

Elections, Signals, and Interstate Crises*

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Abstract

We argue elections can influence interstate conflict by revealing information about a public's willingness to bear the costs of war. How informative an election is depends on the relative difference in the hawkishness of the candidates and the margin of victory. Close elections between a very hawkish candidate and a very dovish candidate should reveal the least amount of information to foreign states and, consequently, are more likely to be followed by a state being targeted in a crisis. We assess this claim with a novel data set that identifies the relative hawkishness of the winner and first-runner up of presidential elections in the Americas between 1945 and 2004. Consistent with expectations, we find that a country is more likely to be targeted in an interstate crisis when the previous election was a toss-up between candidates who are clearly differentiated with respect to their willingness to use force.

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Elections are fundamental to democracy and, in many accounts, to unique features of the foreign policy of democratic states. Most work in political science focuses on how the looming shadow of elections can discipline the foreign policy of incumbent leaders, shaping the credibility of threats and commitments (Fearon 1994, Leeds 1999, Haynes 2012), the risk of international conflict (Williams 2013, Carter and Nordstrom 2017), as well as the costs, duration, and outcome of interstate wars (Bennett and Stam 1998, Reiter and Stam 2002, Filson and Werner 2004, Schultz and Weingast 1998, Lake 1992). Elections can constrain behavior *ex ante*, but they can also reveal information *ex post*. Free and fair elections are public events, with participants and outcomes observable both at home *and* abroad. Just like domestic politicians, foreign states can use elections to draw inferences about the public mood, including whether the median voter is more or less hawkish, i.e. more or less willing to support a war effort, than believed before the election. Our question follows directly: how do the outcomes of national elections affect the risk of international conflict?

We answer this question by leveraging insights from literatures on crisis bargaining, national leaders in international politics, and candidate positioning in elections. First, when states have private information over the attractiveness of war, including the public's willingness to support it, they can struggle to convince their adversaries of their willingness to fight, and their adversaries can struggle to craft war-averting bargains (Fearon 1995). Second, leaders of the same state can differ from one another in their willingness to fight (Wolford 2007, Horowitz, Stam and Ellis 2015), and sometimes voters have clear choices between relatively hawkish and relatively dovish candidates (Carter Nd). Third, candidates (or the parties that select them) can diverge in their policies when the median voter's preference is uncertain (see, e.g. Calvert 1985), and sufficiently decisive electoral outcomes between candidates that take disparate positions—say, hawkish and dovish—reveal more information about public preferences than similar elections with narrower margins or elections between candidates with less distinguishable policy positions. Therefore, elections

characterized by winners and runners-up with different levels of hawkishness and wide electoral margins will be followed by lower risks of being targeted in an international crisis than other elections; however, close elections between clearly differentiated candidates should reveal uniquely little information about the public's willingness to fight.

We conduct empirical analyses on a sample of leader-years in the Americas between 1945 and 2004 using a new measure of the relative hawkishness of winners and first runners-up in presidential elections (Carter Nd). Consistent with our expectations, leader-years following close elections between clearly differentiated candidates are associated with greater risks of the state being targeted in an international crisis than compared to leader-years following other electoral outcomes. Leadership turnover in all states can bring to power new leaders with new foreign policy preferences, but when turnover is the product of public elections, it may reveal information about public preferences that leaders might otherwise hold private. Elections serve as regular opportunities for leaders to signal their commitment to the rule of law, e.g. by stepping down peacefully (Fearon 2011), but also as regular, if noisy and variably informative, signals of public preferences that can shape the probability of international conflict.

1 Elections, Information, and Interstate Conflict

Free and fair elections are often considered a distinguishing feature of democracy (e.g., Dahl 1971, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, Przeworski 1991), allowing citizens to hold leaders accountable through the relatively low-cost mechanism of the ballot box (among others, Lake and Baum 2001, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). The public's credible threat to remove the leadership supports explanations for why, compared to non-democracies, democracies should pay higher audience costs (Fearon 1994, Partell and Palmer 1999), be more selective

when initiating interstate conflicts (Reiter and Stam 1998), fight shorter wars (Bennett and Stam 1998), suffer fewer casualties when fighting wars (Siverson 1995, Valentino, Huth and Croco 2010), and be more likely to win the interstate wars they fight (Lake 1992, Reiter and Stam 2002). As elections approach, democratic leaders are less likely to initiate interstate conflicts (Williams 2013) and more likely to signal resolve using “tying-hands” strategies (Chiozza 2017). And when the electoral connection is broken by term limits, lame duck leaders initiate and escalate international conflicts in ways more similar to non-democratic leaders than to electorally accountable democrats (Haynes 2012, Zeigler, Pierskalla and Mazumder 2014). However, elections do more than constrain foreign policy *ex ante*; they can also shape it *ex post*.

Election outcomes can have several consequences for democratic conflict behavior. First, when they result in leadership change, elections can bring to power new incumbents unbound to their predecessors’ policies (Wolford 2007).¹ Research from a range of scholarly traditions concludes that hawkish leaders are more likely to initiate conflicts and pursue more aggressive foreign policies than are dovish leaders. For example, democracies run by leaders of hawkish or right-wing parties are more likely to initiate interstate conflicts (Palmer, London and Regan 2004, Arena and Palmer 2009, Clare 2010), fight shorter conflicts (Koch 2009), and pull out more quickly from unpopular interventions (Koch and Sullivan 2010) than are democracies led by dovish or left-wing leaders. That hawkish and dovish leaders behave differently is key to our argument; the desire to be re-elected encourages leaders to pursue policies consistent with their constituents’ policy preferences (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002, Burstein 2003, Soroka and Wlezien 2010).² Perhaps most importantly, democratic leaders whose campaign platforms are more aggressive

¹These preferences are often unknown, creating reputational traps in which new leaders and their rivals have incentives to bid up the risk of war early in the formers’ tenure (Wu and Wolford 2018).

