

The Sources of Presidential Foreign Policy Decision Making: Executive Experience and Militarized Interstate Conflicts

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Abstract

Do leader experiences prior to becoming head of government influence their foreign policy decision-making? In this paper, we assess overall conflict onset, as well as targeting and initiation in the U.S. context and evaluate the extent to which previous executive experience of U.S. presidents conditions the use of military force, from 1918-2001. Our argument and evidence refines recent research by Bak and Palmer (2010). While Bak and Palmer (2010) maintain that leader experience, measured as age and tenure in office, influences the likelihood of becoming a target of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), we show that a president's political experiences prior to obtaining office represent a better measure of experience. We offer evidence in showing that prior executive experience of US presidents strongly reduces the probability of MID onset, targeting and initiation. Furthermore, the higher the level of a president's executive experience (no experience, state, federal) the less likely the United States will be a target, initiate, or be involved in MIDs.

Introduction

Age and experience frequently shape the impressions voters have of aspiring leaders. Ronald Reagan, for example, captured this concern during a debate with Democratic opponent Walter Mondale in 1984. Reagan said, "I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." (De Groote, 2011) Opponents of John F. Kennedy similarly suggested that his inexperience allowed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to control their first meeting in Vienna in 1961, embarrassing the new president on the world stage. Khrushchev's later risky attempt to place medium and intermediate range nuclear tipped missiles in Cuba was, according to some, encouraged by Khrushchev's belief in Kennedy's diffidence. More recently, Vice-Presidential candidate Joe Biden opined that foreign leaders would confront Barack Obama early in his tenure to assess his resolve (Bak and Palmer, 2010). These anecdotes suggest that age and experience may influence leader decision-making. Indeed, we theorize that leaders who come to their country's highest political office with prior executive experience will be less likely to engage in militarized conflict. Furthermore, the higher the level of leader's executive experience (no experience, state, federal) the less likely he is to be targeted, initiate, or get involved in militarized interstate conflicts. We consider that leaders with state executive experience are those whose top executive position was at the state level (governors or lieutenant governors); leaders with federal executive experience are those who served as vice presidents, cabinet members, etc., prior to becoming presidents. While Bak and Palmer (2010) examined the targeting of leaders, we assess overall conflict onset, as well as targeting and initiation in the U.S. context and assess the extent to which previous executive experience conditions the use of military force.

This project builds on current research focusing on individual leaders (Barber, 2009; Gelpi and Feaver, 2002; Neustadt, 1990; Hermann, 1980). For too long research on international politics has concentrated on structural factors, such as power, contiguity, and regime type. Such models, however, tend to ignore micro-level influences on foreign policy choices. Even analyses that examine domestic-political conditions rarely account for the characteristics or beliefs of decision-makers (Kaarbo, 2008; Hermann and Kegley, 1995). But if leader experiences translate into perceptions or beliefs about the world they live in, or the efficacy of using military force, then such factors may help explain the observed variance in the use of armed force (Sprout and Sprout, 1965; Hudson, 2005).

Most studies that examine the relationship between leader experience and military conflict (Bak and Palmer, 2010; Wolford, 2007; Horowitz, McDermott and Stam, 2005; Gelpi and Grieco, 2001) use leader age and tenure in office as proxies for experience. Unlike these studies, we look at a president's political experiences prior to obtaining the presidency. We differentiate between past executive and legislative experiences because they shape different abilities and thus produce different types of leaders (Hermann, 2003; Hermann, 1980). In this paper, we investigate the role played by the president's past executive experience in determining foreign policy behavior, leaving other experiences for future work. We argue that previous executive experience will produce leaders that

signal control, confidence, and command abilities in decision-making, enabling presidents to avoid militarized disputes. Our empirical results indicate that leaders with executive experience are less likely to get involved in militarized interstate conflicts than those without executive experience. Further, although executive experience reduces the likelihood of both MID targeting and initiation, the effect appears to be considerably stronger for the targeting of US leaders. Our results also show executive experience explaining more of the variance in MID involvement as compared to other measures such as leader age and tenure.

Leader Experience and Foreign Policy Decision-Making

The role of the individual in the study of countries' foreign policy behavior was not part of mainstream post-World War II international relations scholarship. However, more recent studies, especially in the area of political psychology, offer multiple lines of inquiry and theorizing which concentrate on the individual decision maker. For example, scholars have looked at the role of emotions and reason (McDermott, 2004, Schwartz, 2004), personality traits (Kowert, 1996), perception and cognition (Jervis, 1976), and styles of leadership (Keller and Yang, 2008; Kaarbo, 1997) in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Why might experience matter? Holsti (1979, 1990) insists that inexperienced leaders may be more susceptible to defective and/or inefficient decision making. In foreign policy making, it is important to emphasize that leader experience is a multilayered concept which encompasses, among others, familiarity with foreign policy issues, leadership skills, and reasoning abilities. McDermott (2004) also suggests inexperienced leaders may make poor foreign policy choices. First, inexperienced leaders may overlook data which are available to them, by depending on sources of information that they have used successfully in the past. Indeed, inexperienced leaders may not receive complete information because they select advisors who share similar views. Second, inexperienced leaders often fail to readjust their goals when the international security environment changes. For example, the underlying objectives of the U.S. intervention in North Vietnam in the 1960s and the price the U.S. was willing to pay for this intervention seem to have not been thoroughly discussed by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (McDermott, 2004).

Inexperienced leaders are also more likely to miscalculate the costs and the risks of a preferred course of action. Once the initial strategy or course of action has been proven wrong or ineffective, inexperienced leaders maintain the course, thus aggravating the situation even more. President Carter's decision to go ahead with the hostage rescue mission in Iran, in spite of the CIA estimates of minimum chances of success, illustrates this problem. Further, inexperienced leaders often fail to consider options previously rejected when circumstances change (McDermott, 2004). A new strategic environment may require the reconsideration of all possible courses of action, but inexperienced leaders persist with the initial strategy without reevaluating its appropriateness.

Inexperienced leaders additionally may fall into the trap of not collecting enough information before making a particular decision (March and Simon, 1958). The search for alternative courses of action stops when the first acceptable one is reached. Conversely, inexperienced leaders may keep looking for information beyond the point where it is worth the cost, in order to properly justify a particular choice. Finally, inexperienced leaders are likely to selectively process information. That is, they are inclined to disregard information which contradicts their preexisting beliefs and attitudes and consider information which supports those prior beliefs (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Such leaders tend to examine less critically the information that reinforces their prior beliefs and attitudes. When information is both confirming and contradicting their initial beliefs, there is a tendency to embrace the confirming evidence. Inexperienced leaders may fail to follow up on orders as well. Thus, they fail to work out the details of implementation and monitoring (McDermott 2004).

Leaders' lack of experience also affects the quality of their advisors and the competency and stability of management structures surrounding them (Neustadt, 1990). Discussing the particular case of new U.S. administrations, Potter (2007, 355) claims that:

“New U.S. administrations may not be as competent in their internal practices or as established in their relationship with the bureaucracy and legislature. In addition, the lag that accompanies the nomination and confirmation of political appointees leaves the bureaucracies without leadership and direction. No other major power democracy experiences such deep and frequent turnover in its foreign policy apparatus. These factors can limit the flow of critical information and short-circuit checks on imprudent decisions that would normally exist.”

In support of his argument, Potter cites Kennedy's handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion and concludes that inexperience and the lack of established decision-making structures within his administration were responsible for the fiasco. The ill-advised invasion is explained in particular by Kennedy's passive acceptance of the recommendations of the more experienced Allen Dulles and President Eisenhower and the hesitation of a minority group in Kennedy's inner circle to search for and suggest alternative options.

