Opposition Politics and International Crises: A Formal Model

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Democratic foreign policy choices are a function of expected international outcomes and the preferences, power, and information of domestic actors. Studies of domestic political competition and international crisis bargaining have argued that an opposition’s policy positions send credible signals of the government’s intentions to adversarial target states. This paper contends that while opposition behavior may send informative signals, it can also directly constrain the policy options of the government. We relax previous assumptions that the opposition cannot directly prevent war or influence the outcomes of war (Schultz 2001). Instead, we assume that the opposition controls some political resources and attempts to influence the government’s policy decisions in a way that advances its own partisan interests. To empirically demonstrate the theoretical differences in our model in comparison with previous domestic opposition models, we examine the case of the Quasi-War of 1798 between the United States and France.

Among the leading trends in the study of international conflict during the last two decades is the rapidly growing interest in the domestic sources of state foreign policies and international outcomes. This interest has led to major research projects on the democratic peace, the diversionary theory of war, the influence of domestic economic and ethnic groups, the impact of societal culture and ideology, and the role of public opinion. One important and influential line of research focuses on the role of domestic political oppositions in international crises and war, with particular attention to the strategic interaction among governments, oppositions, and external adversaries. Beginning with Schultz (1998, 2001), this domestic opposition research found that opposition behavior can signal the resolution of the government. This helps democracies demonstrate the credibility of their threats during crises.

Although standard signaling models of opposition behavior have contributed significantly to our understanding of democratic crisis behavior, they understate the constraining effect that domestic opposition can have on a government. Among other things, they neglect the fact that oppositions possess political resources that can help deter the government from initiating conflict or force the government to back down after a threat has been challenged. They also neglect the lasting political consequences of rally effects. Incorporating these assumptions leads to different theoretical predictions than do the standard opposition signaling models.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin with a review of the domestic opposition literature. Next, we justify our assumptions that in many political systems the opposition controls adequate resources to warrant an attempt to block war or to interfere with the successful conduct of the war, and rally effects can have lasting political consequences. We then construct a formal model of the strategic interaction of governments, oppositions, and adversaries. The model couples the opposition’s dissent with political resources that influence the value of war for the challenging government. The model also allows the opposition to be selective when it imposes additional costs on the government, providing the option to nominally oppose the government by registering its complaint against the government without directly influencing the government’s expected value for war. Next, we examine the case of the Quasi-War of 1798 between the United States and France to highlight the empirical predictions of our model. We conclude with a summary of the implications of our theory for signaling in international crises.

Opposition Politics in Crises

crises, the incentives of opposing states to conceal their capabilities and resolve, and the consequent risks of escalation to war. He argued that the combination of the transparency of the democratic foreign policy-making process and the opposing political interests of governments and oppositions leads to a situation in which the behavior of the domestic opposition sends a credible signal of the government’s resolve to the adversary. This signal, along with the adversary’s response and the government’s anticipation of that response, reduces uncertainty between states in crises and significantly decreases the likelihood of a war arising from miscalculations.

Schultz’s (2001) model of the relationship among governments, oppositions, and adversaries in international crises was elegant and generated powerful results. His empirical tests were quite supportive, demonstrating that the information-based signaling model outperformed a traditional institutional constraints model of democratic foreign policymaking in international crises. As some have noted and as Schultz has acknowledged, however, his model is based on strong assumptions. The model assumes that government and opposition are exclusively office-seeking; that the government gains (loses) political support only from policies that advance (harm) the national interests of the state, and that the “rally” effects triggered by conflict with an external adversary are temporary and inconsequential; that the opposition has the same information as the government about the benefits, costs, and political popularity of war; and that the political opposition lacks the capacity to block war, impose costs on the government for initiating war, or impede the effectiveness of the war effort.

Our aim in this study is to develop an alternative model of the relationship among governments, oppositions, and adversaries. We accept Schultz’s (2001) basic framework but relax his assumptions that rally effects are temporary and inconsequential and that oppositions lack the political resources to block war, affect the conduct of war, or impose political costs on the government for initiating war.

The Opposition’s Incentives and Capacity for Blocking War

Schultz (2001) argues that when the government fights a successful war that is supported by the domestic opposition, the government makes some additional political gains at the expense of the opposition because the public recognizes that the government has advanced the interests of the country. It is conceivable, however, that the government might make political gains through another mechanism, one involving a “rally round the flag” effect (Mueller 1973). This is based on the systematic tendency for publics in both democratic and nondemocratic states, aroused by external threats to the nation, to respond to a foreign policy crisis or war by supporting the government in power.

Schultz (2001:72) acknowledges the existence of rally effects but argues that these effects tend to be temporary and that they are shorter and less politically consequential if the opposition does not support the government (Brody and Shapiro 1989; see also Arena 2008). It is true that rally effects are generally short, but that does not mean they are necessarily inconsequential, because governments are sometimes able to exploit temporary rally effects to weaken the opposition. More important, war has other consequences besides rally effects that might allow governments to implement policies and institutional changes that significantly enhance the power of the government at the expense of the opposition. The anticipation of these potentially far-reaching political effects of war gives oppositions incentives, under some conditions, to try to discourage, deter, or block their governments from initiating war.

The political consequences of war are well recognized. They are perhaps best summarized by James Madison in his letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1793 (quoted in Hunt 1906:174): “War is... the true nurse of executive aggrandizement.” War, particularly a major war, generally results in increases in the extractive power of the state, higher taxes, larger state bureaucracies, and, generally, a more powerful executive (Rasler and Thompson 1989). The executive, with enhanced power and the popular enthusiasm generated by rally effects (however, temporary), often has the ability to exploit its strengthened position to adopt policies or institute structural reforms that have significant long-term consequences for the domestic balance of power between the parties in and out of office (Levy and Mabe 2004).

