Intra-Elite Bargains and the Character of Democratic Foreign Policy

Elizabeth N. Saunders  
George Washington University  
esaunder@gwu.edu

Scott Wolford  
University of Texas at Austin  
swolford@austin.utexas.edu

August 22, 2015

Abstract

Most theories of democracies and crisis bargaining assume that leaders deal with a public audience, rather than bargaining with elites in their own state. Yet side payments and intra-elite bargains are an essential feature of democratic politics. We develop a model in which democratic elites can cue a rationally ignorant voting public via opposition to a leader's bargaining position or war effort, but leaders, for their part, can make side-payments to accommodate key elites and keep these cues from reaching the public in the first place. We show that when side payments are possible, there exist conditions under which democratic leaders may devote less effort to the war than autocrats and be less selective in their choice of targets. Critically, this relationship emerges not despite but because of the threat of political accountability. Explicitly theorizing elite bargaining and leaders' strategic behavior helps reconcile democratic advantage arguments with critiques from both political behavior and autocratic accountability.

*Draft version; please do not cite without permission. Prepared for presentation at the 2015 Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco CA. Thanks to Alexandra Guisinger, Sarah Kreps, and Caitlin Talmadge for helpful comments and suggestions, Yon Lupu for greasing the wheels at this project's inception, and to Workhorse Bar for providing an excellent jukebox and a space conducive to the writing of mathematical proofs.
Since the end of the Cold War, scholars and observers of international relations have been keenly interested in the character of foreign policy in democracies. A major research agenda coalesced around the distinctive and ostensibly advantageous nature of democratic political institutions in the international arena, focused in particular on crisis bargaining and coercive diplomacy (Fearon 1994, Schultz 2001), as well as war selection and war-fighting (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Lake 1992, Reiter and Stam 2002). Although these models vary in their specific assumptions and key mechanisms, they generally rely on arguments that emphasize the salutary effect of electoral accountability in democracies. Voters in democracies gain information about their elected leaders’ behavior, then use the sanctioning power of the ballot box to induce their leaders to produce good foreign policy and effectively defend national interests.

With some exceptions, one feature that models of democracies and crisis bargaining generally share is a direct relationship between leaders and voters who can cheaply vote incumbents out of office, rather than the bargaining among elites that often shapes whether and how the public evaluates their leaders’ performance. Although a few models have a role for elites (notably, Schultz 2001), most models are centrally concerned with a mass public audience. In Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s (2003) selectorate theory, a crucial distinguishing feature of democratic systems is an infinitely large public audience, which cannot be “bought off” with private goods. Democratic leaders thus invest more effort in providing the public good of prudent war selection and increased war effort in the pursuit of victory.

Yet intuitively, intra-elite bargains are an essential feature of democratic politics and the making of foreign policy itself. Even in war, compromises with military or legislative elites can allow leaders to initiate conflict or continue fighting even in the face of declining
public support. Consider, for example, the “surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan, when both
George W. Bush and Barack Obama worked hard to ensure the political support of key elite
figures (Feaver 2011). More generally, we know that intra-elite bargains, facilitated by side
payments and logrolling, fuel democratic politics, but they have been largely ignored by
theorists of democracy and war (for a partial exception, see Snyder 1991).¹

In this paper, we develop a theory that focuses attention on political dynamics at the elite
level within democracies. This turn to intra-elite democratic politics is opportune given
that the literature on the democratic advantage has come under fire from two directions.
First, at the level of individual voters, many scholars have noted that models relying on
voter accountability lack clear behavioral microfoundations (see. e.g., Baum and Potter
2010, Gartzke and Lupu 2012, Potter and Baum 2014, Slantchev 2006). These critiques,
in turn, rest on well-established insights from the study of American political behavior that
emphasize the rational ignorance of the mass public. Most voters pay little attention to
the everyday details of foreign policy, relying instead on cues from elites to help them form
opinions and judge their leaders’ performance (Berinsky 2009, Zaller 1992). Second, at the
level of international outcomes, many recent studies have found no significant difference
in the behavior of democracies and autocracies, in areas that include credibility in crisis
bargaining (e.g., Downes and Sechser 2012, Weeks 2008, Weiss 2013), war initiation and
selection (Downes 2009, Weeks 2012), and war-fighting (e.g. Lyall 2010, Talmadge 2015).
Many of these critiques are empirical; those that have a prominent theoretical component
have thus far mainly concentrated on domestic politics in authoritarian regimes, advancing

¹Notably, the literature on international cooperation has been more open to considering elite influence and
side-payments, as illustrated by the older literature on two-level games (Mayer 1992, Putnam 1988).
our understanding of the audiences evaluating autocratic leaders’ performance in crises and wars. On the democratic side, some studies recognize the need for an intermediate role for elites to provide information that can cue the public (e.g., Levendusky and Horowitz 2012, Potter and Baum 2014), but intra-elite bargaining and the strategic behavior of democratic leaders trying to secure elite support remain largely unexplored in these accounts.

This paper analyzes a game-theoretic model in which democratic elites can cue a rationally ignorant voting public via opposition to a leader’s bargaining position or war-fighting strategy, activating processes of ex post evaluation and accountability. However, leaders can make side payments to accommodate these elites, keeping damaging cues from reaching the public in the first place. We explore the implications of this intra-elite bargaining, which shapes the public’s ability to hold their leaders accountable, for democratic crisis bargaining and international conflict. In this account, elite politics is not a perversion of democracy—as many arguments claim—but rather a feature of it. This view of democracy acknowledges the rational ignorance of voters (Downs 1957) and the role of elites to whom voters delegate responsibility for foreign policy. It also comports with “minimalist” theories of democracy, in which voters elect representatives and then let them make policy largely out of public view (e.g., Przeworski 1999, Schumpeter 1942).

We first analyze a baseline model including only a leader and median voter, reproducing in a spare environment several common equilibrium relationships between political accountability and foreign policy behavior. Then, in the fully specified model, we introduce an elite audience member that the leader can strategically manage, effectively shrinking the size of the democratic audience by short-circuiting the relationship of direct accountability assumed to exist in most extant work. Securing elite support, however, requires
resources that cannot be devoted to the war effort. Contrary to some of the dominant theories of domestic politics and foreign policy, we show that the most accountable leaders do not necessarily devote the greatest effort to the conflicts in which they participate, nor do they show greater selectivity in engaging in “wars of choice.” Further, their failure to do so stems directly from voters’ incentive to replace them for demonstrated foreign policy incompetence. Put differently, the threat of replacement and the ability to manage the elite cues that trigger accountability can result in leaders underperforming in war and publics failing to hold them accountable.

The Democratic Advantage and Its Critics

There has been intense interest in democratic distinctiveness in international relations in the last few decades, particularly since the finding that democracies tend not to go to war against each other (Russett 1993). As the literature began exploring explanations for this phenomenon, arguments about the nature of democracies began to emerge, along with further empirical observations such as the tendency for democracies to win the wars they fight (Lake 1992, Reiter and Stam 2002). Although so-called “institutional” explanations have many variants, most begin from the basic premise that leaders wish to stay in office, and that in democracies, elections are the crucial accountability mechanism. These arguments, in turn, place the power to sanction leaders for poor foreign policy in voters’ hands. For example, Reiter and Stam (2002, p. 9) argue that democracies win wars at higher rates because of the “the constraining power of political consent granted to the leaders and the people’s ability to withdraw it.” Lake (1992, p. 26) emphasizes that the “costs of political
participation vary by regime type... in most democracies, where elections are the primary focus of political participation for the majority of citizens, it is relatively costless to vote and exercise voice.”

Despite their differences, many of these arguments assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that voters have access to information with which to assess a leader’s performance.² Yet this assumption is at odds with scholarship on American political behavior, which takes as its starting point the basic insight that voters have few concrete opinions about policy. As Zaller (1992) and, in the context of war, Berinsky (2009) have demonstrated, citizens tend to look to elite cues to help them form opinions. When elites are united, the public will largely follow the elite consensus; when elites disagree, the public will typically divide along the lines of elite dissent. These arguments usually posit partisanship as the most likely cleavage: voters will follow the cues of elites whose partisan predispositions they share, making partisan elites (such as legislators) crucial cue-givers. (In the US context, see Howell and Pevehouse (2007, ch. 7) for empirical evidence that members of Congress are important cue-givers on the use of force.) The implication for IR theory is that many models of democracies at war impose excessive informational requirements that most voters will—quite rationally—fail to meet.

