

# Testing electoral theories of US military deployment

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Two prominent hypotheses link domestic political conditions, particularly electoral influences, to the use of US military force. The first is the diversionary war hypothesis, which holds that the use of force is more likely when the president faces declining public approval. The second is the hypothesis that unified party control of government, through diminished power of the opposition to constrain the executive, results in increased use of military force. In this paper, we use an (arguably) exogenous series of US monetary shocks from Romer and Romer (2004) and a regression discontinuity design of close elections to test the impact of these hypothesized electoral influences on the use of US military force.

Hegemony makes American foreign policy central to global politics. Accordingly, scholars have focused attention on the determinants of US foreign policy, including the decision to deploy military force. Much of this literature has focused on the interactions between the constitutional branches of government (particularly Congress and the President) and how these interactions influence and are influenced by public opinion and the electorate.

A key question in this vein has been the possibility or extent of Congressional constraints on the President. Classically, Wildavsky (1966) argued that the president

has much more potential for unilateral action in foreign than domestic policy, in part due to differences in interest group activity between these two spheres. Canes-Wrone et al. (2008) present evidence that Congress has accepted an increased Presidential role in foreign policy. In looking at Congressional acceptance of foreign policy agency budget requests, and the insulation of bureaucrats through administrative procedures, they find differences between executive agencies involved in foreign affairs and those involved in domestic affairs.

Milner and Tingley (2015) echo and amend this argument, presenting evidence that Congress exerts influence in foreign policy when there are interest group pressuring and supplying information to Congress, such as with regard to trade agreements. Milner and Tingley argue that across the range of foreign policy instruments, the President has the most discretion when it comes to military force. Congressional influence is less constraining for the President when members of Congress have few constituency interests.

In a related vein, Howell and Pevehouse (2005, 2007) argue that Congress maintains the power to constrain the President in foreign affairs, when Congress decides to do so. Both Howell and Pevehouse and Kriner (2010) view media attention as a crucial mechanism for Congress to influence the president's conduct prior to and continuing through wartime. Congressional responses to the President are transmitted through the media to influence public opinion, which the President must then take into account.

Other scholars have explored more specifically the link between media attention and public opinion (*e.g.* Meernik and Ault, 2001). Zaller (1994) argues that elite debates about the use of military force subsequently impact public opinion, using evidence from polling during the first Iraq War. Of course, given the (predomi-

nantly low) level of basic knowledge about foreign affairs among the mass public (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1997), it is unclear how the direction of influence on foreign policy opinion could be otherwise. Additionally, when candidates are ambiguous on controversial foreign policy issues, voters are unable to differentiate between party positions (Page and Brody, 1972).

These studies have a number of important attributes in common. For the most part, they focus on formal institutions of constitutional government (the President, Congress, or electorate), and how the media and political parties relate to or influence these institutions. This focus on the electoral connection as the important aspect of foreign policymaking leads to a picture of foreign policymaking that is largely procedural. In other words, we might learn about who can influence or impose their preferences in these political conflicts, but we know less about the origins of the ultimate content of American foreign policy. There are a few exceptions.

Specifically, two hypotheses have attracted attention in the literature on US military deployment. The first is the diversionary war hypothesis. Here, scholars have investigated whether or not incumbents with low domestic approval ratings are more likely to get involved in military disputes to divert attention away from their domestic failures. The second area of investigation concerns party control of government. Under this second hypothesis, when a single party controls Congress and the Presidency, war is more likely because the President faces fewer constraints on military action.

Our goal in this paper is to investigate these two questions while avoiding a set of common methodological challenges. For example, in evaluating the diversionary war hypothesis, an incompetent incumbent might be more likely to fail at both economic management and dispute de-escalation. Additionally, in measuring the decision to use military force, many studies leave out the denominator (“opportunities to use

force” or the general global “threat level”) or attempt to address this issue, but do so in an unsatisfying way. Allowing for variables such as the underlying level of threat is important, since the same conditions causing future wars might also affect current economic performance.

To address these issues, we utilize two empirical strategies. First, we look at responses to (arguably) exogenous economic shocks. Romer and Romer (2004) regress Federal Reserve interest rate policy on Federal Reserve economic forecasts. The residuals, they argue, constitute a series of monetary policy changes purged of Fed anticipation of future economic events. Second, we examine close elections between 1870 and 1994. The identifying assumption here is that at the cut-point between unified and divided government, the outcome of the election is effectively random.