²The relationship between a democratic leader and his/her constituents can be viewed in a principal-agent framework for both “trustee” and “delegate” models of political representation (Fox and Shotts 2009, Woon 2012).

and hawkish are more likely to initiate conflicts once in office than democratic leaders who campaign on relatively dovish platforms (Heffington 2018). Democratic publics then have a reasonable expectation that their country is more likely to fight in a costly interstate conflict when they elect a hawkish leader than when they elect a dovish leader.

Second, the magnitude of electoral victory defines the constraints under which democratic leaders can pursue their preferred domestic and foreign policies. For example, the substantial margins of victory that define “mandate” elections appear to have a larger effect on the policies that American incumbents pursue than do close elections (Peterson et al. 2003, Grossback, Peterson and Stimson 2006). Wide margins also appear to encourage American presidents to initiate major uses of force, though institutional and partisan opposition tends to constrain them at lower levels of hostility (Potter 2013). In larger samples, electoral margins appear to have no effect on presidential systems generally, but they discourage conflict initiation in parliamentary systems, presumably because such sweeping victories require compromise among a diversity of interests (Haynes N.d.). By contrast, leaders that win by slimmer margins enjoy less freedom of action, even on foreign policy, where heads of state are typically given wide latitude.

But electoral margins do more than weaken or tighten constraints on the executive; when combined with meaningful policy differences between candidates, they can also reveal information about what the voting public wants. Models of retrospective voting assume individuals vote based on their assessment of an incumbent’s performance (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Re-electing an incumbent implies that the public supports her policies and job performance, while electing a challenger signals unhappiness with the incumbent. Elections also convey information about the policies the public would like the winner to pursue in the prospective voting framework (MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1992). Repeated elections allow candidates and incumbents to use information gleaned from previous compe-

titions to inform campaign strategies, policy platforms, and the policies they pursue in office (Shotts 2006, Meirowitz and Tucker 2007). Research on policy responsiveness indicates that election outcomes influence the policies incumbent politicians enact (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995, Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002, Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Therefore, elections convey information about voter preferences, and that information can shape the behavior of politicians that have an interest in tailoring their policies to that information.

Our theoretical model extends this insight from politicians at home to a heretofore neglected audience: politicians abroad. To the extent that a domestic state's electoral outcomes reveal information about the public's willingness to back a war effort, foreign adversaries should be able to make more accurate judgments about what deals the domestic state will accept in lieu of war (Fearon 1995). We turn now to developing a theoretical model that links candidate differentiation and margins of victory to information about a state's willingness to go to war, which then feeds directly into standard models of crisis bargaining, from which we derive our main hypothesis.

2 Theory

Exploring the relationship between electoral outcomes and international conflict requires that we link a theory of crisis bargaining under asymmetric information with a theory of candidate positioning and elections. We argue that foreign states can look to the outcomes of elections to make guesses about a domestic public's willingness to bear the costs of war, glean information from candidate positions and electoral margins that would otherwise be difficult to communicate through simple diplomacy. Some elections reveal sufficient information about the public's willingness to use force that they can facilitate war-averting bargains, but others may fail to solve a foreign state's information problem, leaving it suffi-

ciently optimistic that it will risk demanding more than the domestic state will yield in lieu of war. We argue in this section that the information revealed by elections depends on the relative hawkishness and dovishness of the candidates and the margin of victory.

When states have private information over their war payoffs and incentives to lie about or obstacles to revealing it, bargaining can break down in costly fighting (Morrow 1989, Fearon 1995). This private information may relate to the quality of a state's armed forces, its military strategy, or the reliability of allies (Fearon 1995, 391-395); the leader's resolve, or general sensitivity to the costs of war (Wolford 2007); and, crucial for our purposes, the public's willingness to bear the costs of war. We can think of the domestic state's costs for war as containing a leader-specific and a public-specific component; uncertainty over either can lead the foreign state to over-demand at the bargaining table and create a risk of war. A leader's own resolve shapes a state's willingness to fight, but even hawks must bear in mind the public's willingness to cooperate in the war effort. And even if their own information is imperfect, national leaders likely have a better idea of their own public's taste for war than foreign states; they have access to internal polling, networks of advisers, experts, and other politicians, even domestic intelligence-gathering apparatuses. If their private information indicates that the public is not generally willing to fight about a given issue, leaders will be loath to admit it to their adversaries. This incentive to indicate greater public resolve that actually exists undermines the credibility of communication, generating uncertainty over just what bargains the domestic state will accept, because leaders with hawkish publics cannot easily separate themselves from those with more dovish publics. Thus are foreign states tempted into bargaining positions that raise the risk of war.

