

The Monkey Cage

Civil Wars and Violence in Soccer

by Erik Voeten on October 23, 2009

The notion that soccer can [explain the world](#) has been popular for a while. Recently economists have picked up on this, for example using soccer as a laboratory for examining the use of [mixed strategies](#). The attractiveness of soccer and other sports is that they offer a unique opportunity to evaluate behavior (rather than attitudes) in a real (rather than laboratory) setting where everyone is playing under the same rules.

My favorite example is [a working paper](#) by Edward Miguel, Sebastián Saiegh and Shanker Satyanath that uses evidence from professional soccer (football) matches to evaluate whether exposure to civil wars increases the propensity of young men to behave violently. They find that players from countries that have had more exposure to civil wars are much more likely to get yellow and red cards (cautions) than are players from countries that have had little or no recent exposure to civil wars. The findings are substantively strong and robust to a host of controls. The evidence comes from the main European football leagues, which are very cosmopolitan. This strikes me as an example of research that is both clever and important.

Below is the abstract (hat tip, Henry Farrell).

Abstract

In recent years scholars have begun to focus on the consequences of individuals' exposure to civil war, including its severe health and psychological consequences. Our innovation is to move beyond the survey methodology that is widespread in this literature to analyze the actual behavior of individuals with varying degrees of exposure to civil war in a common institutional setting. We exploit the presence of thousands of international soccer (football) players with different exposures to civil conflict in the European professional leagues, and find a strong relationship between the extent of civil conflict in a player's home country and his propensity to behave violently on the soccer field, as measured by yellow and red cards. This link is robust to region fixed effects, country characteristics (e.g., rule of law, per capita income), player characteristics (e.g., age, field position, quality), outliers, and team fixed effects. Reinforcing our claim that we isolate the effect of civil war exposure rather than simple rule-breaking or something else entirely, there is no meaningful correlation between our measure of exposure to civil war and soccer performance measures not closely related to violent conduct. The result is also robust to controlling for civil wars before a player's birth, suggesting that it is not driven by factors from the distant historical past.