Political Life Cycles and Dispute Onset

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August 18, 2025

Abstract

Using a learning model within a selectorate politics framework, we examine how leader tenure and political institutions affect a leader's decision to initiate an interstate dispute, and, should a dispute occur, how much diplomatic/military effort to make. Due to the learning process, as tenure increases, supporters anticipate greater access to private goods and so become more loyal, especially in small winning coalition systems. Democratic leaders are generally reluctant to engage in disputes, unless they face a heighten deposition risk (in which case they 'gamble for resurrection'). Should a dispute occur, democratic leaders make a high and relatively constant level of diplomatic/military effort. In contrast, in small winning coalition systems, autocratic leaders are initially reluctant to initiate disputes but become more likely to initiate as their tenure increases, even as tenure reduces their diplomatic/military effort.

Word count: 10,257

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In a seminal paper, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) examine how conflict involvement affects political survival. They argue that the desire to survive in office is a, if not the, major determinant of leaders' decisions to engage in international disputes. Within this genre of argument, our model uncovers a political life cycle effect in which survival in office becomes easier over time for autocratic leaders but remains consistently difficult for democratic leaders. As a consequence, democratic leaders always pay close attention to the impact of international events on their survival and are therefore reluctant to engage in an international dispute unless it is truly necessary or they need to gamble for resurrection (Downs and Rocke 1994). At the beginning of their tenure, autocratic leaders are also reluctant to engage in disputes. However, as their tenure increases, they become more secure in office, and as a result, autocrats can engage in disputes without significant jeopardy to their hold on power.

International disputes are risky events for leaders. If they resolve in a leader's favor, then they aid her tenure in office. In June 1981, three weeks before elections in Israel, Prime Minister Menachem Begin ordered an airstrike that successfully destroyed an Iraqi nuclear facility. At the election, and despite widespread international criticism regarding the attack, his Likud party secured about 10,000 more votes than the next-largest party, Alignment. However, there is a substantial risk that things go wrong. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis, during which Israel, France, and Britain attempted to regain control of the Suez Canal merely 18 months into his tenure. Failure and other headline events, such as soldiers killed or battles lost detract heavily from the people's assessment of their leader. The essential argument in this paper is that before initiating an international dispute or before reciprocating a challenge from another nation, a leader assesses how the dispute will affect their survival. Begin's gamble paid off; Eden's did not. Democrats are always sensitive to these concerns, as are recently installed autocrats. Yet once well established in office, autocrats can engage in international disputes with relative impunity. In 1990, after ten years in power, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait but was ignominiously pushed out and militarily defeated by a US-led coalition. Despite that defeat, he survived domestically and his cadre of core supporters remained loyal and crushed domestic uprisings.

Building on Melnick, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2025), we derive a political life

cycle within a selectorate politics framework (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson and Morrow 2003) in which policy decisions and the likelihood of dispute initiation depend on the interaction of political institutions and leader tenure. Selectorate politics classifies political institutions according to the number of backers whose active support a leader needs to retain office (winning coalition, W) and the size of the pool from which these supporters are drawn (selectorate, S). In the model, leaders decide whether to initiate a dispute, how much effort to make to improve the outcome of the dispute, and how many public goods and private goods to offer their supporters. All citizens benefit from public goods and foreign policy outcomes, but only winning coalition members benefit from private goods. The tension within the model arises from the credibility with which leaders can promise members of their coalition continued access to private goods.

Private goods are an efficient means of rewarding supporters when the winning coalition size is small because relatively few people receive them. In contrast, when the winning coalition size is large, as is the case in democracy, private goods are relatively inefficient because so many people need to be paid. Instead, democratic leaders provide public goods and make significant diplomatic/military efforts to help ensure that disputes resolve well. Since democratic leaders provide relatively few private goods, their supporters are not especially loyal as they anticipate receiving similar rewards under alternative leadership. On the other hand, when the coalition is small, access to private goods is very valuable, and so supporters in small coalition systems tend to be very loyal, and this can give autocratic leaders a big incumbency advantage. However, this incumbency advantage only accrues to autocrats once they can credibly promise access to private goods.

Leaders have idiosyncratic likes and dislikes for coalition members, termed affinity. Leaders progressively learn affinities and replace any supporter within their coalition whom they learn is of low affinity. As tenure increases and much of the learning is complete, supporters retained in the winning coalition anticipate that they will remain in the coalition and receive private goods in the future, making them less likely to challenge the leader's position in office.

In large coalition systems, learning about affinity has a relatively small impact on loyalty because private goods are relatively unimportant as a means of rewarding supporters. As a result, democratic leaders have a small incumbency advantage and provide similar policies

throughout their tenure. Yet, when the coalition is small, access to private goods is highly valuable. As learning progresses, autocrats can promise their supporters access to private goods more credibly, and this credibly leads to a shift towards private goods provisions and a greater incumbency advantage, inducing a political life cycle whose effects are much stronger in small coalition systems than in large coalition democracies.

But again, dispute involvement is risky. Success might aid survival, as it did for Begin. But a poor outcome endangers a leader's hold on power, as Eden experienced. Democratic leaders have only a small incumbency advantage and so avoid the additional risk associated with disputes unless it is likely to benefit their supporters or if their ex ante survival prospects are very poor. This latter case corresponds to the 'gambling for resurrection' of diversionary war theory (Levy 1989). When they first come to power, autocratic leaders are also reluctant to initiate disputes. Like democratic leaders, they only have a small incumbency advantage and so are unlikely to survive a poor foreign policy outcome. However, as tenure increases and supporters anticipate being retained in the coalition, the incumbency advantage of autocratic leaders grows. With a large incumbency advantage, established autocratic leaders can engage in disputes with relative impunity, as was the case for Hussein. Dispute involvement is politically risky for democratic leader and newly installed autocrats, but it is much less risky for an established autocrat. The political life cycle means that large coalition democrats are reluctant to initiate disputes throughout their tenure. Newly installed autocrats share this reluctance. However, as an autocrat's tenure increases, her growing incumbency advantage means that she can initiate a dispute without jeopardizing her tenure. As a result, the initiation rate of autocrats increases the longer they remain in power.

Tenure also affects the level of diplomatic/military effort that leaders make when involved in disputes. Given the leader's budget constraint, money spent on diplomatic or military effort cuts into the amount of money left over for private goods. The value of private goods increases with tenure in small coalition systems. Therefore, autocrats make less diplomatic/military effort as their tenure increases. From their political perspective, resources are better spent on private goods. Yet for democrats, or autocrats new to office, private goods are not as politically valuable and their chances of survival after a military defeat are slim; therefore, if involved in a dispute, leaders make considerable foreign policy

efforts.

We use militarized interstate dispute data for 178 nations between 1840 and 2014 to evaluate the main implications of the model. In this empirical analysis, we find that, in line with our predictions, at the beginning of their tenure in office, leaders of both large and small coalition have similarly low probabilities to get involved in a dispute. But their paths diverge over time. While the likelihood of participating in a dispute slightly decreases throughout tenure for democratic leaders, it goes up for autocrats. This trend is particularly clear when they are the initiators of disputes, that is, the type of conflict in which they have more control regarding involvement timing.

1 Literature

Beginning with Nordhaus (1975), there is an established political business cycle literature that argues the electoral cycle affects fiscal and monetary policy (see Dubois (2016) for a review). The focus here is on how the electoral cycle and tenure in office affect foreign policy and particularly involvement in interstate disputes. Gaubatz (1991) is perhaps the first paper to systematically assess the impact of electoral cycles on war participation. He finds that wars are more likely to occur early rather than late in the electoral term (Gaubatz 1999; Chiozza and Goemans 2003). Likewise Huth and Allee (2002) find that conflict is more prevalent shortly after elections. In the US context, Potter (2007) find that US involvement in international crises declines with tenure. Gelpi and Grieco (2001) argue that inexperienced leaders are more attractive as targets. In contrast, Russett (1990) finds that the US President is more likely to use force in presidential election years, as does Wang (1996). Hess and Orphanides (1995) argues that it is the combination of US presidential elections and a weak economy that most significantly increases the risk of conflict. Smith and Spaniel (2019) formally model the impact of a new leader on the cessation of disputes, arguing that agreement is easier to reach with an established leader because the other side has had the opportunity to learn information about their type. Other scholars contrast the conflict initiation policies of term-limited leaders with those able to seek reelection (Carter and Nordstrom 2017; Haynes 2012; Zeigler, Pierskalla and Mazumder 2014) .

Other scholars examine the links between the electoral calendar and other forms of

violence. For example, Bali and Park (2014) examines the frequency of terror attacks. Thyne (2012) and Uzonyi and Wells (2016) both examine the link between the tenure of the leader and the duration of civil wars, although they come to different results. Thyne argues that experienced leaders are predictable and that makes negotiations more likely to succeed; while Uzonyi and Wells argue that the relationship is conditioned by domestic institutions. Tiernay (2015) finds that replacing rebel leaders helps end civil conflicts.

Although much of the literature focuses on democratic systems and the electoral cycle, Chiozza and Goemans (2003, 2011) examine how conflict affects the survival of the leader and how the prospects of political survival influence foreign policy in all regimes. Bak (2020) focuses on autocratic leaders and divides their rule into three phases: early power struggles; power consolidation; and power decline. He argues that conflict is most likely in the middle phase.

Our model focuses on how the tenure of the leader differentially affects the involvement of disputes between regime types. Our model builds extensively on Melnick, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2025). That paper and our model consider a learning process via which a leader learns about her supporters and replaces those she dislikes or distrusts. Having weeded out those she distrusts, loyalty among her retained supporters grows, and a leader shifts from public goods rewards to private rewards, and with this shift comes enhanced survival, particularly in non-democracies. The interaction of tenure and institutions determines political loyalty, the riskiness of dispute involvement, and consequently, the effort that leaders make when involved in disputes.

