Successor-Driven Wars: 
More Incumbents, Successors, and Crisis Bargaining

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Abstract

I analyze an extension of the model found in “Incumbents, Successors, and Crisis Bargaining” (Wolford 2012) that allows (a) the identity of a country’s leader to affect war outcomes and (b) war to lock in an outcome that cannot be renegotiated. These two assumptions render the the model similar to more conventional treatments of the commitment problem, albeit with an endogenous chance of a shift in bargaining power via leadership turnover. The main result, in contrast to the original model, is that the shadow of a resolute successor can lead an incumbent’s adversary to attack, despite the incumbent’s known willingness to make concessions, in order to lock in a share of the benefits that would otherwise be lost to leadership turnover. I briefly discuss examples from the Balkan and Peloponnesian Wars.

In “Incumbents, Successors, and Crisis Bargaining,” (Wolford 2012), I analyze a model of crisis bargaining and endogenous leadership change, where new leaders cannot credibly promise to abide by agreements reached by their predecessors. In that model, leaders differ in their resolve, or subjective assessments of the costs of war (cf. Wolford 2007). This forces an incumbent’s opponent to consider the effect of a crisis outcome today on the probability of facing a new, potentially more hawkish or dovish leader, tomorrow. In that paper, however, new leaders can revise any settlement, regardless of whether it was reached peacefully or imposed by war, and leadership change affects only the state’s willingness to resort to war, not its military prospects. In this companion piece, I explore the consequences of relaxing these assumptions.

Many treatments of the commitment problem see a declining side using war to lock in a share of the benefits prior to an unfavorable shift in power (e.g. Powell 2004, 2006), but this mechanism is notably absent from Wolford (2012). Rather, war occurs due to some combination of political sensitivity and successor resolve, which affect an opponent’s ability and incentives to manipulate an incumbent’s chances of political survival. When successors can renegotiate deals after both peace and war, fighting and winning merely hastens the rise of a resolute successor and guarantees an unfavorable deal in the second period. However, should (1) leaders’ preferences affect war outcomes and (2) war be sufficiently decisive to lock-in settlements against renegotiation, I show in this paper that an incumbent’s opponent may choose to fight a “successor-driven” war in hopes of locking in gains before the rise of a resolute new leader.

To briefly characterize the model in Wolford (2012), incumbent and successor leaders in state B, labeled B1 and B2 respectively, bargain with an adversary leader in state A. The more B1 yields to A in a first-period crisis, the less likely she is to remain in power, and she will be replaced by a successor, B2, with potentially different resolve. Bargaining is re-opened in the second period in order to capture the fact that the incumbent cannot bind her suc-
cessor to inherited policies. In this paper, I consider a variant of the model with the following two changes that bring it in line with those analyzed by Powell (2004, p. 232). First, war allows the victor to lock in a share of the benefits into the second period, preventing the opposing leader from renegotiating it. There are at least two ways in which war may solve the commitment problem in this context: (a) military victory can lead to the collapse of the opposing government (Morrow et al. 2006, Reiter 2009), and (b) war might destroy enough of the stakes that a more resolute successor finds less of value to bargain over (Leventoglu and Slantchev 2007). In each case, the decisiveness of the war allows the victor to secure a share of the benefits that would otherwise be lost to future leadership turnover in the other state.

Second, leadership change implies a change in the probability of military victory. In Wolford (2012), A’s military prospects against B₁ and B₂ in the second period are identical, ensuring him the same minmax value and removing any incentive he might have to fight a preventive war. However, individual leaders can make decisions that can affect their state’s military fortunes, including how many resources to devote to the war effort (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). All else equal, leaders more willing to invest in a war effort or to tolerate greater costs (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Langlois and Langlois 2009)—her willingness divert money, matériel, and lives to the war—should have a bearing on the probability with which her country prevails.1 Therefore, I let A’s probability of military victory differ according to which leader holds power in state B, such that he defeats B₁ with probability p₁ and B₂ with probability p₂.2