Both the opportunity and willingness of the government to take such actions against the opposition, and consequently the opposition’s incentive to try to block war, vary with the institutional structure of the state and its political culture. Executive exploitation of the opposition, and hence the opposition’s fears of such exploitation, is undoubtedly much greater in nondemocratic states, given fewer guarantees of minority rights and no guarantees that the punishment of the opposition will not be severe or that the political marginalization of the opposition will not be permanent (Chiozza and Goemans 2011). However, even in more established democracies, fears arise that the government might exploit its enhanced power from war to weaken or marginalize the opposition. In 1812, Federalists opposed war with Britain because they feared that the Republican government would use the opportunity of a popular war to further weaken the Federalists (Mabe and Levy 1999).

Another path through which the higher power of the party in power is increased by war is through territorial acquisitions that sometimes accompany a victorious war. New territories can bring into the state new peoples or economic resources that can enhance the power of some ethnic groups, regions, and voting blocs more than others. A political opposition tied to groups that are likely to be weakened may be tempted to oppose war in an attempt to forestall that shift in power. For example, many Northern Whigs opposed war with Mexico in the 1840s for fear that new territories brought into the Union by the war would be slave states. That would weaken the Abolitionists and weaken the Whigs in the process. Together with Southern Whigs who feared that the war would tear the party apart over the issue of slavery, they

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5 In addition, the notoriously short time horizons of political leaders, especially democratic political leaders whose term of office averages only half that of their autocratic counterparts (Buena de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith 2003), increase the relevance of even temporarily-limited rally effects.

6 For arguments that that the Federalists expected a popular war (undercutting Schultz’s 2001 argument that expectations of an unpopular war are the primary grounds for partisan opposition to war), see Trager (2004).

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4 Rally effects are a key causal mechanism underlying the diversionary theory of war and are explained theoretically by the conflict/cohesion or in-group/out-group hypothesis of social identity theory (Coser 1956; Levy 1989). On alternative rationalist mechanisms generating diversionary incentives, see Chiozza and Goemans (2011).
pushed for (but failed to secure) a Congressional declaration of “no more territory” (Schroeder 1973). In 1812, the Federalist opposition feared that the expansion of the war into Canada would lead to territorial annexations and that the new territories would be a potential source of Republican electoral support, further limiting Federalist influence in national politics (Hickey 1989). The potential acquisition of Canada gave the opposition “the best reason for not going to war” (Risjord 1961:204).

The fear that war will strengthen the political position of the government, and that the government might exploit its advantage to further weaken the opposition party, is not the only motivation for the opposition to oppose war. If the opposition believes that a war will be unpopular with its constituents despite being popular with the country as a whole, it might be tempted to oppose the war to consolidate support among its constituents (Levy and Mabe 2004).

Alternatively, oppositions are constantly looking for issues that help to differentiate themselves from the government, and in some circumstances, opposition to war may be the most effective way to do this. Trager (2004) concludes that the Federalists opposed the Madison Administration’s decision for war in 1812 because they believed that “if they did not differentiate themselves on this issue dimension, they would have no chance of influence in national politics.”

These and other examples suggest that under some conditions oppositions have incentives to try to block a decision for war, that they occasionally make an effort to do so, and that they are sometimes successful. It is important to note if the government anticipates that the opposition will be successful, the government, eager to avoid an embarrassing political defeat, will not issue the initial challenge. Therefore, if we focus on cases of observable opposition to war, we will underestimate the causal impact of opposition behavior. We need to look not only for observable instances of oppositions trying to block war, but also instances where governments decide not to push for war because they fear that the opposition might successfully block their efforts or impose significant costs in the process. As we will discuss in more detail later, President Adams decided against submitting a declaration of war against France in 1798 because he believed that the Republican opposition was strong enough to block it (DeConde 1966:68).

The model developed in this paper will assume that the institutional arrangement of the challenging state provides to the opposition, under some conditions, the incentives to oppose war. In addition, the opposition has political resources that give it some hope of blocking war, but attempts to block war are not always successful. An opposition’s decision to try to block war requires a careful calculation of the probability of a successful effort to prevent war and the costs of the failure to do so, in addition to the political costs of an unopposed successful war and the probability of a successful war. If the odds of success are low and the political costs of failure are high, it may be more prudent for the opposition to support the government’s decision for war rather than risk a failed effort to block a popular war.

Even more politically costly than trying but failing to prevent a popular and successful war is the decision, once the government decides on war, to interfere with the preparation for war or the prosecution of war. For example, in 1812, after their failure to block a decision for war, the Federalists made it difficult for the national government to collect taxes in Federalist strongholds, particularly New England, and to obtain credit from domestic banks, many of which were owned by Federalists or aligned with the Federalist Party (Mabe and Levy 1999). In addition, Federalist governors in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut refused to relinquish control of the state militias over to the federal government in preparation for the invasion of Canada. The Republican war hawks, led by Henry Clay, viewed the Federalists opposition to war “with shame and indefensible disgrace” (Risjord 1961:210). The Federalists’ obstructionist tactics left them in a politically untenable position in a popular war and contributed, within a few years, to the disappearance of the Federalists as a national political party (Hickey 1981).

Summary of the Argument

We have argued that under some conditions a political opposition’s expectation of a popular and successful war might not lead it to support the government’s position in order to get some of the credit for war, as Schultz (2001) argues, but instead to oppose war in an attempt to prevent the government from making a domestic political gain at its own expense. This has important implications for signaling behavior in crises involving democratic states. Contrary to Schultz’s (2001) argument that the opposition’s lack of support for a government in a crisis reflects evidence, shared by the opposition and government alike but concealed by the latter, of the government’s limited resolve in the crisis, the opposition’s behavior might mean the opposite, that the government is highly resolved to stand firm in a crisis to secure the benefits of a diplomatic victory or a successful and popular war. Moreover, the political benefits to the government of a popular war will be all the greater when the opposition opposes the war. The key implication of this analysis is that the observation of partisan opposition to war does not necessarily constitute an informative signal of the government’s likely resolve in a crisis. Instead, the opposition’s behavior can be more of a function of its anticipated ability to force the government to back down from its threat, along with the risks it is willing to take.

