
Presidents, Congress, and the Use of Force

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Abstract Scholars have long debated the relative influence of domestic and international factors on the presidential use of force. On one matter, however, consensus reigns: the U.S. Congress is presumed irrelevant. This presumption, we demonstrate, does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Using a variety of measures and models, we show a clear connection between the partisan composition of Congress and the quarterly frequency of major uses of force between 1945 and 2000; we do not find any congressional influence, however, on minor uses of force. We recommend that the quantitative use-of-force literature in international relations begin to take seriously theories of domestic political institutions, partisanship, and interbranch relations that have been developed within American politics.

Debates over U.S. congressional involvement in foreign military engagements trace back to the Republic's founding. But irrespective of the normative issues at stake (for example, should Congress shape foreign policy?), a basic point of fact remains unresolved: Does Congress effectively constrain presidents from unilaterally exercising force abroad? While illustrative case studies abound, few quantitative investigations systematically address the topic.

In principle, Congress should contribute to the politics surrounding the use of military force. The U.S. Constitution vests Congress with the power to raise and support armies, to provide and maintain a navy, and to regulate the military forces. Congress can use its budgetary powers to limit the scope and duration of troop deployments—setting strict reporting requirements and sunset provisions, targeting money for certain military activities, and restricting the use of appropriated funds for others.¹ Members of Congress can sway public opinion against the president; just as they can impede other aspects of his (someday her) legislative

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1. Auerswald 1999 and 2000.

agenda.² While presidents retain considerable discretion to use force as they please, Congress may be able to increase the marginal costs of doing so. And when facing particularly risky foreign conflicts, congressional opposition may ultimately dissuade a president from deploying the military.

The existing quantitative literature on the use of force does not examine whether presidents balance their “preference for action” against congressional interests.³ Rarely are measures of congressional relations with the president included in statistical models on the use of force; and when included, they are crudely specified, typically nothing more than indicator variables for divided government, the post-War Powers Resolution era, or periods of “cold war consensus.”⁴

We revisit the event-count models used to predict uses of force, adding appropriate measures of congressional support for the president. Our findings are unambiguous and run directly against the notion that politics stop “at the water’s edge.”⁵ While Congress does not appear to constrain the president’s capacity to initiate low-level military maneuvers, sizeable effects are observed for major military ventures—the very events that can have electoral consequences for presidents and members of Congress.

The Quantitative Use-of-Force Literature

Military deployments short of war (such as the Berlin Airlift or the Cuban Missile Crisis) represent potent expressions of executive authority. Not coincidentally, they have garnered a large academic following, beginning with the pioneering work of Blechman and Kaplan in 1978. Blechman and Kaplan were principally concerned with the international conditions (for example, whether the Soviet Union was a party to a crisis) that lead presidents to initiate lower-level military ventures, which they termed “force without war.” They identified 226 such incidents between 1946 and 1976 and tracked when, and whether, U.S. presidents achieved their strategic objectives.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, scholars built on Blechman and Kaplan’s data base to test a confluence of international relations theories about interstate conflict and political psychology insights into executive decision making. According to Ostrom and Job, U.S. presidents use simple decision rules to balance the competing demands placed before them. As commander-in-chief, chief executive, and “political leader,” presidents “monitor salient dimensions in the domestic, international, and politi-

2. On swaying public support, see Brody 1991; on impeding the legislative agenda, see Lindsay 1994; Lindsay and Ripley 1993; and Auerswald and Cowhey 1999.

3. Ostrom and Job 1986, 544.

4. See Gowa 1998 and 1999, and Fordham 2002; DeRouen 1995; and Meernik 1993, for each of these measures, respectively.

5. Gowa 1998.

cal arenas” before committing U.S. forces abroad.⁶ Domestic politics, however, retain special significance. In Ostrom and Job’s empirical analysis, the substantive impacts of domestic variables (weighted economic misery index, presidential approval, and national elections) on the frequency with which presidents exercise military force consistently match or exceed those of their international counterparts.⁷

The bulk of studies following Ostrom and Job have examined how the economy and public opinion influence presidents’ decisions to deploy troops abroad. James and Oneal introduced a new variable tapping international threats to U.S. interests, yet found results consistent with Ostrom and Job.⁸ Fordham subsequently argued that economic factors and public opinion do not directly shape presidential choices, but instead influence how presidents view their environment.⁹ Presidents, according to Fordham, only “see” opportunities to use force when the domestic economy is poor—otherwise they have few incentives to imperil their reelection prospects with military ventures.

Other scholars have reached different conclusions, holding that purely external factors drive decisions to use force. Meernik finds that domestic economic forces played little to no role in predicting U.S. uses of military force.¹⁰ Gowa contends that neither the partisan nature of Congress, nor electoral cycles, nor the state of the economy predicts the regularity with which presidents exercise military force.¹¹ In a slightly different vein, Mitchell and Moore, as well as Fordham, raise important issues of data comparability (scholars use different years in analyzing their hypotheses) and temporal dynamics (uses of force may be clustered together in time) that may compromise previous statistical findings.¹²

While much divides the protagonists in the use-of-force literature, one assumption is consensual: Congress is weak.¹³ Indeed, an assumption of legislative impotence has achieved the status of conventional wisdom. According to Meernik:

The literature on U.S. foreign policymaking unambiguously demonstrates that because of his constitutional prerogatives and political incentives as well as congressional weaknesses in foreign policy, it is the president who exercises supreme control over the nation’s military actions.¹⁴

6. Ostrom and Job 1986.

7. *Ibid.*, 555.

8. James and Oneal 1991.

9. Fordham 1998a.

10. Meernik 1994. See also Meernik and Waterman 1996.

11. Gowa 1998.

12. See Mitchell and Moore 2002; and Fordham 2002.

13. For a partial exception, see Morgan and Bickers 1992; and Morgan and Campbell 1991. Morgan and Campbell 1991 examine cross-nationally “legislative constraints” on executive war powers. Because executives are coded as being constrained only when “legislatures have the ability to overturn [them],” Morgan and Campbell do not assess the varying capacities of individual legislatures to constrain their executives over time. Morgan and Bickers 1992 examine the influence of partisanship and public opinion on decisions to use force in the context of diversionary war.