To establish the conditions under which leadership change can produce a successor-driven war, consider Inequality (1), $EU_A(\text{war}_1) > EU_A(x_{11} = 1)$, which states that A finds war more profitable than a settlement in which he receives all of the benefits in the first period:

$$\begin{align*}
(1 - \delta)(p_1 - a) + \delta(p_1) &> \\
(1 - \delta)1 + \delta \left( (1 - \phi^1) x^*_1 + \phi^1 x^*_2 \right).
\end{align*}$$

When Inequality (1) is satisfied, A attacks in the first period rather than pursue any peaceful settlement.3

**Proposition 1 (Successor-Driven War).** When $\delta > \delta_{su}$, $p_1 > p_2$, $\phi > \frac{b}{p_1 - p_2}$ and $b < p_1 - p_2$, there exists no $x_{11} \in [0, 1]$ that A prefers to war.

**Proof of Proposition 1.** In any second period subgame, $B_k$ accepts only those proposals that leave it at least as well off as it will be in expectation by fighting a war, such that it accepts some $x_{k2}$ iff $1 - x_{k2} \geq 1 - p_k - b \iff x_{k2} \leq p_k + b$. Should A make a proposal acceptable to $B_k$, it will satisfy $B_k’s$ acceptance constraint at equality, taking as much of the surplus as possible in the settlement since settling for any less would leave him strictly worse off, proposing $x^*_{k2} = p_k + b$. A proposes $x_{k2} = p_k + b$ iff $p_k + b \geq p_k - a$, which is strictly true since $b, a > 0$. Therefore, in any second-period subgame, A proposes $x^*_{k2} = p_k + b$, which $B_k$ is sure to accept. When

$$\begin{align*}
(1 - \delta)(p_1 - a) + \delta(p_1) &> \\
(1 - \delta)1 + \delta \left( (1 - \phi^1) x^*_1 + \phi^1 x^*_2 \right),
\end{align*}$$

where $x_{11} = 1$, then A prefers war to any settlement $x_{11} \in [0, 1]$ in the first period.

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1While political institutions also condition effort decisions (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), my focus here is on the role of leaders’ personal preferences. To the extent that political institutions encourage leaders to make similar effort decisions in war, then the results that depend on large differences in resolve across instances of leadership change should be attenuated.

2Though I assume $b_1 = b_2 = b$, one may retain the assumption that leaders of state B differ in their costs of war. However, since I derive a sufficient condition for the absence of efficient equilibria, Proposition 1 is robust to either specification.

3This of course assumes that A’s best possible deal is $x_{11} = 1$, or that preemptive appeasement is not possible. A similar inequality in which $x_{11} = x_{11}$, adjusted for the assumptions of this model, can also show the existence of successor-driven war, but in the interests of space I only present the simpler of the two inequalities here.
This inequality is satisfied when \( p_1 > p_2 \), \( \phi > b/(p_1 - p_2) \), \( b < p_1 - p_2 \), and

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\delta > \frac{1 + a - p_1}{1 + a - b + (-1 + \phi)p_1 - \phi p_2} \equiv \delta_{su},
\]

which is sufficient to ensure that \( A \) attacks in its first move.

Proposition 1 shows that successor-driven wars occur when several conditions are satisfied. First, the future must be sufficiently valuable to justify the use of the costly mechanism of war in the present. Second, \( A \)'s prospects of military victory must decline sufficiently in the transition from incumbent to successor, such that the difference \( p_1 - p_2 \) must be greater than \( B_k \)'s costs of war, \( b \). Third, the incumbent must be sufficiently sensitive to concessions, such that peace would require \( A \) to yield more than he would pay in terms of the costs of war, especially since war allows him to lock the gains from a military victory into the second period. Thus, \( A \) uses war to prevent the successor from exploiting her strength in the future, which she cannot promise not to do, rendering peace unacceptable to \( A \). This is the same mechanism behind other treatments of the commitment problem, where an expected shift in relative power larger than the present bargaining surplus creates incentives for inefficient conflict. However, the present model locates the source of changes in bargaining power not in state-level phenomena but in the rise and fall of leaders. Hence, I refer to such wars as “successor-driven.”