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7 This is reminiscent of the finding in the literature on the diversionary theory of war that a government’s level of support among its constituents is a better predictor of the use of force than is its overall level of political support (Morgan and Bickers 1992).

8 Also relevant would be a situation in which government decision makers, in their decision to initiate military action or a crisis that might lead to war, consider the likelihood and political consequences of overt opposition to war, conclude that the risks are tolerable and proceed with their challenge or use of force.

9 From a prospect-theoretic perspective (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Levy 1997), if the opposition is certain that war will lead to a political gain for the government and a corresponding loss for itself, it might be willing to take substantial risks to avoid that “dead loss” by attempting to block war, even if that action might lead to an even greater loss.

10 Opponents of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who appeared to be generally motivated more by principle and national interest concerns than by partisan politics, were careful not to take any actions that might be perceived as interfering with the safety of US military personnel or the effectiveness of the war effort.

11 If the government initiates the crisis in the knowledge that it will not have the support of the opposition, selection effects suggest that its resolve must be all the greater. One complication, however, is that the opposition’s declared opposition to war divides the country and weakens popular support for the war effort (Trager 2004)
The observation of partisan support or opposition to war is informative for the adversary only if it is supplemented with information about the opposition’s expectations and motivations, but such information is often not available.

Opinion with Resources: A Formal Model

The assumption that the opposition has control over political resources that might enable it to block or impede the war effort, which marks a deviation from previous models (Schultz 1998, 2001; Ramsay 2004; Trager 2004), is only interesting if a model based on that assumption generates different predictions. We now construct such a model.

The question is whether the behavior of oppositions with political resources sends different signals to target states than that of opposition without resources. Our model allows the opposition to oppose war in two ways. First, using their political resources in an attempt to stop the war, and second, opposing without utilizing their political resources. Ultimately, our model is interested in the strategic calculus of the government and opposition in the challenging state and of the government of the target state.

_Actors_

We begin with two states, a challenger and a target, in disagreement over the possession of some good. The challenging state has domestic political competition with a government and an organized opposition. We assume that both the government and opposition are office-seeking, and as a result have utility functions dependent on how crisis outcomes affect their respective probabilities of victory in future elections. We assume that voters will be more likely to re-elect the incumbent government when it produces favorable policy outcomes. Oppositions are partially rewarded by the electorate for supporting successful policies, rewarded for opposing unsuccessful policies, and punished for opposing successful policies.

_Actions_

The government of the challenging state decides either to maintain the status quo, where the target maintains full possession of the disputed good, or to issue a threat. If the government initiates a threat, a crisis emerges. The government’s threat is a claim that the challenging state is both willing and able to use force to attain possession of the disputed good. Therefore, the government demands that the target state reallocate a portion of the good over to the challenging state. The portion demanded by the government is equal to the expected probability of victory in war, _p_, for the challenging state times the value of good in dispute.

Before the target state decides whether to concede to the challenger or resist, it observes the behavior of the opposition within the challenging state. The opposition can either support or oppose the government’s strategy. However, when opposing the government, the opposition can impose additional costs, _δ_, on the government’s value of war (_w_ch_), or the opposition can oppose with no additional costs imposed on the government. The imposition of additional costs is designed to block decisions to go to war, and if that is not possible, interfere with the conduct of war.

After observing the opposition behavior, the target state either concedes or resists the threat. The target state recognizes that the challenger has incentives to bluff. As a result, the target may risk war if it believes that the government is bluffing. If the target state resists, the government must decide whether to follow through on the threat (and go to war) or to back down and admit its bluff. Backing down is not a costless activity as there are audience costs, a (where a ≥ 0), associated with this strategy. Following previous models (Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001), we assume that the electorate in the challenging state is adverse to the government backing down on its threats.

_Outcomes_

If the state capitulates to the challenging state’s threat, then the game ends in a negotiated settlement. If the target state resists, then the game ends in war if the government stands firm, or the game ends with the government backing down from its initial threat. If the government does not initiate a threat, the games end in the status quo.

_Information Structure_

Our model assumes a two-sided incomplete information game, consistent with Schultz (2001). Each state involved in the crisis is uncertain about the other state’s expected costs of war. Nature randomly selects the costs for the challenger, _c_h_, and for the target state, _c_t_, from independent distributions that are common knowledge, with the respective ranges of [0, _τ_ch_], [0, _τ_t_], where _τ_t_ represents a maximum value of costs. The government and opposition in the challenging state observe the selection of _c_h_, while the target state observes the selection of _c_t_.

The government, opposition, and target state share the same level of information about the challenger’s probability of victory (_p_), and the opposition’s ability to impose additional costs, _δ_, on the government’s expected value of war (_w_ch_). The challenger’s expected value of war, _w_ch_, is equal to the value of the good in dispute (which we set equal to one) multiplied by its probability of winning the war, _p_, minus the costs of war for the challenging state, _c_h_; or _w_ch_ = _p_ – _c_h_. The target state’s expected value for war is _w_t_ or _1 – p – c_t_.

_Electorate Evaluation in the Challenging State_

The government and opposition in this model are attempting to maximize their prospects in future elections. We do not model the voters’ evaluation process. Instead, we make a number of simplifying assumptions about the electorate that are consistent with Schultz’s (2001) model. First, voters prefer governments that produce successful policy outcomes. The function _r_(_·_) represents the probability function of the government’s re-election as a result of a given crisis outcome. Specifically, _r_d_(_·_) is the probability function of the government’s re-election when the opposition supports the government, and _r_d_(_·_) is the probability function of the government’s re-election when the opposition opposes the government’s policies. Our model assumes that the election is a zero-sum contest between the government and opposition and therefore the opposition’s election probability function is _1 – r_d_(_·_) or _1 – r_d_(_·_), depending on its policy.
position. \( r_d(\cdot) \) and \( r_f(\cdot) \) are both increasing functions, with higher value outcomes increasing the probability that the government will win re-election.