2 Model of Life Cycles and Dispute Involvement

We consider an indefinitely repeated game. The periods of the game are indexed by $t = 0, 1, 2, ...$, where substantively the period of the game corresponds to the tenure of the incumbent leader. The model assumes a simple selectorate model of domestic political competition (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), in which the leader needs a coalition of supporters of size W drawn from a pool of potential supporters (S), called the selectorate. For technical convenience, the pool of supporters is treated as a continuum, although for ease of language, we typically discuss supporters as if they are individuals. Treating

the coalition of supporters as a mass allows the use of population statistics rather than path-dependent sample statistics.[1] The leader has idiosyncratic likes and dislikes for each selector i, which are referred to as affinity, a_i. Building on the learning technology in Melnick, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2025), over time the leader learns about her feelings towards coalition members and, if she discovers that she dislikes a supporter (i.e., the supporter is a low affinity type), she can replace that supporter with another selector. As the model elucidates, the leader's learning about her idiosyncratic likes and dislikes of coalition members induces a political life cycle.

In each period of the game, an opportunity to have a dispute might arise. If it does, the leader decides whether to engage or decline. Following the engagement decision, the leader allocates her available resources between public goods (g_t) that benefit everyone in her society, private goods (z_t) that benefit only her coalition of supporters, and diplomatic/military effort (m_t) that influences the outcome of the dispute. After these allocation decisions, the outcome of the crisis Q_t and a valence shock θ_t (which represents the performance of the leader in all other issues) are revealed. The leader's coalition of supporters decides whether to depose or retain her. The leader learns about her affinity for members of her coalition. In particular, with probability q she detects a low affinity type, that is, she learns that she dislikes that individual. The leader reshuffles her coalition, replacing coalition members detected to be low-affinity types. Private goods are distributed to those supporters in the winning coalition at the end of the period.

The size of the winning coalition, W, and the tenure of the leader, t, determine a leader's policy provisions and her propensity to engage in a dispute. The temporal results are driven by the leader learning about her idiosyncratic likes and dislikes of her supporters. Once detected, the leader replaces low-affinity supporters. We define ρ_t as the probability that a supporter is retained in the coalition during period t. As she progressively weeds out those she dislikes, the coalition becomes dense in high-affinity types, supporters that for idiosyncratic reasons she likes. Hence, as tenure increases, there are fewer low affinity types to discover, and so the rate of coalition replacement declines; that is, ρ_t, the rate of retention in the coalition increases over time. As tenure increases, ρ_t increases, and supporters become more sure of being retained in the coalition and therefore are more

[1]For a large population, sample statistics converge to the population statistics.

likely to receive private goods. With a greater expectation of being retained in the coalition, private goods become a more effective means of buying political support, leaders find it easier to stay in power, and might therefore be willing to engage in more risky foreign policies.

The stage game is as follows:

1. An opportunity of a dispute arises with probability ω. The leader decides whether to initiate the dispute or not.
2. The leader allocates resources to diplomatic/military effort (m_t), public goods (g_t) and private goods (z_t) from a budget of R resources.
3. The supporters observe a valence shock θ_t and, if a dispute occurs, the outcome of the dispute Q_t.
4. Supporters decide whether to retain their leader or depose her at cost c_t.
5. The leader learns about the affinity of her supporters. In particular, with probability q she detects a low affinity selector. The leader replaces any supporters discovered to be of low affinity.
6. Private goods are distributed and payoffs are realized.

The solution concept is subgame perfect equilibrium in weakly undominated strategies. We focus on the case where players fully discount the future and so optimize on a period-by-period basis.[2] In each period of the game, the leader's strategy is a choice whether to engage in a dispute and an allocation of goods between public goods, g_t, private goods, z_t, and diplomatic/military effort, m_t, subject to the budget constraint (and $g_t \geq 0$, $z_t \geq 0$, and $m_t \geq 0$)

$$\underbrace{p\, g_t}_{\text{public goods}} + \underbrace{W\, z_t}_{\text{private goods}} + \underbrace{m_t}_{\text{diplomatic/military effort}} \leq R \tag{1}$$

The price of public goods is p. The size of the winning coalition, W, serves as an effective price for private goods, since it determines the number of people who receive rewards. The leader's final choice is whether and whom to replace from her coalition after learning about the affinity of her supporters.

[2] Melnick, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2025) allows for partial discounting and establishes similar dynamics.

The coalition members decide whether to retain or replace the leader. Given weakly undominated strategies and that the expected payoffs for all supporters are symmetric, all supporters make the same choice. Moving forward, we discuss the coalition's deposition decision as a unitary decision.

Payoffs: Let $u(g)$ represent the value of g public goods. All members of society receive these rewards. The value of z private goods is $v(z)$. However, these rewards are only received by members of the leader's winning coalition at the end of the period; normalize $v(0) = 0$. We use simple utility functions that ensure interior solutions, in particular $u(g) = \sqrt{g}$ and $v(z) = \sqrt{z}$. If a dispute occurs, then each member of the society receives the payment Q_t associated with the outcome of the dispute. Further, let θ_t represent the leader's performance on all additional policy dimensions. If the coalition replaces their leader, then their payoff is $U_0 - c_t$, where U_0 represents the reservation value of a new leader and c_t is the cost of leader replacement.

Since the valence shock, θ_t, is composed of performance on many dimensions, it seems natural to consider it as the aggregate of many small shocks, and so we treat θ_t as normally distributed with mean μ_t and variance σ^2. The mean μ_t parametrizes the popularity of a leader and the ex ante likelihood of retaining office. Let $\phi(x) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} e^{-\frac{x^2}{2}}$ be the standard normal probability density, and $\Phi(y) = \int_{-\infty}^{y} \phi(x)dx$ be the standard normal distribution.

Dispute opportunities arise with probability ω. Disputes are risky events. They might result in great rewards, but they can also go disastrously wrong. Of course, the more attention, effort, and resources the leader dedicates to the dispute, the better the result is likely to be. $m_t \geq 0$ represents the resources that the leader dedicates to diplomatic/military effort during a dispute. To reflect that effort, on average, helps to produce good outcomes and that international disputes are high-variance events, we assume that the nation's payoff for a dispute, Q_t is normally distributed with mean $\zeta + \sqrt{m_t}$ and variance γ^2 . The functional form $\sqrt{m}$ reflects the diminishing marginal return to effort. The leader's (private) expected payoff from dispute participation is Ω_t.

The leader receives payoffs from three sources: office holding (Ψ), their private evaluation of dispute involvement (Ω_t), and affinity rewards from being surrounded by those she likes. If the leader is retained, then she receives the office holding benefit Ψ. If the leader engages in the dispute, she receives an expected reward Ω_t associated with how much she

privately values the international issue. Although the leader's assessment of the dispute might be in part similar to that of the rest of society, Q_t, the leader has private biases. For instance, she might be more hawkish (suggesting $\Omega_t > E[Q_t]$), or she might be more dovish (suggesting $\Omega_t < E[Q_t]$) (Downs and Rocke 1994). The leader's final payoff component is her affinity with members of her coalition.

Affinity reflects a leader's idiosyncratic likes and dislikes of others. The leader prefers to surround herself with people she likes and trusts. Although we might readily imagine more elaborate structures, we consider a simple binary structure. Let a_i represent the leader's affinity for selectorate member i and assume that affinities can be high or low: $a_i \in \{a_H, a_L\} = \{1, 0\}$. The leader receives a payment of $\varpi\ E[a_i | i \in W_t]$ relating to the value of being surrounded by friends, rather than those whom she dislikes. The ϖ term parametrizes the extent to which affinity matters. To reduce notation, we focus on the case as $\varpi \to 0$.

Initially, the leader is uncertain of her affinity for selectors, but she progressively learns about the members of her coalition.[3] Let $\alpha_0 = Pr(a_i = a_H)$ represent the prior probability that the leader's affinity for the supporter i is high. Quite simply, α_0 is the probability that the leader will like someone and regard them as a friend. We focus on the case where $\alpha_0 = \frac{W}{S}$, that is, the leader selects the bar for friendship at a higher level when she needs few supporters; in contrast, a leader who needs a very large coalition will only exclude those whom she really dislikes. Of course, when a leader first comes to office she cannot know her affinity for everyone. The leader progressively learns about her supporters. In step 5 of the game the leader learns if a selector is of low affinity with probability q.

Table 1 states the payoffs for supporters and the leader under the difference contingencies.

3 Analysis

We start the analysis by considering the incumbent's decision to reconstitute her coalition after learning affinities. This reshuffling induces coalition dynamics.

[3] Alternatively, we might assume she knows whom she likes upfront but requires opportunities to replace coalition members. If such opportunities arise with probability q, then the retention probabilities would be identical to those described here.

Table 1: Payoffs

Outcome		Leader	Retained Supporter	Replaced Supporter
No Dispute	Leader kept	$\Psi + \varpi E[a_i \mid i \in W_t]$	$u(g_t) + v(z_t) + \theta_t$	$u(g_t) + \theta_t$
	Leader deposed	0	$U_0 - c_t$	n.a.
Dispute	Leader kept	$\Psi + \Omega_t + \varpi E[a_i \mid i \in W_t]$	$u(g_t) + v(z_t) + \theta_t + Q_t$	$u(g_t) + \theta_t + Q_t$
	Leader deposed	Ω_t	$U_0 - c_t$	n.a.

3.1 Affinity and Coalition Dynamics

The leader's payoff increases in the expected affinity of her coalition. Hence, in every period she replaces any supporter revealed to be of low affinity with a selector who has not been identified as a low type. At the start of period t, let α_t represent the probability that a supporter in the coalition is a high type: for $i \in W$, $\alpha_t = Pr(a_i = a_H)$. Each member of the coalition has a $(1 - \alpha_t)q$ chance of being replaced in period t. The chance of being retained in the coalition is $\alpha_t + (1 - \alpha_t)(1 - q)$; the chance a supporter is a high type plus the chance that they are a low type that remains undetected. By Bayes rule,

$$\alpha_t = Pr(a_i = a_H \text{ in period } t) = \frac{\alpha_0}{\alpha_0 + (1 - \alpha_0)(1 - q)^t}$$

and so the retention probability is

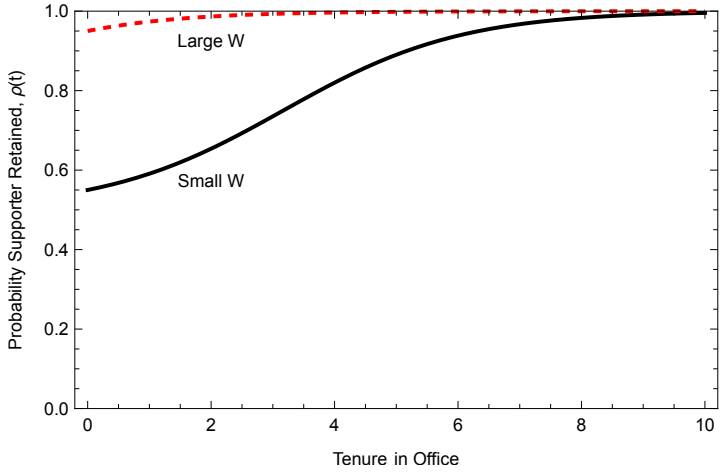
$$\begin{aligned} \rho_t &= \frac{\alpha_0 + (1 - \alpha_0)(1 - q)^{t+1}}{\alpha_0 + (1 - \alpha_0)(1 - q)^t} \\ &= \frac{(1 - q)^{t+1}(S - W) + W}{(1 - q)^t(S - W) + W} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where the second equality results from the substitution that $\alpha_0 = \frac{W}{S}$.