Some recent scholarship in IR has recognized this information problem and incorporated a larger role for elites. Much of this work has been in the area of audience costs, or the costs that domestic audiences impose on leaders for backing down from threats in crisis bargain-

²Other variants posit that voters observe the outcomes of crises to gain information about a leader’s competence, which then informs their overall judgment and electoral decisions (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, Ramsay 2004, Smith 1998). These arguments are somewhat less demanding in terms of voter attention, but can still be subject to strategic elite management if, for example, the perception of competence depends on the presence of an elite consensus to that effect.
ing (for the classic argument, see Fearon 1994). Some arguments show how alternative configurations of elite cues can help mitigate audience costs, for example if the opposition endorses a leader’s decision to back down (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). Several critiques have highlighted the need for free media access to help voters glean the information they need to hold leaders accountable (Potter and Baum 2014, Slantchev 2006). These arguments, along with scholarship in American political behavior, generally do not explore how the configuration of elite cues arises, however. Leaders are not strategic in these accounts, which emphasize the transmission of an elite consensus (or dissensus) rather than its origins (for a discussion, see Saunders 2015). To the extent that bargaining postures or war efforts are shaped to influence elite consensus, just as they may be shaped to secure public support, assuming that the two are independent may be problematic for understanding the foreign policy of democratic states.

While this informational critique originates at the individual level and emphasizes voters, another set of arguments has reassessed the democratic advantage at the international level itself. Many of these critiques are empirical (Clarke and Stone 2008, Downes and Sechser 2012, Lyall 2010), questioning the validity of findings that democracies are more selective or credible in their crisis bargaining or war-fighting (for exceptions, see Desch 2007/2008, Downes 2009). Significant research on the autocratic side provides a more theoretically-driven account for why some authoritarian regimes have enough accountability to effectively eliminate any gap between democratic and authoritarian behavior in crisis bargaining or even war-fighting (e.g., Talmadge 2015, Weeks 2008, Weiss 2013). The model

---

3One exception comes from Schultz (2003), who explores how US leaders manage Congressional dissent and aim to keep the opposition from opposing the use of force for humanitarian purposes. More generally, some arguments see elites other than the leader as strategic, such as opposition figures in the legislature. See Schultz (2001) and Arena (2008, 2015).
of democracy against which these authoritarian regimes are compared, however, remains largely unchanged despite our evolving understanding of the behavior of rationally-ignorant voters.

With some exceptions, these models bypass elite interactions in favor of a more direct link between leaders and voters. One of the most prominent models, Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s (2003) “selectorate” theory, explicitly bypasses intra-elite bargaining in democracies. The model focuses on the relationship between the selectorate \( S \), or the “set of people whose endowments include the qualities or characteristics institutionally required to choose the government’s leadership and necessary for gaining access to private benefits doled out by the government’s leadership” (p. 42) and the winning coalition \( W \), or the subset of the selectorate required to put the leader in power. Members of \( W \) gain a share of any private benefits the leader distributes in exchange for their support (p. 51). In democracies with universal suffrage, \( W \) is large—often a simple majority of \( S \). In non-democracies, \( W \) is small, and \( S \) may be large or small depending on institutional arrangements (p. 70).

Selectorate theory makes arguments about the mix of public and private goods a leader will provide depending on \( W \) and \( S \). Public goods, in this arena, include policies that increase national security. Private goods can take the form of “booty or rents that are distributed only among supporters of the regime...favorable tax policies, subsidies to special interests, trade or tariff policies that especially benefit domestic supporters,” or even imperialist policies that are a “burden to the entire state” but “greatly benefited a narrow segment of the population” (p. 29; on imperialism, see also Snyder 1991, ch. 5).\(^4\) A key insight of selectorate

\(^4\)In contrast to public goods, pure private goods are excludable (i.e., there is a cost to enjoying them) and rivalrous (i.e., only one person or group can enjoy them).
theory is that when $W$ is large, as in democracies, the leader is more likely to provide public goods, such as those that enhance national security, rather than private goods that are targeted at only a few supporters. In terms of war, this means that democracies will be more selective in the wars they fight, and put more effort into the war itself, than autocracies. Since a large $W$ means that the leader “cannot easily compensate for policy failure by doling out private goods,” successful public policies, like victory in war, are the only way they can keep the member of the winning coalition happy. In contrast, autocrats can “more readily compensate for policy failure by providing benefits to their few key backers” (p. 236). Members of the selectorate, in any system, vary in terms of their “affinity” for the leader, an assumption that helps the leader identify those most likely to be loyal and the potential members of the winning coalition to assess whether a leader will keep his promises of private benefits once in office (p. 60-61). In a democracy, affinity could take the form of copartisanship or ideological affinity, among other potential ties. Leaders generally prefer to fill coalitions with those who are like-minded first, but to secure their hold on power they must extend the membership of $W$ to the “lowest-affinity person whose support is needed to sustain a long-term coalition” (p. 62).

The size of $W$ has other implications for regime type. When $W$ is small, there is a larger risk that any give member of a winning coalition will be excluded from a new coalition if they defect and the incumbent is removed from office. This higher risk of defection induces loyalty in small-$W$ systems, and reduces the cost to the leader of retaining the support of any given member of $W$ (p. 66-68). In contrast, in a large-$W$ system (which democracies are presumed to be), “since any citizen in a democracy can be a member of the winning coalition, the policy preferences of all citizens must be considered by leaders as they formulate the public policies
they pursue and the private goods they allocate” (p. 70). Replacing the incumbent is thus cheap in large-$W$ systems but quite expensive in small-$W$ systems, making successful public policy a key to political survival in the former.

Consider now what voters’ rational ignorance implies for this model. If the voters rely on elite cues to tell them that a war is inadvisable, or even that an ongoing war is failing or, if progress is contested, that the war will not bring long-term security benefits, then the elites that provide those cues become the de facto winning coalition. Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003, p. 470) acknowledge that selectorate theory “treats coalition members and selectorate members as independent agents, each making choices in the political arena.” But selectorate theory admits that there are conditions that effectively shrink the size of $W$ even in apparently-democratic contexts: “When support is aggregated through a hierarchical mechanism, such as bloc voting, the effective number of supporters required to form a coalition is often substantially lower than the nominal rule suggests” (p. 472). These “hierarchical” mechanisms, or “correlated affinities” for the leader, take the form of identity voting (such as ethnic bloc voting) or “machine” politics (in which a key patron delivers votes), such that key figures become “essential coalition members...who collectively deliver the requisite number of nominal coalitions members,” and thus “reduce the size of the actual winning coalition” (pp. 63-64, 471).

We contend that the public’s reliance on elite cues endows key democratic elites with the power selectorate theory identifies in the case of “correlated” or “lumpy” affinities. While it is true that national security is a public good—and selectivity and success in war presumably enhance security—decisions for war are often highly uncertain in their desirability, and elites have well-documented information advantages over the public (for a discussion,
see Baum and Potter 2008). Although we do not limit our discussion to these wars, uncertainty and informational asymmetries may be particularly acute for modern democracies that fight “wars of choice,” where reasonable people can disagree about the wisdom of fighting (see Caverley 2014, Saunders 2011). Furthermore, in such cases the payoff from war is often uncertain and any benefits may be realized in the relatively distant future (Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015). Thus voters, who must economize on information-gathering to begin with and are not likely to have access to independent information about the security benefits of the war for some time, are happy to delegate to elites the task of informing them about the wisdom of fighting. This delegation gives the leader an incentive to earn and retain the support of key elites. Explicitly theorizing elite bargaining and leaders’ strategic behavior helps reconcile democratic advantage arguments with critiques from both political behavior and autocratic accountability.

**Democracy, War, and Coalition Politics**

A significant question is whether the leader can gain elite support through the provision of private goods targeted at a particular individual or small group, a possibility that is effectively foreclosed for democracies by the selectorate model. Yet in many areas of democratic politics, including foreign policy, it is well known that democratic leaders use side payments and other tools of domestic coalition building. For example, the literature on international trade and treaty negotiations emphasizes domestic bargaining among elites (e.g. Milner 1997, Putnam 1988). Rarely, however, is this type of elite coalition bargaining discussed in
the context of democracies and war.\footnote{As discussed below, Snyder (1991) is a partial exception that allows coalition politics like log-rolling to lead to war, but he emphasizes that these effects are dampened or transient in democratic polities.}

While elite bargaining with tools like side payments are familiar in cases of, say, international treaty ratification, they are less often discussed in war. What would these political tools look like in practice? In the context of war, it is more difficult to imagine that democratic leaders use traditional side payments like pork barrel spending to gain the support of key elites. It would be politically unpalatable, for example, for a member of Congress to tout a new project in his district obtained in return for his support for war. While it is possible to imagine that such direct payments occur, they would be difficult to trace empirically in a systematic way.