We also assume that \( r_f(\cdot) \) increases faster than \( r_d(\cdot) \), or that \( \frac{\partial r_f}{\partial x} \geq \frac{\partial r_d}{\partial x} \) for all \( x \). The voting public is more sensitive to each group’s policy position when there is policy disagreement (Schultz 2001; Arena 2008). The probability of a policy’s success increases as the challenging state’s expected value of war, \( w_{ch} \), increases. In practice, this means that the government’s probability of re-election is greater when the opposition opposes a successful policy rather than supporting the same policy.\(^{13} \) The intuition behind this assumption is that the opposition will share in some of the credit of successful policies as long as it lends its political support. Similarly, if the opposition supports unsuccessful policies, the opposition shares some of the blame. This provides the opposition with incentives to support successful policies and oppose unsuccessful policies.

Since the government and opposition are motivated by winning office, they only value the international outcomes as a function of the electorate’s evaluation. The target state, as a unitary actor, values the outcomes directly.

**Payoffs**

There are four possible outcomes in this model: the government pursues the status quo; the target state concedes after the government issues a threat; the government backs down from its threat after the target resists; and war. Since we assume that the value of the disputed good is one, this is the target’s payoff in the status quo or if the government backs down from its initial threat. The government faces audience costs, \(-a\), from backing down, but its overall utility will depend on opposition behavior. If the opposition was supportive of the government, the government’s payoff from backing down is \( r_d(-a) \) and the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(-a) \). Conversely, if the opposition opposes the initial threat, and the government eventually backs down, the government’s payoff is \( r_d(-a) \), and the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(-a) \).

If the target concedes, the share of the good reflects each state’s relative probability of victory, \( p \). Therefore, the target state’s share will be \( 1 - p \). The government’s payoff for this outcome is again dependent on the opposition. If the opposition was supportive of the government, the government’s payoff from the negotiated settlement is \( r_d(p) \) and the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(p) \). Conversely, if the opposition opposes the initial threat, the target state concedes, the government’s payoff is \( r_d(p) \) and the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(p) \).

If the game ends in war, the target state’s expected payoff is always \( w_t \) while the government and opposition’s expected payoff is a function of opposition behavior. If the opposition supports the government, the government’s expected payoff of war is \( r_d(w_{th}) \), while the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(w_{th}) \). If the opposition opposes the government with additional political resources, \( \delta \), the government’s expected payoff of war is \( r_d(w_{th} - \delta) \), while the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(w_{th} - \delta) \). If the opposition opposes the government without using additional political resources the government’s expected payoff of war is \( r_d(w_{th}) \), while the opposition’s payoff is \( 1 - r_d(w_{th}) \).

Finally, we assume that voters may pay attention to the criticism that the opposition provides when the government follows the status quo. This assumption has little effect on the equilibria of our model, given that as \( w_{ch} \) increases, the probability that the government follows the status quo decreases. The payoffs, strategies, and beliefs of the actors in the status quo are discussed in more detail in the Appendix. See Figure 1 for the game tree depiction of this model.

**Solution to Model**

We employ a perfect Bayesian equilibrium solution concept in which all the actors’ strategies are sequentially rational and are weakly consistent with beliefs derived from equilibrium strategies and updated according to Bayes’ Rule.

We are interested in the existence of perfect Bayesian equilibria where the opposition opposes with \( \delta \). Before proving this existence of this equilibria, we derive equilibrium strategies for each of the actors. We start with the government’s decision to stand firm or back down from its threat.\(^{14} \)

The equilibrium strategies of the government is depicted over the continuum space, \((p - c_{ch} - \delta, p)\) (see Figure 2). The government’s back down/stand firm strategy is partitioned by the cutpoint \(-a\). At this cutpoint, the government has to decide to incur audience costs from the electorate for backing down from a threat or go to war. If the government’s expected value of war is sufficiently high (\(w_{ch} - \delta \geq -a\)), the government stands firm at the end of the game.

The target state’s decision after the government issues a threat is a function of its own war costs and its beliefs about the challenging state’s war costs. Specifically, the target resists the threat if

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\epsilon_t < p - \frac{1 - q}{q} \equiv \epsilon^t
\]

where \( q \) is the target’s posterior belief that the challenging state is resolved, or \( w_{ch} - \delta \geq -a \). It is revealing to examine the target’s beliefs after the opposition’s acts. The opposition’s support validates the credibility of the government’s threat prompting the target to concede. If the opposition couples its dissent with adding additional costs to the government’s value of war, the target will be uncertain whether the threat is credible. On this equilibrium path, the target’s strategy will be a function of its own costs for war, \( c_t \). Finally, if the opposition opposes the government without imposing \( \delta \), the target knows with certainty that the government is bluffing. As shown in the Appendix S1, this follows from the opposition’s incentives to let the government be caught in a bluff.

The opposition’s strategies are partitioned by two cutpoints, \( k_{opp} \) and \(-a\). At \( k_{opp} \) the opposition must decide whether to support the government’s use of force or oppose force with additional political costs imposed on the government. If the expected value of war is sufficiently high, \( w_{ch} - \delta > k_{opp} \), the opposition will support the war. This outcome implies that the opposition party

\(^{13} \) Our electorate also has some similarities to Ferejohn’s (1986) model. However, voters in Ferejohn’s model have a utility threshold: any policy outcome that exceeds that threshold is sufficient to guarantee re-election. We omit any policy threshold voting rule, but suggest that future research explore variations of a domestic opposition model with different electorate evaluation assumptions.