We use these two data series to test the effects of economic shocks and the effects of partisan control (unified versus divided government). To preview our results: we find no evidence that incumbents engage in diversionary conflicts and no evidence that unified party control of government makes war more likely. Of course, these null results might reflect data problems rather than truly absent effects. We endeavor to assess this possibility as convincingly as possible.

The following sections present and test theories of electoral influence on military deployment. The first section summarizes the two theories that have been developed in prior literature on diversionary war and control of government. The second section describes in more depth methodological challenges in evaluating these hypotheses. The third section presents our data and results. Finally, we conclude by considering future directions for the study of US foreign policy.

# 1 Theories of US military deployment

## 1.1 Diversionary war

There are a number of variants and complications to the diversionary war hypothesis, but the essence of the idea is this: US presidents faced with declining approval ratings will seek to divert attention from their domestic failures through involvement in foreign crises. Some scholars, such as Fordham (1998), introduce a partisan dimension. Republicans are either more likely to engage in diversionary conflicts, because their constituencies are more hawkish (Foster and Palmer, 2006) or less likely because foreign actors are more likely to strategically avoid an aggressive hawkish leader (Foster, 2008).

A number of studies cast doubt on the diversionary war hypothesis. Meernik and Waterman (1996) look at relationships between domestic and international variables, finding little link. Both Meernik (2005) and Moore and Lanoue (2003) argue that international conditions are more important. In an alternative to the predominant quantitative tests, Hendrickson (2002) provides a case study of Clinton's 1998 bombings of Afghanistan and Sudan. Though this case is sometimes provided as an example of a President's use of diversion from domestic political challenges, Hendrickson argues that such an interpretation is implausible.

## 1.2 Party control

Proponents of the party control hypothesis argue that, in the American presidential system, the more power the opposition party holds in Congress, the better able they will be to constrain the President's use of military force. In other words, the argument goes, Congress has the capacity to constrain the president, but only chooses to do so

when the opposition party holds Congressional power (Howell and Pevehouse, 2005, 2007).

Howell and Pevehouse examine periods of divided government, both quantitatively and through case studies, to conclude that Congress is able to reduce the use of military force by the President. Similarly, Kriner (2010) argues that opposition party members in Congress are able to utilize media attention to influence public opinion, sway presidential decisions during wartime, and decrease the duration of military actions.

## **2 Challenges for traditional approaches**

Prior methods of assessing these theories have faces several challenges. First, there is the underlying level of threat (the denominator problem). In principle, the dependent variable of concern is not the count of US military deployments, but is instead the propensity to use force, given the opportunity. A number of scholars have sought to measure opportunities to use force or the level of threat facing the US. Meernik (2005) looks at media sources to construct a series of incidents in which the US did not get involved, but similar to cases in which the US did. Howell and Pevehouse (2007) also use the New York Times to build a dataset of opportunities to use military force.

However, in using American media sources to measure threat, this strategy compounds events in the world with the salience of other political issues in the United States. Foreign policy stories are competing, in a sense, with media stories about the economy, social issues, or scandals. Thus, media stories of foreign policy crises also measures attention to domestic political events.

A second major challenge for prior approaches concerns the quality of political

leaders. In the case of the diversionary war hypothesis, one possible explanation for a correlation between low presidential approval and foreign policy crises is that the incumbent president is incompetent: bad at both domestic management and resolving foreign policy crises. In the case of unified government, it is possible that leaders who achieve party control of government are generally more aggressive, and that this leads to more foreign policy disputes, rather than the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of Congressional opposition.

### **3 Testing electoral influence**

There are two main military deployment series used in quantitative evaluation of US foreign policy. The first is the Correlates of War Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset. The second is the Blechman/Kaplan use-of-force series. The Blechman and Kaplan dataset, subsequently extended to stretch from 1870 to 1995, is considered the more accurate series for evaluating American political decisions concerning military deployment (Fordham and Sarver, 2001). One downside of the Blechman/Kaplan series is that it does not distinguish between major and minor uses of force. Fordham (2002) argues against extending the original Blechman/Kaplan intensity rankings backward to 1870 based on differences in the nature of military deployment (for example, one of the criteria originally used was whether a show of ships included an aircraft carrier). Figure 1 shows the frequency of conflict between 1870 and 1995.