Figure 1 illustrates the retention probabilities for small and large coalition systems. Although the precise figure depends on the parameterization, the figure illustrates some basic features that follow from equation 2 and that are formally stated in the following proposition:

Proposition 1 *Retention probabilities increase with tenure ($\rho(t)$ increases in t). Supporters of a long established leader become near certain of being retained in the coalition (as $t \to \infty$, $\rho_t \to 1$). The probability of being retained in the coalition is greater as W increases*

Figure 1: Coalition Dynamics: Probability Supporter is Retained in the Coalition, $\rho(t)$



and S decreases (ρ_t increases in W and decreases in S).

3.2 Policy Provision, Dispute Involvement, and Leader Retention

Against the background of coalition dynamics described in Proposition 1, in each period, the leader decides whether to engage in a dispute should the opportunity arise and the policies to provide. Coalition members decide whether to retain or depose the incumbent. The nomenclature superscript $*d$ represents equilibrium policies given a dispute, and superscript $*n$ represents equilibrium policy absent a dispute.

Proposition 2 *In subgame perfect equilibrium the leader engages in a dispute opportunity if and only if*

$$\begin{aligned}\Omega_t \quad &\geq \quad \Omega_t^* = \Psi\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sigma}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}} + c_t - U_0\right)\right) \\ &- \quad \Psi\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R\left(W+pW+\rho_t^2 p\right)}{pW}} + \zeta + c_t - U_0\right)\right) \qquad (3)\end{aligned}$$

If the leader is not engaged in a dispute, then her policies are $g_t^{*n} = \frac{RW}{p(W+p\rho_t^2)}$, $z_t^{*n} = \frac{Rp\rho_t^2}{W(W+p\rho_t^2)}$ and $m_t^{*n} = 0$; the coalition's expected payoff from the leader's policies is $E[U(g_t^{*n}, z_t^{*n}, m_t^{*n})] = \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}}$, and the leader survives with probability $\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sigma}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}} + c_t - U_0\right)\right)$.

If the leader engages in a dispute, then her policies are $g_t^{*d} = \frac{RW}{p(W+pW+p\rho^2)}$, $z_t^{*d} =$

$\frac{Rp\rho^2}{W\left(pW+W+p\rho_t^2\right)}$ *and* $m_t^{*d} = \frac{RpW}{\left(pW+W+p\rho_t^2\right)}$*; the coalition's expected payoff from the leader's policies is* $E[U(g_t^{*d}, z_t^{*d}, m_t^{*d})] = \sqrt{\frac{R\left(W+pW+\rho_t^2 p\right)}{pW}} + \zeta$*, and the leader survives with probability* $\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R\left(W+pW+\rho_t^2 p\right)}{pW}} + \zeta + c_t - U_0\right)\right)$*. The leader replaces any supporter discovered to be a low affinity type; in equilibrium she retains* ρ_t *proportion of her coalition and reshuffles* $1-\rho_t$ *portion of her coalition, where* ρ_t *is given by equation 2.*

We outline the basic logic for this proposition and consign the technical details to the Appendix. If the leader is retained, then the expected rewards for each supporter are $u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + \theta_t + \mathbb{1}_{dispute} Q_t$. The key thing to note in this expected payoff is that the supporter only receives private goods probabilistically (with probability ρ_t). If the leader is deposed, then each supporter's expected payoff is $U_0 - c_t$. Hence, the leader survives in power provided that $\theta_t + \mathbb{1}_{dispute} Q_t \geq U_0 - c_t - u(g_t) - \rho_t v(z_t)$. Given the policy profile (g_t, z_t, m_t),

$$Pr(survive|(g_t, z_t, m_t)) = \begin{cases} \Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sigma}(u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + c_t - U_0)\right), & \text{if no dispute} \\ \Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}(u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + \zeta + \sqrt{m_t} + c_t - U_0)\right), & \text{if dispute} \end{cases} \tag{4}$$

Importantly for our analysis, the survival probabilities in equation 4 differ in both mean and variance. Beyond changing the expected reward of the coalition, disputes increase the variance of outcomes.

The leader picks policies to maximize her chances of survival, which amounts to maximizing the terms in equation 4. Hence, absent a dispute, the leader maximizes $u(g_t) - \rho_t v(z_t) + c_t - U_0$ subject to $pg_t + Wz_t \leq R$. If engaged in a dispute, the leader maximizes $u(g_t) - \rho_t v(z_t) + \sqrt{m_t} + \zeta + c_t - U_0$ subject to $pg_t + Wz_t + m_t \leq R$. The optimal policies, stated in Proposition 2, follow from standard constrained optimization techniques (see the Appendix). The leader survives if supporters are better off under her than under a new leader (less cost of replacement).

The policy provisions depend on institutions and tenure. With an initial focus on nondispute policies, the provision of public goods, $g_t^{*n} = \frac{RW}{p(W+p\rho_t^2)}$, is increasing in W and decreasing in tenure (as ρ_t increases with tenure). Democratic leaders and leaders new to office provide more public-oriented policies than do their more autocratic and long-term counterparts. Private goods become more prevalent as coalition size decreases and tenure

increases. The expected rewards for coalition members, $E[U(g_t^{*n}, z_t^{*n}, m_t^{*n})] = \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}}$, increase as tenure becomes longer. In addition, the impact of tenure on coalition welfare is greater in small coalition systems than in large coalition systems. These effects make it increasingly easy for leaders to survive in office as their tenure increases, and the survival benefit of tenure is greatest for small coalition leaders.

In systems where public goods are the dominant form of rewards, tenure has relatively little impact on policy provision, as formally stated in the following corollary.

Corollary 1 *In the limiting case as either* $\frac{p}{W} \to 0$ *or* $W \to S$*, leader equilibrium policies profiles become time invariant:* $(g_t^{*,d}, z_t^{*,d}, m_t^{*,d}, g_t^{*,n}, z_t^{*,n}, m_t^{*,n}) = (g_{t'}^{*,d}, z_{t'}^{*,d}, m_{t'}^{*,d}, g_{t'}^{*,n}, z_{t'}^{*,n}, m_{t'}^{*,n})$ *for all* t, t'*.*

Although the corollary considers the limiting cases, the logic is straightforward. As the winning coalition becomes large, private goods become expensive relative to public goods, and so few private goods are provided. Similarly, as the coalition becomes inclusive, $W \to S$, the leader keeps everyone in the coalition ($\rho_t = 1$ for all t) and so the provisions of private goods (and therefore coalition loyalty) are constant across tenure. The central intuition to take from the formal statement is that in large W systems policy provisions are relatively constant and that private goods play a relatively small part in the rewards leaders provide their supporters.

Although the statement in Proposition 2 holds for any U_0, it makes sense to appropriately parameterize this term within the model of coalition dynamics. If the coalition of supporters replaces the incumbent with a new leader, then they are effectively restarting the tenure clock. Hence for the purposes of exploring the decision to engage in disputes, we parameterize the coalition's reservation value with the following assumption:[4]

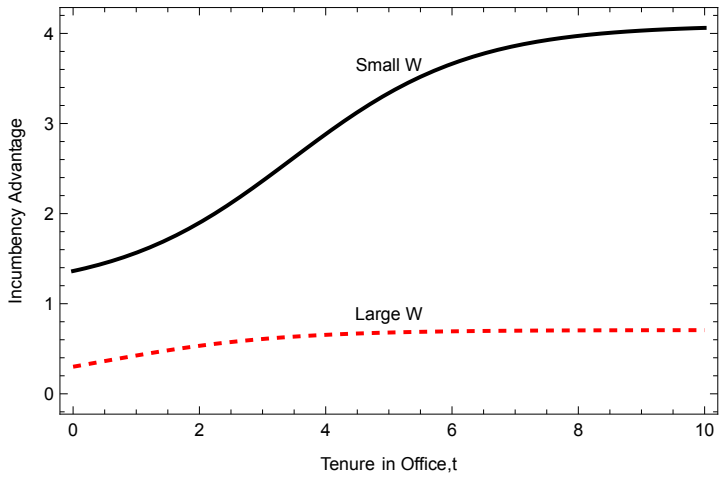
Assumption 1 *The expected value for selecting a new leader is equivalent to being in the coalition of a novice leader (i.e.* $t = 0$*):*

$$U_0 = E[U(g_0^{*n}, z_0^{*n}, m_0^{*n})] = \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_0^2 p)}{pW}}$$

[4]Implicitly we are assuming that disputes are relatively rare such that the expected value of a new leader is defined by the non-dispute policies.

Figure 2 illustrates the incumbency advantage that develops as the tenure of the leader increases. The graph plots the difference in expected coalition rewards (assuming no dispute involvement) minus the expected value of a new leader (U_0) against leader tenure for a small coalition system (solid line) and a large coalition system (dashed line). The incumbency advantage grows for all leaders; however, it grows most in small coalition systems, those in which private goods are an important source of rewards. As the incumbency advantage becomes large relative to the variance in the valence shock, leaders have little risk of being removed from office.

Figure 2: Incumbency Advantage: Winning Coalition Size and Leader Tenure



Having established the political life cycle and its dependence on institutions, we turn to the main focus of this essay, dispute involvement.