\(^{14} \) For completeness, the government always chooses to back down in the status quo. This is shown in the online Appendix.
does not have sufficient control over political resources, or faces a severe enough backlash from the public, to deter the government from either issuing a challenge or standing firm. If \( w_{ch} > k_{opp} \) and \( w_{ch} - \delta < k_{opp} \), the opposition will oppose the war and use political resources to increase the costs of war for the government. If \( w_{ch} < k_{opp} \) and \( w_{ch} > -a \), the opposition will use its resources in an effort to force the government to back down. The opposition will be successful in forcing the government to back down when \( w_{ch} > -a \) and \( w_{ch} - \delta < -a \).

Finally, if \( w_{ch} \leq -a \), the opposition will oppose the government’s threat, but will not impose \( \delta \) on the government’s expected payoff. The opposition knows that for this expected value of war the government is bluffing. The opposition has incentives for the government to be caught in its bluff and therefore will not add any negative components to the expected value of war that would deter the government from making the bluff in the first place. If the government were to be caught in a bluff, the audience costs incurred by the government would ultimately help the opposition’s electoral evaluation.

Given the target and opposition’s equilibrium strategies, the government will not make threats if \( w_{ch} \leq -a \). In other words, the government will not make a threat that is initially a bluff. The government can issue a threat that is initially credible \( (w_{ch} > -a) \), but becomes a bluff because of the opposition’s strategy \( (w_{ch} - \delta < -a) \). The government’s decision cutpoint for issuing a challenge or maintaining the status quo is represented by \( b \), but \( b > -a \). This constrains the ability of the government to bluff. This prediction is a significant departure from previous opposition models, particularly Schultz’s (1998, 2001) models, which predict that the government has greater leniency to bluff in international crises.

**Discussion**

Like other opposition models, signaling dynamics are still prevalent in our model. If the expected value of war, \( w_{ch} \) is sufficiently high \( (w_{ch} - \delta > k_{opp}) \), the opposition will support the war. In this range of \( w_{ch} \), the opposition’s support signals to the target that the government is resolved and will stand firm behind its threat.

In addition, when the opposition opposes the government’s threat without imposing political sources, the opposition signals with certainty that the government is bluffing. While the government has incentives to bluff in crises, the opposition has incentives for the government to be caught in its bluff. Because the opposition can
clearly signal the bluff, we observe no bluffing in equilibrium in our model.

Another departure from previous opposition models is that oppositions in our model will oppose high valued wars as long as the opposition thinks it can prevent war and force the government to back down ($w_{ch} > k_{opp}$ and $w_{ch} - \delta < k_{opp}$). This is why it is important to highlight the risk that the opposition faces with its strategy in this model. Since $k_{opp} > -\delta$, there are expected values of $w_{ch}$ and $w_{ch} - \delta$ in which the opposition will oppose the government’s threat even though the government’s threat is credible. Within the range of $k_{opp} + \delta$ and $-\delta$, the opposition does not have the incentive to support government policy, knowing that support will result in the capitulation of the target state (the best outcome for the government). Therefore, within this range, the opposition will gamble that the war will be unfavorable for the government and oppose war. While this is similar to other models (Schultz 1998, 2001), the use of political resources to undermine the war increases the risk for the opposition.

This is nicely illustrated by the war of 1812, where Federalists opposed the war with the belief that their opposition to war “would eventually return them to power” (Brown 1964:188). However, the general support of the war exceeded Federalist expectations, leading some Federalists to hope for a military defeat. Alexander Hanson wrote in a letter to Timothy Pickering, “A few hard blows struck [by the British] in the right place would be of great service to the country” (quoted in Adams 1986:667). Benjamin Stoddert echoed this sentiment in a letter to James McHenry: “Success in this War, would most probably be the worst kind of ruin” (Stoddert to McHenry, July 15, 1812 in Steiner 1907:581). The war eventually did become unpopular, but the Federalists were already identified as self-interested traitors. Because of this, it was the Federalists, not the Republicans, that were harmed by the war.

To further explore the hypothesized causal mechanisms driving opposition, government, and adversary behavior in international crises, we examine the case of the 1798 Quasi-War between the United States and France.

**Case Analysis: The Quasi-War of 1798**

There is substantial evidence that during the 1798 crisis President Adams considered asking Congress for a formal declaration of war, but decided against it because of anticipated political opposition. Our model predicts this behavior, although the effects of political opposition during crises are often predicted as unobservable in a range of cases. If the opposition party is strong enough, it will deter the government from issuing challenges in the first place, and thus, we often do not observe the deterrent effects of the opposition. This is similar to Howell and Pevehouse’s (2005:213) conclusion that “having to stave off a mobilized opposition party within Congress during the course of a military campaign may dissuade presidents from initiating force at all.” This reinforces our earlier point that a methodology that focuses only on observable instances of opposition to war will underestimate the causal impact of opposition behavior. The Quasi-War thus provides a case where the constraining effects of political opposition can be highlighted.

This case study is not intended to be a formal test of the hypotheses generated from the formal model. Rather, the case is designed to be a plausibility probe that can highlight the causal mechanisms at work and demonstrate the utility of our theory by showing that the historical evidence is consistent with the predictions of our model but not with those of Schultz (2001).15

This is important given that the signaling and constraining mechanisms of political opposition are not always distinguishable. The following sections will connect the historical circumstances of the Quasi-War to the predictions of our model.