Diplomatic relationships between countries may become strained when there is a change in a country's leadership. An incoming leader lacks the accumulated foreign policy knowledge and personal relationships of the previous administration. In addition, it takes time for foreign leaders to learn how to deal with an incoming administration (Potter, 2007). During this time, miscommunication may occur, possibly raising tensions and even triggering violent conflict, between two or more countries. When Truman came into office in 1945, he was not aware of the tacit post-War understandings between Roosevelt and Stalin. As a consequence, Truman's toughness in relation to the Soviet Union had a negative impact on the relationship between the superpowers. As he became more experienced, Truman better understood Roosevelt's arrangements with Stalin and the Soviet Union's new strategic role (Larson, 1985).

Finally, inexperienced leaders may have a difficult time mastering their countries' complex foreign policy. They may fail to understand the multidimensional web of relationships of which their countries are a part and how their decisions may impact those relationships, in the both short and long term (Potter, 2007, 360). "Richard Nixon made significant and well-documented missteps in his initial handling of the Vietnam War that were the direct consequence of his inexperience and the inexperience of his national security team. Similarly, Jimmy Carter's policies on human rights and energy and Ronald Reagan's high rhetorical posture on terrorism were positions that undercut existing American foreign policy stances".

In conclusion, leader inexperience might affect the quality of foreign policy decisions. Indeed, inexperience may produce flawed management structures that fail to send the right signals to foreign leaders. Increased hostility and conflict could be the result.

Leader Experience and Armed Conflict

Are experienced leaders more or less likely than their inexperienced counterparts to involve their countries in militarized interstate disputes? Few studies examine systematically the relationship between leader experience and the likelihood of militarized conflict with other countries (Bak and Palmer, 2010; Horowitz and Stam, 2010; Potter, 2007; Horowitz et al., 2005; Gaubatz, 1991). However, most extant research uses leader age and tenure in office as proxies for experience.

Examining more than 100,000 inter-state dyads between 1875 and 2002, Horowitz et al. (2005) test empirically the relationship between leader age, regime type, and the likelihood of militarized dispute initiation and escalation. In general, the results show that, as the age of leaders increases, they become more likely to both initiate and escalate militarized disputes. Also, they find that increasing leader age in democracies raises the relative risk propensity for conflict initiation more than for personalist regimes. However, the impact of increasing leader age is most substantial in intermediate regimes. Depending on their age, leaders have different time horizons. "...relatively older leaders may also be more likely to prefer to start and escalate militarized disputes than younger leaders because the older leaders have shorter time horizons... [they] attempt to build their legacies faster and therefore be forced to accept riskier choices than they might otherwise" (Horowitz et al., 2002, 668).

In a more recent cross-national study, Bak and Palmer (2010, 257) examine Vice President Joe Biden's claim that "hostile foreign enemies would try to test a young and inexperienced leader's resolve and ability to handle a crisis as commander-in-chief". They find solid evidence that challenges Biden's conjecture. More precisely, the study finds that the impact of age of the target leader is significant but positively related to the likelihood of being a target. Essentially, the relative risk of being a target is on average 26% higher for a 70-year-old leader than a 40 year old one, when holding other variables constant at their mean. Bak and Palmer claim that leader age itself should not matter so much since foreign leaders "make threats against the target whom they believe is more likely to acquiesce to the demands or to make concessions rather than to resist the challenge" (259).

The relationship between tenure in office and military conflict has also been empirically examined. While Gaubatz (1991) finds that democratic states have tended to get into relatively more wars early in a presidential election cycle and fewer wars late in the cycle, Bak and Palmer (2005, 266) demonstrate that the impact of tenure on the likelihood of being targeted is conditional on age. "For example, a 40-year-old leader has on average about 41% higher risk of being a target after 6 years in office than after a month in office when holding other variables at their mean. On the other hand, a 75-year-old leader has on average about 6% lower relative risk of being a target after 6

years than after a month". That is, old leaders are more likely to be a target of militarized disputes early in their term rather than late.

Similarly, Potter (2007) finds that the likelihood of crisis or MID involvement decreases as the length of time a leader stays in office increases. Those results hold only for US presidents, whereas in the case of the leaders of Israel and United Kingdom, they do not. On a similar note, Gelpi and Grieco (2001, 794) theorize that:

"Domestic incentives may make resistance more costly than offering concessions for inexperienced leaders of both democratic and authoritarian states. Over time, however, resistance may become domestically less costly, causing experienced leaders to be more likely to prefer resistance. Anticipating this response, potential challengers may be more likely to target inexperienced leaders."

Their empirical findings support this argument and show that leaders of democratic countries are more likely to become targets of international crises as time in office increases.

Few studies operationalize experience with indicators other than age and tenure in office. However, Horowitz and Stam (2010) do consider the military experience of leaders and whether it is related to instances of armed conflict. Using the Archigos dataset developed by Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), they examine the behavior of heads of state worldwide from 1869-2004 and find that leaders with military service, but without combat experience, are the most likely to initiate MIDs. In addition, combat experience appears for the most part to be unrelated to whether or not leaders initiate or escalate disputes once they enter office.

The Influence of Executive Experience

As discussed above, extant research has largely assessed the role played by leader experience in militarized conflict by looking at age and tenure in office. However, capturing leader experiences prior to securing a head of government position seems more appropriate for several reasons. First, age does not necessarily reflect political experience. At most, age can speak of life experience, but not political experience per se. There are young leaders (presidents or prime ministers) who have significant executive or legislative experience. J.F. Kennedy became president when he was 43 years old. By that time, he had been a Congressman for 6 years and a Senator for eight and also served in the military as a lieutenant in the US Navy, from 1941 to 1945. Bill Clinton entered the White House at the age of 47, with significant executive experience, serving for 12 years as the governor of Arkansas. Put differently, age captures the amount of life experience a president has rather than the experiences which help him to be a good and effective commander in chief. Second, the use of tenure as an estimate of leader experience assumes that leaders mature and increase in experience while in office. In reality, foreign policy mistakes have been committed by leaders who were in office for a significant period of time. Jimmy Carter's major foreign policy failure, the approval of an ill-fated secret rescue mission during the Iran hostage crisis, took place in the last year of his presidency. By the same token, toward the end of his second term, Bill Clinton failed to act decisively against Al-Qaeda and its former head, Osama bin Laden and his associates, in spite of reports which showed that the terrorist organization presented a real threat to U.S. national security. Finally, more than two years into his first term, George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq without solid proof that the country was a real danger to the United States, complicated the strategic position of the United States in the world.

We claim that executive experience prior to obtaining the presidency is a determining factor in shaping a president's foreign policy behavior. As suggested by Neustadt (1990, 208), past experiences, similar to chief executive and commander in chief, are more beneficial to a president:

"The search [for a president] should encompass his previous employment. Since nothing he has done will be precisely like the presidency, nothing in his past can be conclusive. But, the nearer the comparisons the more suggestive. Hence, the relevance for him - and us - of previous experience, its prime utility, overshadowing acquired skills: it tests his temperament, with luck it strengthens his perspective on himself (and gives us some on him)".