We can link electoral outcomes to foreign beliefs over the public's willingness to fight in a few steps. First, voters choose candidates for national office under a veil of ignorance over what crises and wars will emerge in the future. This ensures that when it comes to

foreign policy they vote sincerely; dovish citizens have little incentive to vote like hawkish citizens when they are unsure of the need to bluff and when electing hawks may encourage unwanted wars in any case. Second, elections are noisy but public events, their candidates and outcomes visible to foreign states. Winners may gain more information after the fact about public preferences, but electoral outcomes themselves are public information. Third, we assume that political parties and their candidates are both office-seeking *and* policy-oriented; they may trade some chance of winning for the opportunity to implement more preferred foreign policies if they do win. When the median voter's preferences—here, her willingness to bear the costs of war—are well-known, then parties select candidates (or candidates choose positions) reflective of what the median wants. But when the median's preference is uncertain, then policy-oriented parties may select more extreme candidates that reflect their own policy preferences (Wittman 1977, Wittman 1983, Calvert 1985); dovish parties select more dovish candidates and hawkish parties more hawkish candidates. Each candidate expects to win with probability 0.5, but this does not imply that elections will be close; large margins are possible when the median turns out to be closer to one candidate's position than the other's, which can prove revelatory *ex post*.

The key dimensions, then, are the extent of disparity between candidate hawkishness (small or large) and the margin of victory (small or large). First, when candidates stake out similar positions, roughly equally hawkish or equally dovish, then electoral margins are less important than the apparent consensus on the median voter's preferences; foreign states can judge that the public's willingness to use force is close to the winning's candidate's position. Second, when an election pits two disparate candidates against one another—in this case, a hawk versus a dove—larger margins indicate that the winning candidate's position matches the public's more closely than the loser's, enabling foreign judgments about rough alignment between the hawkishness/dovishness of winner and median voter. Third, however, when disparate candidates compete in an election that turns out to be close, little in-

formation is revealed about the public's willingness to fight. The candidates may have both been too extreme relative to the median *or* foreign policy issues simply turned out to have been unimportant to the voters, which would eliminate a relationship between candidate choice and the median voter's hawkishness. Therefore, close elections between candidates disparate in their level of hawkishness reveal less information than (a) decisive elections between disparate candidates and (b) any election between similar candidates.

The informational consequences of elections have direct implications for the theory of crisis bargaining. Foreign states can make more accurate guesses after some elections than others about a domestic state's willingness to fight a war. But close elections between candidates at disparate levels of hawkishness reveal the least amount of such information, and we expect this combination of candidate positions and electoral margins to be associated with higher rates of states being targeted in international conflicts than is the case with either similar candidates or disparate candidates but wide electoral margins. Competitive elections between candidates with clearly differentiated preferences may be good for the health of democracy, but our theory implies that they may be associated with greater risks of post-election conflict than less competitive elections.

Our theory merits a clear caveat. Independent of the substantive nature of the signal an election sends, the amount of information an election reveals about a public's resolve varies with the salience of foreign policy issues in a campaign and election. Conventional wisdom is that foreign policy and international relations considerations play a minor role in determining election outcomes (among others, Page and Brody 1972, Abramowitz 1995). This is due primarily to the fact that the public generally pays little attention to foreign affairs (Holsti 1996). While foreign policy considerations often have minimal influence on election outcomes, this is not always the case. In particular, the importance of foreign policy in campaigns and elections is increasing in citizens' concerns about foreign affairs, which is driven

largely by the international security environment (Holsti 1996, Aldrich et al. 2006, Baum and Groeling 2009). Thus, elections convey more information about the public's willingness to support military conflict when foreign policy issues are relatively salient. This amounts to a scope condition; if the public does not care about foreign policy, then our predicted patterns are not expected to exist—and if they do, it is not clear that they should tell us anything about the hypothesis derived here. We return to this matter in the empirical analysis.

3 Research Design

We argue that a winner's margin of victory and the candidates' relative hawkishness influence how much information an election reveals about a public's willingness to fight to potential opponents in the international system. This implies the likelihood a state is targeted in an interstate crisis should vary as a function of electoral outcomes. We test this claim using a leader-year data set of democratic states in the Americas that held at least one presidential election between 1945 and 2004. A leader-year data set allows us to identify which leader was in charge of a state at the beginning of a conflict in years where multiple leaders served, which is not possible with a state-year or state-dyad-year unit-of-analysis. Our dependent variable (*Target*) is coded one if a state is targeted in an interstate crisis in year t and zero otherwise and is taken from the International Crisis Behavior data set (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997).

Testing our hypothesis requires we operationalize two theoretical concepts. The first is the difference in the votes received by the winner and runner-up in an election. *Margin of Victory* is calculated by subtracting the percentage of the vote received by the first runner-up in an election from the percentage of the vote received by the winner. Data for the

winners' and first runners-up's vote totals were taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al. 2018).

The second variable needed to test our argument is a measure that identifies the difference in the relative hawkishness (or dovishness) of the winner and runner-up in a presidential election. Empirically identifying politicians' hawkishness is challenging. Scholars commonly proxy politicians' and/or governments' underlying willingness to use military force with measures based on their left-right orientation (Palmer, London and Regan 2004), personality or operational code (Renshon 2008, Keller and Foster 2012), or their objective attributes and background experiences (Horowitz, Stam and Ellis 2015, Carter and Nordstrom 2017). While reasonable, such proxies represent very rough measures of politicians' underlying willingness to use military force. We take a different approach and use latent variable techniques to measure candidates' underlying hawkishness.