#### **3.1 Diversionary war**

##### *Strategy*

Economic shocks are used as an instrument to bring about shifts in electorally-induced

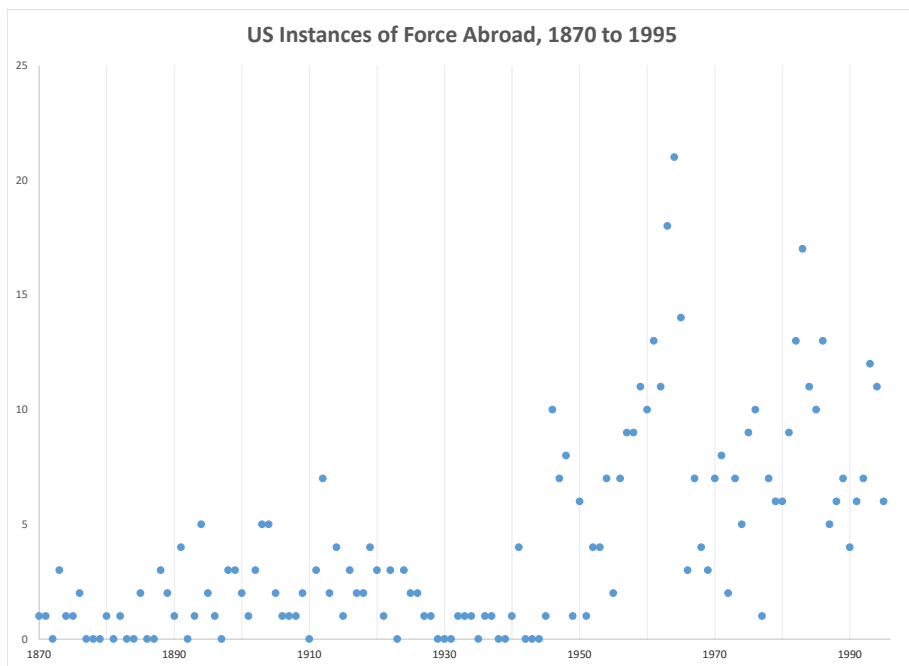


Figure 1: Annual frequency of use of force (1870-1995).



issue preferences. Our assumption is that negative economic shocks will negatively impact presidential approval. If the diversionary war hypothesis is true, then there should be an increase in US military deployment in response to the prospect of declining approval ratings. The use of force data allow us to examine whether shifts in these preferences are actually realized in the actions of the military.

### *Data*

We use a data series from Romer and Romer (2004) of (arguably) exogenous monetary policy shocks. The authors regress Federal Reserve federal funds rate decisions on internal forecasts and meeting minutes. The residual are their measure of shocks, as the residuals reflect the portion of monetary policy that cannot be explained by the Fed's anticipation of future economic performance. This allows us to isolate the effect of a negative economic shock exogenous to the possible reverse causal arrow running from war to economic performance.

It is worth noting that the Romer monetary shocks series works well as a predictor of economic shock through the 1980s. However, Barakchian and Crowe (2013) argue that institutional changes at the Federal Reserve altered the efficacy of the Romer approach post-1988, showing that the derived shocks fail to produce an impulse response of industrial production. Barakchian and Crowe extend the series using an alternative methodology to 2008. The flaws in the monetary shocks series thus only would have attenuated the relationships we demonstrate, making our significant results more notable. We eventually intend to replicate the analysis over the additional two decades of data.

### *Results*

We regress each of several (differenced log) outcome variables on 24 lags of itself,

month indicators to control for seasonality, and 48 lags of the monetary shock series. Next, summing the coefficients on the lags of the shock series from  $t - 1$  to  $t - t'$  gives us the approximate percentage change in the outcome from  $t = 0$  to  $t = t'$ , given a one-point shock at time  $t = 0$ . We graph these impulse response functions as well as 1.96 standard error confidence bands. The confidence bands are constructed through a Monte Carlo simulation of 10,000 trials that draws coefficients from a multivariate normal distribution with the variance-covariance matrix estimated in the model; the confidence interval for  $t = t'$  is 1.96 times the standard deviation of the sum of randomly drawn coefficients from  $t = 1$  to  $t = t'$ .