4 Dispute Involvement

4.1 Diplomatic/Military Effort within Disputes

Proposition 3 *During dispute involvement, the level of diplomatic/military effort is increasing in winning coalition size and decreasing in tenure:* m_t^{*d} *increases in* W *and decreases in* t.

The proof follows directly from the comparative statics of $m_t^{*d} = \frac{RpW}{\left(pW+W+p\rho_t^2\right)}$ characterized in Proposition 2. There is a simple economic interpretation of this result. Leaders efficiently allocate resources across public goods, private goods, and diplomatic policies, such that

the ratio of marginal value divided by marginal cost is the same across all three policies:

$$\frac{\frac{du(g_t)}{dg}}{p} = \frac{\rho_t \frac{dv(z_t)}{dz}}{W} = \frac{\frac{d\sqrt{m_t}}{dm_t}}{1}$$

If this relationship did not hold, then the leader could improve supporters' welfare, and hence her survival prospects, by reducing effort on the low-ratio good and increasing spending on the high-ratio good.

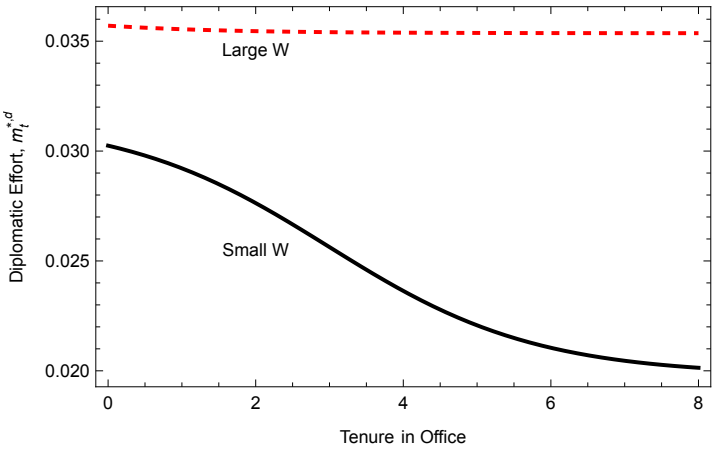
In small coalition systems, the marginal cost of private goods is low because relatively few people receive them. As coalition size increases, the cost of private goods increases, and so leaders substitute away from the increasingly expensive private goods to the now relatively cheaper options of public goods and diplomatic/military effort. So large coalition leaders spend more on diplomacy than small coalition leaders because for them, diplomacy is cheap relative to private goods.

Diplomatic effort decreases with the tenure of the leader. Early in a leader's tenure, supporters are uncertain as to whether they will be retained in the coalition and hence whether they will receive private goods. Uncertainty about whether they will receive private goods leads supporters to discount the value of private goods. As tenure increases, ρ_t increases, and so the expected value of private goods for supporters increases. As their tenure increases, leader substitute away from public goods and diplomacy towards private goods as the efficacy of private goods increases, and this is particularly so for small coalition leaders.

The results of Proposition 3 are illustrated in Figure 3. Compared to a small coalition leader, a large coalition leader makes a greater and relatively constant level of diplomatic effort. The diplomatic effort of small coalition leaders declines as their tenure increases.

The formal model focuses on the leader's decision to initiate a crisis. However, Proposition 3 suggests that the attractiveness of a nation as a target in a dispute varies across political institutions and tenure. Large coalition systems are always relatively unattractive as targets in disputes due to the relatively high diplomatic/military effort of the leaders in such systems (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson and Smith 1999, 2004). In contrast, small coalition systems become more attractive targets as leader tenure increases, because increased tenure reduces the diplomatic effort that leaders make. The testable empirical

Figure 3: Diplomatic Effort: Winning Coalition Size and Leader Tenure



implication is that democracies should be targeted at a relatively constant rate, whereas autocracies become more likely to be targeted as leader tenure increases.

4.2 Dispute Initiation

Equation 3 in Proposition 2 provides a formal statement of the conditions under which a leader initiates a dispute. In particular, a leader's personal valuation of dispute involvement needs to be larger than the value of office holding multiplied by the difference of surviving in office with and without a dispute. A dispute affects leader survival in two ways. First, a dispute affects the expected value of the rewards for supporters. Second, involvement in disputes is risky, as it increases the variance in outcomes. Leaders are primarily concerned with the probability of survival, which depends on both the expected level of rewards and the variance within these rewards. The difference between the expected level of supporter rewards with and without dispute involvement is

$$\text{Expected rewards difference} = \sqrt{\frac{R}{pW}}\left(\sqrt{W + pW + \rho_t^2 p} - \sqrt{W + \rho_t^2 p}\right) + \zeta \qquad (5)$$

Although the terms in parentheses are positive (because leaders can buy a convex combination of three policies in a dispute rather than just two policies absent a dispute), given that conflict is inefficient (Fearon 1995), we should expect $\zeta < 0$. Of course, all else equal, as the expected rewards difference increases, it becomes more likely that a leader engages in a dispute. However, it is important to remember that the leader's interest is in increasing her chances of survival and not improving the expected rewards of supporters. Variance

matters. To emphasize the impact of variance, consider the probabilities of leader survival with and without a dispute.

$$\underbrace{\Phi\left(\overbrace{\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}}^{\text{high variance}}\left(\mu_t+\sqrt{\frac{R\left(Wq+pW+\rho^2pq\right)}{pWq}}+\zeta+c_t-U_0\right)\right)}_{\Pr(\text{survive}|\text{dispute})} \text{ versus } \underbrace{\Phi\left(\overbrace{\frac{1}{\sigma}}^{\text{low variance}}\left(\mu_t+\sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2p)}{pW}}+c_t-U_0\right)\right)}_{\Pr(\text{survive}|\text{no dispute})} \quad (6)$$

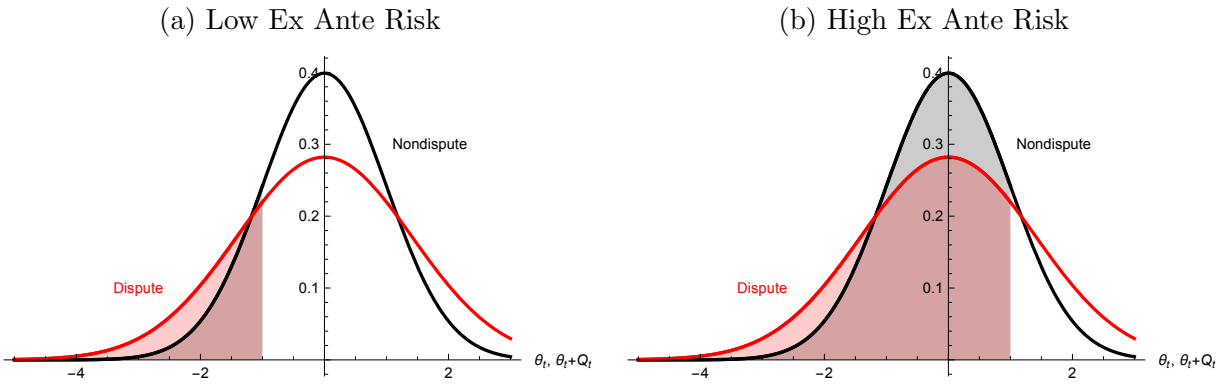
Disputes make extreme outcomes more likely. Although diplomatic successes improve supporter well-being, a diplomatic or military disaster results in leader removal. To focus on the importance of variance, suppose that the expected value of the dispute (from the supporter's view point) is identical to no dispute: Expected rewards difference= 0. Within this setting, Figure 4 plots the distribution of the valence shocks θ_t and $\theta_t + Q_t$, and the risk of removal for leaders with a low ex ante risk of being removed (left panel, large μ_t) and a high ex ante risk of being removed (right panel, small μ_t). The curves represent the pdf of the valence shocks, and the shaded areas under the curve represent the probability that a leader will be replaced.

In the case of low ex ante risk, $\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(W+pW+\rho^2p)}{pW}} + \zeta + c_t - U_0 > 0$, shown by the vertical line to the left of the pdf mode, means that on average the leader will survive. While by construction, the mean returns to dispute and no dispute are the same, a leader increases her deposition risk by dispute involvement: the shaded area under the high-variance dispute related red line is larger than the shaded area under the lower variance black line. A leader contemplating dispute involvement in this circumstance must have a high personal valuation for the dispute before engaging, since the dispute puts her reign at increased jeopardy.

In contrast, for the high ex ante risk case $\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(Wq+pW+\rho^2pq)}{pWq}} + \zeta + c_t - U_0 < 0$, shown in the right panel of Figure 4, the increased variance associated with a dispute is beneficial for survival. The shaded area under the black low variance curve is larger than the shaded area under the red high variance curve. Although in this example political survival is unlikely, survival is more likely with dispute occurrence than in the absence of a dispute. The right panel illustrates the classic diversionary argument of gambling for resurrection (Downs and Rocke 1994; Richards, Morgan,

Wilson, Schwebach and Young 1993). In this situation, a leader would have to be personally strongly opposed (highly negative Ω_t) before avoiding the conflict.

Figure 4: Risk of leader removal for crisis and non-crisis involvement
pdf of θ_t in black and $\theta_t + Q_t$ in red



In general, leaders appear to have an incumbency advantage, since in most months they manage to survive in office. Therefore, it seems that the left panel of Figure 4 reflects the modal case to focus on. Tenure affects the incumbency advantage of leaders. As tenure increases, political survival becomes easier. For large coalition leaders, the growth in the incumbency advantage is relatively small. As a result their dispute initiation decisions are relatively constant over time.[5] Small coalition leaders become more likely to initiate crises over time. For them, increases in tenure produce large increases in incumbency advantage. Graphically, this is shown by the shaded regions in the left panel of Figure 4 that characterize the probability of deposition being shifted to the left. Such shifts mean that established small coalition leaders are relatively safe from deposition whether a dispute occurs or not. Given such immunity, established small coalition leaders have large discretion and initiate crises for private reasons $\Omega_t > 0$.

The model predicts a relatively constant rate of dispute initiation for large coalition leaders and an increased rate of dispute initiation for small coalition leaders.