Beginning in the 1790s, two political parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (hereafter, the Republicans), vied for political power. In 1796, the Federalist Party’s candidate, John Adams, won the election to succeed George Washington as president. The Republican Party’s candidate for president, Thomas Jefferson, was elected vice president and became one of Adams’ two chief political rivals.16 Adams’ other political adversary was fellow-Federalist Alexander Hamilton.17 Whereas Adams drew support from the moderate Federalists, Hamilton drew his support from the High Federalists, who were more loyal to Great Britain, more hostile to France, and geographically concentrated along the coast (Dauer 1953:6–7; DeConde 1966:11). Jefferson and the Republicans won the presidency in 1800, retained it in the 1804 election, and again in 1808 under Madison.

When Adams took office, the central problem that the United States confronted was France’s continuing seizures of American commercial vessels that traded with Great Britain, a leading opponent of France in the Wars of the French Revolution. Although some American officials wanted war, Adams decided to appoint a special diplomatic mission in October 1797 to negotiate an end to hostilities (DeConde 1966:11). The French, however, rebuffed Adams’ negotiating team when it arrived in France in October 1797. France’s treatment of the American envoys throughout the fall and winter outraged Adams and Americans generally and developed into a crisis known as the XYZ Affair (Stinchcombe 1980).

In March 1798, Adams penned a declaration of war that he intended to submit for congressional ratification. The president was confident that once the public was fully informed about the events of the XYZ affair, it would “arouse such emotion among the people as to drive the nation immediately to war.” In the draft declaration, Adams wrote that “[a]ll men will think it more honorable and glorious to the national character when its existence as an independent nation is at stake” (DeConde 1966:67–68).

Before presenting the formal declaration of war to Congress, Adams presented a milder message to Congress on March 19, 1798. In the message, the president reaffirmed his commitment to protect shipping lanes and coastal areas, but did not formally ask Congress to declare war. With a formal declaration expected, Republicans began to organize their opposition to the war. They planned to use their political resources to block the war declaration in Congress. In addition, as a sign that they would impede

15 On the theoretical utility of plausibility probes, see George and Bennett (2005).

16 At this time in American history, the vice president was the runner-up in the presidential election, regardless of party affiliation.

17 Although he was a private citizen during much of Adams’ presidency, Hamilton held great sway over the opinions of many of Adams’ cabinet members (DeConde 1966:7).

18 Welch (1965:174–175n.) contends that the split between moderate and High Federalists emerged over how to respond to French naval depredations. Dauer (1953:6–7) attributes the division to the commercial (High Federalist) versus agricultural (moderate Federalist) wings of the party.
the conduct of war, the Republicans tried to prevent the armament of merchant ships and other war preparations (DeConde 1966:70; Mabe and Levy 1999).

The Republicans were motivated by the fear that Federalists would make political gains from a popular war and use those gains to limit their political influence. Republicans clearly feared suffering political losses if the United States went to war. Jefferson had long distrusted Federalist motives, and "neither Washington nor anyone else could drive from his head the obsession that monarchy was just around the corner, that Hamilton and his fiscalist, anglocrat followers were plotting to make an end to republican government in America" (Elkins and McTrick 1993:338). Madison feared that war merely provided the Federalists a pretext for suppressing dissent. In describing the effects of Federalist war preparations, Madison lamented to Jefferson that "Perhaps it is a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to provisions against danger, real or pretended, from abroad" (Madison to Jefferson, in Smith 1995:1048).

Although it is clear that a war would have been an undesirable outcome for the Republicans in 1798, a strategy of actively opposing war carried significant risks. Their opposition resulted in being branded as unpatriotic and even treasonous by the Federalists and pro-Federalist newspapers. The Republicans were confident, however, that they had the political strength to block a war with France (DeConde 1966:62; Smith 1995:999). Although there was widespread public support for a potential war with France in 1798, the risk of opposition was worth it to the Republicans because the Federalists, as the governing party, would reap most of the political benefits from a successful war. Republican support for a popular war would have resulted in a net relative gain for the Federalists, a gain that Federalists would have used to marginalize the Republicans further, and was consequently not a viable Republican strategy. Thus, although politics motivated Republican opposition to war in 1798, the Republicans' undertook this opposition not in hopes of making a political gain from an unpopular war but instead to avert a relative political loss from a popular war Mabe and Levy 1999.

As it turned out, Republican fears were well founded, especially as support for the war grew. The Republicans mistakenly forced the president to disclose the XYZ dispatches because Republicans believed that the dispatches "would reveal that France stood ready to negotiate" (DeConde 1966:70). As DeConde argues, however, Adams had laid a political trap for the opposition, as the documents revealed a bellicose France. When the dispatches were finally revealed, the Republicans "recognized that a wider disclosure would probably arouse the public to such frenzy as to precipitate the very war they sought to avoid" (DeConde 1966:72).

With the publication of the dispatches, public opinion began to sway in Adams' favor. Abigail Adams wrote that "people began to see who have been their firm unshaken friends, steady to their interests and defenders of their Rights and Liberties" while the Republicans should be “adjudged Traitors to their Country” (DeConde 1966:75–78). The Federalist Party as a whole exploited the dispatches and the reaction they generated to question the patriotism and loyalty of the Republican opposition. This facilitated the passage of the Alien Sedition Act of 1798, which imposed limits on speech critical of the government, to the extent that a number of journalists were put in jail. The Federalists also used the Naturalization Act to disqualify many recently immigrated, pro-Republican, Irish voters (Smith 1956:22; DeConde 1966:98–103).

However, Adams eventually decided against presenting the declaration to Congress for two reasons. First, he feared that doing so might endanger the lives of his negotiators who remained in France. Second, and more importantly, Adams believed that the majority of Congress would vote down his war declaration (DeConde 1966:68–69). This was despite wide public support for the war. Abigail Adams noted that the public "would have wholeheartedly joined in the most decided declaration which Congress could have made... but the majority in Congress did not possess firmness and decision enough to boldly make it" (DeConde 1966:107). Domestic opposition to war thus played a significant role in explaining why the United States did not go to war with France in 1798. Adams opted instead for fighting an undeclared "Quasi-War" against French shipping, hoping that France's continued belligerence would provoke Congress in favor of a declared war. In the meantime, Adams proposed measures for military preparedness in case relations between the United States and France escalated to full-scale war (DeConde 1966; Vaughan 1972).