Latent variable models increasingly are used in political science to measure concepts that are not directly observable; including but not limited to legislators' ideology (Poole and Rosenthal 1991), judges' ideology (Martin and Quinn 2002), regime type (Pemstein, Meserve and Melton 2010), states' preferences over the international status quo (Reed et al. 2008), and standards of human rights accountability (Fariss 2014). Two recent works are particularly relevant for our purposes. First, Carter and Smith (Nd) use a Bayesian latent variable framework to construct measures of leaders' underlying hawkishness based largely on their personal attributes and background experiences using data from the LEAD project (Horowitz, Stam and Ellis 2015). Second, Carter's (Nd) *Candidate Hawkishness Data Set* develops a measure of the latent hawkishness for the top two candidates in presidential elections in the Americas between 1945 and 2004. This measure is constructed using a Bayesian two-parameter logistic (2PL) item response (IRT) model based on a set of personal characteristics Carter and Smith (Nd) find to (a) be relatively important in determining

leaders’ latent hawkishness, (b) have a reasonable theoretical link to an individual’s latent hawkishness, and (c) apply to both the winners and losers of an election.³ More formally, the IRT model is defined as

$$\text{logit}[Pr(y_{i,j} = 1|\theta_j)] = \gamma_i(\theta_j - \alpha_i)$$

$$\theta \sim \mathbf{N}(0, 1)$$

$$\alpha \sim \mathbf{N}(0, 10)$$

$$\gamma \sim \mathbf{N}(0, 10)$$

where $y_{i,j}$ is the probability that the j th candidate has the i th characteristic, α_i is a “difficulty” parameter that identifies the proportion of observations in each category of the latent trait is equal to zero, γ_i is a “discrimination” parameter that takes on higher values for items that do well grouping similarly-situated candidates on the latent dimension, and θ_j represents a candidate’s latent hawkishness.⁴

To give a sense of how candidates’ personal characteristics map on to their latent hawkishness, Figure 1 presents a set of “item characteristic curves” (with 95% credible intervals) that plot the probability that a candidate possesses a given characteristic (y-axis) across the range of estimated latent hawkishness (x-axis).⁵ Item Characteristic Curves incorporate information about both the difficulty and discrimination parameters in a model, with the steepness of a curve reflecting the relative discriminatory power of a characteristic and the location or height of a curve reflecting the relative difficulty of an item. For example, Figure 1 tells us that whether a candidate served in the military (Column 2, Row 1) does a better

³Specifically, prior military service, whether or not a candidate was a rebel, whether or not a candidate saw combat in the military, the outcome of a war or rebellion a candidate participated in, whether a candidate had a military education, the candidates’ sex, and the candidates’ level of education. Data for these variables for election winners are taken from the LEAD project (Horowitz, Stam and Ellis 2015). Data for the losers were collected by Carter and a team of research assistants. Information on candidates’ age and political parties will be included in future versions of the data set.

⁴Distributions for θ , α , and γ are based on the two-parameter logistic IRT model estimated in Carter and Smith (Nd).

⁵Code to estimate and plot the item characteristic curves was adapted from Terechshenko (2017).

job at discriminating among hawkish and dovish candidates than whether a candidate has at least a college education (Column 3, Row 3). Overall, Figure 1 provides some face validity to using latent variable techniques to measure candidates' underlying hawkishness; all else equal, possessing various attributes associated with being in the military or participating in a rebellion is associated with a candidate's latent willingness to use force.