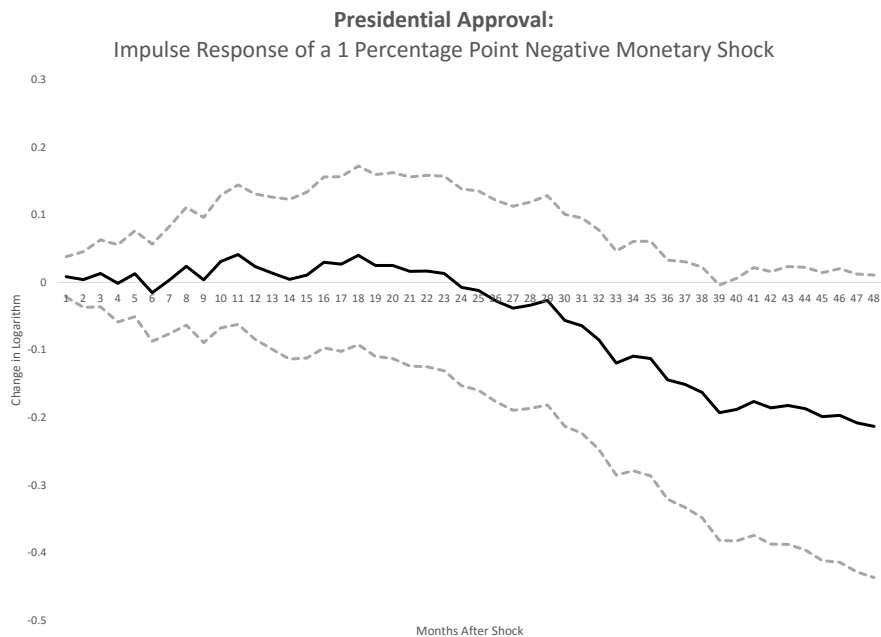


Figure 2: presidential approval following monetary shock

We first examine whether negative monetary shocks are realized in presidential approval ratings. Assuming that the diversionary war hypothesis holds, we might expect to see little to no effect (if in equilibrium the President can successfully use military aggression to counter anticipated economic-related drops in approval) or a

negative effect. Looking at Figure 2, the series is not significantly different from 0 until 39 months after the initial shock, briefly reaching significance at 0.05 and showing a negative effect. This implies that our instrument produces a negative public opinion shock to the president, validating its use to test the diversionary war hypothesis.

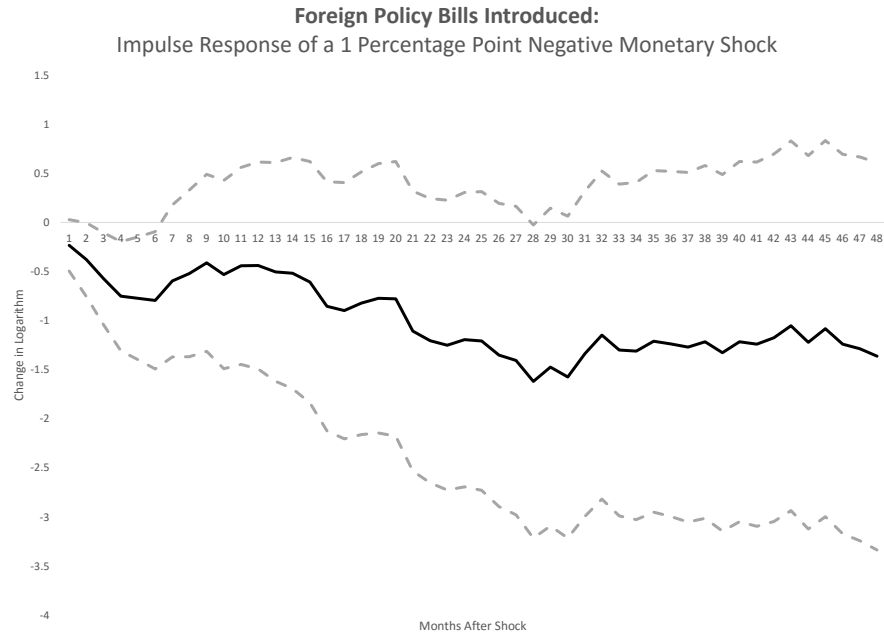


Figure 3: Foreign policy bills

Figure 3 shows the impulse response of foreign policy bills to a negative monetary shock, along with confidence bars. Within the initial six months and at 28 months, the negative effect on foreign policy bill introductions reaches significance at 0.05. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that Congress will direct its attention away from foreign policy when economic concerns become more salient.