During the summer of 1798, the Federalist Party divided over additional belligerent measures. The majority of the Adams administration, though not Adams himself, favored a scheme whereby the United States would declare war on France, form a de facto alliance with Great Britain, and invade Spain's colonies in Louisiana and the Floridas. However, the United States never declared war on France, nor implemented the invasion plan. In October 1798, Adams abruptly reversed course, favoring a peaceful resolution of the conflict to war. This reversal is also consistent with the politically motivated opposition to war hypothesis, but in an intra-party context. Between March and September 1798, Adams favored war with France. During this period, Adams sought to capitalize on popular support for war by inciting pro-war sentiments in public appearances (DeConde 1966:81). In October, however, Adams suddenly turned against war with France and began to favor a peaceful settlement to the Franco-American naval conflict. To explain this, we note that between the summer and fall of 1798, the only variable that changed significantly was the political benefit to Adams of war with France. At the end of the summer, Hamilton finagled, despite Adams' objections, an appointment as the de facto leader of the US Army. Once this appointment was finalized at the end of September, Adams thought that Hamilton would reap the glory of a full-scale war with France, just as Washington had benefited politically from commanding the Revolutionary Army. Eleven days after Hamilton's

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20 In the released dispatches, the identities of French diplomats were replaced by the letters X, Y, and Z, accounting for the name given to the episode.

21 Republican fears of the loss of their liberty were genuine, but they were not the reason why the Republicans opposed war. Republican eagerness for war in 1812 and their willingness to use that opportunity for partisan advantage strongly suggests that Republicans were less concerned about the denial of liberty per se than with their own loss of political influence.

22 In 1800, the belligerents settled their differences in the Treaty of Mortefontaine (DeConde 1966).
appointment, Adams turned against war and favored seeking a negotiated peace with France. A consensus of historians has concluded that Adams turned against war because war was no longer in his political self-interest (Smith 1962:984; DeConde 1966:112; Jones 1985:38).23

As we have discussed, the Schultz model predicts that opposition to war arises only when the opposition expects an unpopular war, while our model allows for opposition to oppose a range of wars they expect to be popular. The two models also offer different explanations for how opposition to war affects the credibility of the government’s threat to use force. Whereas the Schultz model implies that opposition to war should invariably undermine the credibility of a democratic government’s threat to use force, our model posits that when the opposition opposes war in order to deny the government a political gain, active opposition to war might reinforce the credibility of such a threat.

In the Quasi-War crisis, the Republicans opposed war, but not because they expected an unpopular war and wanted to exploit popular resentment at the expense of the governing Federalist Party. Rather, they expected a popular and successful war, feared that the Federalists would exploit their popular victory to diminish the political power of the Republican Party, and consequently threatened to veto a declaration of war in Congress.

The events of 1797–1798 also illustrate the strategic behavior predicted by the model. During 1797 and the first half of 1798, Republican opposition to war convinced French leaders that Adams’ threats were bluffs. Their perception derived in part from Talleyrand’s belief that the Federalists’ belligerence would undermine their popularity and allow the Republicans to win the presidency (DeConde 1966:59). This belief also stemmed from France’s perception that the Republican Party would prevent the Adams administration from implementing its threats (Stinchcombe 1980:40). During this period, France made no concessions to the United States, continuously seized American commercial vessels, and stalled negotiations that might have resolved the conflict, all of which made the United States increasingly belligerent.

In July 1798, Talleyrand received a report on Franco-American relations from his emissary Victor DuPont. DuPont reported that the leaders of the Republican Party, including Jefferson, had told him that if France did not abstain from its attacks on American shipping, the Republican Party, which had strongly opposed Federalist calls for a full-scale war and had traditionally been sympathetic to the French, would be “lost.” This implied that the Republicans would no longer be able to sustain their opposition to Federalist policies, increasing the probability that the United States would make good on its threat to declare war on France. Soon after reading DuPont’s dispatches, Talleyrand and the Directory reversed many of their most belligerent policies, though some unauthorized piracy attacks continued. Thus, in 1797 and 1798, opposition to war in the United States undermined the threats that the United States made against France and encouraged the French to continue their belligerent policies. As this opposition receded in the second half of 1798, American threats became more credible and induced a conciliatory change in French behavior, averting war.

Note that unlike our formal model, the Republican opposition to the war was not a one-time decision. There is ample historical evidence that the Republicans were going to reverse their position on the war given growing public support. The French viewed the opposition to the war as a signal that Adams’ resolve was weak. However, they did not realize that Adams’ reluctance to declare war was a function of the Republican opposition, and therefore, without the opposition, Adams’ was likely to declare war. It was not until the Republicans signaled to DuPont that their opposition strategy was perilous that the French correctly perceived the likelihood of war and subsequently reduced their belligerence. Had the French not reduced their belligerence, the Republicans would likely have switched their position to support a war with France. This would have created an interesting situation, given that Adams would have been free to declare war, but would risk Hamilton, Adams’ rival, receiving most of the credit for the war’s success.

Conclusion

How do governments, oppositions, and adversarial states behave during an international crisis when the opposition has access to political resources that enable it to either block a decision for war or to influence the government’s ability to mobilize resources for war? In our formal model, the opposition constrains the government by reducing the expected value of war and thus can turn threats that would have been credible with no opposition into non-credible threats. This has several potential effects. First, the opposition’s use of political resources to decrease the government’s expected value of war can force the government to back down from some of its threats. Second, the expected use of opposition resources may deter the government from issuing a threat in the first place. Even if the government does issue a threat and does not back down, causing war, the overall expected value of the war is lowered by the domestic opposition.