To illustrate this argument, the mishandling of the Bay of Pigs invasion was attributed to Kennedy's lack of executive experience, more precisely, the weakness of his presidential management structures (Janis, 1982; Neustadt, 1990). Studies from the organizational sciences also support the assertion that past experiences relevant to the present activity increase job performance while others that are not related may have minor or negative effect

(Cormier and Hagman, 1987; Benor and Hobfoll, 1981). According to Dokko, Wilk, and Rothbard (2009, 52-54), “similar work activities are likely to provide opportunities to develop relevant knowledge and skill that can be applicable to performance in a new context” whereas unrelated work skills may be improperly employed and thus, job performance may be adversely affected.

Studies in political psychology (Hermann, 1980; Hermann, 2003; McDermott, 2004) bring further insight to the relationship between prior executive experience of a leader and foreign policy behavior. As suggested by Herman, different past experiences tend to produce leaders with different personalities and leadership styles, who will adopt similar stylistic behavior regardless of arena:

“Thus, political leaders' preferred methods of making personal decisions and interacting with others will carry over to their political behavior. Style is probably one of the first differences, for example, noted when heads of government change as the new leader tries to make himself comfortable in his role. One head of state may focus foreign policy-making within his own office, while his predecessor may have been willing to let the bureaucracy handle all but problems of crisis proportions. One head of state may be given to rhetoric in the foreign policy arena; his predecessor may have wanted action”. (Herman, 1980, 11)

That is to say, as former governors, federal administrators or vice presidents, presidents will maintain their predisposition for action, decision making and executing policy. A worthy distinction between the state and federal levels of experience is that federal executive experience brings a working knowledge of the federal government (with a focus on the national security agencies and departments) as well as experience in managing enormous bureaucracies at the national level. Conversely, a president who has only legislative credentials (state or federal) will be more inclined toward maneuvering and compromising. As Herman further notes, leaders may have a predisposition toward an aggressive or conciliatory behavior in foreign affairs. Among the traits associated with aggressive leaders, Herman (1980, 11-12) suggests that they have a “need to manipulate and control others, ... a high interest in maintaining national identity and sovereignty, and a distinct willingness to initiate action” whereas conciliatory leaders seek to create and sustain friendly relationships with other leaders, unlikely to initiate action, and not very concerned with national sovereignty. We contend that these predispositions are, in part, explained by the previous experience of leaders.

Given that there are US presidents with limited or no prior foreign policy experience, they may be reluctant early in their tenures to get directly involved in international affairs and thus, they delegate authority on some foreign policy matters to cabinet members or close advisers (Milakis and Nelson, 2008). Two illustrative examples are President Clinton deferring authority for US Russia policy to Al Gore and President George W. Bush delegating responsibilities to Dick Cheney post 9/11. However, we contend that it is still the president who approves major strategic decisions and ultimately makes the “higher level” calls. When it comes to MIDs, it is the president who orders troops into battle, even though the direction of military operations is left to the military commanders. Additionally, those to whom the authority is delegated, are expected to share the president’s views when making decisions.

The above literature allows us to advance the following expectations. First, we expect that leaders with political executive experience, state or federal, are less likely to be targeted, initiate, or get involved in military interstate conflicts than those without executive experience.

We contend that presidents with previous executive experience are more risk-tolerant and exhibit higher resolve than presidents who have no experience at all. In their former capacities, as state governors, federal government secretaries, or vice presidents, they developed a certain leadership style, influenced by their executive responsibilities: act, lead, weigh options, and make decisions. As presidents, they will signal resolve, control, confidence, and a willingness to accept risks in the relationship with other countries. This argument stands for the vice presidents too, even though they do not have direct executive powers. They shape policy only at the discretion of the president. Noteworthy, recent studies show that the vice presidency has grown in power and prestige (Goldstein, 2008). These leaders are expected to be more effective in mobilizing the government resources in case of military interstate disputes than leaders with no executive experience because of their working knowledge of the executive branch at the state or federal levels.

As a former CIA director and then vice president under Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush has been characterized as “more decisive than Jimmy Carter and more in charge than Ronald Reagan” (Berman and Jentleson, 1991, 162). Embracing a pragmatic approach to decision making, Bush is also described as “a problem solver rather than a visionary, a doer rather than a dreamer” (Pffifner, 1990, 66). Conversely, presidents without or with less executive political experience are not as likely to manifest the leadership style described above. John F. Kennedy, who served in Congress for 14 years, but with no executive experience, was able to manage and shape productively

the interpersonal relations of those around him. He forged a collegial style of policymaking based on teamwork and shared responsibility, recognizing the value of diversity and compromise among advisers (George and George, 1998, 210). Dwight Eisenhower, a man with a great military career, but with no political experience at all, had a tendency to move away from involvements and to avoid personal commitments (Barber, 2009, 180). “At the same time, however, Eisenhower recognized that conflict and politics are inevitable and adapted to them by defining his own role as that of someone who could stand “above politics”, moderate conflict, and promote unity” (George and George, 1998, 207).

We posit that US presidents with prior executive experience discourage potential foreign adversaries from targeting the United States. Foreign leaders’ temptation to test or bully the US president is met by the resolve, determination, and the readiness to use military force. Under these circumstances, foreign leaders behave strategically; they will not target the United States. With respect to initiation, leaders with executive experience are less likely to initiate militarized interstate disputes against foreign competitors. Their familiarity with different levers of the executive branch translates into being able to send strong signals to potential enemies, short of the use of force. Among them, verbal condemnation, imposing sanctions, or the threat with the use of force are the most common ones. Conversely, inexperienced leaders may blunder into a conflict or unnecessarily test boundaries.

Second, we expect that the higher the level of executive experience (no experience, state, federal) the less likely to be targeted, initiate, or get involved in military interstate conflicts. The discussion above already provides theoretical support to the contention that leaders with no executive experience are more likely to be targeted and initiate military disputes than as with prior executive experience, state or federal. We contend that executive experiences gained as state governor, high-ranking federal administrator or vice president, have a relatively similar impact on presidents’ leadership styles. In the case of governors and high-ranking federal administrators, both manage large bureaucracies at the state or national level. Regarding the post of the vice president, recent trends show that the office has evolved over time. Even though the vice president serves at the discretion of the president, vice presidents have gradually increased their impact on policy making (Goldstein, 2008). Jimmy Carter allowed Mondale to participate in all presidential meetings and received advice from him on all matters (Milkis and Nelson, 2008, 467). Similarly, Al Gore had a significant influence on Clinton’s economic policies. In some policy areas, among them “...science, technology, NASA, telecommunications...nuclear dealings with the Russians, media violence, the Internet, [and] privacy issues...” the vice president assumed primary control (Milkis and Nelson, 468). More recently, Dick Cheney is considered to be the main architect of the US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The distinct expertise that a US president gains from previously serving in a federal executive position is the working knowledge of the executive branch and the ability to manage sectors of the federal machinery and possibly of the national security apparatus. This particular kind of experience, which cannot be gained at the state level, benefits him as a future chief executive and commander in chief (Neustadt, 1990). Sometimes, presidents may need to reform and adapt the government agencies in order to better respond to changing international circumstances. In that case, federal executive experience would help a president to perform this task. As a Secretary of Commerce, Hoover received authority to direct economic activities throughout the government. In that position, he established a number of sub-departments and committees which regulated and oversaw areas such as air travel, manufacturing statistics, the census and radio (Nash and Clements, 1983). George H.W. Bush became director of the CIA at a time when the agency needed serious reform and, according to various sources, he was a competent administrator.

Thus, we suggest that leaders with prior federal executive experience are less likely to be targeted by foreign enemies than those with state executive experience because they are more prepared to organize and engage the resources of the federal government in order to defeat a possible aggressor. Also, federal executive experience helps a leader to better identify and utilize the foreign policy tools at his disposal, short of the use of force.