Next, Figure 4 plots the impulse response of foreign policy executive orders to a negative monetary shock. We see that foreign policy executive orders respond negatively, contrary to the diversionary war hypothesis. Although this does not reach statistical significance at 0.05, it is significant at 0.1 at months 19, 24, and 26. Thus,

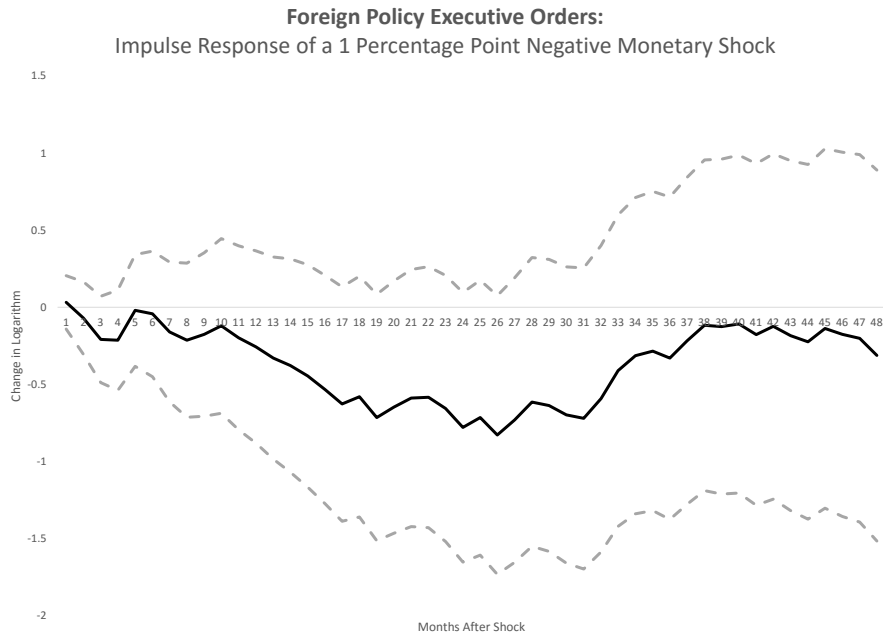


Figure 4: Foreign policy executive orders

while we cannot definitively conclude that foreign policy executive orders decrease, the evidence is suggestive of movement in the negative direction while more strongly contradicting the implication of the diversionary war hypothesis that there would have been an *increase* in such orders.

Finally, we look at the impulse response of US use of force to a one-point monetary policy shock. Figure 5 shows no significant effect. This null result should be interpreted with caution. On one hand, this it might imply that existing military strategy and commitments march on despite shifts in preferences of the President and Congress; this could reflect relative insulation of the foreign policy bureaucracy and military from public pressure. Additionally, there could be strategic anticipation by external actors, with opponents of US interests walking carefully when US leaders are particularly prone to a violent response. However, on the other hand, we cannot draw strong conclusions here, because it is also possible that the test is underpowered