[5]It is worth noting that as leaders are likely to engage in the issues most salient to them first, we should anticipate a general decline in the expected value of Ω_t over time, and this will reduce the rate of initiation.

4.3 Elections

Democratic leaders are especially vulnerable to deposition at election time. While the main focus of the model is leader tenure, the presence of an election lowers the cost of leader deposition, c_t. The lowering of deposition cost makes a leader more vulnerable and this can create the conditions in which gambling for resurrection becomes attractive. For large coalition leaders who are likely to lose power, an upcoming election makes dispute initiation attractive. However, for a leader with better prospects, starting a dispute probably increases the risk of deposition. Elections surely matter, but without reliable proxies of leaders' expectations of survival to differentiate between cases, their marginal effect is ambiguous.

4.4 Testable implications

The model derived a political life cycle and implies the following relationships between leader tenure, political institutions, and dispute involvement.

1. Large coalition leaders initiate disputes at a relatively constant rate.
2. Large coalition leaders are targeted in disputes at a relatively constant rate.
3. Small coalition leaders are more likely to initiate disputes as their tenure increases.
4. Small coalition leaders are targeted in disputes more often as their tenure increases.

These predictions are the focus of our empirical tests. However, the model also hypotheses relationships between diplomatic/military effort, institutions, leader tenure, and political survival. We state these predictions in the following, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to test the additional implications.

1. Large coalition leaders exert more diplomatic/military effort in disputes than smaller coalition leaders.
2. The diplomatic/military efforts of large coalition leaders are relatively constant

throughout tenure. For small coalition leaders, such efforts decline as tenure increases.

3. The outcome of a dispute is likely to always affect large coalition leader tenure; in small coalition systems, the domestic political survival of leaders with long tenure is relatively insulated from the outcomes of the dispute.

4. Leaders with a high ex ante risk of being removed are particularly likely to initiate disputes (gamble for resurrection).

5. When comparing hawks (high expected value for Ω_t) and doves (low expected value for Ω_t), the participation in disputes is more likely to adversely affect the survival of hawks than doves.[6]

5 Empirics

5.1 Data

The unit of analysis is the leader-month using an update version of the Archigos data (Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza 2009; Smith 2022). These data code when leaders enter and leave office. The primary variable of interest is the leader's tenure (recorded at the monthly level but reported as years). For each leader-month, the primary dependent variables are various types of militarized dispute onset (0,1). The dispute data are taken from the Correlates Of War (COW) Militarized Interstate Dispute Data (Version 5) (Palmer, McManus, D'Orazio, Kenwick, Karstens, Bloch, Dietrich, Kahn, Ritter and Soules 2021; Jones, Bremer and Singer 1996). We use the monadic version of these data which codes the date on which a state became involved in an interstate dispute, whether it was on the side of the initiator (side A) or the target (side B), whether the state was an original participant to the dispute or a subsequent joiner, and the level of violence used by each side. We present results based on five cases of MID involvement:

[6]Because of the high value hawks place on dispute involvement, they potentially enter disputes even when it harms their survival prospects. In contrast, dovish are likely to engage in disputes only when they are tenure-enhancing.

1. **Any MID**– state had any form of MID involvement.
2. **Initiator of MID** – state was an original initiator in a dispute, rather than a joiner or target.
3. **Initiator of Violent MID** – state was an original initiator in a dispute that escalated to the use of violence (hostility level 4 or 5).
4. **Target of MID** – state was an original target in a dispute, rather than a joiner or initiator.
5. **Target of Violent MID** – state was an original target in a dispute that escalated to the use of violence (hostility level 4 or 5).

Power is measured using the COW National Material Capabilities data (Version 6) (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey 1972). These data report each nation's power as a proportion of total world capacity using a composite index based on military personnel, military expenditure, iron and steel production, energy consumption, total population, and urban population. Political institutions are measured using the Polity Project's democracy-autocracy measure, which ranges between -10 and 10 (Marshall, Jaggers and Gurr 2002). For presentation clarity, we compare dispute onset for democracy (large coalition systems) and non-democracy (small coalition systems), with democracy coded as a polity score of more than 7. The economic and demographic variables for the logarithm of GDP per capita, the logarithm of population, and economic growth are taken from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank 2023). We coded the dates of executive elections using the National Elections in Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data (Hyde and Marinov 2012). Throughout, we report robust standard errors clustered by nation.

5.2 Analyses

Table 2 shows logit analyses of the impact of regime type, tenure and power on the five forms of dispute involvement. Given data availability, the table contains results based on 178 nations between 1840 and 2014. The table also reports the

receiver-operator characteristic as a measure of fit. The row labeled p:NonDemo Trend provides the significance level of joint hypotheses tests that tenure does not affect dispute involvement when $Demo = 0$.[7] p:Demo Trend reports the significance level of the analogous test when $Demo = 1$. We indicate a cubic specification for leader tenure since Bak (2020) argues that there is a non-monotonic relationship between tenure and dispute involvement.

The results suggest that powerful nations are much more likely to become involved in disputes than weak nations, although the impact of strength on dispute involvement is slightly weakened in democracies. The statistics p:NonDemo Trend and p:Demo Trend indicate that the null hypothesis is rejected, that is to say, tenure has a significant effect for most forms of dispute involvement. The impact of tenure is seen most easily graphically. Figure 5 presents five panels that correspond to each of the forms of dispute involvement investigated. The red dashed lines show the predicted probability of dispute involvement (and 95% confidence level) for non-democracies. The solid black lines show analogous predictions for democracies.

Table 2: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (logit)

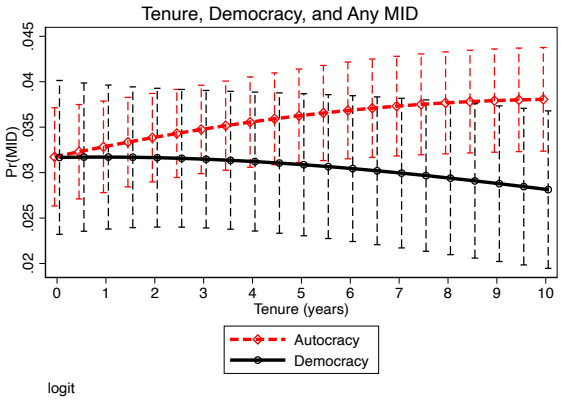
	(1) Any MID	(2) Initiator	(3) Violent Initiator	(4) Target	(5) Violent Target
Demo	0.0627	-0.0308	-0.115	-0.0244	-0.250
	(0.151)	(0.180)	(0.208)	(0.192)	(0.242)
Power	11.63***	12.80***	11.08***	9.708***	8.349***
	(1.037)	(1.191)	(1.481)	(1.211)	(1.366)
Demo*Power	-2.070	-2.369	-1.143	-2.291	-2.278
	(1.871)	(1.914)	(2.380)	(1.866)	(2.154)
Tenure	0.0383+	0.0722**	0.107***	0.00581	0.00934
	(0.0209)	(0.0267)	(0.0304)	(0.0222)	(0.0318)
Tenure^2	-0.00207	-0.00406*	-0.00638**	-0.000452	-0.00161
	(0.00142)	(0.00194)	(0.00213)	(0.00150)	(0.00198)
Tenure^3	0.0000180	0.0000444	0.0000847*	-0.00000106	0.0000202
	(0.0000261)	(0.0000375)	(0.0000382)	(0.0000285)	(0.0000353)
Demo*Tenure	-0.0352	-0.106**	-0.185***	0.0170	0.000719
	(0.0325)	(0.0409)	(0.0435)	(0.0430)	(0.0573)
Demo*Tenure^2	0.000216	0.00432+	0.00882***	-0.00307	-0.00232
	(0.00191)	(0.00252)	(0.00263)	(0.00266)	(0.00346)
Demo*Tenure^3	0.0000121	-0.0000368	-0.000103*	0.0000514	0.0000385
	(0.0000298)	(0.0000419)	(0.0000422)	(0.0000383)	(0.0000486)
Observations	156514	156514	156514	156514	156514
Number Nations	178	178	178	178	178
Years	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014
Fit (roc)	0.662	0.686	0.678	0.642	0.614
p:NonDemo Trend	0.026	0.012	0.003	0.149	0.024
p:Demo Trend	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.053	0.007

Standard errors in parentheses
p:NonDemo Trend = significance level of time trend in non-democracies
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

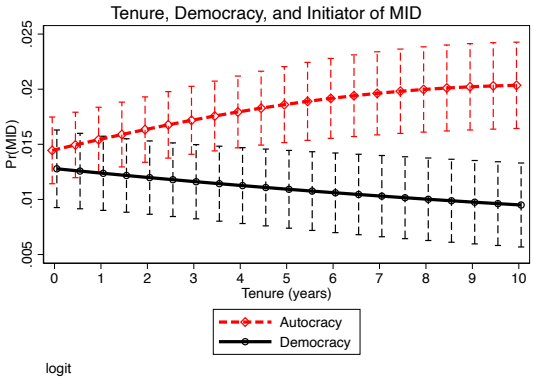
[7] In particular, the null hypothesis is that the coefficients on $Tenure$, $Tenure^2$, and $Tenure^3$ are zero.