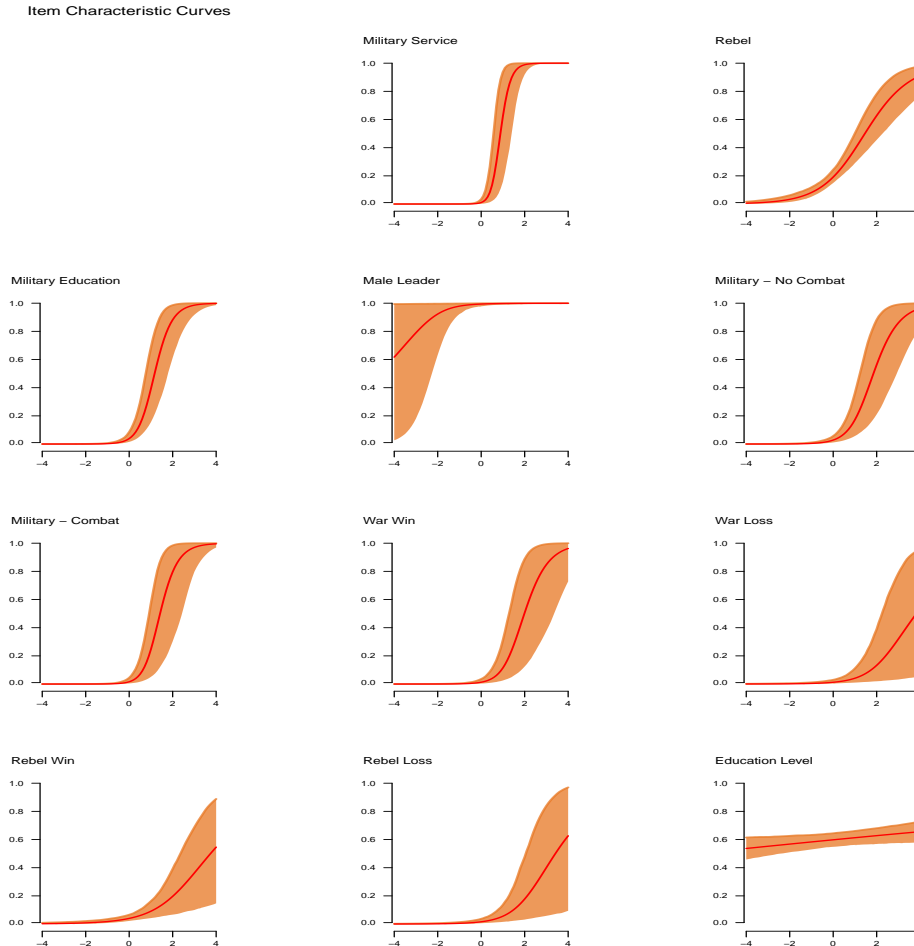


Figure 1: Item Characteristic Curves

We require a measure of the difference in the top two candidates' hawkishness to test our hypothesis. We therefore calculated the absolute value of the difference between the winner's and loser's latent willingness to use force in the 209 presidential elections currently covered by the *Candidate Hawkishness Data Set* (Carter Nd). The resulting mea-

sure, *Difference in Hawkishness*, varies from 0.00005 (Guatemala’s 1978 election between Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia and Enrique Peralta Azurdia) to 2.45 (Brazil’s 1955 election between Juscelino Kubitschek and Juarez Távora). We interact *Difference in Hawkishness* and *Margin of Victory* to capture the conditional nature of our claim that states should be more likely to be targeted after close elections between candidates clearly differentiated in relative hawkishness than following other elections.

4 Results

Table 1 reports the results of a logit model that estimates the probability a country is targeted in an interstate conflict as a function of *Difference in Hawkishness*, *Margin of Victory*, and *Difference in Hawkishness*Margin of Victory*.

Table 1: Interstate Targets and Election Outcomes

<i>DV: Target</i>	Model 1
Difference in Hawkishness	0.97* (0.29)
Margin of Victory	0.01 (0.01)
Difference in Hawkishness*Margin of Victory	-0.02* (0.01)
Intercept	-3.73* (0.35)
Observations	822
AIC	305.38
BIC	380.77
Log Likelihood	-136.69

Standard errors in parentheses.

* indicates significant at $p < 0.05$ with two-tailed test.

Unfortunately, our use of a multiplicative interaction term limits the inferences we can draw from a standard results table (Braumoeller 2004, Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006).

We therefore use a set of post-estimation simulations based on the coefficient and variance-covariance matrices associated with the model in Table 1 to calculate three quantities that allow us to test our hypothesis: 1) the probability a state was targeted when the incumbent won in a blow-out election across the range of *Difference in Hawkishness*; 2) the probability a state was targeted when the incumbent won in a toss-up election across the range of *Difference in Hawkishness*; and 3) the difference in these two quantities. We define a blow-out election as one in which the margin of victory was one standard deviation about the sample mean (47%) and a toss-up election as one in which the winner won by one percent. Figure 2 graphically reports the mean values and 90% confidence intervals yielded by our post-estimation simulations.

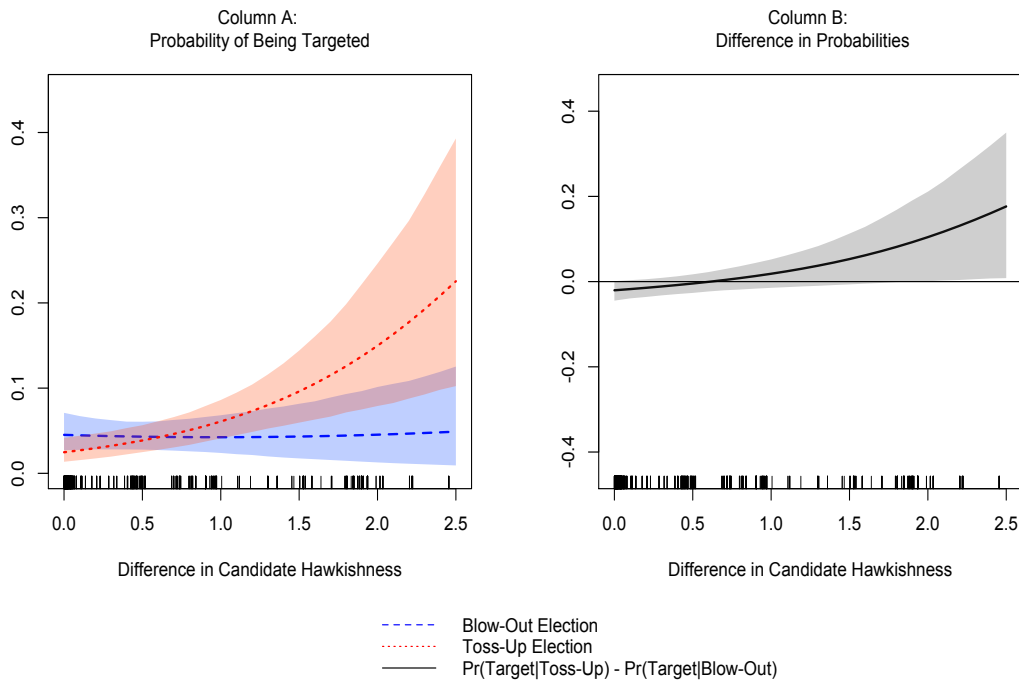


Figure 2: The Effect of Elections on Interstate Targets

Panel A in Figure 2 reports the probabilities that a state will be targeted following a blow-out election (blue dashed line) and a toss-up election (red dotted line) across the ob-

served differences in candidates' relative hawkishness (denoted by ticks in the rug plot). Consistent with our expectations, states are more likely to be targeted following a toss-up election in which the candidates are clearly differentiated with respect to their relative hawkishness than after a toss-up election with similar candidates or a blow-out election. For example, after a close election a state has a 13.8% chance of being targeted at the 90th percentile of *Difference in Hawkishness* (1.9) but only a 2.7% chance of being targeted at the 10th percentile of *Difference in Hawkishness* (0.009). The degree to which candidates are differentiated with respect to hawkishness has almost no effect on whether a state is targeted following a blow-out election. For instance, a state has a 4.3% chance of being targeted at the 90th percentile of *Difference in Hawkishness* and a 4.4% chance of being targeted at the 10th percentile of *Difference in Hawkishness*.

