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Partisanship, Militarized International Conflict, and Electoral Support for the Incumbent

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Abstract: Comparative politics scholarship often neglects to consider how militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) shape political behavior. In this project, we advance an argument that considers voter responses to international conflict at the individual level. In particular, we consider how the well-known conditioning effects of partisanship manifest in relation to militarized international conflict. Examining individual- and macro-level data across 97 elections in 42 countries over the 1996-2011 period, we find consistent evidence of militarized conflict impacting vote choice. This relationship is, however, moderated by partisanship, conflict side (initiator or target), and conflict hostility level. Among non-copartisan voters, the incumbent benefits the most electorally from initiating low-hostility MIDs or when the country is a target of a high-hostility MID; the opposite scenarios (target of a low-hostility MID or initiator of a high-hostility MID) lead to punishment among this voter group. Copartisans, meanwhile, tend to either maintain or intensify their support in most scenarios we examine; when a country is targeted in a low-hostility MID, copartisan support erodes mildly.

Note: Author order is alphabetical and co-authorship is considered equal. We wish to thank …

Introduction

A number of studies consider the impact of foreign events on incumbents' political fortunes (e.g. Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Berinsky 2009; Blechman and Kaplan 1978; Brace and Hinckley 1992; James and Rioux 1998; Lian and Oneal 1993; Mueller 1973; Oneal and Bryan 1995; Page and Shapiro 1983). Present in many of them is the rally around the flag argument, which maintains that international militarized confrontations boost incumbent support (e.g. DeRouen Jr. 1995, 2000; James and Oneal 1991; Levy 1998; Russett 1990). In our view, however, the effects of militarized conflicts on incumbent support have not been adequately examined. First, most existing empirical examinations focus on the US and were conducted some time ago; whether their findings extend to other contexts is unknown. Second, the cross-national studies that have been conducted almost exclusively investigate whether or not an incumbent retains office (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Chiozza and Goemans 2003; Gartner and Segura 1998; Miller and Elgün 2011; Williams, Brulé, and Koch 2010); in doing so, they ignore the issue of how *individuals* respond to foreign militarized confrontations in terms of their voting behavior. Such confrontations may well produce more nuanced effects than is detectable by macro-level variables, and inferences about how disputes shape a leader's standing with the public can thus at best be deduced indirectly from works focused solely at the country level. Further, such studies cannot take into account theoretically important individual-level factors

In particular, the voting behavior literature demonstrates that one's partisan identification can serve to "screen" perceptions of incumbent performance (Healy and Malhotra 2013). This points to the necessity of using individual-level data to examine whether partisan attachments also condition the impact of militarized conflict on incumbent support. This is a conspicuously important issue to consider, as the diversionary scholarship (see e.g. Levy 1998 and Oneal and Tir 2006 for extensive reviews) argues that incumbents can stir a rally around the flag effect by initiating

a militarized conflict with another state. Such arguments suggest that a country's involvement in a militarized dispute outweighs domestic divisions that can cause voters to evaluate the leader according to their partisan predispositions.

The recently updated Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) (Palmer et al. 2015) and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (CSES 2013) datasets help us determine electoral effects of militarized international conflict and the potential filtering of these effects through the partisan screen. These datasets provide the opportunity for our study to be the first to evaluate the individual-level electoral effects of militarized international conflict across countries. Our data cover nearly all advanced democracies, as well as developing democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. In total, our data include 97 elections in 42 countries over the 1996-2011 period. Through multilevel modeling techniques, we bring together national- and individual-level variables to offer novel insights to the question of whether foreign militarized conflicts help leaders' chances of improving their electoral fortunes.

Based on the rally argument, diversionary logic, and our own theoretical reasoning, we arrive at several hypotheses. We expect both the initiation of militarized conflict and being targeted in militarized conflict to increase voter support for the incumbent. Moving beyond the extant literature, we also expect these relationships to be conditional on voter partisanship. While we anticipate little "movement" among the incumbent's copartisans in response to international conflict, we hypothesize that both conflict initiation and targeting will increase the likelihood that the incumbent's non-copartisans will support him/her at the voting booth.

Our findings, which we demonstrate are largely robust to variations in variable measurement and model specification, challenge certain aspects of the conventional wisdom. Moving beyond the bulk of the public opinion scholarship, which has left potential individual-level foreign policy-related boosts in incumbent voting largely unconsidered, we find that voting behavior

is consistently influenced by militarized conflict. That is, a voter is significantly more likely to select an incumbent in wake of his/her country initiating a MID, but being targeted in a MID leads to an erosion of voter support. Considering the potential modifying impact of partisanship, we find that MID initiation continues to help the incumbent garner votes among non-copartisans. Copartisans, meanwhile, do not alter their vote choice significantly: they simply continue to support the incumbent at a high rate. While these findings provide at least some backing to the diversionary argument, the news continues to be problematic for the incumbent when the country is the target of a MID: both copartisan and non-copartisan support erodes in this scenario.