The two hypotheses that we will test empirically are the following:

- *Leaders with executive experience are less likely to be targeted, initiate, or to get involved in military interstate conflicts than those without executive experience.*
- *The higher the level a leader’s executive experience (no experience, state, federal) the less likely the leader will be targeted, initiate, or get involved in military interstate conflicts.*

Research Design and Data

The data used for this study were generated using the Archigos data set (Version 9.0) for political leaders (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza, 2009), the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MIDs) data set (Ghosn and Palmer, 2003), and EUGene (Bennett and Stam, 2000). Data on US president executive experience were collected by analyzing their biographies posted on the White House website. We analyze all US dyads during the 1918-2001 time period. Thus, the unit of analysis is non-directed-leader-dyad-year. In the years when there is no change of leader at the White House or the turnover takes place in January (as is the case most of the time), the unit of analysis becomes dyad-year and there will be one observation per year per dyad (US - country B year). When there is leadership turnover in the United States in the months other than January, there will be two cases per non directed leader-dyads. For instance, Gerald Ford took office in August 1974, as a result of Nixon's resignation. In that particular year, there is a non-directed dyad U.S.-country B with Richard Nixon as president and there is a second dyad U.S.-country B, with Gerald Ford as a president. Out of fifteen US leadership turnovers during 1918-2001, seven of them took place during months other than January.

The total number of observations is 9,815, of which 179 are MIDs (1.82%). We do not exclude from our analysis time periods where U.S. and country B have an ongoing dispute. However, due to missing alliance portfolio data, our working sample is somewhat smaller (9,618). With the use of pooled data, the standard regression assumptions of no auto-regression and constant variance are likely violated. Indeed, with such a panel structure different temporal observations are presumably correlated within a cross-sectional unit and different spatial observations are likely correlated with a temporal unit. Consequently, controlling for such dependencies provides more accurate estimates. We present results for MID onset, targeting, and initiation using two different methods to manage spatial and temporal dependence. First, we use a common logit estimator that models temporal dependence with a cubic polynomial approximation (Carter and Signorino, 2010). We include peace years, peace years squared, and peace years cubed as Carter and Signorino (2010) suggest. This model is similar to Bak and Palmer (2010) and is an effort to replicate their results as closely as possible, although only for the U.S. case, which is the focus of our analyses here. For the logit models, we model the panel structure of the data using robust standard errors clustered on dyad. The second statistical estimator used in the analyses presented below is a general estimating equation (GEE) with a logit link function. The quasi-likelihood GEE model is well-designed for panel data as it allows for spatial and temporal controls. We define the panel structure according to dyad and model autocorrelation with the AR(1) error structure. The AR(1) specification removes 1848 observations from our analyses. Zorn (2001, 475) insists that population-averaged models are "valuable for making comparisons across groups or subpopulations."

Dependent Variable

We model three separate dependent variables in this study of U.S. conflict behavior. First, we measure militarized dispute onset. This is a dichotomous variable, which is coded 1 if there is a MID between US and country B in a given year, otherwise 0. Version 3.1 of the Militarized Interstate Dispute data collection effort is used here. Militarized disputes, according to Jones, Bremer, and Singer (1996, 166) are "confrontations that [lead] politicians to invest energy, attention, resources, and credibility in an effort to thwart, resist, intimidate, discredit, or damage those representing the other side." Second, we measure dispute targeting. Third, we code dispute initiations. The latter two variables are subsets of the first and are designed to test the Biden hypothesis more explicitly. Since the US does have multiple disputes with certain countries in the same year, it is possible for the US to be both a target and an initiator with the same country in a given year. The targeting and initiation distinctions allow us to directly compare our results with Bak and Palmer (2010) as well as assess whether executive experience affects the actions of foreign leaders in their behavior toward US presidents or alternatively that executive experience shapes how and when a president instigates the first use of military force. We determine initiation and targeting by using the Side A and Originator variables in the MID dataset.