Figure 5: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (logit analysis, Table 2)

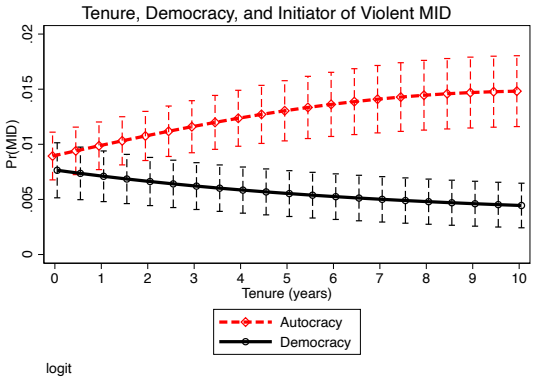
(a) Any MID Involvement



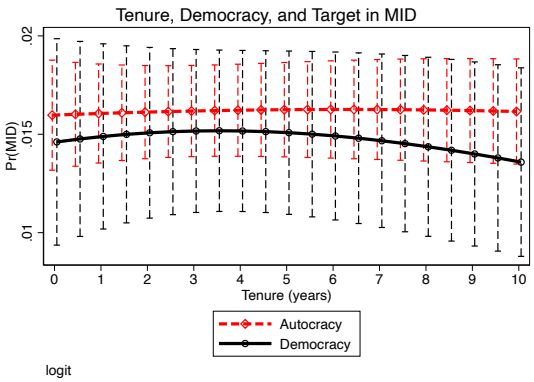
(b) Original Initiator of MID



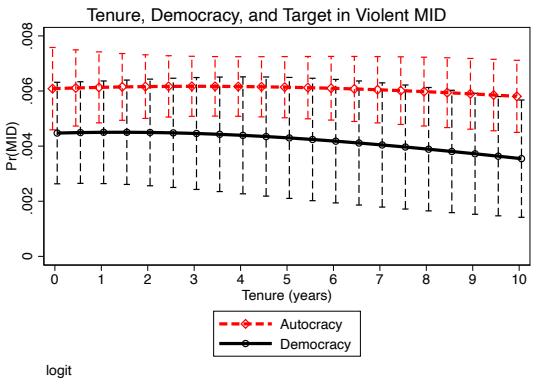
(c) Original Initiator of Violent MID



(d) Original Target of MID



(e) Original Target of Violent MID



The first panel shows that democratic and non-democratic leaders have very similar probabilities of dispute involvement when they first come to office, but that over time the likelihood on involvement declines for democratic leaders and increases for non-democratic leaders. As the overlap of the confidence intervals shows, in terms of all forms of dispute involvement, the distinction between the temporal behavior

of democratic and non-democratic leaders is slight. The second and third panels of the figure examine initiation of MIDs and initiation of violent MIDs. These panels show sharp distinctions between how democrats and non-democrats behave over time. When first in office, leaders in both forms of government have similar rate of dispute initiation. As tenure increases, non-democrats become more likely to start disputes while democrats become less likely to start disputes. The theory predicts such trends. The risk for democrats from dispute initiation is relatively constant, and presumably as they settle the issues they most care about, dispute initiation declines slightly. In contrast, dispute involvement entails less risk to an autocrat's hold on office as tenure increases, and so autocrats become more willing to start disputes as they become more established in office.

The fourth and fifth panels show the impact of tenure on being a target of a dispute. The broad overlap of the relatively large confidence intervals indicates that the temporal patterns for the targeting of disputes are weaker for being targeted than for the initiation of disputes. This result should come as little surprise, as leaders have far more control of their decision to challenge another nation than they do over the decision of others to target them. Hence, the domestic concerns engendered by tenure are more likely to be reflected in initiation rather than targeting.

The results shown in Table 2 and Figure 5 are robust to alternative methods and the inclusion of additional economic and demographic control. In the Appendix, Table 4 and Figure 6 replicate the analyzes using fixed effect regression models with fixed effects for the nation and year. Table 5 and Figure 7 show logit results with the inclusion of economic and demographic control. Table 6 and Figure 8 present fixed-effect regressions with these additional controls. Since systematic economic data are only available for a shorter time period, these latter analyses contain substantially fewer observations. Yet, the same pattern prevails: as tenure increases, non-democratic leaders become more likely to initiate crises, and democratic leaders become less likely to initiate crises.

In democratic systems, elections reduce the cost of replacing the incumbent (c_t in

Table 3: Tenure, Elections and Dispute Involvement in Democracies (logit)

	(1) Any MID	(2) Initiator	(3) Violent Initiator	(4) Target	(5) Violent Target
Power	12.82***	12.49***	11.87***	10.79***	8.767***
	(1.746)	(1.427)	(1.551)	(1.558)	(2.006)
Tenure	0.0278	-0.0309	-0.101	0.0249	0.0618
	(0.0618)	(0.0797)	(0.107)	(0.0807)	(0.136)
Tenure^2	-0.00422	0.00348	0.00749	-0.00665	-0.00685
	(0.00813)	(0.0131)	(0.0156)	(0.00941)	(0.0224)
Tenure^3	0.0000736	-0.000193	-0.000192	0.000202	-0.0000982
	(0.000249)	(0.000474)	(0.000495)	(0.000262)	(0.000828)
Close to Election	-0.182$^+$	-0.161	-0.102	-0.175	-0.0192
	(0.0986)	(0.200)	(0.296)	(0.136)	(0.265)
Months till Election	-0.00570	-0.00162	-0.000299	-0.00844$^+$	0.00617
	(0.00351)	(0.00552)	(0.00732)	(0.00511)	(0.00527)
Observations	37350	37350	37350	37350	37350
Number Nations	105	105	105	105	105
Years	1945-2014	1945-2014	1945-2014	1945-2014	1945-2014
Fit (roc)	0.710	0.738	0.717	0.676	0.624
p:Trend	0.658	0.684	0.381	0.731	0.064

Standard errors in parentheses
p:Demo Trend = significance level of time trend
$^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

the formal model). Table 3 examines how proximity to elections affects the participation of democratic leaders in disputes. The variable *Months till Election* represents the time in months until the next executive election. The variable *Close to Election* codes whether an election will occur within the next 6 months. In general, proximity to elections has no robust impact on dispute involvement for democratic leaders.[8] The theory predicted that leaders facing a high risk of deposition might gamble for resurrection, while those who are relatively secure will avoid disputes. Some existing studies have used unemployment and inflation data to create misery indices (for example, DeRouen (1995)). Unfortunately, monthly unemployment data are unavailable for the breadth of number of nations and time periods in our study. Although most existing studies have focused on the impact of electoral proximity, our analyses suggest that leader tenure is at least as important in determining dispute involvement.

[8]In many parliamentary systems elections dates are no fixed. Although not reported here, we also created variables based on timing until an election had to be called based on the maximum time permitted between elections. As with the results reported here, these alternative variables did not have an aggregate marginal impact on dispute involvement.

6 Conclusions

Our model provides a novel framework for understanding the interplay between political survival, institutional design, and international conflict, building directly on the seminal work of Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) and the concept of a political life cycle. We show that a leader's tenure fundamentally alters their calculus regarding foreign policy. The key mechanism is the learning process through which leaders identify and cultivate loyal supporters within the framework of selectorate politics.

Democratic leaders, operating with large winning coalitions, face a consistently challenging survival environment. Their reliance on public goods means they gain little additional loyalty over time, making them perpetually wary of the inherent risks of international disputes unless absolutely necessary or a 'gamble for resurrection' is their last resort.

In contrast, autocratic leaders experience a distinct political life cycle. Newly installed autocrats, similar to democratic leaders, are constrained by the fragility of their nascent support. They are thus also cautious about engaging in risky international disputes. However, as their tenure lengthens and they effectively weed out less loyal supporters through a learning-and-reshuffling process, their core coalition becomes more secure and reliant on valuable private goods. This increasing incumbency advantage liberates established autocrats from the survival concerns that typically restrain leaders. Consequently, they can engage in international disputes with greater impunity, as domestic political survival becomes less dependent on external success or failure.

This differential impact of tenure across regime types has profound implications for international relations. It suggests that while democracies are consistently conflict-averse (barring extreme circumstances), the propensity of autocracies to initiate disputes is not static, but increases with leader tenure. Furthermore, this dynamic also shapes the level of effort leaders exert in disputes, with democratic leaders and new autocrats making greater efforts to ensure positive outcomes due to

their precarious positions, while established autocrats may prioritize private goods over foreign policy success. Our model thus offers a micro-founded explanation for observed patterns of international conflict behavior across diverse political systems and over time.

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Appendix

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A Proofs

Proof of Proposition 2: In the main text Proposition 1 showed that leaders replace low affinity supporters and therefore the probability of being retained in the coalition, ρ_t, is given by equation 2. Given these retention probabilities, equation 4 gives the survival probability given leader policies.

Consider the case of no dispute involvement. Given leader payoffs in Table 1, the leader wants to maximize her chance of retaining office, which given equation 4 means her objective function is

$$\max_{g_t \geq 0, z_t \geq 0, m_t \geq 0} u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + c_t - U_0 \text{ subject to } pg_t + W z_t + m_t \leq R$$

Straightforwardly, spending on diplomatic/military effort does not affect supporter payoff but decreases available resources and so $m_t = 0$. Further the leader spends all available resources, so $z_t = \frac{R - pg_t}{W}$. We can rewrite the maximization as

$$\max_{g_t \in [0, R/p]} L = u(g_t) + \rho_t v\left(\frac{R - pg_t}{W}\right)$$

The first order condition is

$$\frac{dL}{dg_t} = u_g(g) - \rho_t \frac{p}{W} v_z\left(\frac{R - pg_t}{W}\right) = 0$$

and the second order conditions

$$\frac{d^2L}{dg_t^2} = u_{gg}(g) + \rho_t \frac{p^2}{W^2} v_{zz}\left(\frac{R - pg_t}{W}\right) < 0$$

For our specific utility functions, $u(g) = \sqrt{g}$ and $v(z) = \sqrt{z}$, the first order condition results in the policies $g_t^{*n} = \frac{RW}{p(W+p\rho_t^2)}$, $z_t^{*n} = \frac{Rp\rho_t^2}{W(W+p\rho_t^2)}$ and $m_t^{*n} = 0$; the coalition's expected payoff from the leader policies is $E[U(g_t^{*n}, z_t^{*n}, m_t^{*n})] = \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}}$, and the leader survives with probability $\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sigma}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(W+\rho_t^2 p)}{pW}} + c_t - U_0\right)\right)$.

