditions that should be considered when drawing conclusions from this analysis.

First, the statistical tests only estimate the average treatment effect for the countries in the World Cup sample. Since these countries barely qualified or barely missed, the effect for them may be different than the effect for the countries that qualified more comfortably. While the countries in our samples did on average about as well as the other participants at these competitions, they tended to go less often, so the effects might be magnified for them. Similarly, the countries in this study are very different than smaller states that were never close to qualifying, and these smaller countries might have experienced a different effect if they had participated in the World Cup.

Nevertheless, the estimates in this study are still of theoretical and substantive importance. The World Cup sample includes 71 of the 298 countries that went to the World Cup between 1958 and 2010 (approximately 23%). There are also strong theoretical reasons to believe that the World Cup increased the aggression of most of the other participants. As I have discussed at length, many scholars have argued that sports tend to increase division between the competing sides, whether they are played between countries, cities, universities, or high schools. It is therefore more plausible that these findings are indicative of a general phenomenon rather than just being limited to our sample of countries.

Second, this study only looks at soccer, and other sports that people take less seriously may not have the same impact on state aggression. Unfortunately, the regression discontinuity design used here cannot be applied to the Olympics or other competitions, because

their qualification processes have not produced many countries that barely qualified and barely missed. Furthermore, it is difficult to estimate the effects of these competitions by simply looking at how countries behaved before and after them, because they are typically preceded and followed by other major sporting events in a systematic way. For example, a study that compared the behavior of countries before and after they went to the Summer Olympics would have to get around the problem that the World Cup and Winter Olympics always happen about two years before and after that event and the FIFA Regional Championships are usually held sometime in the same year, depending on the continent. The regression discontinuity design used here avoids this problem because it compares countries that barely qualified to countries that barely missed, rather than just looking at how countries behaved before and after the World Cup without any comparison to a control group.

Nevertheless, qualitative evidence suggests that many other sporting events also play a divisive role in international relations. For instance, international rugby and cricket tournaments have featured substantial amounts of nationalist violence. Moreover, the 1956 “Blood in the Water” water-polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union is one of the most widely cited cases of nationalistic violence between players and fans.<sup>5</sup> In Orwell’s 1945 essay, he discussed at length how boxing often created hatreds between different national groups.

Of course, the fact that countries where soccer is less popular experienced no increase in aggression because of the World Cup suggests that sports that are not taken seriously may have little effect on state aggression. Some optimists might even argue from this finding that these sports could provide opportunities for leaders to meet and engage in diplomacy.

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5. Rinehart 1996; Bouras 2008.

However, this result should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size (n=10). It is also possible that more could be accomplished if the leaders arranged a diplomatic meeting instead of attending a sporting event, so the benefits of sports diplomacy relative to more direct forms of negotiation are unclear.

I believe that a more promising option, which allows countries to continue playing popular sports, is to merge the national sports teams at these events so that they compete as groups of exceptional athletes rather than representatives of different countries. The recent trips of the Harlem Globetrotters to North Korea featured this format, as the Globetrotters and North Korean team split up into two teams with mixed nationalities rather than playing against each other head-to-head. While these trips were mocked by the American media because of Dennis Rodman's comments, HBO recently produced a documentary showing how they improved perceptions of Americans in North Korea. This practice of integrating players from different countries is also present in the National Basketball League and the National Football League. Markovits and Rensmann argue that it can promote cultural respect and understanding, especially when fans admire players from other countries.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, FIFA employs this strategy in their programs to decrease animosity between Israeli and Palestinian children. The players are divided so that each team consists of children from both national groups. This practice seems to indicate that FIFA recognizes that having a team of Israeli children play against a team of Palestinian children would likely make the two sides dislike each other more. However, FIFA regularly pits national teams against each other on the international stage and expects the opposite result, and this view is generally accepted by politicians and the media.

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6. Markovits and Rensmann 2010.

A third limitation is that this study only looks at conflicts between states, and international sports may have an entirely different effect at the domestic level.<sup>7</sup> That is, when a country competes against other states, it may create unity within that country. For instance, Mehler argues that qualification for the 2006 World Cup helped unify the Ivory Coast and end its civil war.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Steenveld and Strelitz claim that Nelson Mandela's used international sports, especially rugby, to unite South Africa following the end of the apartheid regime.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, Clint Eastwood directed a movie based on this story called *Invictus*, which starred Matt Damon and Morgan Freeman. Unfortunately, there is no reliable measure of internal conflict for the countries in this study. Civil wars, like interstate wars, happen infrequently, and there is no equivalent of militarized interstate disputes at the domestic level. Nevertheless, I believe that the historical evidence suggests that sports played between countries can encourage unity within them.

## CONCLUSION

This paper uses a natural experiment to address a question that has long been debated by scholars, journalists, and policymakers. Specifically, it identifies a strong causal relationship between international soccer and state aggression. The findings are both significant and robust. In fact, if the World Cup had no effect on state aggression, the chance that we would see such a trend in the data by chance is less than one in 150.

Moreover, the findings are consistent with what a large number of scholars and reporters have claimed for decades. Many books and articles have been written using qualitative and theoretical reasoning to argue that sports lead to conflict between countries. Nevertheless, these studies have tended to be overlooked by political scientists and policymakers, in

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7. Sugden and Bairner 1999.

8. Mehler 2008.

9. Steenveld and Strelitz 1998.

part because they have not shown a clear, generalizable causal effect. My goal was to provide this evidence while giving credit to the scholars who developed the theoretical and qualitative arguments that motivated my research.

This study also shows a straightforward case where national identity influences state behavior. This example should remind scholars who are deeply committed to material or rational explanations that emotion is sometimes a driving force behind human decision-making. While rational choice theory is a powerful tool for the study of international relations, strategic constraints are not always so important that they limit human choice to a simple cost-benefit analysis. While I believe that most rational choice theorists would agree with this point, it is helpful to always keep in mind the complexities of human psychology and sociology that can sometimes influence foreign policy.

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