14. Meernik 1994, 122–23.

Because the president also serves as commander-in-chief of the military, Congress cannot (or will not) try to constrain the president's freedom to pick battles, define the scope and duration of conflict, or set the terms by which a conflict ultimately is resolved. While Congress may direct domestic policymaking, its hold over foreign policy is quite tenuous; and when the president decides to exercise military force abroad, members of Congress can only complain on Sunday morning talk shows. For the most part, the president's authority over military matters is beyond reproach.

Consider, by way of examples, work on two of the causal mechanisms that underlie the use-of-force literature: diversionary war and "rally around the flag" effects. The diversionary war hypothesis suggests that heads of state deploy troops abroad in an effort to distract attention away from domestic strife, most commonly economic downturns.¹⁵ Advocates of the theory typically assume that Congress and the public are blind to a leader's true intentions and, as a consequence, regularly accept on faith proffered justifications for conflicts.¹⁶ By sending troops abroad, it is supposed, presidents can shift public attention away from a failing economy and rally widespread support, as members of Congress automatically fall behind their chief executive.

Congress is also largely absent from most quantitative tests for "rally around the flag" effects.¹⁷ Congress's stance on military ventures conducted abroad, it is assumed, does not mediate the size or direction of changes in the president's public approval ratings.¹⁸ "Aggressive foreign behavior is a useful tool for dealing with domestic political problems"—especially because domestic political institutions, presumptively, cannot temper the president's efforts to distract and, occasionally, deceive.¹⁹ Quite the contrary, members of Congress are just as susceptible to the rally phenomenon as is the general public.²⁰

Accounting for Congress

Presidents, to be sure, retain profound informational and tactical advantages over Congress in formulating and implementing U.S. foreign policy. As Peterson correctly observes, "presidents remain the most potent political force in the making of foreign policy," while Congress remains "a secondary political player."²¹ Nonetheless, we question the "unambiguous demonstration" that domestic political institutions do not, or cannot, impede the presidential use of force. Presidents cannot

15. Richards et al. 1993.

16. For a critique, see Meernik and Waterman 1996.

17. See Baum 2002; and James and Rioux 1998.

18. For an important exception, see Brody 1991.

19. Morgan and Bickers 1992, 26.

20. Hinckley 1994.

21. Peterson 1994, 217.

easily and automatically dupe political opponents, especially when doing so entails putting American troops in harm's way. Indeed, there are at least three ways in which Congress can interfere with presidential plans to deploy troops abroad; and hence, three reasons why presidents should take Congress seriously when contemplating military action.

1. *Dismantling the President's Military Venture.* Congress can actively work against the president, materially affecting the course of a military campaign. It can refuse to appropriate needed funds, call for the return of troops sent on ill-conceived foreign missions, or raise concerns about the efficacy of an intervention. Grimmatt has documented numerous instances since 1970 when Congress cut off military funding to compel the withdrawal of forces, typically using the appropriations powers to restrict military operations.²² In their study of the War Powers Resolution, Auerswald and Cowhey show that Congress regularly places obligations on presidents (reporting requirements, budgetary limitations) that can prove burdensome.²³ 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.
2. *Conveying Political Resolve.* Whether lower-level military deployments can achieve strategic objectives in short order depends, in part, on the president's ability to credibly convey political resolve. Congress plays an important role in this regard. When facing considerable opposition within Congress, presidents will have a more difficult time signaling the nation's willingness to see a military campaign to its end. As Schultz shows, an "opposition party can undermine the credibility of some challenges by publicly opposing them. Since this strategy threatens to increase the probability of resistance from the rival state, it forces the government to be more selective about making threats"—and, concomitantly, more cautious about actually using military force.²⁴ Domestic political strife weakens the credibility of signals of resolve, and as such, undermines the effectiveness of those shows of force designed to "influence . . . specific behavior of individuals in another nation without engaging in a continuing contest of violence"—the very kinds of lower-level deployments the use-of-force literature means to explain.²⁵ To the extent that presidents want to avoid protracted military entanglements abroad, they may be wary of deploying troops when they do not have their domestic house in order.²⁶

22. Grimmatt 2001.

23. Auerswald and Cowhey 1997, 523.

24. Schultz 1998, 840.

25. Blechman and Kaplan 1978, 12.

26. Smith 1998.

3. *Moving Public Opinion*. In three ways, scholars have shown that Congress influences media coverage of, and public opinion on, the president's foreign policy initiatives. First, Brody presents evidence that rally effects are conditional on support for the president within Congress, especially among party leaders.²⁷ Facing foreign crises, presidential approval ratings spike when members of Congress stand in defense of the president; when critical voices predominate, rally effects disappear. Relatedly, a number of scholars have stipulated that media outlets key off Congress when covering military deployments, a phenomenon they label "indexing."²⁸ "The spectrum of debate in the news, the indexing hypothesis asserts, is a function of the spectrum of debate in official Washington. If there is debate inside the American government over U.S. policy, critical perspectives appear in the news. If government policy has bipartisan support in Washington, however, critical perspectives expressed outside the government are not well reported."²⁹ In the early stages of a military deployment, therefore, Congress helps shape the scope and content of debate covered in print and television news. Finally, Congress may directly inform the public's understanding of past deployments. Should a military venture go awry, or simply prove to be more protracted than expected, the opposition party may level due criticism at the next election; and if the opposition can speak with one voice while holding large majorities in Congress, it may sway a significant number of voters to vote against the president and his or her party. Anticipating that Congress will push public opinion against them, presidents may be less likely to engage the military, especially on ventures that pose considerable risks.

Two features of these politics deserve emphasis. First, the probability that Congress employs any of these tactics surely depends on the perceived costs of a military initiative. While lower-level deployments are unlikely to attract widespread attention, larger initiatives (measured in terms of sheer manpower or financial investment) stand some chance of inviting congressional opposition. To the extent that interbranch politics surround the use of military force, they should intensify as the scope of a military venture escalates.³⁰ Second, much of the action is anticipatory. Rather than going head to head with Congress at the front end of a military campaign, presidents anticipate what members of Congress will do once they have had a chance to observe evidence of the campaign's success or failure and the public's reaction to it.³¹ When Congress appears likely to extend sympathy and support throughout the course of a military venture, presidents should be more willing to deploy the troops; but when early disappointments are likely to

27. Brody 1991, 63–76.

28. See Bennett 1990; Bennett and Manheim 1993; and Mermin 1999.

29. Mermin 1999, 5.

30. Auerswald and Cowhey 1997.

31. Lindsay 2003.

trigger a congressional requital, presidents, from the beginning, should be wary of proceeding.