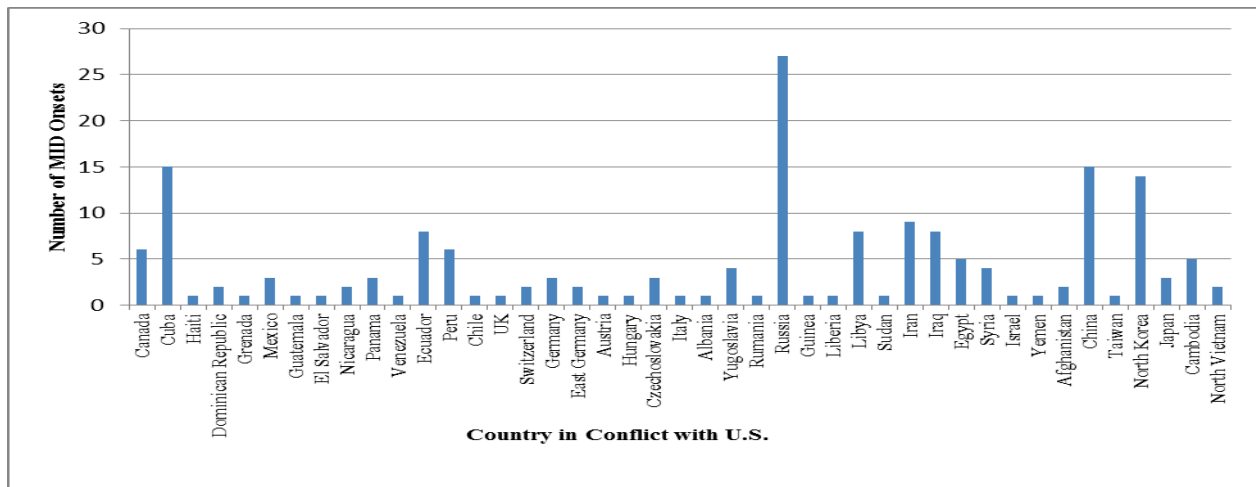


Figure 1: U.S. MIDs by Country, 1918-2001

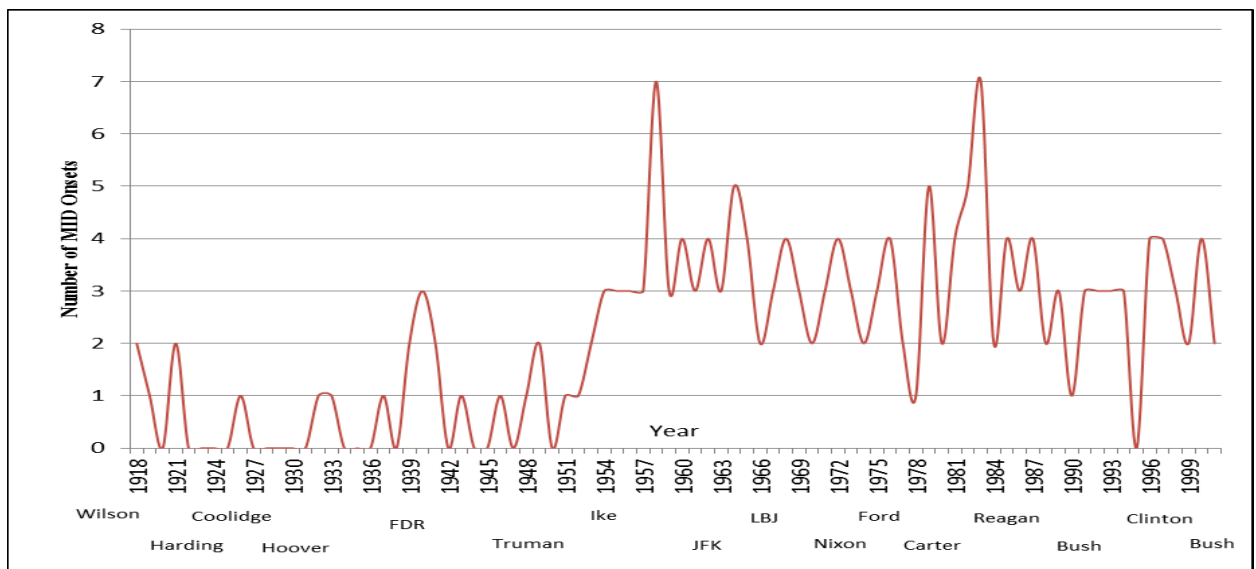


Figure 2: U.S. MIDs by Year, Noting Presidential Administration, 1918-2001

Independent Variables

The primary theoretical variable of interest in this study is a president’s executive experience. We operationalize executive experience in two ways. First, we use a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the president has any executive experience (state or national) and 0 otherwise. At the state level we code lieutenant governors and governors and at the federal level we code federal administrators (cabinet secretaries and assistant secretaries) and vice presidents. In the period 1918-2001, out of 16 presidents, only two do not have any political executive experience (Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy). Seven presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) have state executive experience, while seven others (Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and George H.W. Bush) have federal executive experience (see Table 1).

	Exec. exp.	Position	Level (highest)	# of MID onsets
Woodrow Wilson	Yes	G	State	4
Warren Harding	Yes	LG	State	1
Calvin Coolidge	Yes	VP, G, LG, M	Federal	1
Herbert Hoover	Yes	CS	Federal	1
Franklin D. Roosevelt	Yes	G	State	10
Harry Truman	Yes	VP	Federal	6
Dwight Eisenhower	No	-	-	28
John F. Kennedy	No	-	-	10
Lyndon Johnson	Yes	VP	Federal	18
Richard Nixon	Yes	VP	Federal	16
Gerald Ford	Yes	VP	Federal	8
Jimmy Carter	Yes	G	State	10
Ronald Reagan	Yes	G	State	31
George H.W. Bush	Yes	VP, AS	Federal	10
Bill Clinton	Yes	G	State	23
George W. Bush	Yes	G	State	2

Position: VP=Vice president; G=governor; LG=Lieutenant governor; CS=Cabinet secretary; AS=Assistant secretary; M=Mayor

Table 1: Presidents’ Executive Experience and the Number of MID Onsets During Their Mandates

Among those who have state-level experience, all of them served as governors but one, Herbert Hoover, who served as a lieutenant governor. Among those who have federal-level experience, all of them served as vice presidents but one, Warren Harding, who served as a secretary of commerce. We code a second version of this variable that distinguishes experience more precisely. This ordinal variable codes presidents without executive experience, presidents with only state-level experience, and finally presidents with federal-level executive experience. We observe that presidents with no executive experience faced 38 total militarized disputes, while presidents with state-level and federal-level executive experience faced 81 and 60 militarized disputes respectively. We also use a dichotomous measure of our experience variable with only federal-level executive experience coded as a 1 and the results remain robust to this specification as well.

Control Variables

We include several control variables in our empirical models: relative capabilities, geographic distance, similarity of alliance portfolios, and joint democracy. Capabilities are measured using the Correlates of War national capabilities dataset (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey, 1972). These data account for the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states (Gilpin, 1981, 33). Each country’s overall strength measure is based on military personnel and expenditures, iron and steel production as well as energy production, and finally both total and urban population. The Composite Indicator of National Capabilities for each state is calculated as the percentage share of total system capabilities. We create a relative power measure, which divides the stronger country’s CINC score by the weaker country’s score (Oneal et al., 1996; Bremer, 1992). As such, the measure ranges from 1 (perfect equality) to infinity. We take the natural log of this ratio to reduce variability in the data series. Higher values on this logged measure continue to indicate a greater imbalance of power. Extant research tends to show increasing power preponderance reduces the incidence of militarized dispute onset (Hegre, 2008; Moul 2003).

Geographic distance is expressed as the logged distance in miles between the capitals of the two states. Even for the United States, distance increases the difficulty in using force and as such countries that are farther away are less likely to generate a militarized dispute. Many empirical studies of dyadic conflict also include contiguity alongside distance (Henrikson, 2002; Vasquez, 1993, 307). However, it makes little sense to include such an additional measure for the United States as it has few contiguous neighbors.

In order to take into account the similarity of foreign policy views, a standard measure of alliance portfolios is included. We use an S score, which considers both the presence and the absence of alliances in the correlation calculation (Bennett and Stam, 2004, 237). Data for regime type is taken from the Polity IV project. Our measure of joint democracy is coded 1 when both states in the dyad are democracies and 0 otherwise. A democracy is defined as

a state that scores a 6 or above on the democracy indicator (Reuveny and Li, 2003; Bremer, 1993). We expect both controls to be negatively related to MID onset.

Our models also attempt to replicate the basic findings in Bak and Palmer (2010). Their analyses are cross-national in orientation whereas ours only examine US leaders. However, we include the primary variables they use in their empirical investigations: namely leader age, leader tenure in office, and the interaction of the two variables.

Empirical Analysis

We begin our analyses by comparing our results for the US case with Bak and Palmer's (2010) cross-national findings. We have leader data only for the US, but our analyses follow their empirical models quite closely and we find similar relationships for the US case (see Model 1 in Table 2).

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Marginal Effects Model 2
Leader Age	.065*** (.019)	.087*** (.019)	.075*** (.018)	.034* (.023)	.056** (.024)	.046** (.023)	-----
Leader Tenure	.466* (.315)	.741** (.345)	.650** (.305)	-.090 (.321)	.137 (.339)	.105 (.323)	-----
Age*Tenure	-.008* (.005)	-.013*** (.006)	-.012** (.005)	-.0003 (.005)	-.004 (.005)	-.003 (.005)	-----
Exec. Experience	-----	-.947*** (.258)	-.453*** (.106)	-----	-.846*** (.261)	- (.140)	-58%
Joint Democracy	-.278* (.202)	-.503*** (.204)	-.306* (.236)	-.307 (.260)	-.538** (.286)	-.331 (.281)	-34%
CINC (Logged)	-1.65*** (.312)	-1.72*** (.314)	-1.68*** (.312)	-1.94*** (.375)	-1.97*** (.376)	- (.377)	-81%
Distance (Logged)	-.456*** (.047)	-.477*** (.048)	-.460*** (.048)	-.555*** (.055)	-.571*** (.056)	-.560*** (.056)	-87%
Alliance Portfolio	-1.19*** (.141)	-1.21*** (.152)	-1.20*** (.148)	-1.46*** (.169)	-1.45*** (.172)	- (.171)	-70%
Peace Years	-1.56*** (.540)	-1.34*** (.517)	-1.52*** (.532)	-2.09*** (.353)	-1.92*** (.348)	- (.352)	-50%
Peace Years ²	-.195*** (.035)	-.190*** (.036)	-.189*** (.036)	-----	-----	-----	-99%
Peace Years ³	.005*** (.002)	.004*** (.002)	.004*** (.002)	-----	-----	-----	-----
Constant	-.000** (.000)	-.000** (.000)	-.000** (.000)	-----	-----	-----	-----
	6.13*** (1.66)	6.05*** (1.66)	6.20*** (1.65)	9.61*** (1.91)	9.10*** (1.93)	9.52*** (1.91)	-----
N	9618	9618	9618	7770	7770	7770	
c ²	452.62	449.82	442.58	231.31	234.12	233.78	
P<	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
Pseudo R ²	0.27	0.28	.27	-----	-----	-----	

Table 2: Logit and GEE Models of Militarized Conflict Onset

Note: Y = MID onset. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01, one tailed tests. For models 1 and 2, errors were robust and clustered on dyad. Models 3 and 4 use an xtgee estimator with a logit specification and AR(1) error structure. Models 3 & 6 use an ordinal measure of executive experience that includes no experience, state-level experience, and federal-level experience.