Investigating these findings further by considering the MID hostility levels, we find that these trends generally continue to hold for low-hostility MIDs. For high-hostility MIDs, however, the most notable is the change in electoral behavior in the wake of a voter's country being targeted in a high-hostility MID: both non-copartisans and copartisans intensify their support for the incumbent, suggesting a genuine rally effect. Initiating a high-hostility MID meanwhile tends to have a polarizing effect, where an increase in the copartisan voting support is accompanied by a decrease in non-copartisans voting for the incumbent. Seen from the incumbent's perspective of garnering extra votes, the most desirable scenarios are thus the ones where the country is targeted in a high-hostility MID, or where the incumbent initiates a low-hostility MID. As we discuss in the conclusion, the findings of this project have implications for the understanding of the relationship between international conflict, partisan attachments, and vote choice—and for the well-known diversionary and rally arguments.

Incumbent Performance, Partisan Attachments, and Incumbent Voting

The idea that individuals retrospectively evaluate the incumbent's performance when making their vote decisions dates back to the scholarship of Key (1966, 61), who saw the electorate as an

"appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions." While there is a general consensus on the importance of the economy, in particular, to the vote (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007), there is reason to believe that militarized international conflicts also play a potent role in determining incumbent support. Militarized conflict is ostensibly an important political event, capturing the attention of the populace. Indeed, Aldrich et al. (1989) demonstrate that Americans care about foreign issues and take them into account when deciding their vote choices, and Berinsky (2009, chp. 8) finds that, when determining how to vote, the American public evaluates presidents vis-à-vis their handling of foreign wars. Furthermore, militarized disputes are thought to be able to affect people's emotions by creating in-group/out-group dynamics and a sense of nationalism (see Coser 1956). Along these lines, Williams and Brulé (2014) show that, in predicting the incumbent parties' aggregate vote shares, the forecasting power of traditional economic models of voting breaks down when countries are involved in militarized international disputes.

Further, psychological factors can play a large role in a voter's decision calculus. Individuals tend to attribute positive outcomes to their in-group and negative outcomes to out-groups (Taylor and Doria 1981). For example, individuals' subjective evaluations of the economy tend to be rosier when an incumbent from "their" party holds office (e.g. Bartels 2002; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1987; Evans and Andersen 2006; Rudolph 2006), and these partisan rationalizations go on to influence vote decisions (Marsh and Tilley 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

The partisan screen also extends to non-economic events. For example, blame assignment for responses to natural disasters (e.g. Malhotra and Kuo 2008) or governmental gridlock (e.g. Lyons and Jaeger 2014) is contingent upon partisan orientations. Partisanship can shape perceptions of foreign policy events, as well. Gaines et al. (2007) find that individuals' interpretations of the US-led war in Iraq were colored by their partisan orientations, Jacobson (2007) discusses how perceptions of George W. Bush's handling of foreign events were conditioned by party attachments, and

Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) find that strong partisans are more likely to punish opposite-party presidents for perceived foreign policy blunders. Outside of the US, Kriner and Wilson (2016) find that public opinion about Britain's involvement in the war in Afghanistan was shaped by partisan orientations.

To us, the above research highlights both the potential importance of militarized conflicts to voters' decision calculi and the need to go beyond extant macro-level studies (see below) to examine voters' decisions at the individual level. Accordingly, we focus below on whether militarized conflict has the ability to sway voters' decisions and whether these decisions are driven by partisan (in)congruence between the voter and the incumbent.

Militarized Conflict and Incumbents' Political Fortunes

Understanding how individual voters respond to foreign policy issues is complicated by a relative dearth of studies that examine this relationship empirically. Traditional American and comparative politics studies of voting tend to focus on domestic issues. Meanwhile, international relations scholarship often posits that leaders will benefit electorally from conducting foreign policy in ways that the public approves of (e.g. defending the country from foreign threats, complying with treaties). Empirical evaluations of such arguments are, however, seldom conducted. Studies of so-called rally around the flag effects and leader tenure come closest to evaluating the repercussions of foreign behavior for leaders. Here we provide an overview of this line of research.

Sociological studies of group dynamics long ago pointed out that groups become more cohesive in response to conflict with outsiders (Coser 1956; Simmel 1898). Such a confrontation causes a feeling of threat that solidifies bonds in the in-group and differentiates it from the out-group. This dynamic is at the heart of the rally effect, where members of the in-group will unite behind their leader—ostensibly to better help protect the group from the threatening outsiders. The

leader thus benefits from increased voter loyalty and support (see Russett 1990). Based on this logic, for decades now several dozens of studies—particularly in the diversionary scholarship tradition—have argued that militarized confrontations with foreign powers cause rally around the flag effects, thereby boosting incumbent support.[1] The problem, however, is that the diversionary school of thought has focused so much on the causes of diversionary behavior (i.e. the circumstances under which a leader may want to initiate a conflict) that the actual *effects* of foreign confrontations on leader support have seldom been examined empirically.