Partisan Support/Opposition

That members of Congress can work against the president does not mean that they necessarily will. Just as they can erect roadblocks, so too can they lend critical support to a president attempting to deal with a foreign crisis. If they take any public stand or introduce any substantive legislation, copartisans in Congress are likely to demonstrate solidarity with their president, authorizing the use of force or appropriating the funds needed to carry it out. Interference, if it is to occur, usually originates from within the opposition party's ranks.³² We suggest three reasons why this is so.

1. *The Content and Credibility of Signals.* With regards to the use of force, profound informational asymmetries define relations between presidents and Congress.³³ Presidents have at their disposal considerable amounts of private information about developments abroad and their impacts on the nation's strategic interests. Congress, meanwhile, has few formal mechanisms for corroborating this information. When presidents make a case for deploying troops abroad, Congress must decide whether or not to take them at their word.³⁴

A number of game-theoretic models demonstrate that the credibility of signals improves as political actors' preferences converge.³⁵ The first principle of Krehbiel's information theory of congressional committees, for instance, states that "the more extreme are the preferences of a committee specialist relative to preferences of a nonspecialist in the legislature, the less informative is the committee."³⁶ When senders and receivers in incomplete information games share a common worldview, the signals conveyed are especially informative. Conversely, when preferences diverge, signals can be indecipherable.

If presidents are to make an effective case for deploying troops, members of Congress must believe the information presidents transmit. Because shared ideological orientations facilitate belief, presidents should garner trust

32. Huth and Allee 2002, 82–83.

33. Schlesinger 1989.

34. Information asymmetries assuredly decline over the course of a military campaign, as interest groups, the media, and members of Congress collect and disseminate relevant information. But when military force is initiated (the subject of this article), the information available to presidents from the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, and the State Department is unparalleled.

35. See Crawford and Sobel 1982; Lupia and McCubbins 1994; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990; and Canes-Wrone forthcoming.

36. Krehbiel 1991, 81.

from members of their party, and suspicion from the opposition party. As their party grows in size and strength, therefore, presidents ought to benefit from greater legislative discretion (formal and otherwise) to exercise force abroad.

2. *Shared Electoral Fortunes.* When their electoral fortunes are linked to the president's, congressional members of the president's party have a vested interest in the president's success—just as members of the opposition party do in the president's failure. If presidential approval ratings increase when presidents exercise force abroad, as the “rally around the flag” literature suggests; and if high presidential approval ratings boost members' electoral prospects, as the literature on coattails suggests; then, all else equal, members' willingness to grant the president broad discretion to exercise force abroad should critically depend on the president's partisan identification.³⁷ Presidential uses of force rebound to the electoral benefit of members of the president's party and, by implication, to the detriment of the opposition party. As such, members of the president's party, all else equal, ought to actively support the president's plans to exercise force abroad, as members of the opposition party, at a minimum, raise cautious reservations.
3. *Currying Presidential Favor.* In a variety of ways, presidents can influence the electoral prospects of members of Congress. By visiting their districts, appearing in their television advertisements, or introducing them to potential funders, presidents can significantly affect members' electoral returns. Precisely because constituents pay more attention to domestic than foreign policy matters when deciding how to vote, members of Congress often have little to lose, and much to gain, from actively supporting a president interested in exercising force abroad. Of course, presidents work on behalf of members of their own party. Republican members of Congress rarely have anything to gain from currying the favor of Democratic presidents; as Democratic members have little reason to go out of their way to support Republican presidents. To the extent that broad grants of authority in foreign affairs help members remain in the president's good graces, members of Congress have cause to support presidents of their party when they consider using force abroad.

There are, then, a variety of reasons why members of the president's party should be more likely to support the president. But while resting on different first principles, all generate the same prediction: congressional members of the president's party reliably will line up behind the president during times of international crisis, while members of the opposition party may not. Thus discretion to exercise force

37. On the rally effect, see Baker and Oneal 2001; and Wittkopf and Dehaven 1987. On the coattail effect, see Campbell and Sumners 1990; and Campbell 1986.

should critically depend on the level of partisan support a president enjoys within Congress.

Empirical Tests

To test whether congressional politics play a role in the president's calculus to deploy military troops abroad, we conduct several statistical examinations of the U.S. use of force between 1945 and 2000. Our data draw from Fordham, Fordham and Sarver, and Zelikow, all of which update the original Blechman and Kaplan time series that ended in 1976.³⁸ The dependent variable is a count of the number of times each quarter that the president initiates military force abroad.³⁹

Blechman and Kaplan ranked demonstrations of force on a five-point severity scale. Many scholars use only the most severe uses of force in their analyses, that is, instances that involved the deployment of nuclear capabilities or the mobilization of multiple aircraft carrier task groups, battalions, or combat wings.⁴⁰ As previously indicated, one would expect Congress to exert the most influence in major uses of force. Still, we do not want to dismiss the possibility of broader legislative involvement in foreign policy, and therefore we estimate separate models for both major uses (1–3 on the severity scale) and minor uses (4–5).⁴¹

Figure 1 traces use-of-force trends in U.S. foreign policy.⁴² Between 1945 and 2000, presidents exercised force a total of 383 times, 141 of which qualified as major and 242 minor.⁴³