Yet there are a variety of other tools at an executive’s disposal that are more reasonable to expect in the context of war, and which have the practical effect of imposing costs on the leader and diverting resources from the war effort, either directly (through limits on the war itself) or indirectly (in terms of costing the leader political capital for future attempts to increase effort, for example). In outlining the possibilities, it is important to note that those who could be cue-givers include not only members of Congress, but also other key elite actors such as members of the military, who can provide important cues themselves (Dropp, Golby and Feaver 2014), or who can provide information to Congress about the war effort, or bureaucratic actors whose preferences might diverge from the leader and whose support or opposition would be informative to voters (Saunders 2015). As Milner (1997, p. 110) notes, these tactics can be implicit rather than explicit, making it more difficult to assess them empirically but suggesting that they are perhaps more common than the public record.
implies at first glance.

One form of side payment could be tangible benefits such as favors, including appointments or promotions, campaign support, or quieter, less visible favors like backchannel support for a favored policy or bill. While direct side payments of pork might be unlikely in the case of Congress, budgetary incentives might be more likely for military and bureaucratic actors. For example, Woodward (2008, p. 286) reports that in the debate over the Iraq “surge,” the Bush administration sought to gain the endorsement of a skeptical military by offering what “[National Security Advisor Stephen] Hadley called ‘sweeteners’—more budget money and a promise to increase the size of the active duty Army and Marine Corps” (see also Feaver 2011, p. 107). After extensive bargaining about the policy itself (about which more shortly), the administration did claim the Chiefs’ endorsement. The administration also took specific steps to placate and manage key individuals: in replacing his leadership team in Iraq with those who favored the surge, Bush notably promoted the outgoing commander in Iraq, General George Casey, and the ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, to be Army chief of staff and ambassador to the United Nations, respectively, despite their opposition to the surge and association with the strategy it was replacing. Casey’s appointment, as Feaver notes, was “controversial, especially among proponents of the surge beyond the administration” (p. 112). But Bush was “determined to bring Casey along to his point of view to avoid creating damaging fissures within the team” (p. 113).

These kinds of positive inducements also surfaced in the Vietnam War. In 1964, for example, Johnson tasked Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright, who had doubts about American involvement in Vietnam, with spearheading the effort to get the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed by a wide margin, partly because doubting
senators “respected Fulbright and would listen to him” (Logevall 1999, p. 203). In 1965, Johnson also worked hard to keep his former Senate colleagues from debating the merits of escalation, again asking Fulbright to take the lead, relying on “Fulbright’s weakness for flattery and of his desire to remain on good terms with the administration” (p. 307). The implicit promise of insider status thus helped keep Fulbright on board.\(^6\)

Threats can also be considered a form of side payment. Although this characterization may seem counterintuitive, Riker (1962) explicitly argues that threats are a form of side-payment, which “consists of a promise not to carry out the threat and the gain of the follower is simply escape from misfortune” (p. 109). Milner (1997) concurs, noting that both promises and threats “are intended to make an actor do something he would not otherwise do” (p. 111). Threats are perhaps more readily imagined in the arena of the use of force than explicit promises of tangible benefits. One tactic is to frame the issue in a way that puts those who oppose it on the wrong side of the issue, as in the case of McCarthy painting his opponents as treasonous (Riker 1962, p. 109-110). Presidents have used this tactic in forcing Congress to vote on war-related resolutions, as in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution or the 2002 vote on the authorization for using military force in Iraq, or otherwise threatening political damage for failing to support the war effort.

In either the case of promises or threats, a key element is that the use of these tactics affects the pool of resources available to the leader, of which she would like to preserve as much as possible. Even the “expenditure of energy on bargaining and planning tactics” is a cost to the leader in making side payments (Riker 1962, p. 116). Using political capital

\(^6\)This type of side payment may also reflect what Riker (1962, pp. 113-114) calls “payment of emotional satisfaction,” which rests on intangible connections between leader and follower. Keeping insider status in a given leader’s circle may be one type of side payment in this category.
to ensure elite support today may diminish his ability to call in favors tomorrow, including going back to the well of elite support for further military escalation or changes in strategy. Both Johnson and Bush faced this problem as their support in Congress eroded, but there are also opportunity costs to spending energy or favors on obtaining elite support for war rather than another policy. Logrolling is another form of side payment that can have consequences for decisions for war. Snyder’s (1991) argument about imperialism suggests that even democracies can become “cartelized,” with narrow interests joining forces in ways that produce overextension. In the case of the Cold War, he argues that American involvement in the Korean War was itself the result of a logroll between Asia-first and Europe-first politicians, and that the price of getting the increased commitment in Europe that Truman desired was to make commitments in Asia (ch. 7).

Finally, policy concessions are an important tool of coalition-building. Such concessions on the direct issue under negotiation are considered side payments by both Riker (1962, pp. 111-112) and Milner (1997, p. 109). In the context of war, concessions on policy are common, and may involve features that include the overall size of the war effort or military strategy. For example, the military might be skeptical of involvement in a given conflict yet agree to fight if the leader adopts a particular strategy. Feaver’s (2011) discussion of the Iraq “surge” decision notes that the Bush administration engaged in significant bargaining with military leaders about the precise form of the surge in order to gain the military’s support for the new policy, and ultimately “modified the strategy as the process unfolded to address the initial concerns of the military and thus win its backing” (p. 114). Such accommodations to the military’s preferences also manifested in the debate over strategy in the surge in Afghanistan in 2009 (Woodward 2010). The overall size of the effort in that case
also reflected Congressional preferences: for example, Senator Lindsey Graham, a leading Republican hawk, privately told the administration that a troop number “that began with 3” would ensure Republican support (quoted in Baker 2009).

As in all cases of distributing private goods or side payments, a critical distinguishing feature of a policy concession related to war or conflict is that it is targeted at a particular individual or group, rather than at the public at large. Other arguments, in contrast, posit that leaders modify strategy to satisfy the median voter’s preferences, for example by minimizing casualties (Caverley 2014). In our model, policy concessions are aimed at an elite or group of elites whose support cues the public to support the war (or whose silence keeps the public quiescent). In theory, even casualty-minimizing concessions on strategy could be aimed at a small group of elites rather than the public, given that the public’s perception of casualties very often depends on elite cues (Berinsky 2009). Our discussion of “policy concessions” below implies just such targeted adjustments to policy.

This discussion is not to suggest that these forms of coalition building are common in war, or that every war involves any or all of these tactics. Rather, our aim is to illustrate that such tactics, which are more commonly discussed in the IR literature on trade or treaties, are plausible in the context of decisions for war. There is some debate about whether these various tools can all be lumped together under the rubric of “side-payments,” or whether they represent distinct political phenomena (for a discussion, see Milner 1997, pp. 109-112). However, following Riker (1962) and Milner (1997), we see these as different forms of side payment. Of course, policy concessions that relate to the war itself more directly affect the resources available to fight, and thus the probability of success. For this reason, we model them as a distinct form of side payments in the discussion below, to allow for the possibility
that bargaining with elites over war policy rather than other forms of side payments yields different implications. As such, we consider two versions of the model in the discussion below, one involving side payments that are essentially orthogonal to the war itself (such as promotions, political threats or favors, or implicit vote-trading or deal-making), and the other involving policy concessions that directly relate to the war, and thus imply that elites have preferences about the effort devoted to the war or the strategy for fighting.7

Model

Suppose that two states, domestic (D) and foreign (F), disagree about relative shares of some international pie of unit size. While foreign is a unitary state, domestic is made up of an incumbent leader L and two other actors whose support and opposition determines whether she can retain office: a median voter (or selector, V) and a member of the elite (B) whose support or opposition can send cues to the voter over how to evaluate the outcome of international crises. At the end of the game, whether the leader initiates a crisis or tolerates the status quo, the voter chooses to retain her in office or replace her, and this process of reselection, in addition to her own concerns over national security, shapes the leader’s incentives both to get involved in and devote costly resources to international conflicts. Figure 1 lists formal symbols and their definitions.