Studies examining US presidential popularity reveal that rallies tend to be short-lived and have small—or even uncertain—effects (e.g. Lian and Oneal 1993; Mueller 1973; Russett 1990). Cross-national examinations, meanwhile, overwhelmingly focus on the executive's ability to remain in office. Militarized confrontations with other countries are thought by some scholars not to be helpful to the leader's ability to retain office (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995). Miller and Elgün (2011), however, report that militarized interstate dispute initiation helps Latin American leaders shield themselves from removal through coups. Similarly, Boehmer (2007) finds that militarized interstate conflict reduces the likelihood a leader will lose power, and Colaresi (2004) suggests that domestic audiences prefer violent conflict with a rival state to peace, even if the state suffers losses in the conflict. An exception to the studies of office retention is found in Williams, Brulé, and Koch's (2010) work on incumbent vote shares in nine advanced democracies. These authors report that foreign uses of force either have no effect or reduce the incumbent's vote share in subsequent elections. As we note below, we suspect that inferences derived in extant cross-

[1] See, for example, DeRouen Jr. (1995); DeRouen Jr. (2000); James and Oneal (1991); Levy (1998); Meernik (2004); Oneal and Tir (2006); Pickering and Kisangani (2005).

national studies may well mask theoretically-important individual-level effects, warranting a re-examination of the issue of incumbent support in the wake of militarized foreign confrontations.

Theoretical Logic and Expectations

Micro-level models of incumbent support in the comparative politics tradition often fail to explain a substantial portion of the variance in vote choice. While much of this unexplained variance is likely due to the randomness inherent to human behavior, a notable portion of the missing explanation is likely due to the ubiquitous omission of foreign affairs variables from these models. Further, while some international relations research considers how foreign events shape the incumbent's political fortunes, this work generally fails to consider domestic- and voter-level factors. Inferences about how disputes shape a leader's standing with the members of public—and whether individuals react differently to the disputes based on their own predispositions—can thus at best be deduced indirectly from extant research. Here we theorize how, at the individual level, militarized disputes may affect incumbent vote support across countries.

According to the rally around the flag argument, involvement in a militarized confrontation with another country stirs an effect that increases the leader's popularity ratings (DeRouen Jr. 1995; Levy 1998; MacKuen 1983; Morgan and Bickers 1992; Mueller 1973; Russett 1990). The mechanism of this logic is rooted in the in-group, out-group premise (Coser 1956; Simmel 1898), in that exposure to foreign threat is thought to unify a society (i.e. transform it into the in-group) by painting the foreign foe as the out-group. Members of the society are expected to leave their differences behind in face of the foreign threat, close the ranks, and rally behind the leader. The foreign threat thus becomes more important than domestic issues that may be divisive (e.g. the leader's partisan orientation) and serves as a focal point around which the society unifies behind its leader. This, in turn, helps boost the leader's popularity. And, the expectation is that the rally feeling

would persist beyond being just a brief bump in poll numbers, in that the thankful electorate will also reward the leader in the voting booth at election time for providing leadership when the country's security was compromised due to the foreign threat.

While the above logic may appear straightforward, there are at least two important further considerations. First, we consider whether the leader's country was the one that actually initiated the attack, as opposed to being targeted. In the Coser-type (1956) logic, the threat to the in-group motivates fear of the out-group. Following this logic suggests that a foreign attack on the country provides an impetus for people to rally behind the leader to successfully defend the country from the foreign foe with a united front. This in turn means that the leader will benefit electorally precisely when the country is a target of foreign attacks. Additionally, militarized dispute involvement may be perceived by voters as more legitimate when the country is attacked rather than when it attacks others. Being targeted should therefore allay the rather common skepticism that the leader is looking for a foreign adventure in order to help his/her prospects at the polls.

The diversionary literature, however, focuses instead on militarized conflict *initiation* as a way for an unpopular leader to help his/her political fortunes (see e.g. Oneal and Tir 2006). Such a leader will attempt to simulate the feeling of threat by portraying a foreign state as being an acute danger to the homeland. That is, the leader is expected to provide a persuasive pretext for initiating the attack that makes it look like a legitimate preemptive strike against a looming threat. In fact, by attacking first, the leader is thought to show foresight, competence in seizing the first mover advantage, and strong leadership ability in proactively defending the country and its interests. And, once the attack is initiated, the foe may well fight back, further validating the narrative that the foe is a real threat to the country. So the expectation is that militarized dispute initiation should be able to prompt rally effects, increasing an individual's chances of voting for the incumbent and doing so regardless of whether the individual is a partisan ally or not.

While the origins of diversionary behavior are beyond the scope of our study, we focus here on examining whether the assumption of an electoral boost from militarized conflict initiation, which underlies the diversionary argument, is accurate. This oft-made assumption has seldom been examined empirically, and there is a similar lack of inquiry into the electoral consequences of being targeted in a militarized dispute. Our consideration of these issues therefore adds notable value to the literature. This discussion leads to our first two hypotheses.

H1: Voters are more likely to select the incumbent when their country initiated a recent MID than when it did not.

H2: Voters are more likely to select the incumbent when their country was targeted in a recent MID than when it was not.