Turning to the case where dispute occurs, the leader again wants to maximize her chance of retaining office, $\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}(u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + \zeta + \sqrt{m_t} + c_t - U_0)\right)$, which is achieved by maximizing the argument $u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + \zeta + \sqrt{m_t} + c_t - U_0$. From standard constrained optimization,

$$L = u(g_t) + \rho_t v(z_t) + \zeta + \sqrt{m_t} + \lambda(R - pg_t - Wz_t - m_t)$$

with the first order conditions

$$\frac{dL}{dg_t} = u_g(g_t) - \lambda p = 0$$

$$\frac{dL}{dz_t} = \rho_t v_z(z_t) - \lambda W = 0$$

$$\frac{dL}{dz_t} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{m_t}} - \lambda = 0$$

$$\frac{dL}{d\lambda} = R - pg_t - Wz_t - m_t = 0$$

The second order conditions are $\frac{d^2L}{dg_t^2} = u_{gg}(g_t) < 0$ $\frac{d^2L}{dz_t^2} = \rho_t v_{zz}(z_t) < 0$, $\frac{d^2L}{dz_t^2} = -\frac{1}{4} m_t^{-\frac{3}{2}} < 0$, and all the cross derivatives are zero, which ensures that L's payoff is maximized when the first order conditions are satisfied. Solving the first order conditions yields $g_t^{*d} = \frac{RW}{p(W+pW+p\rho^2)}$, $z_t^{*d} = \frac{Rp\rho^2}{W(pW+W+p\rho^2)}$ and $m_t^{*d} = \frac{RpW}{(pW+W+p\rho^2)}$; the coalition's expected payoff from the leader policies is $E[U(g_t^{*d}, z_t^{*d}, m_t^{*d})] = \sqrt{\frac{R(W+pW+\rho^2 p)}{pW}} + \zeta$, and the leader survives with probability $\Phi\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma^2+\gamma^2}}\left(\mu_t + \sqrt{\frac{R(W+pW+\rho^2 p)}{pW}} + \zeta + c_t - U_0\right)\right)$.

Given the characterization of policies and survival probabilities with and without a dispute, equation 3 finds L's private valuation for the crisis that makes L indifference between dispute and no dispute. ■

B Robustness

Table 4 and Figure 6 replicate the main analyses using fixed effect regression models with fixed effects for nation and year. Table 5 and Figure 7 show logit results with the inclusion of economic and demographic control. Table 6 and Figure 8 present fixed effect regressions with these additional controls.

Table 4: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (fixed effects)

	(1) Any MID	(2) Initiator	(3) Violent Initiator	(4) Target	(5) Violent Target
Demo	-0.00463	-0.00462	-0.00181	0.000630	0.00118
	(0.00505)	(0.00324)	(0.00232)	(0.00342)	(0.00197)
Power	0.309	0.312*	0.170	0.0555	0.0140
	(0.199)	(0.140)	(0.119)	(0.100)	(0.0380)
Demo*Power	-0.317	-0.270	-0.152	-0.0998	-0.0668+
	(0.302)	(0.212)	(0.187)	(0.127)	(0.0352)
Tenure	0.000580	0.000809*	0.000887**	-0.000251	-0.000210
	(0.000568)	(0.000367)	(0.000297)	(0.000306)	(0.000170)
Tenure^2	-0.0000485	-0.0000590*	-0.0000599**	0.00000725	0.00000588
	(0.0000350)	(0.0000243)	(0.0000200)	(0.0000189)	(0.00000992)
Tenure^3	0.000000525	0.000000796*	0.000000858*	-0.000000177	-9.05e-08
	(0.000000566)	(0.000000396)	(0.000000335)	(0.000000317)	(0.000000165)
Demo*Tenure	0.000379	-0.000851	-0.00125**	0.000884+	0.000254
	(0.000834)	(0.000556)	(0.000408)	(0.000476)	(0.000226)
Demo*Tenure^2	-0.00000380	0.0000635+	0.0000857**	-0.0000466+	-0.0000123
	(0.0000497)	(0.0000336)	(0.0000267)	(0.0000262)	(0.0000127)
Demo*Tenure^3	3.85e-08	-0.000000856+	-0.00000122**	0.000000648+	0.000000180
	(0.000000725)	(0.000000497)	(0.000000413)	(0.000000377)	(0.000000190)
Observations	156514	156514	156514	156514	156514
Number of Nations	178	178	178	178	178
Number of Leaders	3206	3206	3206	3206	3206
Years	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014	1840-2014
Fit (R2)	0.044	0.028	0.019	0.018	0.010
p:NonDemo Trend	0.051	0.041	0.018	0.062	0.051
p:Demo Trend	0.129	0.183	0.055	0.101	0.048

Standard errors in parentheses
Standard Errors Clustered by Country.
p:NonDemo Trend = significance level of time trend in non-democracies.
p:Demo Trend = significance level of time trend in democracies
$^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (logit)

	(1) Any MID	(2) Initiator	(3) Violent Initiator	(4) Target	(5) Violent Target
main					
Demo	-0.484**	-0.675*	-0.859*	-0.320^{+}	-0.584*
	(0.166)	(0.268)	(0.343)	(0.186)	(0.273)
Power	2.410	0.911	-3.309	2.189	-1.092
	(1.891)	(2.366)	(2.698)	(1.958)	(2.656)
Demo*Power	5.706***	7.073***	13.28***	5.234***	9.283***
	(1.407)	(1.770)	(2.007)	(1.390)	(2.043)
Tenure	0.0452	0.0857^{+}	0.109^{+}	0.00509	0.0439
	(0.0349)	(0.0506)	(0.0607)	(0.0338)	(0.0425)
Tenure^2	-0.00164	-0.00413	-0.00514	0.0000805	-0.00465
	(0.00255)	(0.00389)	(0.00484)	(0.00254)	(0.00287)
Tenure^3	-0.00000599	0.0000277	0.0000363	-0.0000216	0.0000850
	(0.0000480)	(0.0000720)	(0.0000925)	(0.0000530)	(0.0000535)
Demo*Tenure	-0.0250	-0.153^{+}	-0.245*	-0.0148	0.106
	(0.0606)	(0.0904)	(0.121)	(0.0716)	(0.105)
Demo*Tenure^2	0.00198	0.0166	0.0252^{+}	0.000486	-0.0154
	(0.00552)	(0.0119)	(0.0136)	(0.00600)	(0.0100)
Demo*Tenure^3	-0.0000508	-0.000460	-0.000614	-0.000000842	0.000260
	(0.000122)	(0.000412)	(0.000434)	(0.000110)	(0.000202)
log(GPDpc)$_{t-1}$	0.144**	0.138^{+}	0.0498	0.0541	-0.219**
	(0.0463)	(0.0737)	(0.0856)	(0.0433)	(0.0689)
log(Pop)$_{t-1}$	0.399***	0.505***	0.525***	0.339***	0.335***
	(0.0530)	(0.0770)	(0.0852)	(0.0544)	(0.0691)
Growth	-0.0101	-0.0200^{+}	-0.0286*	-0.00422	-0.00398
	(0.00672)	(0.0103)	(0.0130)	(0.00823)	(0.0145)
Observations	83129	83129	83129	83129	83129
Number Nations	167	167	167	167	167
Years	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014
Fit (roc)	0.717	0.756	0.765	0.688	0.702
p:NonDemo Trend	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.194	0.089
p:Demo Trend	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.500	0.009

Standard errors in parentheses
Standard Errors Clustered by Country.
p:NonDemo Trend = significance level of time trend in non-democracies.
p:Demo Trend = significance level of time trend in democracies
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

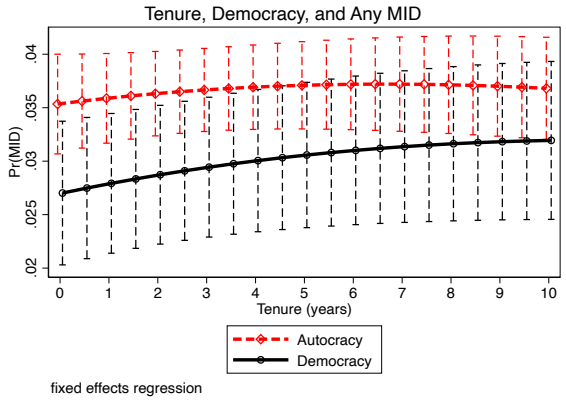
Table 6: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (fixed effects)

	(1) Any MID	(2) Initiator	(3) Violent Initiator	(4) Target	(5) Violent Target
Demo	-0.00853^{+}	-0.00356	-0.00285^{+}	-0.00229	-0.000634
	(0.00442)	(0.00266)	(0.00166)	(0.00284)	(0.00145)
Power	0.727	0.663^{+}	0.0117	0.166	-0.145
	(0.450)	(0.361)	(0.150)	(0.157)	(0.119)
Demo*Power	0.0864	-0.224	0.105	0.0336	0.0389
	(0.397)	(0.314)	(0.135)	(0.221)	(0.160)
Tenure	0.000787	0.000802^{+}	0.000824*	-0.0000965	0.0000997
	(0.000648)	(0.000462)	(0.000401)	(0.000375)	(0.000234)
Tenure^2	-0.0000388	-0.0000520	-0.0000516	0.00000491	-0.0000150
	(0.0000481)	(0.0000386)	(0.0000335)	(0.0000253)	(0.0000158)
Tenure^3	0.000000202	0.000000727	0.000000713	-0.000000217	0.000000267
	(0.000000871)	(0.000000705)	(0.000000608)	(0.000000457)	(0.000000286)
Demo*Tenure	0.0000262	-0.000967	-0.00117*	0.000316	0.000113
	(0.00106)	(0.000658)	(0.000527)	(0.000625)	(0.000297)
Demo*Tenure^2	0.0000248	0.0000835^{+}	0.0000922*	-0.0000111	-0.0000149
	(0.0000753)	(0.0000484)	(0.0000409)	(0.0000455)	(0.0000217)
Demo*Tenure^3	-0.000000125	-0.00000130	-0.00000142*	0.000000345	0.000000265
	(0.00000126)	(0.000000835)	(0.000000696)	(0.000000740)	(0.000000383)
log(GPDpc)$_{t-1}$	-0.00613	-0.00186	-0.00402^{+}	-0.00251	-0.00266*
	(0.00476)	(0.00259)	(0.00230)	(0.00319)	(0.00134)
log(Pop)$_{t-1}$	-0.0167*	-0.00953^{+}	-0.00511	0.00156	0.00215
	(0.00761)	(0.00560)	(0.00414)	(0.00430)	(0.00227)
Growth	-0.000313	-0.000216	-0.000255^{+}	-0.000127	-0.0000581
	(0.000190)	(0.000137)	(0.000136)	(0.000116)	(0.0000552)
Observations	83129	83129	83129	83129	83129
Number Nations	167	167	167	167	167
Years	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014	1961-2014
Fit (R2)	0.059	0.042	0.029	0.026	0.012
p:NonDemo Trend	0.015	0.075	0.018	0.106	0.184
p:Demo Trend	0.015	0.113	0.032	0.100	0.069