38. See Fordham 1998a; Fordham and Sarver 2001; and Zelikow 1987.

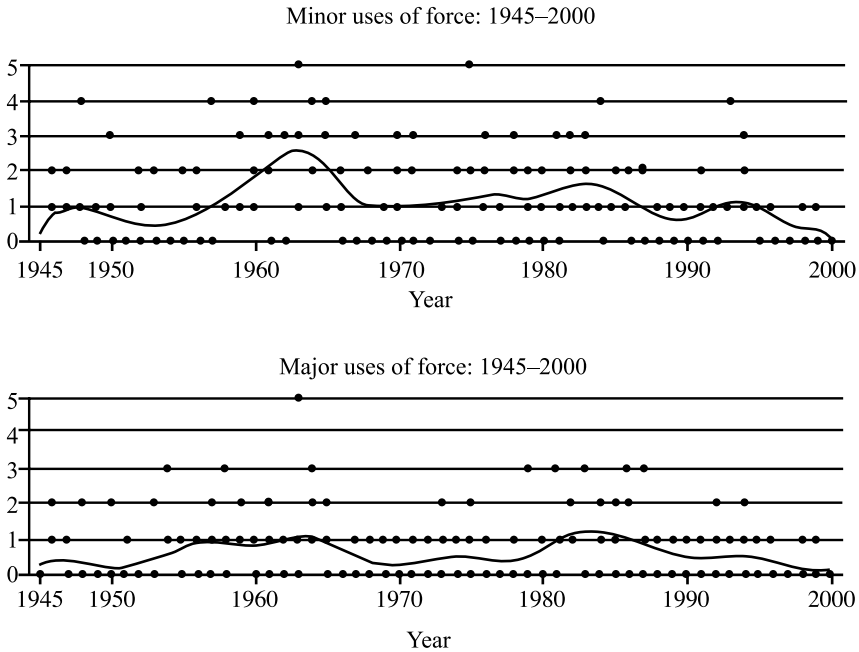
39. In two ways, we amend the existing use-of-force data sets. First, we extend the time series through 2000. To identify uses of force post-1995, we replicated the procedures described in Fordham 1998a. Second, we correct several mistakes in both the original Blechman/Kaplan time series, as well as amendments made to it by subsequent scholars. Specifically, we remove two classes of events: those uses of force that were scheduled (for example, Operation Team Spirit) and those carried out by troops already deployed to a crisis area (for example, attacking Iraqi antimissile batteries after being fired on in the no-fly zone). Note, though, that none of the findings presented below change significantly when the 1945–95 data sets are analyzed.

40. Examples include Fordham 1998a and 1998b. The severity of the use of force is determined by information available at the outset of the crisis. Thus while neither Congress nor the president know, by the eventual severity or duration of a conflict, both have information regarding the size and nuclear capability of the troop deployment, which distinguishes major from minor incidents.

41. This definition of major versus minor force is standard in the use-of-force literature. See DeRouen 1995 and 2000; Fordham 1998a and 1998b; and Mitchell and Moore 2002. Changing the definition of major uses of force to include only level 1 and 2 deployments on the Blechman/Kaplan severity scale yields positive coefficients for all versions of our independent variable of interest, but these estimates vary in their statistical significance. This result is not surprising given the large number of quarters during which no level 1 or 2 deployments occur.

42. Yearly data is used in the graphs simply for purposes of visual coherence. All analyses use quarterly data.

43. Fordham 1998a.



Note: Graphs use annual counts and present a nonlinear smoother for visual coherence.

FIGURE 1. Quarterly U.S. uses of force, 1945-2000

Key Explanatory Variables

We construct three measures of congressional support for the president.⁴⁴ The first, UNIFIED GOVERNMENT, simply indicates whether the congressional majority party is the same as the president’s party in both the House and Senate.⁴⁵ To obtain a more nuanced assessment of the level of congressional support for the president,

44. Consistent with Edwards’s observation that “members of the president’s party almost always form the core of the president’s support in Congress,” all measures of congressional support are partisan based. Edwards 2003, 10. There is, at present, a sizeable literature in American politics that examines the effects of partisan divisions across the legislative and executive branches on lawmaking. See Mayhew 1991; Coleman 1999; Howell et al. 2000; Rudalevige 2002; Binder 2003; and Lewis 2003. Concurrently, there is an ongoing debate about whether parties represent mere proxies for members’ preferences—see, for example, Krehbiel 1993—or whether party leaders independently influence legislative processes—see, for example, Cox and McCubbins 1993. On this particular issue, we remain agnostic. Given that the unilateral presidency literature consistently finds that the partisan composition of Congress influences executive discretionary authority—see Howell 2003; Mayer 2001; and Krause and Cohen 2000—however, we choose in this article to use partisan measures of congressional support.

45. Versions of all key explanatory variables that focus exclusively on the Senate, which arguably plays a disproportionate role in defining Congress’s foreign policy positions, generate comparable results.

however, we also compute the average percentage of seats held by the president's party in the House and Senate and label this variable `PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY`. As the size of the president's party increases within Congress, the president should enjoy additional discretion to deploy troops abroad. Conversely, as the opposition party increases in size, the president's ability to use military force should attenuate.

Southern Democrats present obvious problems for partisan-based measures of presidential support. While Democrats enjoyed large majorities in the House and Senate in the 1960s, they also faced strong divisions within their ranks. To address this shortcoming, Brady, Cooper, and Hurley constructed "legislative potential for policy change" (LPPC) scores.⁴⁶ They base LPPC scores on four factors: (1) the size of the majority party; (2) the majority party's internal cohesiveness; (3) the size of the minority party; and (4) its cohesiveness.⁴⁷ To generate our third measure of congressional support for the president, we modify these scores only slightly, substituting the president's and opposition parties for the majority and minority parties, respectively. When the president's party is relatively large and unified and confronts a relatively small and divided opposition party, the president should be able to use force with considerable freedom. Conversely, when the president's party is relatively small and divided, and the opposition party is larger and more unified, the president's freedom to use force abroad should decline. We label this variable `PRESIDENT PARTY POWER`.

Background Controls

As previously discussed, scholars have focused almost exclusively on other domestic and international factors that shape the president's ability to use force abroad. In order to reduce the chances that our findings result from omitted variable bias, we incorporate controls for many of the alternative hypothesized influences on the use of force. From the beginning, though, it is worth highlighting that none of the main results presented below depend on the inclusion of any particular set of background controls. Indeed, all observed relationships between congressional support for the president and use-of-force frequencies hold in models that add only presidential fixed effects.

Consistent with a burgeoning literature on the political economy of the use of force,⁴⁸ we incorporate the quarterly unemployment rate (`UNEMPLOYMENT`) and the consumer price index (`CPI`)—both of which were taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Past research finds that poor economic performance is likely to create incentives for the president to act aggressively in foreign policy affairs.⁴⁹

46. Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979.

47. The LPPC score for either chamber in any given term is calculated as follows: Chamber LPPC = [(majority party size in percent) × (cohesion of majority party)] – [(minority party size in percent) × (cohesion of minority party)]. Congressional Quarterly's party unity scores are used.