A second consideration is that involvement in a foreign militarized dispute may not have universal appeal. Many voters evaluate their leaders through a partisan "screen," implying that a dispute could have differing ramifications depending on whether or not one belongs to the same political party as the incumbent. We therefore investigate whether individuals react differently to militarized dispute participation based on their partisan (in)congruence with the incumbent. While the incumbent's copartisans can be expected to be more supportive of his/her actions, a more critical issue is whether a militarized confrontation with another country can make voters who do not identify with the party of the incumbent rally behind him/her. If the rally argument is accurate, militarized confrontations should be able to outweigh domestic divisions that cause some people not to support the leader.

Yet, again, these society-unifying effects are not to be taken for granted, as partisan orientations have been shown to condition individuals' perceptions of foreign events and their attributions of blame and reward for the handling of such events (e.g. Gaines et al. 2007; Jacobson 2007; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). Those who do not share the incumbent's partisanship may

be especially skeptical about whether the leader is involving the country in the dispute not out of national security concerns (i.e. for the benefit of the country), but instead simply to garner extra votes (i.e. for selfish motivations). Accusations that a leader's self-interest lies behind a militarized conflict are quite common; and, those without an attachment to the incumbent's party constitute a naturally skeptical audience that may well launch or be persuaded by such accusations. Further, even if a dispute is not suspected to have selfish motivations, non-copartisans may simply decline to alter their likely negative orientations toward the incumbent as events unfold. And finally, the incumbent's non-copartisans constitute by far the largest subset of voters,[2] making the understanding of their reactions to militarized conflict particularly important.

Stated from the perspective of the rally argument, and again considering the issue of MID initiation versus targeting, we put forth Hypotheses 3 and 4 below. Because non-copartisans constitute the more interesting group of voters in terms of evaluating our arguments, the hypotheses focus on them. Copartisans, meanwhile, are already expected to be on the incumbent's side, though our empirical analysis will also help reveal whether they indeed remain on the incumbent's "team" in the wake of MIDs.

H3: Non-copartisan voters are more likely to select the incumbent when their country initiated a recent MID than when it did not.

H4: Non-copartisan voters are more likely to select the incumbent when their country was targeted in a recent MID than when it was not.

Variable Measurement and Method of Analysis

[2] In our sample, about 80% of voters do not identify with the incumbent's party.

Our outcome variable, incumbent voting, is conceptualized at the individual level. To measure it, we gather data across countries from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2013) surveys, which were designed to study how variation in cross-country contextual factors affects political behavior and attitudes. The CSES questionnaire is embedded in national post-election surveys, producing a cross-nationally comparable set of survey questions. After combining the CSES with the country-level indicators, our sample spans 97 elections from 42 countries over the years 1996-2011. Countries included span nearly all advanced democracies; with the exceptions of Latvia and Luxembourg, the sample includes all OECD countries. The sample also includes Russia and developing democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America, such as Brazil, Bulgaria, Romania, and Uruguay.

Incumbent voting is measured dichotomously, with voters who reported selecting the incumbent party coded as 1 and those who did not coded as 0. In presidential systems, we consider the incumbent party to be that of the president. In parliamentary systems, we take the incumbent party to be that of the prime minister, which is known to be held most accountable for government performance (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Fisher and Hobolt 2010; Söderlund 2016; Wilkin, Haller, and Norpoth 1997; Williams, Stegmaier, and Debus forthcoming).[3] About 33% of voters in the sample selected the incumbent party.

As for our key independent variables, we identify high-profile activities by the government that involve military force by relying on the well-known Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data set (Palmer et al. 2015). The MID project records dispute participant countries, dispute timing, and

[3] That is, we treat voting for a junior coalition partner the same as voting for the opposition. We do not count a vote for a junior coalition partner as a vote for the party of the incumbent prime minister, as he/she is almost always seen as the key player in decisions regarding militarized disputes.

provides information identifying dispute initiators and targets.[4] We create two dichotomous dummy variables that record whether or not a state initiated or was targeted in a MID in the one-year period preceding the election. Both are coded 1 if yes and 0 otherwise. In 29 out of the 97 elections in our sample, the country initiated and/or was targeted in a MID in the year prior.

At the individual level, our hypotheses also seek to evaluate whether partisan orientations condition potential rally effects. If a voter reports identifying with the incumbent party, we assign a 1. If the voter does not identify with the incumbent party, we assign a 0.[5]

To help identify the effects of our key independent variables, we introduce a slate of controls. First, due to their established importance as forerunners of incumbent voting in the economic voting literature (e.g. Powell and Whitten 1993; Wilkin et al. 1997) and the possible relationship between economic conditions and militarized conflict, we use unemployment and economic growth to account for economic conditions at the election level. We measure unemployment as the percentage of the workforce seeking a job in the year of the election, and economic growth is measured as the percentage change in the size of the economy in the year of the election relative to the preceding year. Data are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.[6] Further, because democratic development is correlated with leader survival (e.g.

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[4] MIDs are "united historical cases in which the threat, display or use of military force […] by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state" (Palmer et al. 2015). The initiator of a dispute is the state that takes the first militarized action.