Bak and Palmer (2010) observe leader age in the target state correlating positively with MID initiation. We similarly find older presidents are more likely to experience militarized conflict. Tenure also plays a role. Bak and Palmer (2010)'s results show a positive relationship between the tenure of a leader and MID initiation. The longer a leader is in office, the higher the risk a conflict will be started. We also observe tenure positively related to MID onset. Presidents that have been in office longer have a higher propensity for conflict involvement. Yet, the relationship between age, tenure, and MID onset appears to be interactive (see Figure 3).

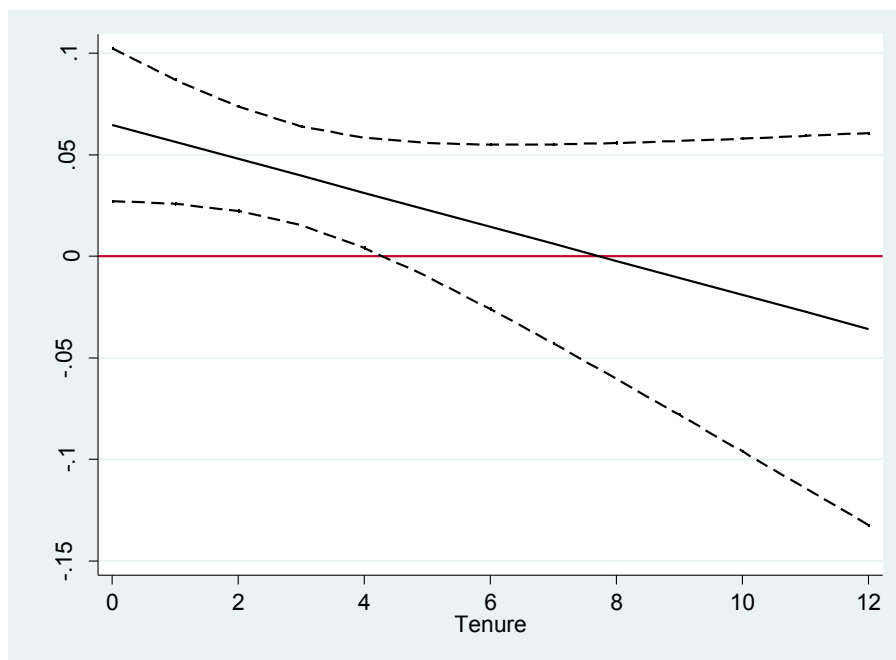


Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Leader Age on the Probability of MID Onset Conditional on Leader Tenure

The effect of age on MID onset is positive and statistically significant, but only for Presidents who have been in office 5 years or fewer, which basically corresponds to a President's first term. Age appears to have no effect on conflict involvement for presidents in their second term. Bak and Palmer's (2010) cross-national results also appear to suggest that the effect of age disappears after 5 to 8 years in office (see Figure 1 in Bak and Palmer).

While Table 2 presents results using MID onset as the dependent variable, Tables 3 and 4 offer a look at the drivers of US targeting and initiation. Table 3, then, most directly compares to the empirical models run by Bak and Palmer (2010)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Marginal Effects Model 2
Leader Age	.059*** (.024)	.091*** (.023)	.070*** (.023)	.034 (.031)	.069** (.033)	.045* (.031)	-----
Leader Tenure	.368 (.356)	.745** (.436)	.540* (.365)	-.057 (.426)	.289 (.455)	.099 (.423)	-----
Age*Tenure	-.006 (.006)	-.013** (.007)	-.010** (.006)	-.0001 (.007)	-.006 (.007)	-.003 (.007)	-----
Exec. Experience	-----	-1.21*** (.265)	- .458*** (.110)	-----	-1.18*** (.332)	-.350** (.186)	-67%
GOP President	-.452** (.272)	-.791*** (.312)	-.505* (.335)	-.431 (.343)	-.813** (.292)	-.473 (.369)	-54%
Joint Democracy	-1.68*** (.379)	-1.74*** (.383)	-1.68** (.380)	-1.88*** (.478)	-1.92*** (.476)	-1.89*** (.475)	-80%
CINC (Logged)	-.490*** (.063)	-.512*** (.062)	- .491*** (.063)	-.572*** (.073)	-.590*** (.073)	-.573*** (.073)	-89%
Distance (Logged)	-1.25*** (.148)	-1.27*** (.156)	- 1.25*** (.153)	-1.46*** (.217)	-1.45*** (.219)	-1.47*** (.216)	-74%
Alliance Portfolio	-1.31** (.791)	-1.09* (.723)	-1.30** (.775)	-1.61*** (.459)	-1.42*** (.442)	-1.61*** (.453)	-48%
Peace Years	-.122*** (.039)	-.111*** (.038)	- .116*** (.039)	-----	-----	-----	-99%
Peace Years ²	.003** (.002)	.002* (.001)	.003** (.002)	-----	-----	-----	-----
Peace Years ³	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-----	-----	-----	-----
Constant	6.14*** (1.84)	5.63*** (1.75)	6.05*** (1.64)	8.84*** (2.51)	7.88*** (2.54)	8.74*** (2.47)	-----
N	9618	9618	9618	7770	7770	7770	
c ²	398.94	443.29	414.27	130.07	139.86	135.19	
P<	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
Pseudo R ²	0.20	0.22	0.21	-----	-----	-----	

Table 3: Logit and GEE Models of Militarized Conflict Targeting

Note: Y = MID Targeting. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01, one tailed tests. For models 1 and 2, errors were robust and clustered on dyad. Models 3 and 4 use an xtgee estimator with a logit specification and AR(1) error structure. Models 3 & 6 use an ordinal measure of executive experience that includes no experience, state-level experience, and federal-level experience.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Marginal Effects Model 2
Leader Age	.055** (.028)	.072*** (.025)	.064*** (.026)	.023 (.029)	.031 (.031)	.033 (.030)	-----
Leader Tenure	.364 (.382)	.539* (.370)	.543* (.345)	-.194 (.428)	-.111 (.444)	-.028 (.435)	-----
Age*Tenure	-.007 (.006)	-.001** (.006)	-.011** (.006)	-.002 (.007)	-.0002 (.007)	-.001 (.007)	-----