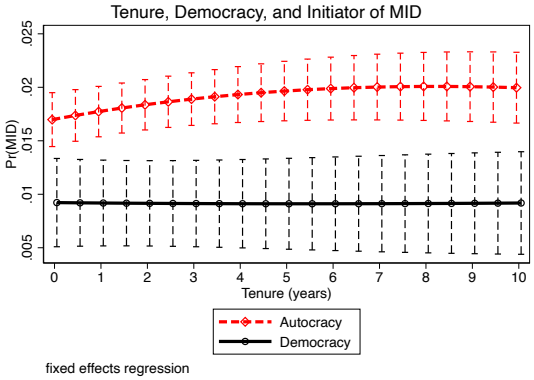
Standard errors in parentheses
Standard Errors Clustered by Country.
p:NonDemo Trend = significance level of time trend in non-democracies.
p:Demo Trend = significance level of time trend in democracies
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 6: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (fixed effect regression, Table 4)

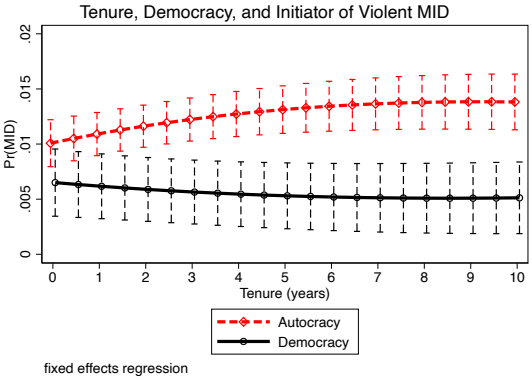
(a) Any MID Involvement



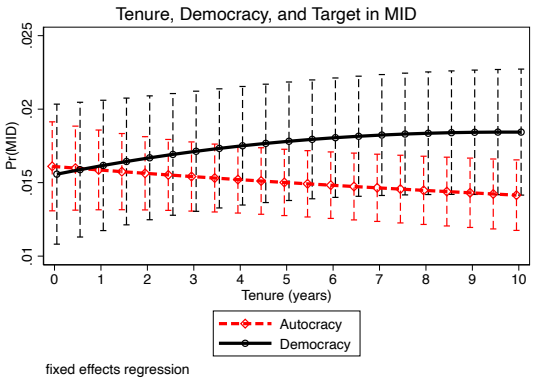
(b) Original Initiator of MID



(c) Original Initiator of Violent MID



(d) Original Target of MID



(e) Original Target of Violent MID

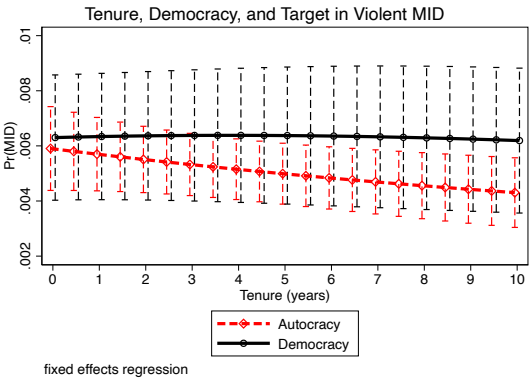
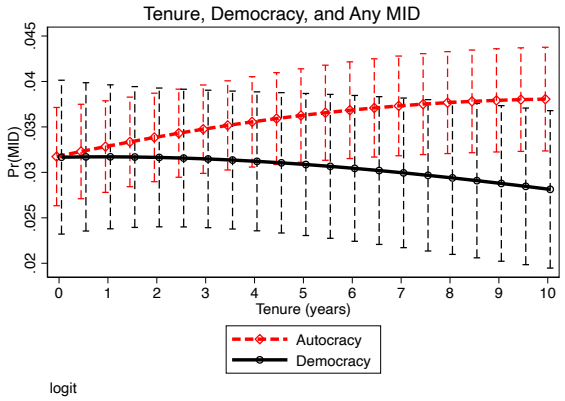
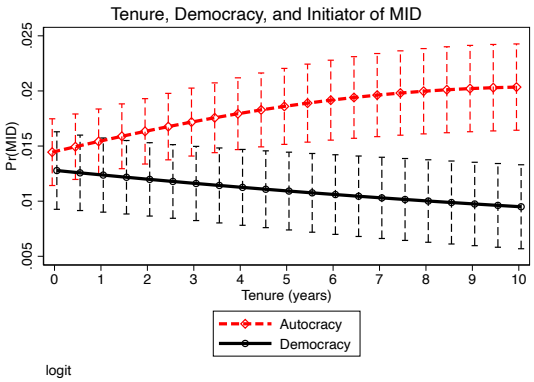


Figure 7: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (logit analyses, Table 5)

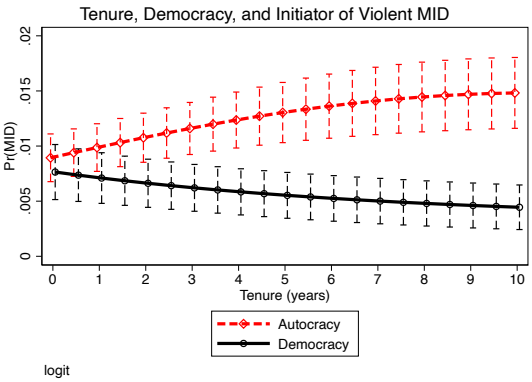
(a) Any MID Involvement



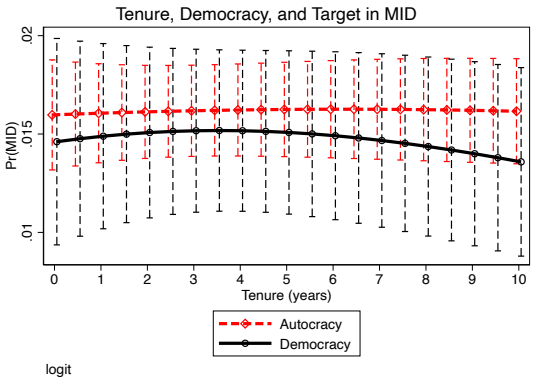
(b) Original Initiator of MID



(c) Original Initiator of Violent MID



(d) Original Target of MID



(e) Original Target of Violent MID

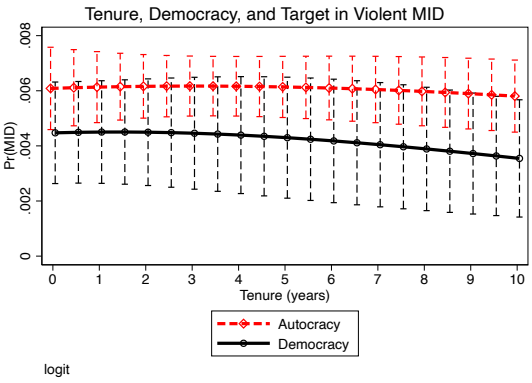
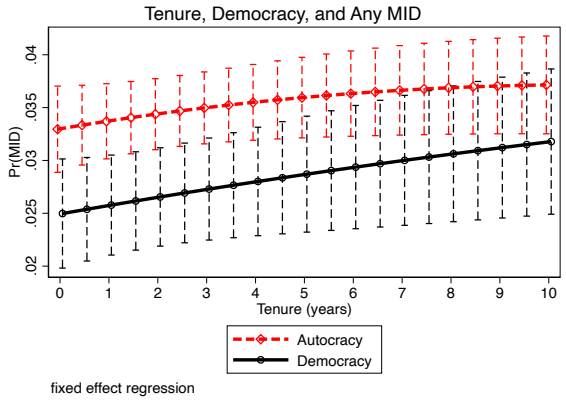
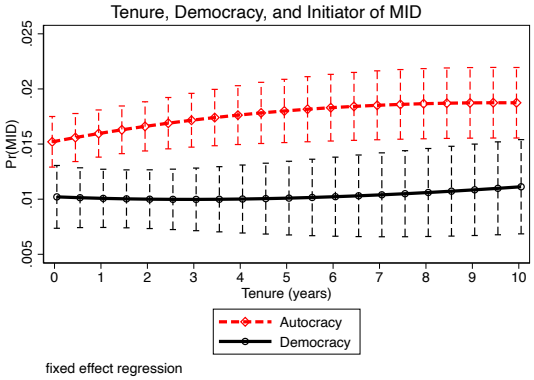


Figure 8: Tenure, Democracy and Dispute Involvement (fixed effect regression, Table 6)

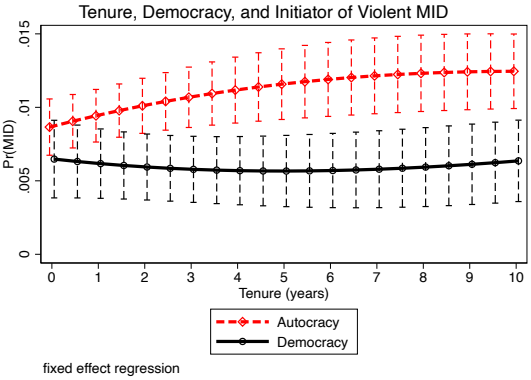
(a) Any MID Involvement



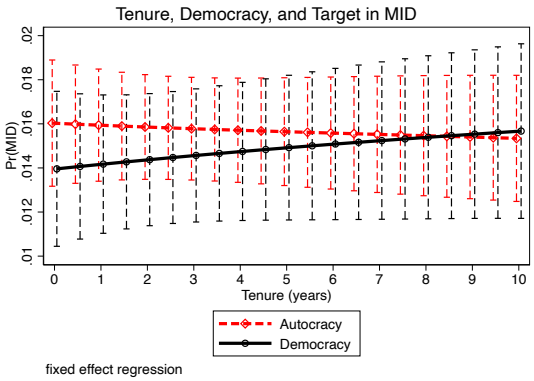
(b) Original Initiator of MID



(c) Original Initiator of Violent MID



(d) Original Target of MID



(e) Original Target of Violent MID