48. Fordham 1998a.

49. See James and Oneal 1991; and Fordham 2002.

Because much of the literature on the use of force draws on theories of diversionary war, we control for the president's public approval rating (APPROVAL). The impetus for much of the original quantitative work on the subject was Ostrom and Job's finding that approval ratings were a highly significant determinant of the use of force—though subsequent research has proven less definitive on the matter. We measure the first Gallup approval rating for the president in each quarter.⁵⁰

A related body of work examines whether elections usher in additional uses of force.⁵¹ This research contends that “rally around the flag” effects establish incentives for presidents to use force during the months immediately preceding an election. Thus we introduce the variable ELECTION, which is coded “1” during the first three quarters of a presidential election year, and 0 otherwise.⁵²

The next four variables capture facets of the international environment that may impinge on the president's autonomy in foreign policy. Because of contemporary military commitments, there should be a tendency for presidents to employ force for bargaining purposes less often during times of war. We create a variable labeled WAR, coded “1” during periods of international wars in which the United States was involved (Korea, Vietnam, and the 1991 Gulf War). The Cold War was also a period of unprecedented concern over international engagement of U.S. forces. To control for its influence, we include the variable COLD WAR, which is coded “1” during the 1945–89 period.

To account for systemic forces that have been linked to the onset of both interstate wars and disputes, we include a measure of U.S. hegemony during the period of analysis.⁵³ The measure is the percentage of international military capabilities held by the United States, and derives from the Correlates of War Capabilities data set.⁵⁴ With hegemonic power may come responsibilities (and incentives) to monitor and intervene in conflicts worldwide. Thus the variable HEGEMONY ought to be positively associated with the use of force. Finally, we include a measure of the number of world military conflicts beginning in each quarter of observation. Presumably, a higher number of world conflicts provides more opportunities for the United States to respond with the use of force.⁵⁵ The variable WORLD DISPUTES aggregates non-U.S. militarized interstate disputes (MIDS) over each period of observation.⁵⁶

50. See Ostrom and Job 1986. In the handful of quarters missing approval data, we fill the data by using a linear interpolation. We also interpolated by using the last known poll. The results are consistent regardless of the method used.

51. Gaubatz 1991.

52. Fordham's election variable differs from ours. While we isolate the three quarters leading up to the national election, Fordham 1998a isolates all four quarters in an election year, as well as the first quarter of the following year when an incumbent is reelected. Moreover, Fordham specifies two election variables, separating peace-time from war-time elections. Doing so makes no difference for our main findings.

53. Mansfield 1994.

54. Singer and Small 1990.

55. Meernik 1994.

56. For a description of the MIDS 3.0 data, see Ghosn and Palmer 2003.

Results

The use of force, then, is assumed to be a function of the partisan composition of Congress, presidential fixed effects, and background controls. We estimate the following event count model:⁵⁷

$$\begin{aligned} \text{FORCE} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{CONGRESSSUPPORT} + \beta_2 \text{UNEMPLOYMENT} + \beta_3 \text{CPI} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{APPROVAL} + \beta_5 \text{ELECTION} + \beta_6 \text{WAR} + \beta_7 \text{COLDWAR} \\ & + \beta_8 \text{HEGEMONY} + \beta_9 \text{WORLDDISPUTES} + \sum \beta_i \text{PRESIDENT} + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

If our expectations about the relevance of Congress hold, β_1 should be positive and statistically significant. Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in the Appendix.

Tables 1 and 2 present the estimated regression results for each measure of congressional support—UNIFIED GOVERNMENT, PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY, and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER—on minor and major uses of force, respectively. The results are strikingly consistent. When minor uses of force serve as the dependent variable, none of the key explanatory variables are statistically significant. Major uses of force, however, are affected by domestic political factors, as the partisan composition of Congress appears to play a significant role in shaping the president's willingness to deploy troops abroad.⁵⁸ With regards to larger-scale deployments, significant effects are consistently observed; the positive coefficients suggest that as the size of the president's party grows, the president's proclivity to use the military for significant purposes also increases.

Although theory suggests that the size of the president's party affects the discretion of the president to use force abroad, it is largely silent with regard to the functional form of the relationship. There may be good reason, however, to expect the impact of PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER to be nonlinear. Incremental changes at the tails of the distribution may not have an appreciable impact on the frequency with which presidents exercise force abroad. Shifts around the center of the distribution, meanwhile, may induce large changes in the use of force. To test for the possibility of nonlinear effects, we take the

57. Autocorrelation function (ACF) plots reveal negligible temporal dynamics. Three of the first four autocorrelations of the major and minor time series are statistically significant, but the largest value of rho observed is only 0.19. Estimates obtained from general estimation equation (GEE) models that correct for an AR(1) process yield virtually identical results to traditional event count models. On GEE models, see Zorn 2001. (The ACF plots and results from GEE models are available from the authors on request.) For the sake of simplicity, we report estimates from negative binomial regressions with robust standard errors that account for clustering on each president. We use negative binomial models because Poisson models assume that events within an observation period are independent. King 1998, 50–51. In this case, the presence of military action may spur further military action in close proximity. Negative binomial models do not assume independence.

58. Models that pool major and minor uses of force never generate statistically significant impacts for congressional support for the president.

TABLE 1. *Minor uses of force: 1945–2000*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
UNIFIED GOVERNMENT	0.173 (0.540)	–	–	–	–
PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY	–	–0.029 (3.037)	–	–	–
e[PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY]	–	–	–0.515 (12.843)	–	–
PRESIDENT PARTY POWER	–	–	–	0.006 (0.018)	–
e[PRESIDENT PARTY POWER]	–	–	–	–	0.010 (0.463)
UNEMPLOYMENT	0.239*** (0.059)	0.248*** (0.063)	0.249*** (0.064)	0.237*** (0.058)	0.247*** (0.066)
CPI	0.066*** (0.028)	0.059*** (0.021)	0.059*** (0.021)	0.063*** (0.023)	0.060*** (0.023)
APPROVAL	–0.002 (0.008)	–0.003 (0.008)	–0.003 (0.008)	–0.003 (0.008)	–0.003 (0.008)
ELECTION	0.163 (0.159)	0.149 (0.128)	0.146 (0.128)	0.174 (0.131)	0.150 (0.155)
ONGOING WAR	–0.656*** (0.214)	–0.625*** (0.206)	–0.624*** (0.205)	–0.646*** (0.214)	–0.627*** (0.209)
COLD WAR	0.250*** (0.100)	0.269*** (0.098)	0.271*** (0.098)	0.252*** (0.102)	0.268*** (0.103)
HEGEMONY	–2.746 (3.767)	–1.905 (3.559)	–1.828 (3.553)	–2.686 (3.735)	–1.972 (4.079)
WORLD DISPUTES (NON-U.S.)	0.027 (0.031)	0.026 (0.031)	0.026 (0.031)	0.027 (0.031)	0.027 (0.031)
Constant	–1.195 (1.200)	–1.358 (2.122)	–1.075 (8.350)	–1.118 (1.115)	–1.354 (1.360)
ln(α)	–13.951*** (1.270)	–13.949*** (1.261)	–13.951*** (1.251)	–13.944*** (1.339)	–13.946*** (1.373)