Panel B in Figure 2 presents the difference in the two sets of probabilities reported in Panel A. When *Difference in Hawkishness* is between 0 and 0.5, our model suggests that, on average, states are more likely to be targeted following a blow-out election than after a toss-up election, though the difference in probabilities never approaches statistical significance. As candidates become increasingly differentiated with respect to their hawkishness, states are more likely to be targeted after a toss-up election than they are when the winning candidate scores a clear victory. The differences become significant when *Difference in Hawkishness* takes on a value of 1.8 or greater, or at the 86th percentile. Taken together, the results presented in Figure 2 are consistent with our claim that states are more likely to be targeted in an interstate conflict following a close election between candidates that differ considerably with respect to their relative hawkishness than after either a close election with similar candidates or an election with a clear winner.

The analyses reported in Table 1 and Figure 2 present the pooled effect of an election's outcome and candidate hawkishness on whether or not a state is subsequently targeted in

a crisis in our sample. However, heterogeneity likely exists in the relationship between the difference in candidates' hawkishness, the winner's margin of victory, and the probability a country is targeted in an interstate crisis. We investigate two potential sources of heterogeneity here.

Our central theoretical claim is that elections reveal information about the public's willingness to fight to other actors in the international system. Beyond the candidates or outcome of any particular election, the strength of the signal an election sends should weaken as time passes. The further out one gets from an election, the less likely it is that an election's outcome accurately reflects the public's preferences and/or will influence political behavior.⁶ This implies that the relationship between an election's outcome and whether a state is targeted in a crisis should weaken over time. We constructed the variable *Time Since Election*, operationalized as a decay function of the form $\frac{1}{1+YearsSinceElection}$, to assess this possibility.⁷ We incorporated *Time Since Election* into a logit model as part of a three-way interaction between it, *Difference in Hawkishness* and *Margin of Victory*, making sure to include all constituent, implicit, and higher-order interaction terms in the model (Braumoeller 2004).

We again use post-estimation simulations to assess the model's results. More specifically, we calculate 1) the probability a state was targeted when the incumbent won in a blow-out election across the range of *Difference in Hawkishness*; 2) the probability a state was targeted when the incumbent won in a toss-up election across the range of *Difference in Hawkishness*; and 3) the difference in these two quantities in two scenarios. The first scenario assumes that an election occurred earlier in the same year (*Time Since Election* = 1) while the second assumed that an election occurred three years ago (*Time Since Election*

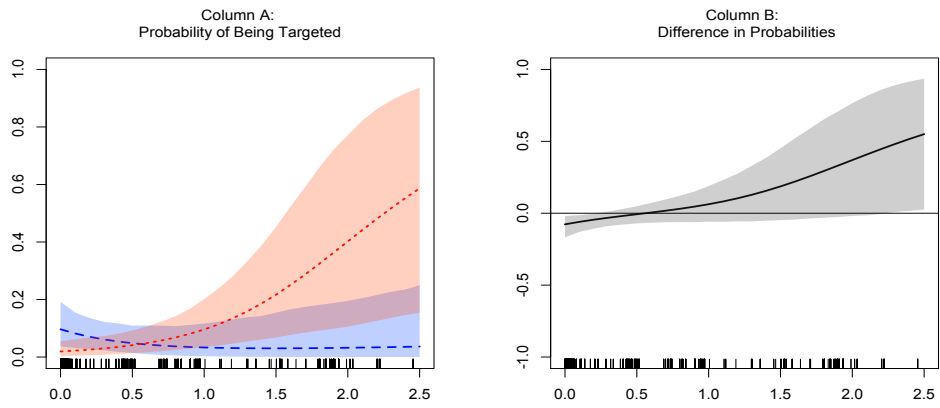
⁶We note that this claim fits with the finding that the effect of elections on policy outcomes is decreasing in the time since an election (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002, Peterson et al. 2003, Grossback, Peterson and Stimson 2006).

⁷This is the same functional form Chiozza and Goemans (2004) use to model the effect of war outcomes on leader survival.

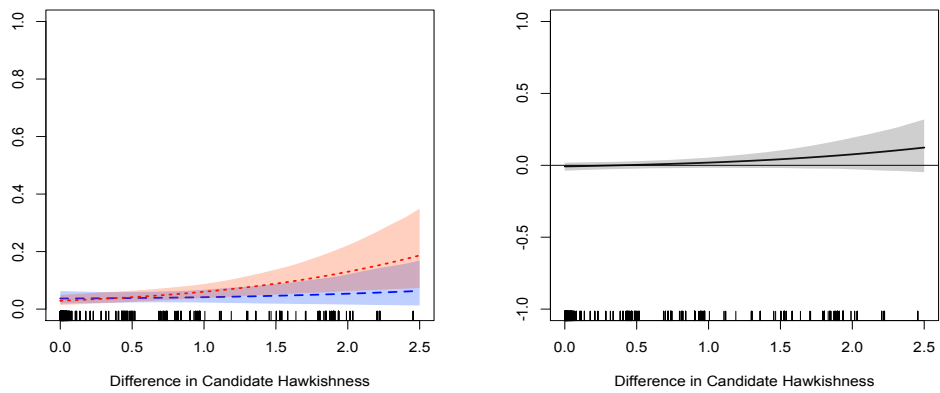
= $\frac{1}{4}$). Figure 3 presents these results.