In addition, the opposition, through its behavior, can signal to the target with complete certainty that the government is bluffing. If the opposition nominally opposes the government’s threat of force (that is, opposes but does not impose additional political costs on the government’s expected value for war), the target knows that the government is not willing to carry out its threat. As a result, the government has no incentive to issue a threat when it knows that the target state will resist, and the a priori bluff becomes a non-equilibrium solution. The government’s ability to issue threats is greatly constrained, as they can only issue threats that are initially credible (before the opposition imposes additional costs).

If the opposition opposes with political resources, the target is not certain whether the government is bluffing or not. In our case analysis, the Republicans opposed using their political influence to constrain Adams. As a result, the French did not receive a clear signal regarding Adams’ resolve. As it turns out, the French did in fact misinterpret Adams’ resolve.

For the opposition, using political resources to undermine a war effort is a risky proposition. In our model, there

23 Adams’ action to check the influence of military officials who might become political rivals was not unique. During the Mexican War, in December 1846, President Polk submitted a proposal to Congress that was to be known as the Lieutenant General Bill. This measure proposed to allow Polk to appoint a lieutenant general to take command of all US troops in the field. Polk’s motivations were almost entirely political, as he “was aroused by the open hostility of Generals Scott and Taylor, their ever growing popularity, and their apparent political ambitions” (Schroeder 1973:65). See also Mabe and Levy (1999).
is a range of expected war values that the opposition will oppose the government with resources even if the government is determined to stand firm and go to war. In this range, the opposition is in essence hoping that the lottery of war will result in an unfavorable outcome for the government. However, as the value of war increases, then the opposition has more incentive to support the government and avoid being on the wrong side of history.

Our model differs from previous work because the constraining effects of the opposition’s behavior can increase due to the opposition’s increased control over political resources, regardless of the value of the war. This approach allows us to vary the strength of the opposition and examine how this variation affects the behavior of the other actors in the crisis.

As with any model, our analysis faces some limitations. These limitations suggest useful avenues for future research, however, and it would be useful to identify them. First, our model is theoretically motivated by the notion that oppositions have incentives to prevent successful wars, but the model does not incorporate the institutional and political advantages that the government can implement as a result of such wars. This omission was intended to maintain the parsimony of our model and to provide a clearer comparison to other opposition models. However, modeling the impact of the government’s post-war behavior on the political fortunes of both government and opposition would be useful given the empirical examples discussed above.

Another limitation of our model is the lack of uncertainty surrounding the opposition’s control over political resources. In our model, when the opposition uses political resources to decrease the government’s utility for war, both the opposition and government know the amount of resources that the opposition has at its disposal and therefore can compute the adjustments to their utility with certainty. However, the assumption that both domestic actors have complete knowledge over the expected value of each outcome in a crisis may be too strong. Uncertain outcomes are the very characteristics that define democratic processes (Przeworski 1991). In future variations of this model, uncertainty can be modeled around the use and effectiveness of the opposition’s political resources so that the opposition and government are less than certain whether the opposition can effectively prevent war or even the initial threat.

This would be consistent with the notion that the opposition is gambling when it opposes a potentially successful war in hopes of preventing the war from occurring. Although successfully blocking a war is the opposition’s best outcome, failing in that attempt is the worst outcome. Our model implicitly analyzes these risks, as the opposition is willing to use political resources to undermine credible threats. However, these risks can also be modeled explicitly in future variations of this model, where the opposition may face some sort of political cost if it dares to oppose the government’s threat. We do not explore this model variation in this paper because we want to remain as consistent as possible to previous opposition models. However, we believe it would be a fruitful endeavor to further explore the relationship between opposition risk and opposition behavior.

One final implication of our model not yet discussed is that our model predicts that we should only observe wars where the opposition uses political resources to devalue the government’s expected war value. If the opposition exhibits any other type of behavior, the target will either concede (when the opposition supports the war) or the government will not even initiate a challenge (when the opposition is expected to nominally oppose the war). However, a cursory examination of wars with democratic participants suggests that many, if not most, democratic governments enjoy support from their political opposition during war. There are several possible explanations for this apparent contradiction. First, it is likely that oppositions are not purely office-seeking, that they derive some utility from the national interest and from supporting the military. In addition, our model only allows the opposition to make a decision once. However, it is more likely that an opposition could try to block a successful war, and if it fails, cut its losses by offering its support. This multistage strategy was employed by the Democrats during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Second, given the lack of empirical study of domestic opposition in international crises, we may be underestimating political opposition during war. Future research should be dedicated to conceptualizing and measuring political opposition, with and without use of political resources.

An additional potential explanation about why we observe some democratic governments enjoying opposition support during war is that information asymmetry may apply to the political opposition as well as adversarial states.24 In our model, we assumed that the opposition knows the costs of war for its own state. This is a useful simplifying assumption that helped move the formal study of oppositions forward. However, it is easily imagined that the government, given its power and resources, would be in a better position to know its own costs of war. In addition, the government would be in a position to hide this information from the opposition. Given that the government has incentives to garner support from the opposition, the government may misrepresent the costs of war to not only the target state but the domestic opposition as well. Again, we do not address domestic information asymmetry in this paper to minimize the difference between our model and other strategic opposition models. However, we suspect that exploring information asymmetry between governments and opposition during crises would provide a useful theoretical and empirical contribution.

These proposed extensions demonstrate the potential growth of the literature on political opposition and further highlight the connection between domestic and international politics. This article attempts to contribute to this burgeoning area of scholarship by examining the constraining effect of the opposition’s control over political resources. Our model reveals how a resourceful opposition can constrain a government and force it to be more selective in its threats.

References


24 We offer several explanations of why we observe wars without opposition using a political resource strategy. Obviously, there are several more potential explanations that relate to potential misperceptions or non-rational behavior of each actor.


Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article: Appendix S1. Model formal solution.