The leader values two goods: (a) her country’s share of the international pie and (b) the size of the domestic pie, which we conceive of as rents, resources, or prerogatives that she enjoys only in the event that she retains office. Her utility function is $u_L = \eta L \rho L$, where

7In practice, of course, it may be difficult to distinguish the two forms of side payments. A promotion such as that of General Casey, for example, could have tangible effects on the war effort.
Table 1: Table of symbols and notation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(\eta_i)</td>
<td>(i)'s payoff for the international pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\rho_i)</td>
<td>(i)'s payoff for its domestic pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(q)</td>
<td>Domestic’s status quo share of the international pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(G)</td>
<td>Domestic’s domestic pool of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S)</td>
<td>Expected competence of potential successor to (L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>Cost to (V) of replacing (L) with successor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(T)</td>
<td>Foreign state’s domestic pool of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>(B)'s payoff for remaining loyal to (L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\beta)</td>
<td>(B)'s payoff for opposing the (L)'s foreign policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>Structural military balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(r_i)</td>
<td>Marginal effectiveness of (i)'s military effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d)</td>
<td>Destructiveness of military conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Choice variables

- \(g\): \(L\)'s proposed side payment to \(B\)
- \(m_i\): \(i\)'s military effort

\(\eta_L\) represents her valuation of the national interest and \(\rho_L\) the benefits of retaining office, such that a large share of the international pie is most valuable when the personal payoff is large, and vice versa.\(^8\) Likewise, the foreign state values both the international pie and its own domestic resources, \(u_F = \eta_F \rho_F\), while the elite figure in the domestic state values the international pie and his own share of the domestic pie, \(u_B = \eta_B \rho_B\). Finally, the voter in the domestic state values competent leadership; the better her country does in foreign policy, the less inclined she is to replace \(L\) with a challenger to national leadership.

The leader of the domestic state begins the game by choosing whether to tolerate the international status quo or to initiate a crisis, which entails a costly military contest with \(F\). If she does not initiate a crisis, the voter then chooses whether to retain or replace \(L\) with a

\(^8\)For a similar representation of the two-good problem international relations, see Palmer and Morgan (2006).
challenger—in other words, to remove $L$ from office. If $L$ retains office, then she receives the status quo share of the international pie, $q \in (0, 1)$, and retains the whole of the domestic pie, $G > 0$, such that $u_L = qG$. If, however, $V$ removes her from power, $\rho_L = 0$, such that $u_L = 0$. The voter, for her part, receives $u_V = q$ if she retains $L$ in office, since $L$’s foreign policy competence to this point has produced the existing international status quo. If she replaces the leader, she receives $S \in (0, 1)$, which increases in the challenger’s expected competence, but pays a cost $c \in (0, S)$ of replacement. When replacement is as easy as casting a ballot, $c$ is low, but it rises in the difficulty and personal risk of replacing one’s leader; as such, $c$ serves as an indicator of the extent to which the political institutions in state $D$ are democratic (low $c$) or autocratic (high $c$). The foreign state receives $u_F = (1 - q)T$ at the status quo, where $T > 0$ is its own pool of domestic resources, while $B$ receives $u_B = qb$, where $b > 0$ is his payoff for remaining loyal to the incumbent (at least with respect to foreign policy) leadership, which he does by construction at the status quo.

If $L$ initiates a crisis, the sequence of moves becomes more complicated. First, $L$ offers a side payment $g \in [0, G]$, which draws from the the domestic pie, to $B$ in return for his support. Next, $B$ chooses whether to support or oppose $L$ in the crisis, where the former entails accepting the side payment, after which $L$ and $F$ both choose costly levels of effort for the contest, akin to a war or militarized dispute, which determines each side’s share of the international pie. If $B$ opposes, no side payment is made and the game proceeds as it would if $L$ offered no side payment. If the leader wins the elite’s support, then the voter acts on the same information she would have possessed if there were no crisis; absent an elite cue from $B$, she has no incentive to change her behavior. However, if $B$ opposes the leader, then the crisis is politicized and $V$ evaluates the leader on her foreign policy
competence as demonstrated by the outcome of the conflict. The central component of each side’s payoffs in this branch of the game tree is the military contest, which allocates a share of the international pie to each side as a function of the structural military balance and the efforts devoted to the conflict. Formally, the share of the pie that \( L \) captures is

\[
\left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right),
\]

where \( M \in (0,1) \) is the extent to which the structural military balance favors \( L \), \( m_i > 0 \) (where \( i = L, F \)) denotes each side’s military effort, and \( r_i > 0 \) is the marginal effectiveness of each unit of resources devoted to the conflict. Since the international pie is valued at 1, we impose the restriction that \( 0 < (M - 1/2 + m_L r_L - m_F r_F) < 1 \), which implies that \( F \)'s share of the pie after the conflict is \( 1 - (M - 1/2 + m_L r_L - m_F r_F) \).

Conflict is also costly and destructive, and we represent these inefficiencies in two ways. First, conflict destroys part of the value of the good over which states fight, so each side pays a cost \( d > 0 \) for participating in the crisis. Second, states also waste their own resources on the contest when diverted to military efforts, decreasing the size of the domestic pie available for the leadership to enjoy—a pie from which she may already have drawn resources to make a side payment. Therefore, the domestic pies remaining for \( L \) and \( T \) are \( G - g - m_L \) and \( T - m_F \), respectively. Since it faces no risk of replacement, \( F \)'s payoffs are the most straightforward:

\[
u_F = \left( 1 - \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right)(T - m_F).
\]

\(^9\)Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999) use the same contest success function, but players choose efforts sequentially rather than simultaneously, as in our formulation.
For $L$, her payoffs depend on the size of the side payment made to $B$, her level of effort, and whether $V$ retains her in office. If she survives in office, her payoff for initiating a crisis is

$$u_L = \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right) (G - g - m_L),$$

while losing office is implies $u_L = 0$, as before. The voter's payoffs in this case are similar, in that retaining $L$ yields $u_V = (M - 1/2 + m_L r_L - m_F r_F)$, while replacing $L$ is again worth $u_V = S - c$. Therefore, when she makes retention decisions, the voter considers the cost of replacement $c$ and the expected benefit of a new leader $S$, which also implies an increase in the competitiveness of domestic politics; as $S$ increases, $V$ will be tempted to replace $L$ no matter well the latter does in the war, requiring ever greater efforts to win $V$’s support.

This allows us to consider variations in two features of domestic politics: the institutional cost of participation and the availability of viable challengers, which can vary widely even in democratic states.

Finally, the elite’s payoffs in the event of a crisis depend on the size of the side payment on offer and whether he supported or opposed the leader’s decision to enter the crisis. If he supports and $L$ retains office, he receives

$$u_B = \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right) (b + g),$$

where he enjoys the crisis outcome as well as the benefits of remaining loyal and any side
payment \( g \), and if he opposes and \( L \) retains office, he receives

\[
u_B = \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right)(\beta),
\]

where \( \beta > 0 \) is the payoff for defecting from the current ruling elite. If \( L \) loses office, we assume that \( B \) gets the same payoff that he does when defecting from the elite coalition. This construction allows us to characterize elites in terms of their loyalty to the current leader, or the ease with which their support can be purchased, as a function of the relative sizes of \( b \) and \( \beta \); opposition is most attractive when \( b \) is low and \( \beta \) is high, while support is most attractive when \( b \) is high and \( \beta \) is low.

**Analysis**

We analyze two variants of the model in this section. First, to establish a baseline for comparison to extant work, we analyze a model in which the public is sure to be cued to evaluate the leader's performance in the crisis. Several common dynamics emerge, including democratic states making larger efforts and exhibiting selectivity in choosing targets. However, in the second, full version of the model, the opportunity to shield herself from accountability sees the leader of a democracy sometimes making less effort than autocrats and being less selective in her decision to initiate crises. In the model with no elites, we summarize results in terms of the cost to \( V \) of replacing the leader and the value of the status quo, but the model with elites adds another dimension—the cost of buying the elite's support with a side payment and short-circuiting the voter's ability to hold \( L \) accountable for foreign policy.
We make one key substantive assumption to facilitate the analysis, namely that \( q > S - c \), such that the voter will not replace \( L \) if the latter tolerates the status quo and refuses to initiate a crisis. This ensures that pure diversionary or “gambling for resurrection” (Chiozza and Goemans 2011, Downs and Rocke 1994) incentives do not operate, allowing us to isolate the reasoning behind \( L \)’s decision to initiate a crisis. If she is sure to lose office at the status quo, she stands nothing to lose by initiating a crisis, but the simple fact of her truncated punishment would suffice to explain the initiation of a risky crisis; we focus instead on the interplay of international factors and the features of her country’s domestic politics.