Figure 3 is consistent with our claim that the relationship between interstate crises and elections weakens over time. Panel A reports how an election's outcome influences the probability a state will be targeted in the same year as the election. These results are qualitatively similar to the relationships reported in Figure 2. In Column A, the probability that a state is targeted increases as the difference in candidates' relative hawkishness increases following a toss-up election (red dotted line) but not after a blow-out election (blue dashed line). Further, the difference in the respective probabilities of being targeted after a toss-up election and a blow-out election become statistically significant when the difference in the candidates' relative hawkishness is relatively large (Column B). In contrast, the relative hawkishness of the candidates in an election that occurred three years ago has a much smaller influence on the relative probability a country is targeted in an interstate dispute when the outcome was a toss-up (Column A in Panel B). Additionally, there is no significant difference in the probabilities a state will be targeted three years after a toss-up election or a blow-out election regardless of the differences in the candidates' hawkishness (Column B in Panel B). These results are consistent with our claims that elections can influence patterns of conflict by revealing information about the public's willingness to fight and that the strength of this signal weakens over time.

As discussed above, for an election to reveal information about the public's preferences on a given issue, it must be the case that members of the public base their votes at least in part on the candidates' positions on that issue. This implies that the information an election reveals about the public's willingness to fight will vary as a function of how relatively important foreign policy and national security issues are to the public in a given election. This has implications for the scope of our argument and results because the salience of national security issues in presidential campaigns and elections varies considerably (Aldrich



(a) Election Same Year



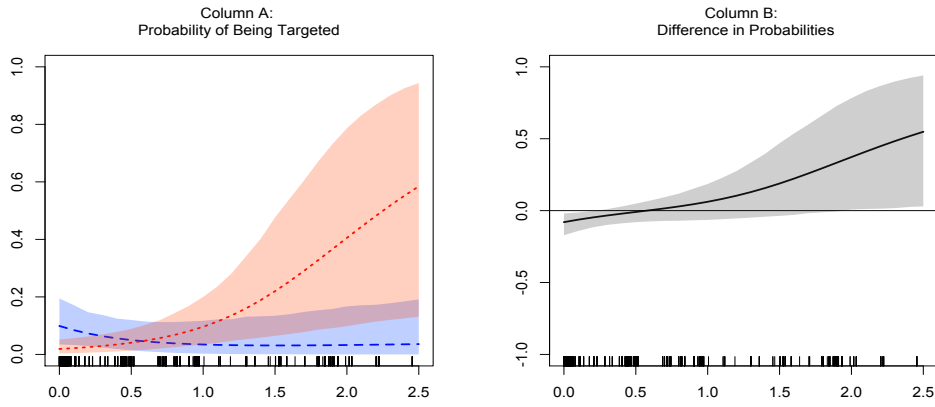
(b) Election Three Years Ago

- Blow-Out Election
- ... Toss-Up Election
- $\Pr(\text{Target}|\text{Toss-Up}) - \Pr(\text{Target}|\text{Blow-Out})$

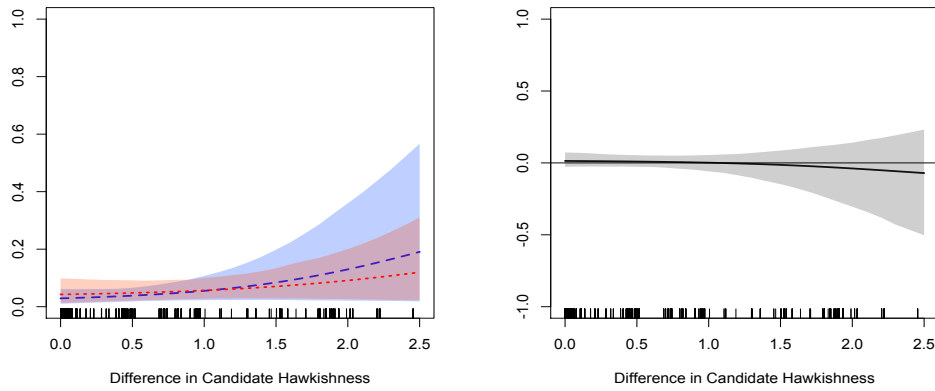
Figure 3: The Effect of Elections over Time on Interstate Targets

et al. 2006, Heffington, Park and Williams 2017). Unfortunately, the lack of cross-national public opinion data over time precludes us from systematically identifying the relative importance of foreign policy and national security issues in the non-U.S. elections in our sample. However, given that rivals are significantly more likely to fight interstate wars than other states (e.g., Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson 2008), it is reasonable to assume that national security concerns are generally more pressing and influential in shaping the public's voting behavior in countries involved in an interstate rivalry than they are in other countries. This implies that our hypothesized relationship between elections and whether a state is targeted in a crisis should be stronger in countries with an international rival than in states without a rival. We assess this possibility with the dichotomous variable *Rivalry*, coded one if a state has a rival in a given year and zero otherwise based on data from Thompson and Dreyer (2011). In particular, we use a logit model to estimate the probability a state would be targeted as a function of a three-way interaction among *Rivalry*, *Difference in Hawkishness*, *Margin of Victory*, and their constituent, implicit, and higher-order interaction terms. Post-estimation simulations of the probability a state is targeted in a crisis as a function of an election's outcome and candidates and whether it has an interstate rival are reported in Figure 4.