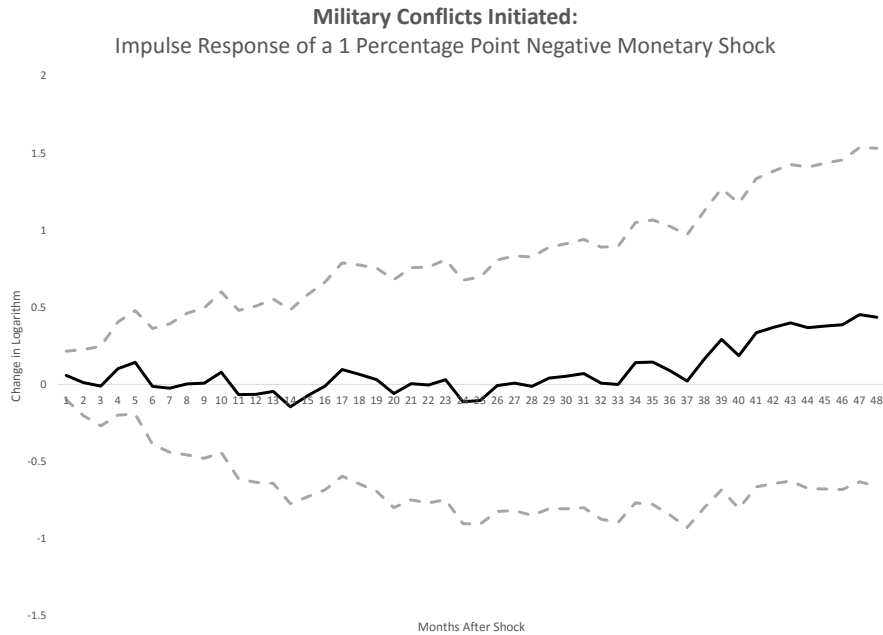


Figure 5: US use of force following monetary shock

given the data series available. Thus, further work is necessary to establish the nature of this relationship.

### 3.2 Party control

#### *Strategy*

We use a regression discontinuity design that seeks to identify the effect of unified government on the use of military force. We hope that by examining use of force when elections barely produced unified government compared to when they barely produced divided government, we can estimate the local average treatment effect of unified government on military force.

The forcing variable  $f$  measures the closeness of government to switching between divided and unified control. Let  $m(p)$  denote half the President's popular vote margin in the marginal state. Specifically, order states the President won by percentage

margin in the popular vote. Now flip states until the President loses the Electoral College. Record half the popular vote margin in the last state as  $m(p)$ .

Next, let  $m(h1_i)$  denote party  $i$ 's percentage seat margin above majority control in house  $h1$ , and  $m(h2_i)$  denote party  $i$ 's percentage seat margin above majority control in house  $h2$ . If there is unified government and the President is of party  $i$ , let

$$f = \min(m(p), m(h1_i), m(h2_i))$$

That is, what is the smallest margin to manipulate that would have resulted in divided control? If the President and one house, say  $h1$ , is of party  $i$  but  $h2$  is of party  $j$ , let

$$f = -\min\left(|m(h2_i)|, \max(m(p), |m(h1_j)|)\right)$$

That is, unified control could have happened either if the second house had switched, or both the President and the first house had both switched. Finally, if the President is of party  $i$  but both houses are of party  $j$ , let

$$f = -\min\left(m(p), \max(|m(h1_j)|, |m(h2_j)|)\right)$$

In the prior two formulae, taking the maximum reflects the underlying thought experiment shifting the underlying tendency of a country that would elect houses by a particular margin, parallel to the idea of finding the President's marginal state. Examining the outcome as we approach this closeness from either side is what allows us to identify the treatment effect of unified government at the cut-point.

Finally, to avoid post-treatment bias, for midterm election years the previous formulae are defined in an analogous way that only allows an election to bring us

close to the cut-point due to closeness in the Senate or House election, not because the Presidential election was close two years prior.

### *Data*

We construct our measure of closeness to unified government using US House, Senate, and Presidential elections from 1870 onward. This is merged with the use-of-force data. Figure 6 shows election closeness by year. We ultimately only use elections through 1994 because of limitations in the use of force data.