Exec.	-----	-.732***	-.432***	-----	-.318	-.310**	-51%
Experience		(.288)	(.126)		(.357)	(.179)	
GOP	-.204	-.361*	-.192	-.189	-.269	-.213	-30%
President	(.264)	(.254)	(.302)	(.340)	(.359)	(.365)	
Joint	-1.42***	-1.49***	-1.46***	-1.77***	-1.79***	-1.78***	-77%
Democracy	(.443)	(.440)	(.443)	(.505)	(.507)	(.510)	
CINC	-.442***	-.463***	-.451***	-.521***	-.527***	-.526***	-85%
(Logged)	(.055)	(.056)	(.055)	(.070)	(.071)	(.071)	
Distance	-1.24***	-1.26***	-1.26***	-1.41***	-1.40***	-1.42***	-74%
(Logged)	(.194)	(.201)	(.201)	(.228)	(.230)	(.232)	
Alliance	-2.35***	-2.12***	-2.27***	-2.59***	-2.51***	-2.55***	-72%
Portfolio	(.460)	(.454)	(.464)	(.473)	(.479)	(.474)	
Peace Years	-.125***	-.121***	-.121***	-----	-----	-----	-99%
	(.044)	(.045)	(.045)				
Peace Years ²	.002	.002	.002**	-----	-----	-----	-----
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)				
Peace Years ³	-.0000	-.0000	-.000	-----	-----	-----	-----
	(.0000)	(.0000)	(.000)				
Constant	6.13***	6.15***	6.37***	9.01***	8.82**	8.87***	
	(2.45)	(2.45)	(2.44)	(2.51)	(2.53)	(2.53)	
N	9618	9618	9618	7770	7770	7770	
c ²	426.84	440.91	407.89	157.77	157.32	156.00	
P<	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
Pseudo R ²	0.24	0.24	0.24	-----	-----	-----	

Table 4: Logit and GEE Models of Militarized Conflict Initiation

Note: Y = MID Initiation. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01, one tailed tests. For models 1 and 2, errors were robust and clustered on dyad. Models 3 and 4 use an xtgee estimator with a logit specification and AR(1) error structure. Models 3 & 6 use an ordinal measure of executive experience that includes no experience, state-level experience, and federal-level experience

For both targeting of the US and initiating by the US, we find similar results to overall conflict onset, although admittedly the relationships are stronger with targeting than with initiation. We continue to see leader age related to both targeting and initiation, but unlike overall MID onset neither tenure nor the interaction of age and tenure appear statistically significant, except when we include our measures of executive experience in the empirical models (see Models 2 & 3 in Tables 3 and 4). The relationships for targeting and initiation are similar in that age positively associates with targeting and initiation, but the relationship is conditional on leader tenure. Figures 4 and 5 show a positive effect for age on targeting and initiation, but only for the first few years in office. After that, the influence of age disappears.

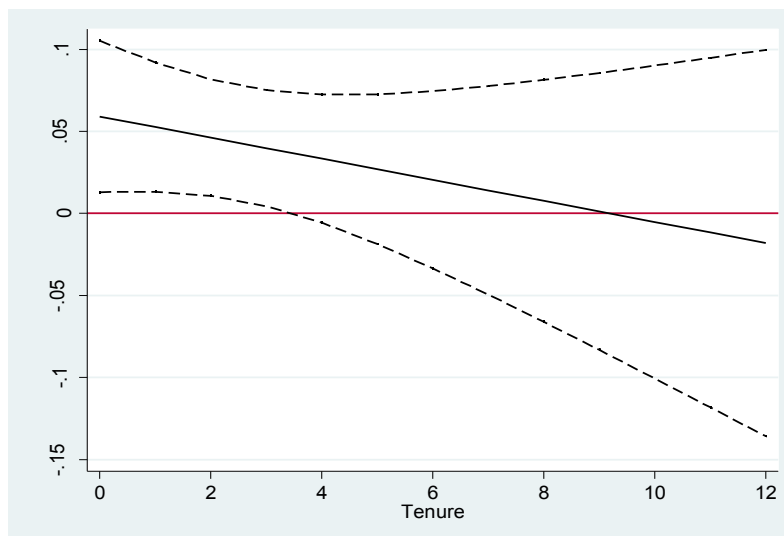
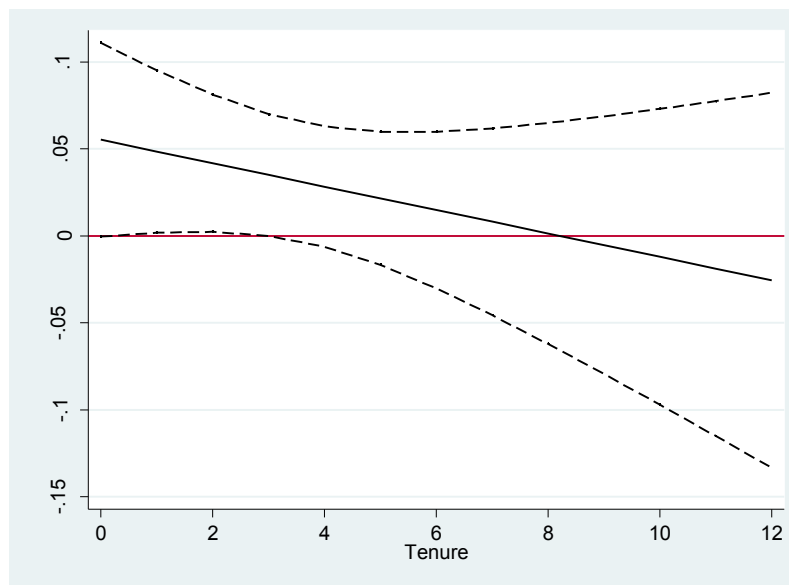


Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Leader Age on the Probability of MID Targeting Conditional on Leader Tenure**Figure 5:** Marginal Effect of Leader Age on the Probability of MID Initiation Conditional on Leader Tenure

The results for our control variables also coincide with Bak and Palmer's (2010) basic findings. Peace years, alliance portfolio, distance, relative power, regime type, and party of the president all are significantly related to MID onset, and the directions of influence correspond to the cross-national evidence of Bak and Palmer (2010). Specifically, joint democracy reduces the incidence of MIDs, while parity in capabilities tends to increase it. Militarized conflict is less likely to occur between geographically distant states, as well as states that possess similar alliance portfolios and have not fought in recent years. We also find limited evidence that Democratic presidents have a slightly higher probability of MID involvement. All of these results remain consistent across the two different statistical estimators used in the analyses, which strengthens our confidence in their validity.

With regards to targeting and initiation, the control variables have similar effects. Democracies rarely target the United States and US presidents rarely initiate against other democracies. US power discourages states from targeting the United States, although this same power reduces the probability that presidents will initiate against weaker countries, perhaps because such minor power adversaries capitulate to US demands. Distance reduces both targeting and initiation, and allies remain unlikely to initiate militarized disputes against the US. Limited evidence again suggests Democratic Presidents are somewhat more likely to be targeted by foreign adversaries, but no party effect emerges for US MID initiation.

Still, our primary conjecture involves the relationship between executive experience and MID onset. In Models 1 and 3 (in Tables 2-4) we present results that mirror the equations of Bak and Palmer (2010). In Models 2 and 5 (in Tables 2-4), we include our dichotomous measure of executive experience alongside the age and tenure variables used by Bak and Palmer. In Models 3 and 6 (in Tables 2-4) we include our 3-category ordinal measure of executive experience (no experience, state-level executive experience, federal-level executive experience). In this way we are interested in comparing our findings with the US case to their more general cross-national evidence. In all three Tables (Tables 2-4), we find that executive experience (using both experience measures) is negative and significant indicating that experience reduces the probability of MID onset, targeting, and initiation, which supports the hypotheses above. The effect appears to be fairly strong. Going from no executive experience to some executive experience reduces the likelihood of MID onset by nearly 60%, targeting by 70% and initiation by over 50% (also see a graphical illustration of marginal effects using our ordinal experience measure in Figures 7 & 8, which show the probability of conflict onset decreasing as experience increases from none to state-level to federal-level). These results remain unchanged in the general estimating equation (Models 5 & 6) for both MID onset and targeting, which suggests experience may send a clear and strong signal to foreign leaders about a president's resolve and willingness to employ military force. Our results with initiation using the general estimation equation are consistent with our other results but not nearly as statistically strong.