The most likely candidates for successor-driven war seem to be political systems that allow large changes in policy as a function of leadership turnover, such as authoritarian states with few checks on policymaking or, more generally, states with small and shifting winning coalitions (Leeds, Mattes and Vogel 2009, McGillivray and Smith 2008). In either case, leaders’ idiosyncratic differences in resolve will play a larger role in wartime decisions than in political systems where leadership turnover generates less policy volatility. Democracies, on the other hand, may be less vulnerable to successor-driven war to the extent that their institutions discourage substantial policy volatility, given that leaders are typically beholden to a consistent median voter and encourage consistently large war efforts (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003); however, even democracies can be vulnerable when their institutions are weak or when the partisan divide is substantial. Nonetheless, while such large turnover-driven shifts in power may be rare, even in permissive political systems, the dynamic does seem to be present in the outbreak of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.

In the early years of the 20th Century, European powers and former imperial territories vied for the spoils from the eventual demise of the Ottoman Empire. A failed coup by the nationalist Young Turk faction in 1908 gave the newly formed Balkan League, made up of Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria, an accurate idea of the likely preferences of any government that would succeed the incumbent Grand Vizier. This idea was widespread: Austrian foreign minister Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal became convinced that, since the Young Turks were expected to be unwilling to tolerate even the current status quo in which European territories crept into independence—much less further concessions granted by the current government that would succeed the incumbent Grand Vizier—the time to grab Ottoman territory was now, ahead of the Young Turks’ eventual rise to power (Fromkin 2004, p. 69). Given the Young Turks’ connections to the military and nationalist ideology, it is likely a leader from their ranks would prove more resolute than his predecessor. This, along with the distraction created by the Italian invasion of Ottoman Libya in 1911 (Gerolymatos 2002, pp. 210-211), may have pushed the League into a now-or-never war with Turkey in 1912, despite the incumbent Vizier’s known propensity to concede territories without war.

Similarly, in 425 B.C.E., during a period of

\footnote{One might argue that the Vizier’s ability to put down the plotters would indicate that the chances of a successful Young Turk revolution were low; while this may have been the case, a lower probability of a shift in power would only make a commitment-driven war less attractive to fight rather than preclude it.}
truce in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta proposed peaceful terms to Athens, acquiescing to recent territorial gains and offering both offensive and defensive alliances with Athens in return for the release of hostages at Sphacteria and a promise not to undermine the government of Plataea.\(^5\) Despite the ostensibly generous terms, the Athenians rejected the proposal and returned to war, because “the Spartans who were now proposing peace and friendship might not continue in power” (Kagan 2003, p. 145). Members of the recently deposed hawkish faction—i.e., those who had prosecuted the war after rejecting Athenian terms five years earlier—would be able to ride the unpopularity of such a settlement back to power, deposing the doves who reigned after the recent military failures. Then, as before, they could pursue war against Athens, trading off other goals like recovery from the first round of fighting in return for heavier investments in the war effort. As a result, the Athenians, led by Cleon, expelled the Spartan ambassadors and effectively ended the truce with the intention of taking what they could through war rather than trusting that a settlement would be robust to changes in Spartan leadership (ibid. pp. 144-147).

Morrow et al. (2006) make a related argument that, since peace agreements based on non-territorial policy issues are difficult to enforce if future governments seek revisions, the leaders of states with large winning coalitions may raise their war aims to include the replacement of the opposing state’s leadership. The argument relies on domestic politics to explain why successors might challenge the settlement in the future, as well as why the victor might make leadership removal a war aim.\(^6\) The model presented here, however, argues that leadership turnover can lead to successor-driven war for any set of domestic institutions, as long as successive leaders can differ sufficiently in their wartime effort decisions. Additionally, while policy-oriented settlements may be easier to flout than territorial changes, there seems to be no reason a priori why this basic logic cannot apply to both territorial and non-territorial issues, as long as relative military power plays a role in shaping the distribution of benefits.\(^7\)

References


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\(^5\)Plataea was a former Athenian colony sacked by Thebes and Sparta two years earlier.

\(^6\)See also Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003, Ch. 9).

\(^7\)In other words, the primary difference in territorial and non-territorial concessions is the cost of revising them—i.e., occupying territory or simply implementing new policies—and not any qualitative difference between the two. The former may require larger differences in resolve between incumbent and successor, but the dynamic is fundamentally similar.