**The Model Without Side Payments**

In the baseline model, any crisis that \( L \) initiates is automatically politicized, such that she is vulnerable to replacement if she performs poorly; \( V \) requires no elite cue to judge the leader’s performance. Since the voter’s decision at the final node is the key driver of \( L \)’s decisions in both the baseline and the full theoretical models, we specify \( V \)’s retention rule first, then give a full characterization of the game’s unique Subgame Perfect Equilibrium (SPE). Specifically, the voter retains \( L \) in office when

\[
\left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{LR}l - m_{FR}r \right) - d > S - c
\]

or when she has demonstrated sufficient competence to outweigh the expected gains of installing a successor in office, net of the costs of replacing the incumbent. The retention rule
also defines what we call the retention constraint, or

\[ m_L > \frac{1}{r_L} \left( S - c - M + \frac{1}{2} + m_F r_F + d \right) \equiv m^c_L \quad (1) \]

in reduced form, which defines the minimal amount of effort that \( L \) must devote to the crisis in order to secure enough of the international pie to retain office.\(^{10}\) Notably, the minimum effort defined by the retention constraint decreases in the ease with which \( V \) can replace the leader; as \( c \) falls and the voter’s threat to turn \( L \) out of office grows more credible, \( L \) must devote ever more resources to the war effort if she is to survive in office. Similarly, the more competitive is the potential replacement (i.e., as \( S \) increases), \( L \) must also devote greater efforts to the war in order to ensure political survival.

The retention constraint binds—i.e., it alters \( L \)’s strategy in the crisis—when it falls above her unconstrained optimum (\( m^u_L \)), or the amount of effort she would devote to the war if she were sure to retain office, balancing the potential gains of increasing the international pie against shrinking her pool of domestic resources. As stated in Proposition 1, political survival incentives raise her war effort over her preferred level via the retention constraint when \( V \)’s costs of replacing her are sufficiently low (\( c < \hat{c} \)), but when replacement is difficult (\( c \geq \hat{c} \)), she limits war efforts to retain control of a larger share of domestic resources, because her unconstrained optimum satisfies the retention constraint.

**Proposition 1.** When \( q < S - c \), the following strategies constitute the unique SPE.

\[(a.) \text{ When } c \geq \hat{c}, L \text{ initiates a crisis iff } q < q^u \text{ and sets } m^u_L; F \text{ sets } m^u_F; \text{ and } V \text{ retains } L.\]

\(^{10}\)Note that \( m_F \) is properly written \( m_F(m_L) \), since the foreign state’s level of effort depends in equilibrium on \( L \)’s effort. As such, Inequality (1) is a reduced-form representation of the retention constraint, which we define fully in the appendix.
(b.) When $c < \hat{c}$, $L$ initiates a crisis iff $q < q^r$ and sets $m^*_L = m^r_L$; $F$ sets $m^*_F = m^r_F$; and $V$ retains $L$.

Starting with the case where replacing the leader is relatively costly ($c \geq \hat{c}$), which we equate with autocratic political systems, the equilibrium is straightforward. The leader initiates a crisis when the status quo is sufficiently unattractive ($q < q^u$), i.e. when she is dissatisfied, and then enters a military contest with the foreign state in which each side chooses an optimal level of effort.\(^{11}\) In equilibrium, these efforts are

$$m^u_L = \frac{6d + 4Gr_L - 2M + 2Tr_F - 1}{6r_L} \quad \text{and} \quad m^u_F = \frac{6d + 2Gr_L + 2M + 4Tr_F - 5}{6r_F},$$

which balance the need to overcome the other’s efforts in the contest—to counter its strategy or to achieve escalation dominance—against the desire to retain as much of the domestic pie as possible. The critical factors in each side’s efforts are the size of each other’s domestic pie ($G, T$), the destructiveness of the war ($d$), the military balance ($M$), and each side’s marginal military effectiveness ($r_L, r_F$).\(^{12}\) $L$’s effort is also notable for the absence of domestic politics; since the cost to the voter of replacing her is so high, her threat to punish the leader for skimping on the war effort to preserve the domestic pie is incredible, and $L$’s unconstrained optimum satisfies the relatively low retention constraint. This is consistent with Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s (1999) model, in which autocrats choose conflicts based solely on the balance of costs and benefits, while democratic leaders evince a lower tolerance for risk, turning down conflicts in strategic circumstances in which autocrats would give battle.

\(^{11}\) We use “dissatisfied” in Powell’s (1999) sense of the expected value for war exceeding the value of the status quo.

\(^{12}\) One surprising result is that efforts actually increase in the deadweight costs of the war $d$; the less there is to go around, the harder each side fights for it.
However, when the voter’s threat to replace the leader is more credible, or when \( c < \hat{c} \) such that the political institutions are more democratic, the contours of the equilibrium change, because \( L \)'s unconstrained optimum now falls below the retention constraint \( (m^u_L < m^r_L) \). In this case, her desire to retain as much of the domestic pie as possible conflicts with the voter’s desire to ensure good foreign policy outcomes, and if \( L \) is to retain office she must raise her war effort beyond her unconstrained optimum. However, she will invest only enough to satisfy the retention constraint. Taking into account \( F \)'s effort in response, \( L \)'s equilibrium level of effort under greater political accountability is

\[
m^r_L = \frac{-4c + 6d - 2M + 2Tr_F + 4S - 1}{2r_L},
\]

which reflects two features of domestic politics. First, she invests more in the war effort the easier it is for \( V \) to replace her (i.e., as \( c \) decreases). Second, her effort increases as \( S \) increases, or as the expected competence of her most likely challenger for political power increases. Therefore, the investments that leaders make in the war effort decrease in the costs of replacing them and increase in the competitiveness of domestic politics.

The baseline model generates two notable results, stated formally in Proposition 2.

**Proposition 2.** In the game with no elite, \( L \)'s effort decreases in \( c \), such that \( m^r_L > m^u_L \), leading to larger shares of the international pie. However, there is no consistent relationship between \( c \) and the willingness to initiate crises.

First, greater levels of domestic accountability are associated with larger investments in the war effort. As they do in selectorate theory, democratic leaders in the version of our model with no elites appear to “try harder” once engaged in conflict than autocratic lead-
ers (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, p. 794). This translates into better military prospects against the foreign state, though they come at greater cost to the leader’s share of the domestic pie, from which she draws these increased war efforts. Second, while there exist conditions under which a democratic leader is hesitant to initiate crises due to the costs of ensuring sufficient performance to retain office, she is sometimes more willing to initiate crises than an autocratic leader. When $V$’s costs of replacing the leader are not too low ($c < c < \hat{c}$), then $L$ hesitates to launch crises that will be too costly, and her initiation constraint is tighter than it is for autocratic leaders ($q^{rc} < q^{un}$). However, when the costs of replacement are extremely low ($c \leq \underline{c}$), democratic leaders become more willing than autocratic leaders to initiate crises ($q^{rc} \geq q^{un}$); the outsized efforts demanded by the retention constraint make the domestic pie relatively worthless, but they ensure such a large share of the international pie that she opts to initiate a crisis in any case. This is also consistent with selectorate theory: democratic leaders are perfectly willing to initiate conflicts, even against other democratic states, when they can be sufficiently sure of success to retain office (pp. 800-802).

The Model With Side Payments

Our baseline model replicates some of the key theoretical claims in the literature on regime type and foreign policy: democrats have political incentives to invest heavily in war efforts, and their chances of military success weigh heavily against the threat of losing office in their calculations over initiating crises, while they are in general no more or less prone to conflict
than autocrats. In this section, we analyze a simple extension that captures another key aspect of democratic politics: the leader may be able to purchase the support of elites whose opposition would cue the voter to hold her accountable for poor military performance. Absent an elite cue that $L$’s foreign policy is undesirable, the voter evaluates the leader as she would as if the status quo remained in place, and we show in this section that the option to short-circuit the accountability mechanism has serious implications for the role of democratic politics in foreign policy.

We restrict our analysis of the elite politics model to conditions under which $c < \hat{c}$, where $L$’s unconstrained optimum is not sufficient to ensure her political survival, because when $c \geq \hat{c}$ she need not worry about buying elite support; the voter finds removing her from power too costly, regardless of whatever cues he might receive from the elite. This particular strategy of purchasing elite support with the express goal of preventing a rationally ignorant public from receiving cues about foreign policy can thus be thought of as a feature of democratic politics that gives some members of the elite purchase over the foreign policy making process that they ostensibly enjoy only in autocratic polities. After characterizing the conditions under which $L$ buys $B$’s support and insulates herself from accountability, we compare her foreign policy across each of three scenarios: (a) autocratic politics, (b) democratic politics with full accountability, and (c) democratic politics with elite support.