[5] The CSES asks: "Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?" If the answer is yes, the respondent is asked to identify this party.

[6] data.worldbank.org

Treisman 2015) and may relate to conflict proneness, we control for it with the Polity IV Index.[7] The index ranges from -10 to 10, with higher values indicating consolidated democracy.

Our individual-level data structure is tiered, with voters clustered within 97 elections in 42 countries. We estimate multilevel models with election-level random effects, which account for individual (level 1) clustering within election country-years (level 2). We allow the intercept and the effect of the individual-level independent variable, copartisanship with the incumbent, to vary randomly across country-years. Following Luke (2004), our basic[8] model setup is as follows:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_j + \delta_j x_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij},$$

where $\alpha_j = \gamma_0 + \mathbf{z}_j\psi + \zeta_{0j}$, and

$$\delta_j = \gamma_1 + \zeta_{1j}.$$

Individuals' (i) values on the dependent variable in a given election (j) are captured with y_{ij}. The incumbent copartisanship variable is captured with x_{ij}. The country-year-level covariates are contained in $\mathbf{z}_j$, and the vector ψ contains their associated coefficients. The γ_0 and γ_1 terms capture the mean value of the dependent variable and the mean slope on the incumbent copartisanship variable, respectively (controlling for the country-year-level covariates). The ζ_{0j} term captures country-year-level random variation in the intercept, α_j, and the ζ_{1j} term captures country-year-level random variation in the slope on incumbent copartisanship, δ_j.

The random error for each individual is represented with the ε_{ij} term. As our outcome variable, incumbent voting, is measured dichotomously, we use a binary logistic link function to map from the covariates to the outcomes. Thus, the individual-level error, which follows directly from

[7] systemicpeace.org

[8] This system of equations becomes more complex when we add cross-level interactions.

the success probability of the dependent variable, is assumed to be distributed logistically with var(ε) = $\pi^2/3$.

Results

We first explore whether being the initiator or target of a MID affects overall support for the incumbent among voters. In Model 1 of Table 1, the coefficient on the MID Initiator variable is positive, while the coefficient on the MID Target variable is negative. Both coefficients are statistically different from zero ($p < .01$, two-sided). These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1 but work against Hypothesis 2. While being targeted can erode voter support for the incumbent, leaders benefit from the initiation of a MID. This evidences in favor of a key, but seldom examined empirically, argument from the diversionary literature—that the leader can expect a boost in voter support when his/her country is the initiator of militarized conflicts with other states (e.g. James 1987; Levy 1998; Mitchell and Thies 2011; Oneal and Tir 2006; Russett 1990).

(Table 1 about here)

We further explore whether the effects of initiation and targeting on incumbent voting are conditioned by partisan affiliation. According to Hypotheses 3 and 4, MIDs should be able to bring the incumbent's non-copartisan voters to his/her side. To test this, we interact the MID Initiator and MID Target variables with the variable capturing a voter's partisan (in)congruence with the incumbent in Model 2 of Table 1. The coefficients on the interaction between copartisanship with the incumbent and MID variables are statistically significant, which suggests that partisan (in)congruency conditions the relationship between MID initiation and targeting and incumbent voting.

Figure 1 explores these findings in terms of predicted probabilities.[9, 10] The patterns displayed in the figure indicate that initiating a MID has no statistically discernable effect on incumbent voting among those who identify with the incumbent party. While this may be disappointing to proponents of the diversionary argument, one could argue that these voters are already on the incumbent's "team" and thus have less opportunity to increase their already-high probability of voting for him/her. Meanwhile, among those individuals who do *not* identify with the governing party, an initiated MID boosts the probability of voting for the incumbent by about six percentage points ($p < .01$, two-sided).[11] MID initiation can thus help the incumbent "persuade" some non-copartisans to his/her side. As an added bonus for the incumbent, this boost does not come at the expense of alienating partisan allies. Seen in the light of effects concerning voters' partisan predispositions, MID initiation can be seen as helpful to the incumbent. This evidence supports Hypothesis H3.

(Figure 1 about here)

In terms of voter support, the news for the incumbent is decidedly negative when the country is targeted militarily by another state. As shown in the bottom panel of Figure 1, being targeted in a MID has a significant ($p < .01$, two-sided), negative effect of roughly three percentage

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[9] We calculate all predicted probabilities with the covariates held at their means.

[10] The relative effects displayed in the figures do not always align precisely with those discernable from the coefficient estimates because the relative linear impact of a given variable on the *latent propensity* to vote for the incumbent may differ from the relative nonlinear impact of a given variable on the *probability* of voting for the incumbent (see Berry, DeMeritt, and Esarey 2010).