Note: $N = 224$ for all models. Each model is estimated using negative binomial regression with Huber/White/sandwich-clustered standard errors. Each model also contains fixed-effect terms for each presidential administration, which are not reported to conserve space.

*** = $p < .01$; one-tailed tests.

** = $p < .05$; one-tailed tests.

* = $p < .1$; one-tailed tests.

logistic transformations of PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER (noted in each table with an “e” prefix) and reestimate the models.

No matter which functional form is used, every measure of congressional support for the president serves as a significant predictor of the quarterly number of major military deployments. Presidents exercise major force roughly 45 percent more often during periods of unified government than during periods of divided government. A one standard deviation increase in the size of the president’s party in the Congress (from a mean of slightly greater than 50 percent to 58 percent) corresponds with a 17 percent increase in the use of force by the United States. Conversely, while a one standard deviation drop leads to a 16 percent decline in

TABLE 2. Major uses of force: 1945–2000

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
UNIFIED GOVERNMENT	0.390*** (0.088)	–	–	–	–
PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY	–	1.711** (0.875)	–	–	–
e[PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY]	–	–	7.196** (3.728)	–	–
PRESIDENT PARTY POWER	–	–	–	0.012** (0.006)	–
e[PRESIDENT PARTY POWER]	–	–	–	–	0.270*** (0.071)
UNEMPLOYMENT	0.216*** (0.080)	0.219** (0.088)	0.219*** (0.088)	0.210** (0.090)	0.217*** (0.084)
CPI	0.036 (0.031)	0.027 (0.031)	0.027 (0.031)	0.027 (0.033)	0.024 (0.036)
APPROVAL	–0.003 (0.010)	–0.004 (0.011)	–0.004 (0.011)	–0.004 (0.011)	–0.004 (0.011)
ELECTION	0.088 (0.206)	0.100 (0.229)	0.099 (0.229)	0.100 (0.225)	0.083 (0.207)
ONGOING WAR	–0.425* (0.262)	–0.356 (0.283)	–0.355 (0.283)	–0.385* (0.290)	–0.404* (0.265)
COLD WAR	0.653*** (0.136)	0.664*** (0.144)	0.664*** (0.144)	0.654*** (0.146)	0.669*** (0.137)
HEGEMONY	3.118 (2.911)	3.859 (3.234)	3.859 (3.261)	3.522 (3.501)	4.024* (2.812)
WORLD DISPUTES (NON-U.S.)	–0.011 (0.019)	–0.013 (0.020)	–0.013 (0.020)	–0.012 (0.020)	–0.011 (0.019)
Constant	–3.337*** (1.115)	–4.195*** (1.275)	–7.820*** (2.516)	–3.195*** (1.346)	–3.453*** (1.156)
ln(α)	–13.925*** (4.415)	–13.087*** (5.452)	–13.082*** (5.533)	–13.409*** (5.328)	–13.515*** (4.394)

Note: $N = 224$ for all models. Each model is estimated using negative binomial regression with Huber/White/sandwich-clustered standard errors. Each model also contains fixed-effect terms for each presidential administration, which are not reported to conserve space.

*** = $p < .01$; one-tailed tests.

** = $p < .05$; one-tailed tests.

* = $p < .1$; one-tailed tests.

the number of uses of force. When shifting to its maximum value of PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY (68 percent), the model predicts a 36 percent increase in the incident rate.

Similar results arise when using the PRESIDENT PARTY POWER scores. A one standard deviation increase in the relative size and cohesiveness of the president’s party yields a predicted 19 percent increase in the number of uses of force, while evaluating the variable at its maximum generates a predicted increase of 39 percent. The level of partisan support for the president within Congress, it seems, stands out as a major determinant of the U.S. propensity to use force abroad. That

congressional effects uniquely apply to major uses of force, further, corroborates Auerswald and Cowhey's observation that:

Congress has acquiesced to the use of force so long as the administration's action is swift or small scale. Such deployments raise little likelihood of future Vietnam-style conflicts and do not necessitate congressional action. Without exception, however, long-term conflicts were met with either congressional threats or legislative action with the potential to start the war powers clock.⁵⁹

The distinction between major and minor uses of force, then, is important, as the president's inclination to consider congressional interests appears to depend upon the size and expected costs of a military venture.

For the most part, the remaining model estimates are consistent with previous findings. For instance, estimates in Tables 1 and 2 for unemployment mirror the original Ostrom and Job findings that higher levels of "economic misery" correspond with higher levels of military activity.⁶⁰ Inflation rates also contribute positively to minor deployments; although they do not influence major uses of force.

Similar to those scholars who do not differentiate war-time and peace-time elections, we find no statistical relationship between the election cycle and the use of force.⁶¹ In addition, the approval variable never attains statistical significance in our estimates. This is consistent with the findings of both Meernik and Fordham, but counters Ostrom and Job's claim that declining approval ratings posit incentives for presidents to use force.

Other variables are of the predicted sign. During the Cold War, the expected number of uses of force more than doubles. Ongoing wars depress the propensity of presidents to deploy U.S. troops, yet their statistical significance varies based on whether minor or major uses of force serve as the dependent variable. The level of military hostility in the world and the level of U.S. hegemony, however, appear to have no consistent or statistically significant influence on the propensity of the United States to engage the military.