Introducing $B$ to the model introduces another dimension to the equilibrium space: the

---

13 While we replicate one mechanism that might account for democratic distinctiveness—the threat of political accountability—there are others, including credible commitments not to punish leaders that lose office (see Chiozza and Goemans 2011, Debs and Goemans 2010). While this alternative accounts for the apparent lack of a relationship in observational data between war performance and regime type, it can also be explained by a strategic avoidance of those wars that impose the largest political costs. Therefore, the underlying relationship between regime type, war, and political survival remains unclear.

14 Compare this claim that democracies can fall prey to the same weaknesses of dictatorships with Weeks’s (2008) claim that some autocracies may share advantageous features with democracies.
price at which \( L \) can purchase elite support. When \( B \)'s support can be secured cheaply, \( L \) offers a side payment \((g)\), wins \( B \)'s support, and pursues a crisis free from accountability but under a tighter budget constraint \((G - g < G)\), since resources promised to \( B \) cannot go towards the war effort. Formally, \( B \) supports \( L \) in return for \( g \) when \( L \) offers a sufficiently generous side payment, given the outcome of the crisis if \( B \) supports, his payoff for defection \((\beta)\), and the outcome of the crisis if \( B \) opposes (requiring that \( L \) set \( m_{rc}^L \)):

\[
\left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{RL} - m_{RF} \right) - d \right) (b + g) \geq \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{rc}^{L}r_{L} - m_{rc}^{F}r_{F} \right) - d \right) (\beta).
\]

Thus, \( B \) accepts any side payment large enough to compensate him for remaining loyal but not so large as to undermine the war effort to an intolerable degree by wasting too much of the domestic pie that could otherwise be devoted to the war. If she chooses to make a side payment in equilibrium, \( L \) makes the smallest possible side payment that ensures support \((g^* = g^{su})\). Proposition 3 characterizes the conditions under which she does so and the consequences of securing elite support for military efforts and crisis initiation.

**Proposition 3.** When \( q < S - c \) and \( c < \hat{c} \), the following strategies constitute the unique SPE.

(a.) When \( \beta < \hat{\beta} \), \( L \) initiates a crisis iff \( q < q^{su} \), proposes \( g^* = g^{su} \), and sets \( m_{L}^* = m_{su}^L \); \( B \) supports; \( F \) sets \( m_{F}^* = m_{su}^F \); and \( V \) retains \( L \).

(b.) When \( \beta \geq \hat{\beta} \), \( L \) initiates a crisis iff \( q < q^{rc} \), proposes \( g^* < g^{su} \), and sets \( m_{L}^* = m_{rc}^L \); \( B \) opposes; \( F \) sets \( m_{F}^* = m_{su}^F \); and \( V \) retains \( L \).

Proposition 3 shows that \( L \) does not always avail herself of the opportunity to purchase \( B \)'s support. When \( \beta \geq \hat{\beta} \) such that the required side payment is too large—because it com-
promises the the domestic pie, the war effort, or both—L forgoes B’s support. This requires that she meet the retention constraint when choosing her level of effort ($m^*_L = m^{r_L}$), just as she does when the costs of replacing her are low in the model without elite side payments. However, when B’s support comes cheaply enough ($\beta < \hat{\beta}$), L can insulate herself from public accountability without sacrificing an intolerable share of the domestic pie. Purchasing B’s support is cheaper than escalating the war effort to the retention constraint, allowing her to both retain office and enjoy acceptable shares of the international and domestic pies.

When can leaders secure elite support? Support may be cheaper to purchase in times of high threat, e.g. when it is easier to paint opposition as unpatriotic or incompetent in its handling of national security. When the leader has a naturally large coalition of elites, as in the case of large majorities in Congress, support may also be cheaper to ensure (see Howell and Pevehouse 2007). More specific conditions may affect how easily the leader can purchase elite support: for example, if we think of B as a single individual with political ambitions of his own (a large value of $\beta$), the leader may need to give B a particularly large side payment to convince B to forgo the benefits of politicizing the war. Such side payments are not unheard of. In the case of Vietnam, Kennedy and Johnson both co-opted their potential Republican rival, Henry Cabot Lodge, by appointing and retaining him to be Ambassador to South Vietnam in the early stages of the war (see Saunders 2015, for a discussion). The ability to purchase B’s support also creates a new initiation constraint ($q < q^{su}$), but, as with her new level of effort ($m^*_L = m^{su}_L$), it is neither consistently higher nor consistently lower than it is without elite support.

**Proposition 4.** In the game with an elite, there is no consistent relationship between the
presence or absence of elite support and either the willingness to initiate crises or equilibrium efforts.

By short-circuiting the voter’s ability to punish her for poor foreign policy performance, L can effectively break the link between democratic accountability and both (a) large investments in war efforts and (b) selectivity in initiating crises. In fact, as stated in Proposition 5, there exist conditions under which L purchases B’s support and insulates herself from punishment as she devotes even less to the war effort than she would as an autocrat able to set her unconstrained optimum effort without fear of losing office because V’s costs of replacement are too high.

**Proposition 5.** L’s equilibrium effort is less with elite support than her unconstrained optimum \( m_{su}^L < m_{un}^L \) when

\[
\beta > \frac{(2c - Tr_F + Tr_T - 2S)(2(b + G)r_L + 6c - 6d - 3Tr_F + 2M + Tr_T - 6S + 1)}{4(c - S)r_L} \equiv \beta^\dagger,
\]

and \( m_{un}^L < m_{su}^L \) otherwise.

When the elite’s support is cheap enough (but not too cheap) to purchase, or when \( \beta^\dagger < \beta < \hat{\beta} \) such that B does not find opposition too attractive, then L is unable both to resist the temptation to insulate herself from accountability and to invest as much in the war effort as she would at her unconstrained optimum, given the cost of securing B’s support. Therefore, the very threat of being held accountable leads to the very behavior—a suboptimal war effort—that voters hope to discipline their leaders against undertaking. Yet since the voter cannot commit not to replace L with a more competent leader, the incumbent
devotes so much effort to avoiding accountability that she can no longer devote sufficient re-
sources to the war effort herself. As a result, she underperforms in the war, even as the public fails to hold her accountable, distorting foreign policy from both her unconstrained optimum and the retention constraint to which \( V \) would like to hold the leadership. Finally, suboptimal war efforts are most likely to occur when \( L \) buys the support of more expensive or politically distant elites, suggesting that broader elite consensus may be associated with both poor performance and low domestic accountability. This result suggests that building a bipartisan consensus for war, often held up as a democratic ideal, may come at the cost of performance given the price of building a coalition that includes those less loyal to the leader.

**Extension: Policy Concessions**

We have also analyzed an alternate version of the model in which \( L \) can attempt to win \( B \)'s support by adjusting her effort level. Formally, \( L \) and \( V \) retain the same preferences, while \( B \) suffers the domestic costs of the war effort at a rate different from \( L \), such that she pays \( c_B m_L \). This induces a range of acceptable war efforts for \( B \), who will support \( L \) when the war effort is large enough to secure a favorable outcome but not too wasteful of the domestic pie. While \( L \)'s side payment is different in substantive form, the basic shape of the equilibria—and the inconsistent relationship between \( c \), efforts, and crisis initiation—remain the same.

Focusing again on the interesting case where \( L \) must set \( m_L \geq m_{rc}^L \) in order to retain office, she may need to lower or raise her effort from that baseline in order to secure support. First, if \( B \) is so hawkish that he prefers an escalation, \( L \) refuses to seek support, opting to
meet the retention constraint and secure support with an already undesirably high level of effort; in other words, if she can retain office with a smaller increase beyond her unconstrained optimum, she will do so. Second, when moderating her effort can secure $B$’s support, she will do so as long as $B$’s support is not too expensive—that is, as long as the required effort does not require that the stray too far below her unconstrained optimum. This, of course, produces the same set of implications discussed in Proposition 5; when $B$’s support can be bought cheaply, $L$ will dial back the war effort and escape accountability, and for the most expensive (but still buyable) elites, she may devote less effort to the war than she would in the absence of a threat of removal.

**Is Elite Bargaining over War “Democratic”?**

We have argued that side payments and what amounts to elite collusion designed to short-circuit accountability are nonetheless features of “democratic politics.” But is this true? There are, of course, many critiques of the democratic advantage school of thought, including from the democratic side. Many of these critiques, however, lay the blame for opportunistic or aggressive policies at the door of voters or see elites as simply channeling those voters’ preferences (Caverley 2014, Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015).