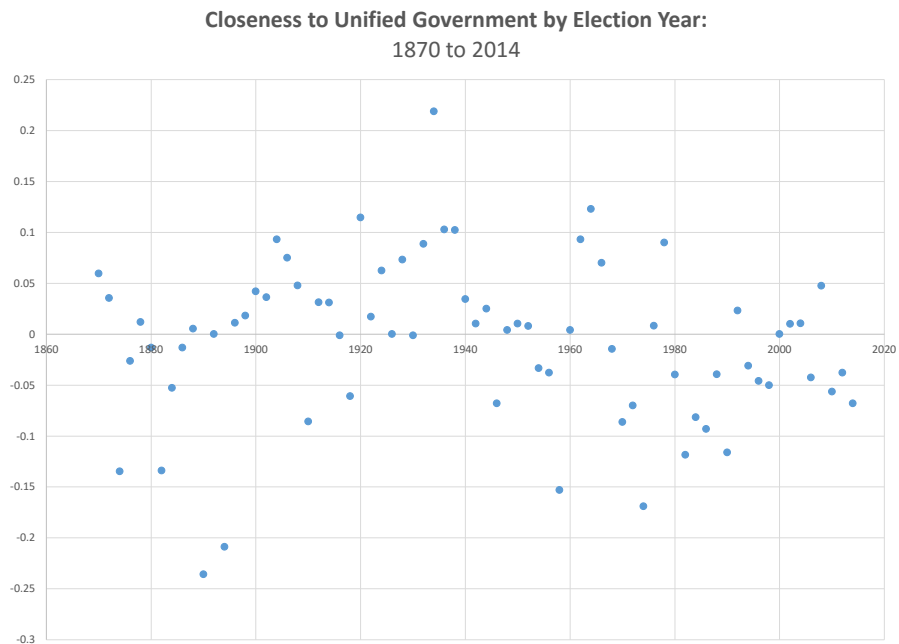


Figure 6: how close one party came to unified control of government

### *Results*

Figure 7 shows force as a function of closeness to the cut-point. We perform a balance test of the year covariate between observations within 0.05 of the cut-point on either side. Untreated units have a mean of 1935.6 and treated units have a mean of 1956.0; the p-value of the difference is 0.178.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The results of a McCrary density test give a p-value of 0.016, with more elections barely unified

**Use of Force as a Function of Closeness to Unified Government:  
Scatter Plot of Elections, 1870 to 1994**

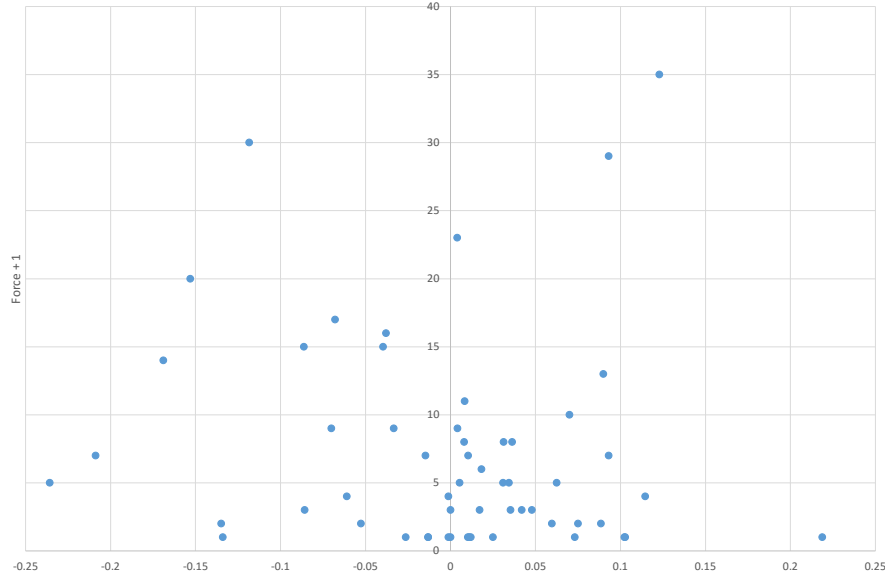


Figure 7: US use of force after election results.

**Use of Force under Barely Divided or Barely Unified Government:  
Regression of  $\ln(\text{Force} + 1)$  on Closeness, Within 5% of the Cutpoint**

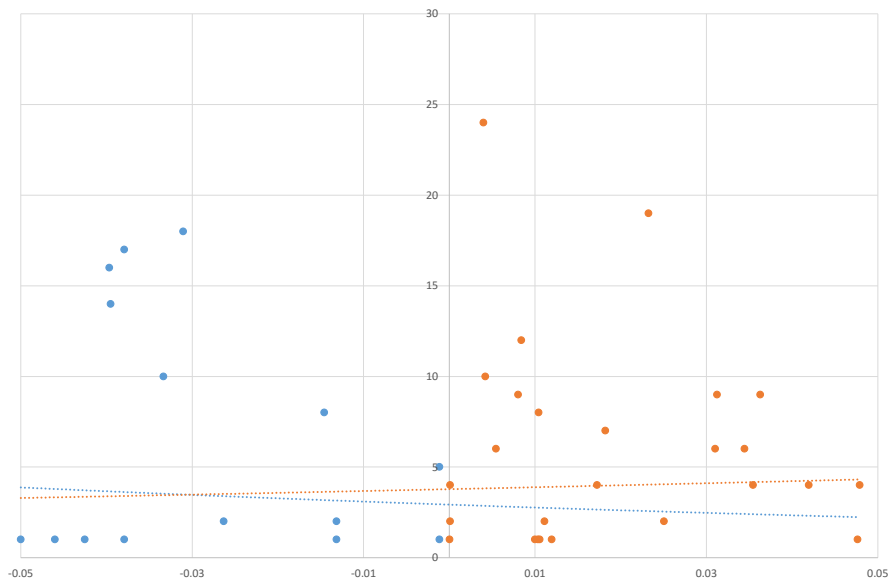


Figure 8: US use of force after election results.