[11] The effects of MID initiation on the probability of voting for the incumbent across his/her copartisans and non-copartisans are statistically different from one another ($p < .01$, two-sided).

points on the probability of selecting the incumbent among voters who identify with his/her party. And for those voters who do not identify with the incumbent's party, being targeted in a MID leads to a smaller, roughly one percentage point decrease ($p < .01$, two-sided) in the probability of voting for the incumbent.[12] It thus appears that voters, regardless of partisan (in)congruence with the incumbent, blame the incumbent for failing to protect the country from being targeted in a militarized dispute. This militates against Hypothesis 4 and, more broadly the rally argument, as MID targeting, ironically, seems to unite the voters *against* the incumbent.[13]

A Second Look: MID Hostility Level

A potential critique of our findings thus far is that they are based on all militarized disputes. Some of these disputes may be relatively minor and thus potentially overshadowed by other news headlines. In turn, voter reactions to such events may be weak and inconsistent. Higher hostility events, in contrast, would arguably have higher profiles and imply higher stakes; this would make them be more noticeable and more likely to evoke feelings of threat on which the rally argument is based. In the below analysis we therefore probe what kind of voter reactions higher hostility MIDs elicit. This

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[12] The effects of MID targeting on the probability of voting for the incumbent across his/her copartisans and non-copartisans are statistically different from one another ($p < .05$, two-sided).

[13] The effects of prominent variables known to affect incumbent voting, unemployment and economic growth (e.g. Powell and Whitten 1993; Wilkin et al. 1997), can be assessed relative the effects of MIDs. There is about a one percentage point decrease in the probability of voting for the incumbent associated with a standard deviation increase in the unemployment rate and about a three percentage point increase in the probability of voting for the incumbent associated with a standard deviation increase in the economic growth rate.

should also help allay concerns that the findings presented so far are somehow accidental or spurious—that is, based on events that few voters actually notice.[14]

To test whether the hostility level further conditions partisanship-specific effects of MID initiation and targeting on incumbent voting, we interact a variable capturing the hostility level with MID initiation and targeting, as well as the dummy variable for copartisanship with the incumbent. We code the hostility level as 1 (high) if the MID was a war or involved the actual use of military force and 0 (low) if it falls below this threshold (e.g. force was merely threatened). We include the resulting three-way interactions (and all of their component parts) as regressors. Numerical results of the model are shown in Table 2; and, in Figure 2, we depict changes in the predicted probability of voting for the incumbent according to the hostility of the MID, initiation, targeting, and partisanship.

(Table 2 about here)

(Figure 2 about here)

While the findings for low-hostility MIDs closely resemble those reported in Figure 1, the patterns shown in Figure 2 make it clear that high-hostility MIDs indeed produce unique effects. With regard to high-hostility MID initiation, the incumbent's copartisans are even more likely to vote for him/her, increasing their support by just under four percentage points ($p < .05$, two-sided). But this comes at the expense of votes among non-copartisans: a non-copartisan voter is about three percentage points less likely to vote for the incumbent ($p < .01$, two sided). These findings indicate that, far from eliciting rallies, high-hostility military activities launched by the incumbent may be

[14] Given that most of the above analyses produce significant findings, examining a mixture of low and high profile confrontations is not necessarily problematic in terms of reporting false positive findings; the mix would systematically bias the findings toward insignificance.

perceived as unnecessary foreign adventures by non-copartisans. This militates both against Hypothesis 3 and the diversionary argument: the incumbent cannot bring non-copartisan voters to his/her side by initiating high-hostility MIDs.

Turning to being targeted in a high-hostility MID, for those who do not identify with the incumbent's party, such confrontations increases the probability of voting for him/her by about five percentage points ($p < .01$, two-sided). Moreover, even copartisan support is further strengthened; such a voter becomes nearly six percentage points more likely to vote for the incumbent ($p < .01$, two-sided). This evidence, which favors Hypothesis 4, is good news for the incumbent, and, more broadly, the rally argument. Being targeted in a high-hostility MID does seem to elicit a rally effect, where the voters start to close ranks behind the incumbent and increase their probability of voting for him/her regardless of partisanship issues.

To probe the robustness of our findings, we estimated several models using different specifications and measurement strategies. Notably, as shown in the online appendix, changing the measurement of our key independent variables, MID initiation and targeting and copartisanship, does not substantively alter our key results. Regarding MIDs, our key results are robust to reducing the length of the one-year pre-election time window we employ here. Regarding partisanship, they are robust to separating out incumbent copartisans, non-incumbent partisans, and non-partisans, rather than grouping together non-incumbent partisans and non-partisans. Our key results are also largely insensitive to the inclusion of a control for left-right ideological distance from the

incumbent,[15] which is a potential source of spuriousness, and specifications that take into account electoral abstention.

Comparing the effects of being targeted in low- versus high-hostility MID suggests that the rally logic, which works via the increased senses of fear and nationalism in the face of a threat, is only activated in high-hostility scenarios. Low-hostility scenarios, in contrast, seem to operate more according to the "normal" effects of partisanship, where targeting may well be interpreted by non-copartisans as a failure of leadership in protecting the country and its interests. While inviting a foreign attack may of course be outside the incumbent's full control, the leader may have some maneuvering room to create on-demand diversionary rally effects by initiating MIDs, provided that they remain at the low level of hostility; this increases non-copartisan support in the voting booth. The leader can expect the opposite, punishing effect among non-copartisans, however, should the initiated MID turn into a high-hostility affair. Ominously, these dynamics follow the diversionary logic closely, in that the Machiavellian-type advice to the leader is to start a smaller, manageable conflict that can cause a distraction—without the liability of provoking a larger conflict in which the voters would turn against the leader due to high material costs, casualties, and questions about whether the conflict was truly necessary.