Additionally, several of these arguments assert that foreign policy in a democracy cannot or should not be captured by elites, or that when such elite-driven policy emerges, democracy is weakened or ceases to function. Caverley (2014) argues that “if an elite minority can capture the government to decide what military gets built, which countries to attack, and how to fight these conflicts without any influence from the public, then that foreign
policy is not particularly democratic” (p. 17). Even selectorate theory’s notion of “correlated affinities” implies a breakdown of democracy: their discussion notes that cases of bloc voting, such as Tammany Hall or the PRI in Mexico, exhibit “corruption and other activities more characteristic of autocracies than democracies” (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, p. 65). Snyder’s (1991) argument, while explicitly highlighting elite bargaining, also see it as pathological in democracies; he acknowledges that the “intelligence of democracy” does not always work…perfectly,” citing voters’ lack of information and susceptibility to “demagogic propaganda,” and the possibility that “representative institutions may work imperfectly and create cartelized blocs within different segments of the elected government.” Snyder also notes that, in the United States, politicians are

   elected at different times by different constituencies, some of them parochial or manipulatable. When this is the case, policy-making necessarily involves bargaining among various party and regional factions and specialized legislative committees, as well as unelected bureaucratic professionals. Even in a democracy this bargaining process, which provides opportunities for logrolling, may resemble a limited form of cartelized politics (p. 51).

Snyder sees these processes as pathologies of democracy that may ebb and flow, however; for example, in describing the United States in the early Cold War period, he argues that “cartelization was merely a transitory aspect of the handling of some foreign policy issues, caused by a temporary pattern of factionalism and partisanship” (p. 257). Another line of argument has highlighted inequality and increasing oligopolistic tendencies in the United States; while these arguments focus less directly on foreign policy, they nonetheless add

---

See also Jacobs and Page (2005) and Page and Bouton (2006).
another dimension to the idea that elite political dominance is anti-democratic (Gilens and Page 2014, Winters and Page 2009).

But it is not clear that elite bargaining or even elite dominance of foreign policy is incompatible with democracy qua democracy. Consider Immanuel Kant, often invoked by IR scholars for the proposition that the “consent of the citizens” is an effective restraint on aggression in democracies. Yet Kant (1970) makes a distinction between direct democracy and republicanism, arguing that the former is a “despotism” while the separation of powers under the latter is the main institutional constraint on making war (p. 100-101). Of course, the arguments for representative democracy in the Federalist also rest on these concerns about direct democracy (Nos. 9, 10). Furthermore, a strand of democratic theory, well-represented in comparative politics debates but less familiar in the IR literature on war, stresses a more “minimalist” approach to democracy (Przeworski 1999). Here, voters elect politicians but largely ignore the details of policymaking until the next election. Accountability does help keep politicians from pursuing extreme policies, but does so only in the broadest sense, leaving many of the details up to elites.

Other views of what makes democracy distinct prevail as well, including credible commitments not to kill, imprison, or otherwise mistreat leaders after they leave office (Chiozza and Goemans 2011, Debs and Goemans 2010), but our aim is to provide an account of democratic crisis bargaining decisions that deal with the empirical reality of voter ignorance and delegation to elites. As Moravcsik (2004) argues, “Applied democratic theory must work with individuals as they truly are—inattentive, inexpert, uncertain about the future and unequal—not as one might wish them to be” (p. 344). Although Moravcsik points out that

16See Saunders (2014) for a discussion.
many theories of democracy underestimate the transaction costs of political participation in democratic polities (see also Saunders 2015), we have followed Lake (1992) in assuming that the costs of participation in democracies are significantly lower, in order to track as closely as possible the assumptions of existing democratic advantage arguments and “stack the deck” in favor of democratic distinctiveness. However, even when we put voters in such an advantageous position, democratic polities may show themselves to be feckless in foreign policy in ways that extant theories attribute mostly to autocracies.

**Conclusion**

The notion of a democratic advantage in foreign policy—from the committed pursuit of victory to wisely selected “wars of choice”—is, despite its prevalence in recent scholarship, relatively new (Desch 2007/2008, Reiter and Stam 2002). As both the scope conditions (Lyall 2010) and sources (Arena 2015) of this distinctiveness have come into question, the need has emerged for a theory that can account for both democratic advantages and democratic deficiencies. By incorporating insights from the literatures on voting behavior and elite bargaining over foreign policy, we have shown that democracy can be a source of either advantage or handicap in foreign policy. When elite consensus can be easily purchased with side payments, a set of conditions that changes both across countries and over time, leaders in democracies may both under-invest in the war effort and choose their wars poorly.

While one might read our key results showing that democratic states can also under-perform in war and choose their conflicts poorly, such an interpretation is less important than another key contribution: identifying the conditions under which low military effort
(which undermines deterrence) and poorly chosen conflicts (which can mire otherwise powerful states in losing wars) are likely to occur, not as anomalies, but as understandable outputs of a democratic political process. The credible threat of deposition wielded by democratic publics can be a double-edged sword: under some conditions, it encourages restraint in choosing wars and all-out effort once engaged, but under others, it discourages both—even to the point of encouraging lower war efforts and less selectivity than autocrats exhibit in the same international conditions.

Appendix

Proof of Proposition 1. Since V’s strategy determines war efforts, we first characterize V’s best response to its choice over retaining or replacing the leader. First, he retains L at the status quo when $q \geq S - c$, which is true by assumption. Second, following a crisis, he retains L when

$$\left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \geq S - c, \quad (2)$$

where $m_F$ is an endogenous variable that is determined by F’s best response function given L’s war effort. To determine F’s optimal $m_F$ for an arbitrary $m_L$, we state F’s maximization problem as

$$\max_{m_F} \left\{ \left( 1 - \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right) (T - m_F) \right\}, \quad (3)$$

which she solves by setting

$$m_F = \frac{2d + 2Tr_F + 2m_L r_L + 2M - 3}{4r_F}. \quad (4)$$

Substituting this expression into Inequality (2) and solving for $m_L$ yields the retention constraint,

$$m_L \geq \frac{-4c + 6d + 2Tr_F - 2M + 4S - 1}{2r_L} \equiv m^{rc}_L.$$

Thus, for any equilibrium in which V retains L, it must be the case that $m^*_L \geq m^{rc}_L$.

Now suppose that $c \geq \hat{c}$, where L initiates a crisis iff $q < q^{un}$ and sets $m^*_L = m^{un}_L$; F sets $m^*_L = m^{un}_F$; and V retains L. We first derive optimal efforts in the military contest and
show that $L$’s unconstrained optimum satisfies the retention constraint, which ensures that she retains office. Then, we derive the conditions under which she initiates a crisis. $F$’s maximization problem remains the same as in (3), and $L$ chooses $m_L$ to solve

$$\max_{m_L} \left\{ \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F r_F \right) - d \right) (G - m_L) \right\}.$$ 

The first order conditions are

$$d + m_F r_F + r_L (G - 2m_L) - M + \frac{1}{2} = d + r_F (T - 2m_F) + m_L r_L + M - \frac{3}{2} = 0,$$

which are satisfied by equilibrium efforts

$$m_{un}^L = \frac{6d + 4Gr_L - 2M + 2Tr_F - 1}{6r_L} \quad \text{and} \quad m_{un}^F = \frac{6d + 2Gr_L + 2M + 4Tr_F - 5}{6r_F}.$$ 

$L$ sets $m^*_L = m_{un}^L$ when $m_{un}^L \geq m_{Lc}^r$, which is the case when

$$c \geq \frac{1}{6}(6d + 2Tr_F - 2Gr_L - 2M + 6S - 1) \equiv \hat{c}. \quad (5)$$

Therefore, when $c \geq \hat{c}$, $L$ sets her unconstrained optimum and retains office. Anticipating equilibrium efforts and the retention of office, $L$ initiates a crisis when

$$\left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{un}^L r_L - m_{un}^F r_F \right) - d \right) (G - m_{un}^L) > qG$$

or when

$$q < \left( -6d - 2Tr_F + 2Gr_L + 2M + 1 \right)^2 \equiv q_{un}.$$

The proposed strategies are therefore in equilibrium when $c \geq \hat{c}$.