The results in Figure 4 are consistent with our expectations. If a state has a rival (Panel A), the probability a state is targeted following a toss-up election (red dashed line) significantly increases as the difference in the candidates' relative hawkishness increases, while the probability it is targeted following a blow-out election does not (dotted blue line). As with our primary analysis, the likelihood a country is targeted in an interstate crisis following a toss-up election is significantly higher than it is following a blow-out election when there is a large difference in the candidates' relative hawkishness (Column B in Panel A). However, when a state has no rival (Panel B) the effect of relative hawkishness after both toss-up and blow-out elections is relatively small (Column A) and there is no significant dif-



(a) Rival



(b) No Rival

- Blow-Out Election
- ... Toss-Up Election
- $\Pr(\text{Target}|\text{Toss-Up}) - \Pr(\text{Target}|\text{Blow-Out})$

Figure 4: The Effect of Elections and Rivalry on Interstate Targets

ference in the probability of being targeted as a function of the margin-of-victory across the range of candidates' relative hawkishness (Column B). Thus, the results in Figure 4 suggest that elections in states with a rival reveal more information about the public's willingness to fight than do elections in states without a rival.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Free-and-fair elections among competitive candidates provide citizens an opportunity to express their opinions about the policies their leaders pursue. Given democratic leaders' desire to be elected and re-elected by generally pacific publics, national elections have long been thought of as a source for peace in the international system. However, we argue and find evidence that an election's influence on conflict is conditional on its outcome. In particular, democracies are more likely to be targeted in an interstate crisis after close elections between candidates who are clearly differentiated with respect to their relative willingness to use force than after close elections with similar candidates or elections where one candidate clearly defeats the other candidate.

Our analyses highlight the important but previously overlooked point that elections can have different ex ante and ex post consequences for foreign policy and international relations. The threat of losing a bid for reelection due to decisions unpopular with the public can induce caution and responsiveness in democratic leaders, which most view as a good thing from both positive and normative perspectives. At the same time, election outcomes represent noisy and imperfect signals of the public's preferences to foreign actors. Accordingly, while elections can promote accountability and deter leaders from initiating costly conflicts ex ante, the uncertainty surrounding the information election outcomes reveal about the public's willingness to fight means that they can also increase the risks of conflict and war

ex post.

Our argument and findings have a number of implications for our understanding of domestic politics and interstate conflict processes and suggest several promising avenues for future research. First, and perhaps most generally, scholars might usefully consider how a leader's willingness to fight and her public's willingness to fight can interact to influence domestic political competition and crisis bargaining dynamics. For instance, recent work suggests that the efficacy of tying hands and mobilization signals depends on the relative hawkishness and dovishness of the sender and receiver and the electoral calendar (Quek 2016, Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer and Renshon 2018, Chiozza 2017). Our analyses suggest that the clarity and credibility of these signals is likely conditional on the extent to which a leader's and her public's relative hawkishness are similar or dissimilar and how shortly before or after an election a crisis occurs.

Our analyses suggest that electoral outcomes can signal whether public support for war has changed. Consequently, elections have implications for the prosecution and duration of interstate and civil wars. Previous work has suggested that leader turnover can influence interstate and civil war duration and outcomes (e.g., Croco 2011, Quiroz Flores 2012, Prorok 2016, Ryckman and Braithwaite 2018). Our analyses imply that whether the public chooses to replace the incumbent with a more hawkish or more dovish leader and the relative decisiveness of this choice will have consequences for the terms on which a state's leader will end a war and how the opposing side will interpret the public's willingness to continue paying the costs of war. The outcome of war-time elections therefore should affect both the duration and outcome of wars.

A third implication of our paper is that whether an election increases or decreases the probability of war between two states relative to what it would have been without an election is likely context dependent. As noted above, our argument and results and existing research

jointly suggest the ex ante effect of elections on interstate conflict and the ex post effect of elections on interstate conflict are countervailing. This implies that the net effect of elections on conflict could be either positive or negative. We suspect that whether the aggregate ex ante and ex post effects of a given election on the probability of war is likely conditional on the nature of the relationship between two states and the election's outcome. Previous scholarship argues that while domestic audiences are generally thought to constrain leaders from fighting conflicts and wars, they can push leaders towards more belligerent positions and conflict in the context of rivalries (e.g., Senese and Vasquez 2005). This implies that an election that very clearly reveals a public's willingness to fight will likely serve to reduce the already low probability two non-rivals will fight relative to what it would have been without an election. However, among rival states whose populations want their leaders to stand tough, we suspect that a revelatory election is less likely to reduce the probability of war below what it would be in the absence of an election.

Our view of elections as a noisy signal that reveals information about a public's willingness to fight predicts significant variation in patterns of conflict behavior and runs counter to the conventional wisdom that elections are a source of peace in the international system. Further, while a work in progress, our argument and findings have numerous implications for the field's understanding of the relationship between domestic politics and conflict and holds promise for future research that considers how leaders' and their key constituents' preferences shape interstate conflict processes.

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