Conclusion

The findings presented here have implications not only for the understanding of the relationship between international conflict, partisan attachments, and vote choice, but also for the above-noted

[15] In line with previous work (e.g. Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Golder and Stramski 2010), we measured each incumbent party's placement by averaging the left-right values given to each party by high-information respondents: those with a college education.

diversionary and rally arguments. Starting with the rally argument, we find that the incumbent gains at the voting booth when his/her country is a target of high-hostility militarized conflict, regardless of whether the voter identifies with the incumbent's party. Indeed, by bringing non-copartisans' voting behavior closer in line with that of the incumbent's copartisans, being targeted in a high-hostility MIDs helps unify the society around the incumbent, as the rally argument suggests. Being targeted in low-hostility MIDs, however, does not have such effects, leading instead to a decrease in the likelihood of voting for the incumbent among both non-copartisans and copartisans. Whether this finding goes fully against the rally argument is somewhat debatable; proponents of the argument would likely state that low-hostility MIDs simply fail to stimulate the anticipated senses of fear and nationalism that are needed to activate the rally dynamics.

In regard to the diversionary argument, which focuses more on conflict initiation rather than being targeted in a militarized dispute, we uncover some evidence that MID initiation can be helpful to the incumbent. While this finding does not hold universally across the scenarios we examine, our results nevertheless suggest that low-hostility MID initiation is perceived positively by voters who do not identify with the incumbent's party; partisan allies, meanwhile do not alter their presumably already high probability of voting for the incumbent. This leads to the uncomfortable implication that unpopular leaders may be tempted to initiate low-hostility militarized disputes in order to help themselves politically, much like the diversionary literature warns. Nevertheless, the incumbent does not have a free reign in initiating MIDs; non-copartisan voters are likely to punish him/her for starting high-hostility MIDs. So, a diversion-minded leader has to be careful to initiate only such conflicts that would indeed remain at lower levels of hostility. In sum, that non-copartisans increase their support for the leader in the wake of low-intensity MID initiation or high-intensity targeting suggests genuine rally effects – prompted, in the former case, by the leader's diversionary behavior or, in the latter case, by an existential threat.

The patterns we uncover also have novel implications for the partisanship literature. Because partisan attachments are stable (e.g. Bartels et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 1960; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Schickler and Green 1997), their distribution in the public is unlikely to vary with the changing economic fortunes of the country and other short-term factors. This suggests that incumbents have a relatively constant reservoir of partisan support. Consistent with this, our findings suggest that the incumbent's copartisan voters either remain loyal or intensify their already high levels of support in most scenarios we examine. Indeed, only in the case of a country being targeted in a low hostility conflict do we observe mild erosion in copartisan support—and certainly no wholesale abandonment of the incumbent. Overall, this suggests that the incumbent can generally count on copartisans' support when it comes to matters of foreign policy.

Finally, our findings suggest that future comparative politics scholarship on incumbent support would benefit from paying closer attention to international conflict. While country-level, cross-national analyses of the incumbent's ability to retain office or of aggregate-level vote shares have occasionally incorporated foreign affairs variables, cross-national individual-level studies routinely neglect to consider how interstate conflict shapes political behavior. Here, we find notable effects of involvement in foreign conflict on individual-level incumbent voting, particularly among the most common type of voters, those not sharing partisan affiliation with the incumbent. This suggests that the omission of foreign affairs variables from models of incumbent support will decrease their predictive power and potentially bias the estimated impact of variables of interest.

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Table 1: MID Initiation and Targeting, Incumbent Voting, and Partisan Identification with the Incumbent

	Model 1	Model 2
Individual Level		
Partisan Identification with Incumbent	3.578 *	3.649 *
	(0.029)	(0.039)
Election Level		
MID Initiator	0.339 *	0.357 *
	(0.028)	(0.027)
MID Target	-0.126 *	-0.090 *
	(0.024)	(0.026)
Unemployment	-0.012 *	-0.013 *
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Economic Growth	0.067 *	0.066 *
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Democratic Development	0.050 *	0.050 *
	(0.009)	(0.009)
Interactions		
MID Initiator ×		-0.241 *
Partisan Identification w/ Incumbent		(0.076)
MID Target ×		-0.202 *
Partisan Identification w/ Incumbent		(0.068)
constant	-2.078 *	-2.086 *
	(0.090)	(0.091)
Number of individuals	113366	113366
Number of elections	97	97
var(ζ_0)	0.215	0.216
var(ζ_1)	0.419	0.444
Pr>χ^2	<0.001	<0.001

Note: Multilevel logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*p<.05 (two-sided)