Using a standard logit estimator with peace years cubic polynomial approximation, Bak and Palmer’s (2010) variables remain statistically significant with the same sign when experience is added to the model. However, results from the general estimating equations (Models 4 & 6 in Tables 2-4), which continue to show the importance of executive experience, also demonstrate that leader tenure and the interaction between tenure and age no longer have much explanatory power across all three dependent variables. So, it appears that at least some of the variance in MID onset, as well as the variance in MID targeting, are better explained with executive experience rather than with leader tenure and age.

To further confirm the relationship between executive experience and MID onset, we examine the impact of outliers on our model results. Figure 6 presents two illustrations. The first plots a measure of observation leverage (Y-axis) against standardized residuals (X-axis). The points to the left of the vertical line are instances of no militarized onsets. Our model predicts some probability above zero and thus we observe a negative residual. As one can see, the model does better predicting 0s than 1s as is to be expected given the rarity of armed conflict. In fact, the average predicted probability of a MID (using Model 2 in Table 2) when no actual MID occurred is .016 with a standard deviation of .04. Yet, the average predicted probability of a MID when a MID actually occurred is .16 with a standard deviation of .19. Model 2 under-predicts most seriously with a dispute involving the US and Israel under President Ford in 1976.

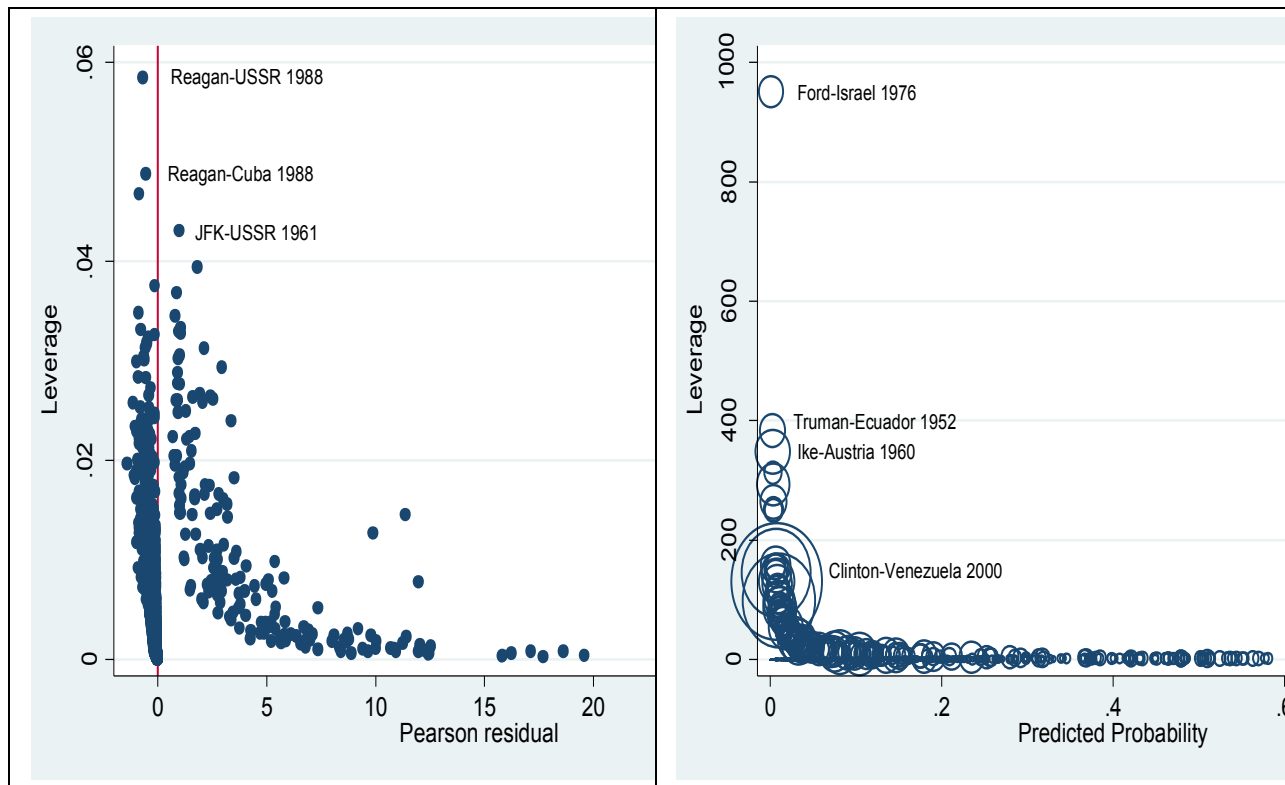


Figure 6: The Influence of Outliers on Model Estimation

Our model predicts a .0012 probability of a MID onset, but one does actually occur. Observations that are of most concern are typically the ones with high leverage and small residuals. Three of these observations are noted: Reagan with the Soviets in 1988, Reagan with Cuba in 1988 and Kennedy with the Soviets in 1961. Model 2 (in Table 2) predicts a fairly high probability of MID onsets for the Reagan cases but no disputes occurred. Fewer than .25% of the cases receive predicted probabilities of .50 or higher. The Model predicts a 53% chance of a MID with the Soviets in 1961 during the Kennedy Administration and one does occur. Importantly, though, the removal of high leverage observations does not affect our substantive results.

The second illustration in Figure 6 presents an alternative measure of influence. Pregibon dbeta measures the change in coefficients that result from removing individual observations. A few observations do stand out as seemingly producing large changes in the estimated coefficients. The size of the circles gets at this influence and the

five observations with the largest dbeta values are identified in the illustration. Still, we once again show no substantive changes to our results in Model 2 (Table 2) when observations with the largest dbeta values are removed from the estimation. Executive experience, in particular, remains strongly significant and negatively related to MID onset.

Conclusion

Leaders' foreign policy decisions may be influenced by a multitude of factors, including system and state-level variables. The framework developed in this analysis tests the relationship between executive experience and the likelihood of MID onset, targeting, and initiation. We offer the first quantitative evidence in support of the argument that prior executive experience of US presidents strongly determines their foreign policy decisions. In general, leaders with executive political experience are more risk-tolerant and exhibit higher resolve than leaders with no executive experience. Under these circumstances, foreign adversaries behave strategically. They will not challenge the United States. As a consequence, resolute US presidents are less likely to get involved in MIDs. More precisely, our empirical findings indicate that past political executive experience strongly reduces the probability of MID onset, targeting and initiation. Furthermore, the higher the level of president's executive experience (no experience, state, federal) the less likely for the United States to be targeted, initiate, or to get involved in MIDs. When experience is measured as leader age and or tenure, our results tend to support Bak and Palmer's findings, although our data remain limited to US leaders. That is, older presidents are more likely to experience militarized conflict and also, presidents that have been in office longer have a higher propensity for conflict involvement.

This study reinforces the role of individual-level variables in shaping foreign policy outcomes. The results clearly show that US presidents' past experience and activities matter and are predictors of their future foreign policy decisions. Given the clear importance of leader's past executive experience in influencing the likelihood of MID involvement, this study broadly calls for further investigation of related areas, such as the impact of leader's prior legislative or foreign policy experiences. While the purpose of this analysis has been deliberately limited to the United States, future studies may broaden the analysis by incorporating a larger number of countries. Finally, building on the results of this study, future analysis may look into the way in which prior experience influences involvement in international crises.

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