Finally, let $c < \hat{c}$, where $L$ initiates a crisis iff $q < q^r$ and sets $m^*_L = m_{Lc}^r$; $F$ sets $m^*_F = m_{Fc}^r$; and $V$ retains $L$. As shown by Inequality (5), $L$’s unconstrained optimum, so to retain office she sets $m^*_L = m_{Lc}^r$, which is the minimal investment that she can make to ensure that she remains in office. To find $F$’s best response, we substitute $m_{Lc}^r$ into Equation (4), which yields

$$m^*_F = T - \frac{1 - 2d - S + c}{r_F} \equiv m_{Fc}^r.$$ 

Anticipating equilibrium efforts and the retention of office, $L$ initiates a crisis when

$$\left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{Lc}^r r_L - m_{Fc}^r r_F \right) - d \right) (G - m_{Lc}^r) > qG$$

37
or when
\[ q < \frac{(S - c)(4c - 6d - 2Tr_F + 2Gr_L + 2M - 4S + 1)}{2Gr_L} \equiv q^{rc}. \]

The proposed strategies are therefore in equilibrium when \( c < \hat{c} \). \( \square \)

**Proof of Proposition 2.** There are three claims to establish: (a) \( m^{rc}_L > m^{un}_L \) when \( c < \hat{c} \), (b) \( L \) gains a larger share of the international pie when \( c < \hat{c} \), and (c) there is no consistent relationship between \( c \) and the crisis initiation constraints. The first claim follows directly from Inequality (5). For the second claim, we solve
\[
\left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m^{rc}_L r_L - m^{rc}_F r_F \right) - d > \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m^{un}_L r_L - m^{un}_F r_F \right) - d,
\]
which is true when \( c < \hat{c} \), which is the precise condition required for \( m^*_L = m^{rc}_L \) in equilibrium. To establish the final claim, we solve \( q^{rc} < q^{un} \), which is true when \( c < c < \hat{c} \), where
\[
c = \frac{1}{12} (6d - 2Gr_L - 2M + 2Tr_F + 12S - 1).
\]

Otherwise, when \( c \leq \underline{c} \), \( q^{rc} \geq q^{un} \). Therefore, there is no consistent relationship between \( c \) and the willingness to initiate crises. \( \square \)

**Proof of Proposition 3.** Since \( q < S - c \) and \( c < \hat{c} \), \( L \) is sure to retain office at the status quo, and \( V \) will retain her after a crisis if \( m^*_L \geq m^{rc}_L \). Therefore, if she does not secure \( B \)'s support, equilibrium behavior is identical to that characterized in Proposition 1 when \( c < \hat{c} \). It thus remains to characterize equilibrium behavior and the conditions supporting it when \( L \) does secure \( B \)'s support.

\( B \) accepts any \( g \) that satisfies
\[
\left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F l_F \right) - d \right) (b + g) \geq \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m^{rc}_L r_L - m^{rc}_F l_F \right) - d \right) (\beta)
\]

which defines a range of acceptable side payments. The values defining this range, \( g \in [g^{su}, \bar{g}] \), depend on \( m_L \) and \( m_F \), both of which themselves are functions of \( g \). Therefore, to determine the size of the size payment in equilibrium, we derive each side’s effort for an arbitrary \( g \). If \( L \) secures \( B \)'s support, she solves \( \max_{m_L} \{ \eta_L \rho_L \} \) or
\[
\max_{m_L} \left\{ \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_L r_L - m_F l_F \right) - d \right) (G - g - m_L) \right\},
\]

while \( F \)'s problem is the same as in Equation (3). The first order conditions are
\[
d + r_L (\bar{g} + G - 2m_L) + m_F r_F - M + \frac{1}{2} = d + m_L r_L + (T - 2m_F) r_F + M - \frac{3}{2} = 0,
\]

38
which are satisfied by equilibrium efforts

\[ m_{su}^L = \frac{6d + 4(G-g)r_L - 2M + 2Tr_F - 1}{6r_L} \]

and

\[ m_{su}^F = \frac{6d + 2(G-g)r_L + 2M + 4Tr_F - 5}{6r_F} \].

Substituting equilibrium efforts into Inequality (6) yields the full-form range of side payments acceptable to B, defined at the minimum by \( g_{su} \) and at the maximum by \( \bar{g} \). Next, \( L \) wishes to purchase \( B \)'s support with the minimally acceptable side payment, because each component of her expected utility decreases in \( g \); substituting efforts as defined above into her expected utility for winning \( B \)'s support, both first partials with respect to \( g \) are negative:

\[ \frac{\partial \eta_L}{\partial g} = -\frac{r_L}{3} < 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\partial \rho_L}{\partial g} = -\frac{1}{3} < 0. \]

Therefore, if she purchases \( B \)'s support, she proposes \( g^* = g_{su} \), where

\[ g_{su} = \frac{1}{4r_L} (1 - 6d + 2(M - r_L(b - G) - Tr_F) - \sqrt{(1 - 6d + 2(M - r_L(b - G) - Tr_F))^2 + 8r_L(b + 6(\beta - S) - bd) + 2b(M + Gr_L - Tr_F)}) \]

Substituting \( g = g_{su} \) into the efforts derived above yields equilibrium efforts \( m_{su}^L \) and \( m_{su}^F \), which we can use to fully characterize \( L \)'s choice over purchasing \( B \)'s support and acting without it. In reduced form, \( L \) purchases \( B \)'s support when

\[ \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{su}^L r_L - m_{su}^F \right) - d \right) (G - g_{su} - m_{su}^L) > \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{su}^{rc} r_L - m_{su}^{rc} \right) - d \right) (G - m_{su}^{rc}), \]

or when \( \beta < \hat{\beta} \), where \( \hat{\beta} \) is the most expensive type of \( B \) that \( L \) finds affordable. Its derivation is complicated, so we omit it here, but the existence of this value if guaranteed by the fact that both components of \( L \)'s expected utility, as above, decrease in \( \beta \). Finally, when she will purchase \( B \)'s support, \( L \) initiates a crisis when

\[ \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{su}^L r_L - m_{su}^F \right) - d \right) (G - g_{su} - m_{su}^L) > qG, \]

or when, in reduced form,

\[ q < \frac{1}{G} \left( \left( M - \frac{1}{2} + m_{su}^L r_L - m_{su}^F \right) - d \right) (G - g_{su} - m_{su}^L) \equiv q_{su}. \]

Thus, when \( \beta < \hat{\beta} \), \( L \) buys \( B \)'s support and initiates a crisis iff \( q < q_{su} \), while equilibrium strategies when \( \beta \geq \hat{\beta} \) are identical to those when \( c < \hat{c} \) in the restricted version of the
model with no elite (see Proposition 1). This ensures that the proposed strategies are in equilibrium for $c < \hat{c}$. ☐

**Proof of Proposition 4.** There are two claims to establish about the game with an elite. First, we compare initiation constraints with and without elite support, where $q^{su} > q^{rc}$ implies that $q^{su} - q^{rc} > 0$. Substituting the equilibrium value for $q^{su}$, we have

$$0 < -q^{rc} + \frac{1}{144GrL} \times (1 - 6d + 2M + 2(b + G)r_L - 2Tr_F + \sqrt{(1 - 6d + 2(M - Tr_F))^2 + 4r_L((b + G)((1 - 6d + 2M) + (b + G)r_L - 2Tr_F) + 12(c - S)\beta)})^2$$

which can be either positive or negative, depending on the value of $\beta$. Next, since the term under the radical (call it $k$) decreases in $\beta$, i.e. $\partial k/\partial \beta = 48r_L(c - S) < 0$, the whole of the squared term does as well. Therefore, when $\beta$ is high enough, $q^{su} - q^{rc} < 0$, and when $\beta$ is low enough, $q^{su} - q^{rc} > 0$.

Second, we compare $L$’s equilibrium war efforts with and without elite support. We first establish that $m^{su}_L$ decreases in $\beta$, since its first partial is negative, or

$$\frac{4(c - S)}{\sqrt{(1 - 6d + 2(M - Tr_F))^2 + 4r_L((b + G)((1 - 6d + 2M) + (b + G)r_L - 2Tr_F) + 12(c - S)\beta))} < 0.$$  

Therefore, there is sure to exist a value of $\beta$ above which $m^{su}_L < m^{rc}_L$ and below which $m^{su}_L > m^{rc}_L$, and solving the relevant inequalities shows that this value is

$$\beta = b + \frac{3c - 3d - Tr_F + M - 3S + 1/2}{r_L} + G.$$  

Thus, there is no consistent relationship between elite support and either crisis initiation or war efforts. ☐

**Proof of Proposition 5.** To establish the claim, we simply solve the inequality $m^{su}_L < m^{un}_L$, which yields $\beta < \beta^\dagger$. ☐

**References**