Robustness Checks

Do congressional effects hold for the entire post-World War II era? A number of scholars have observed that during the 1950s and early 1960s, a broad consensus about national security policies and priorities transcended party lines in American politics; the Vietnam War, however, reestablished partisan cleavages with regards to foreign policy.⁶² If true, then the partisan composition of Congress should pro-

59. Auerswald and Cowhey 1997, 523.

60. Ostrom and Job 1986. These are also consistent with Fordham 1998b.

61. For similar findings, see Gowa 1998; and Meernik 1994.

62. Blechman 1990, 10.

TABLE 3. Major uses of force, with period effects: 1945–2000

	(1)	(2)
e[PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY] PRE-WPR: 1945–73	6.521** (3.947)	–
e[PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY] POST-WPR: 1974–95	4.795 (4.047)	–
e[PRESIDENT PARTY POWER] PRE-WPR: 1945–73	–	0.337*** (0.127)
e[PRESIDENT PARTY POWER] POST-WPR: 1974–95	–	0.177 (0.279)
UNEMPLOYMENT	0.236*** (0.099)	0.219*** (0.086)
CPI	0.029 (0.031)	0.029 (0.043)
APPROVAL	–0.002 (0.011)	–0.003 (0.011)
ELECTION	0.106 (0.230)	0.085 (0.207)
ONGOING WAR	–0.321 (0.306)	–0.411* (0.262)
COLD WAR	0.692*** (0.166)	0.666*** (0.138)
HEGEMONY	4.027 (3.307)	3.728 (2.835)
WORLD DISPUTES (NON-U.S.)	–0.011 (0.021)	–0.011 (0.019)
Constant	–6.544*** (2.435)	–3.383*** (1.114)
ln(α)	–13.464*** (4.872)	–13.520*** (4.693)

Note: $N = 224$ for all models. WPR = War Powers Resolution. Each model is estimated using negative binomial regression with Huber/White/sandwich-clustered standard errors. Each model also contains fixed-effect terms for each presidential administration, which are not reported to conserve space.

*** = $p < .01$; one-tailed tests.

** = $p < .05$; one-tailed tests.

* = $p < .1$; one-tailed tests.

foundly affect the presidential use of force during the post-Vietnam years, but have a negligible impact before.

Table 3 examines the effects of PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER before and after the War Powers Resolution (November 1973).⁶³ This resolution makes for a useful dividing line, as it stood as the centerpiece of the congressional resurgence of the early 1970s and, according to many scholars,

63. Estimates are not sensitive to this choice of year. When using adjacent years, virtually identical results are observed.

marked Congress's reassertion of its constitutional prerogatives over foreign policy-making.⁶⁴ Still, we do not find any evidence that Congress's impact on the quarterly number of major uses of force initiated by the president is confined to the second half of the postwar era. Quite the contrary, whether using PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY OR PRESIDENT PARTY POWER, impacts appear more pronounced between World War II and the advent of the War Powers Resolution. We cannot reject the null hypothesis that the slopes for the two periods are equivalent.⁶⁵

Another concern is that these findings are peculiar to the particular data set analyzed. Virtually all quantitative work on the use of force in U.S. foreign policy relies on the original Blechman and Kaplan data. Indeed, these data were designed especially for this kind of investigation, and various updates have kept them current. Traditionally, however, cross-national studies of military conflict use the Militarized Interstate Dispute Data (MIDS).⁶⁶ Gowa also uses the MIDS data in her contribution to the use-of-force literature.⁶⁷

We prefer the Blechman and Kaplan data over MIDS. Employing the Blechman/Kaplan data facilitates comparisons with a larger body of past statistical work on the use of force. In addition, as Fordham and Sarver have shown, the MIDS data overlook many uses of force included in the Blechman/Kaplan data.⁶⁸ Still, Gowa's rejection of the idea that partisan politics play a role in decisions to use force abroad was based on analyses of MIDS data. Finding an insignificant effect for divided government on MIDS counts for the period between 1870 and 1992,⁶⁹ Gowa concluded that with regards to the use of military force, "partisan politics has . . . remained muted," indicating what she deemed "a subversion of the checks-and-balances system."⁷⁰

64. If the War Powers Resolution reestablished Congress's rightful place in deliberations over the use of force, then congressional effects may be concentrated in the post-1974 period. One mitigating factor, however, is worth noting. By establishing strict reporting requirements, the resolution may have reduced the informational asymmetries between the executive and legislative branches. As we note in the second section above, copartisans within Congress are especially likely to support the president because, in part, they can better trust his assessment of a military intervention's efficacy. If the resolution achieved its intended objectives—a subject of considerable controversy; see Fisher 1995, 2000—then information may replace trust, and the importance of partisanship may decline.

65. Without taking logistic transformations, significant impacts are not observed between 1974 and 2000. These null findings are due to Carter, who exercised force relatively infrequently even though he enjoyed large Democratic majorities in Congress. Taking the logistic transformations of the key explanatory variables effectively attenuates the influence of this outlier, which leverages considerable influence on the shortened time series.

66. Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996.

67. See Gowa 1998 and 1999.

68. Fordham and Sarver 2001.

69. Taking the use-of-force time series back to 1870 would appear to be a strength of Gowa's analysis. Unfortunately, her statistical models do little to account for the marked changes in presidential power, presidential-congressional relations, and the nation's standing in the international order before and after the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, even though she recognizes the marked increase in the number of MIDS observed in the modern era. Gowa 1998, 318. Moreover, as Fordham has pointed out, Gowa fails to account for temporal dynamics in her dependent variable that, uncorrected, potentially generate spurious results. Fordham 2002.