Local linear regression using the IK optimal bandwidth gives an estimated treatment effect of 0.57 and a p-value of 0.371. Plain-vanilla linear regression of  $\log(\textit{force})$  within 0.05 of either side of the cut-point gives an estimated treatment effect of 0.25 and a p-value of 0.684 (using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors). Figure 8 illustrates this estimation. Finally, a fourth-order polynomial regression of  $\log(\textit{force})$  on the forcing variable gives a treatment effect of 0.22 and a p-value of 0.760 (using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors). Thus we show no significant effect of unified government on military action abroad.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide evidence on two prominent hypotheses about the relationship between electoral pressure and foreign policy outcomes. In the case of the diversionary war hypothesis, we found mild evidence that the President and Congress shift attention away from foreign affairs. This shift in attention is contrary to an attempt at diversion, though intuitive from a government-responsiveness perspective. In the case of party control of government, we did not find that barely divided governments act as a constraint on presidents.

Of course, failing to find evidence of a phenomenon does not in itself disprove its existence. Nonetheless, we speculate about potential paths forward in studying American foreign policy. The electoral theories we analyzed above leave out aspects of foreign policymaking that recent studies have moved toward center-stage. These include a specific focus on the foreign policy bureaucracy and interest groups.

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than barely divided. This motivates concern that sorting might have occurred, although the precise mechanism is unclear. Future work will explore this possibility more thoroughly and test balance in additional covariates.

In a fascinating article, Colin Moore (2011) considers strategies used by state officials managing America's colonial possessions recently conquered from Spain. These colonial administrators, lacking support from Congress, formed partnerships with financial firms to attain the capital necessary to engage in public works projects. Though colonial policies aligned with the interests of investors, Moore argues, these policies were developed by colonial bureaucrats. Moore's argument is that opposition from Congress led bureaucrats to innovate and form these partnerships with finance in order to achieve the capacity to implement their own goals.

This argument aligns with Daniel Carpenter's (2001) work on bureaucratic autonomy. Carpenter describes bureaucrats forming alliances with societal interests to build outside constituencies that can challenge the influence of elected officials. In terms of foreign policymaking, these arguments indicate the value of studying bureaucratic efforts to maintain or build autonomy. There is, of course, existing work in this vein. For instance, Flynn (2014) examines the role of military leaders in key positions to influence military spending decisions. A key aspect of bureaucratic autonomy is how or when bureaucrats can alter the political environment over time to achieve their goals.

Attention to the national security bureaucracy does not mean that electoral pressures should be ignored. In fact, an interesting question becomes how bureaucrats anticipate and respond to incentives and constraints on their elected or partisan superiors. One study of bureaucratic foreign-policymaking states, "Bureaucrats have learned that presidents will simply not take seriously proposals that are totally out of bounds in domestic politics; and they recognize that presidents do, in fact, make such calculations" (Halperin and Clapp, 2007).

Similarly, interest groups are likely to play an important role in developing for-

eign policy. While some scholars argue that foreign policy is a “groupless” set of issues (Zegart 1999, Karol 2009), interest groups are clearly active in shaping foreign policy. Milner and Tingley focus on different Congressional incentives created by differences in interest group activity for different policy instruments. Parmar (2009) identifies foundations and think tanks as crucial in developing foreign policy goals and strategies. Jacobs and Page (2005) examine the foreign policy preferences of business groups and experts at think tanks, finding that the preferences of these groups, but not the mass public, align more closely with foreign policy outcomes.

The theoretical picture that emerges from studies such as these is quite a bit removed from the more mechanical relations that have received so much attention in the foreign policy literature. Rather than seeing foreign policy as being driven by the pressures or goals of one set of (elected) actors, future studies might investigate the interactions among bureaucrats, interest groups, and elected officeholders. Such an approach to foreign policymaking would accord with more general studies of American policy formation (Carpenter et al. 2004, Baumgartner et al. 2009), with the same potential for complicated interactions and ambiguous outcomes.

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