Table 2: MID Initiation and Targeting, Incumbent Voting, Partisan Identification with the Incumbent, and MID Hostility

	Model 3	
Individual Level		
Partisan Identification with Incumbent	3.766	*
	(0.032)	
Election Level		
MID Initiator	0.262	*
	(0.033)	
MID Target	-0.092	*
	(0.027)	
Unemployment	-0.014	*
	(0.002)	
Economic Growth	0.068	*
	(0.003)	
Democratic Development	0.048	*
	(0.009)	
MID Hostility Level	-0.091	*
	(0.045)	
Interactions		
MID Initiator × Partisan Identification	-0.140	
w/ Incumbent	(0.090)	
MID Target × Partisan Identification	-0.275	*
w/ Incumbent	(0.069)	
MID Initiator ×	-0.465	*
Hostility	(0.065)	
MID Target ×	0.424	*
Hostility Level	(0.068)	
Partisan Identification	-0.142	
w/ Incumbent × Hostility Level	(0.120)	
MID Initiator × Partisan Identification	0.753	*
w/ Incumbent × Hostility Level	(0.198)	
MID Target × Partisan Identification	0.792	*
w/ Incumbent × Hostility Level	(0.224)	
constant	-2.074	*
	(0.089)	
Number of individuals	113366	
Number of elections	97	
var(ζ_0)	0.221	
var(ζ_1)	0.480	
Pr>χ^2	<0.001	

Note: Multilevel logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. $^*p<.05$ (two-sided).

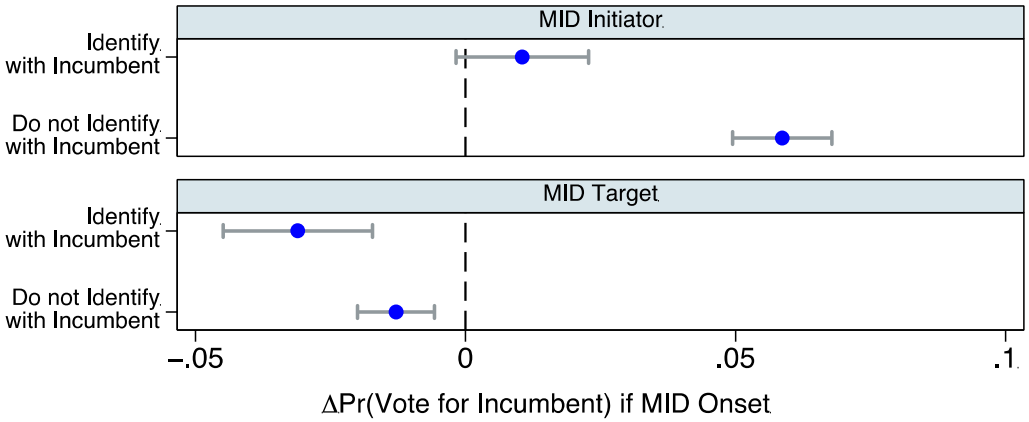

Figure 1: MID Initiation and Targeting, Incumbent Voting, and Partisan Identification with the Incumbent

Note: Created from the results of Model 2. Horizontal brackets indicate 95% confidence intervals.

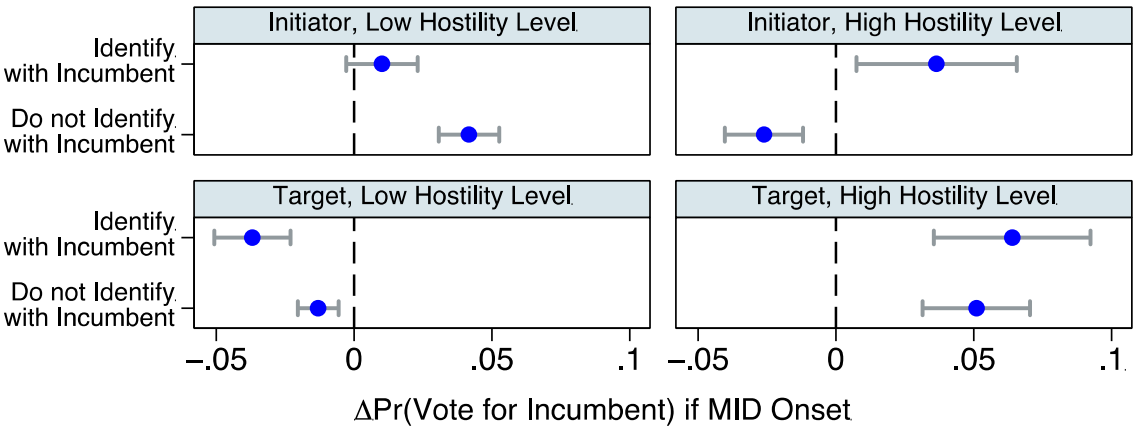

Figure 2: MID Initiation and Targeting, Incumbent Voting, Partisan Identification with the Incumbent, and MID Hostility

Note: Created from the results of Model 3. Horizontal brackets indicate 95% confidence intervals.