70. Gowa 1999, 42.

TABLE 4. *U.S. militarized interstate disputes (MIDS): 1945–2000*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
UNIFIED GOVERNMENT	0.219* (0.144)	–	–	–	–
PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY	–	1.859* (1.323)	–	–	–
e[PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY]	–	–	8.169* (5.509)	–	–
PRESIDENT PARTY POWER	–	–	–	0.009** (0.005)	–
e[PRESIDENT PARTY POWER]	–	–	–	–	0.127 (0.150)
UNEMPLOYMENT	0.194*** (0.058)	0.188** (0.053)	0.188*** (0.053)	0.187*** (0.053)	0.198*** (0.057)
CPI	0.014 (0.020)	0.011 (0.020)	0.011 (0.020)	0.010 (0.020)	0.007 (0.021)
APPROVAL	–0.001 (0.007)	0.000 (0.007)	0.000 (0.007)	0.000 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)
ELECTION	0.143 (0.134)	0.174 (0.131)	0.176 (0.130)	0.161 (0.135)	0.139 (0.138)
ONGOING WAR	0.113 (0.309)	0.138 (0.291)	0.138 (0.292)	0.128 (0.288)	0.136 (0.306)
COLD WAR	0.476*** (0.101)	0.470*** (0.101)	0.468*** (0.101)	0.471*** (0.097)	0.488*** (0.095)
HEGEMONY	–4.938* (3.311)	–5.517** (2.951)	–5.608* (2.973)	–5.223* (2.834)	–4.256* (3.001)
WORLD DISPUTES (NON-U.S.)	–0.032** (0.014)	–0.033** (0.015)	–0.032** (0.015)	–0.032** (0.015)	–0.032** (0.014)
Constant	0.423 (1.159)	–0.193 (0.978)	–4.321* (3.115)	0.664 (1.032)	0.292 (1.142)
ln(α)	–14.720*** (1.806)	–14.781*** (2.071)	–14.817*** (1.990)	–14.820*** (2.120)	–14.687*** (1.768)

Note: $N = 224$ for all models. Each model is estimated using negative binomial regression with Huber/White/sandwich-clustered standard errors. Each model also contains fixed-effect terms for each presidential administration, which are not reported to conserve space.

*** = $p < .01$; one-tailed tests.

** = $p < .05$; one-tailed tests.

* = $p < .1$; one-tailed tests.

When extending the MIDS time series through 2000 and using more informative measures of partisan dynamics, very different findings emerge. As the results in Table 4 indicate, UNIFIED GOVERNMENT, PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY, and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER all serve as significant predictors of the frequency of MIDS involving the United States; only the logistic transformation of PRESIDENT PARTY POWER, though positive, generates an estimated coefficient that falls below conventional levels of statistical significance.⁷¹ During periods of unified govern-

71. When examining the 1945–92 period, we replicate Gowa’s null finding on UNIFIED GOVERNMENT. Effects for PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER, however, remain positive and statistically significant.

ment, military interventions increase by nearly 25 percent; and a one standard deviation jump from the mean values of PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY and PRESIDENT PARTY POWER, meanwhile, generates a 19 percent and 13 percent increase in military involvements, respectively. If these relationships measure the health of the U.S. system of separated powers, as Gowa suggests, then there is more cause for optimism than previously recognized.

Conclusion

For too long, literature on the use of force has ignored domestic political institutions. Indeed, most research equates domestic politics in the United States with election cycles, public opinion, and the state of the economy, and nothing more. Scholars have assumed that because it is not an integral component of the domestic politics of international engagement, Congress can effectively be ignored. Finding that presidential approval ratings are unrelated to the use of force between 1953 and 1978, Moore and Lanoue offer the sweeping conclusion that “international politics, not domestic politics, [must be] the primary determinant of conflictual U.S. foreign policy behavior.”⁷²

We argue otherwise and show empirically that Congress critically affects presidents’ proclivity to use military force. When we isolate minor deployments of troops, we do not observe any correlation between the composition of Congress and the frequency with which presidents generally use force abroad. But when presidents consider a major use of force abroad, the level of partisan support within the Congress appears to matter greatly. As their party’s share of the Congress increases, presidents conduct major military campaigns abroad with increasing frequency. Conversely, as the size of the opposition party increases, presidents act with major force less and less often. This finding is robust across various model specifications, data sets, and time periods, and using multiple measures of congressional support.

These findings clash with existing statistical studies of the use of force in two ways. First, few studies control for potential congressional involvement in foreign policy, but rather assume away its importance. The few models that incorporate measures of divided government do not find substantial effects. Second, when incorporating the influence of Congress in shaping use-of-force dynamics, some traditionally important variables (for example, public opinion and inflation rates) cease to hold much explanatory power.

Important questions, nonetheless, remain unanswered. That the use of force covaries with the partisan composition of Congress is consistent with multiple micro-explanations of executive-legislative relations. Copartisans within Congress have

72. Moore and Lanoue 2003.

strong incentives to support their president for reasons having to do with interbranch signaling, shared electoral fortunes, and the benefits of currying presidential favor. Meanwhile, because of the importance of staying the course in ongoing military ventures, conveying political resolve abroad, and sustaining public support, presidents have good cause to be wary of strong partisan opposition within Congress. Nothing in the data presented here distinguishes among these explanations. Answers, nonetheless, are critical if one hopes to further disentangle the domestic institutional politics of military action.

The proper question should no longer concern whether domestic political institutions matter. Rather, the challenge is to specify when they matter, exactly how their constraining influence manifests, and what this entails for the ultimate conduct of U.S. foreign relations. Scholars would do well to study the particular causal mechanisms that allow Congress to influence foreign policy. Moreover, these mechanisms may influence much more than just the frequency with which presidents initiate force—they may critically affect the choice of foreign crises presidents respond to; the timing, scope, and duration of the response; and the terms of the conflict’s ultimate resolution. Future research, we hope, will further explore the institutional politics surrounding the use of force. For while presidents certainly command considerable discretion to deploy troops when, and as, they please, Congress deserves greater recognition that it has heretofore received.

Appendix

TABLE A1. *Descriptive statistics*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
MAJOR FORCE	0.6	0.9	0	5
MINOR FORCE	1.1	1.2	0	5
<i>Independent variables</i>				
UNIFIED GOVERNMENT	0.39	0.49	0	1
PERCENT PRESIDENT PARTY	0.50	0.09	0.35	0.68
PRESIDENT PARTY POWER	-0.46	13.88	-23.62	26.96
CPI	4.22	3.57	-2.7	18.9
UNEMPLOYMENT	5.51	1.64	1.1	10.7
APPROVAL	55.19	13.21	23.0	87.0
ELECTION YEAR	0.19	0.39	0	1
ONGOING WAR	0.24	0.43	0	1
COLD WAR	0.80	0.40	0	1
HEGEMONY	0.33	0.06	0.26	0.52
WORLD DISPUTES (NON-U.S.)	5.54	3.08	0	17

Note: *N* = 224 for each variable.

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