

Is Anyone Listening? Crisis Signaling by the British House of Commons, 1918-2004

Dennis M. Foster
Department of International Studies
Virginia Military Institute
fosterdm@vmi.edu

Douglas M. Gibler
Department of Political Science
University of Alabama
dmgibler@bama.ua.edu

ABSTRACT

Several prominent theories suggest that legislative opposition to leadership policies in international crises can moderate governmental stances and/or embolden adversaries. However, empirical tests of these theories have looked only at indirect measures of both independent and dependent variables. We change this by employing large-scale, textual analysis software to examine all British Parliamentary debates concerning international crises, for the period 1918-2004. We account for variations in the levels of certainty, anger, and anxiety expressed by Members of Parliament during debates, and identify the level of agreement among party members. Our analyses of these debates suggest our measures perform well since both certainty and anxiety predict British crisis escalation quite well. However, potential signals of calculated risk-taking propensity on the part of the House of Commons do not, independently, influence the escalatory behavior of the UK's primary adversaries in interstate crises. Certainty and anxiety in British Parliament are associated with *increased escalation* by adversaries, even when controlling for common predictors of crisis escalation. We discuss the implications of these arguments for theories of democratic signaling.

One of the most theoretically rich explanations for why democracies do not fight each other focuses on the role of informative signaling. Democracies are purported to signal better because of the prevalence of open debate and competitive domestic political environments (Schultz 2001a). Thus, when the opposition recognizes the gravity of crises, and offers clear support for the leadership's crisis policies, greater credibility attaches to the signal. Knowing this, rivals are less likely to challenge, and, when two democracies face each other over a contentious issue, their signaling abilities assure peaceful resolution of the crisis before escalation to war (see also, Fearon 1994).

Tests of these arguments have seemingly provided strong support for the theory, but this evidence remains based only on indirect measures of rival actions. We use this note to improve empirical tests of signaling arguments in two distinct ways. First, we focus on one democracy and examine, in detail, the entire legislative record of the state as it pertains to foreign policy crises. Using textual analysis software, we generate quite accurate measures of important legislative attitudes towards crises and measure the actual tenor of legislative debate as each crisis unfolded. Second, we examine escalation within conflicts, which constitutes a much more appropriate test of the strategic effects of domestic politics. Together, these research design improvements represent a significant advancement in the empirical testing of democratic signaling.

Legislative Signaling in International Crises

Audience costs are the domestic penalties (e.g., removal from office) that leaders fear they will suffer if they back down from a public threat during an international crisis (Fearon 1994). The added cost associated with backing down adds credibility to leader threats, thereby providing a more informative signal to other leaders than capabilities or other observables. Audience costs have been used to explain a variety of international interactions, but most studies have focused on the unique

ability of democratic leaders to signal their intentions (most recently, Downes and Sechser, 2012, Davies and Johns, 2013, and Gibler and Hutchison, 2014).

One of the primary signaling mechanisms in this literature is legislative influence over crisis dynamics. According to Schultz (1999, 2001a, and 2001b), opposition parties that back the leader's crisis policies signal resolve to adversaries, while opposition parties that fail to support the leader signal ambivalence or contention within the state. In a politically competitive state, opposition parties try to garner support and votes, so their position taking is informative, and, since democracies tend to be the only states that have both active opposition parties and a media system that advertises these platforms, democracies should have a signaling advantage over other types of states during crises.

We argue that, while the underlying theory is clearly innovative, these tests are insufficient to capture more nuanced aspects of crises and legislative behavior that should fundamentally impact strategic interaction. There are three specific areas in need of improvement. First, and most importantly, though many studies model the *possibility* of opposition party influence (by testing the effects of institutional democracy on crisis dynamics) and the *likelihood* of such influence (by correlating the partisan disposition of the legislature with crisis dynamics), no scholarship has tested for legislative effects by systematically examining *actual legislative behavior*. Indeed, even those few works that look for legislative effects during bargaining (Foster, 2006, 2008; Arena, 2008) do not effectively capture the depth, breadth, and intensity of any general legislative attitudes towards crises. Second, the degree to which legislative activity is informative to potential adversaries is likely contingent upon *issue salience*. The consideration of salience is quite limited in seminal tests, but recent works contend that the level of threat necessary to produce meaningful audience costs is very rarely encountered by democracies (Snyder and Borghard, 2011; Gibler and Hutchison, 2014). Finally, no signaling tests have tracked *variations in legislative behavior and adversary activity within the same*

crisis. As should legislators, the leaders of crisis opponents should update prior beliefs about the resolve of their adversaries on the basis of legislative signals. For example, the logic of extant signaling arguments suggests that crisis opponents might escalate given early ambivalence in legislative signaling but decrease escalation if unity and clarity increase over the life of the crisis.

Research Design

We analyze the factors correlated with escalation by the United Kingdom's primary opponents in crises during the period 1918-2004. According the ICB Crisis Database¹, the UK was a direct participant in 44 crises during this time period. Disaggregating the crises into a chronological list of all specific diplomatic and military actions taken by each crisis actor (which serves as our unit of analysis) resulted in the identification of 419 discrete actions. Of these, 106 were actions taken by the UK, 138 were actions taken by the UK's primary crisis adversary, and 175 were actions taken by either the UK's crisis allies or by crisis actors on the opposing side against the UK's crisis allies. Next, we constructed dichotomous escalation variables for the UK and its primary adversary. These variables were coded one if the hostility level associated with the action (based on the COW MID project's 22-point ordinal scale; Bremer, Ghosn, and Palmer, 2004) equaled or exceeded the highest hostility level previously attained by the actor in the given dispute and zero otherwise.² The *UK Opponent Escalation* variable serves as the primary dependent variable for this study and is analyzed via logistic regression with standard errors clustered on the crisis.³

Our primary independent variables in this study are measures of the psychological attitudes manifested in the British parliamentary debate immediately preceding a given opponent action. We derive these measures through computerized content analysis of the texts of 592 crisis-relevant

¹ <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb>

² The first hostile action taken by a state in a given dispute is also coded as an escalation.

³ Cross-sectional time series logit models suggest some temporal "stickiness" within crises. However, since the findings of these models do not substantively deviate from the findings of simple logit models, and to avoid the loss of several observations from an already small sample, we estimate simple logit in this work.

debates in the House of Commons (retrieved from Hansard Commons), which include oral question periods, Prime Minister's time and statements by relevant cabinet ministers, and prescheduled Commons debates pertaining to a given crisis.⁴ We organized the debate transcripts by the international crisis to which they pertained and then separated the debates by day. A list of all UK-involved crises, the dates of British involvement, the number of total diplomatic and military actions taken by the UK's primary crisis adversary, and the number of crisis-relevant debates occurring in the House of Commons, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 about here.

We applied the Language Inquiry and Word Count (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010) (LIWC)⁵ software to measure various attributes of the language used in each debate. The LIWC software was developed to measure the psychological states of speakers or writers and employs a content-analysis dictionary, mapping individual words into particular emotional and cognitive categories. The software uses lists of words associated with each concept; these lists were chosen and refined through a series of statistical analyses and evaluations by human judges.⁶ The higher the proportion of words in a document that match the word lists for a particular concept, the higher the document scores for that concept. In addition to the psychological concepts discussed above, LIWC collects grammatical information, such as the numbers and types of prepositions, articles and helping verbs, the number and types of pronouns used, and the tenses of the verbs. This information provides context for the emotional and cognitive content of the text. Statistical tests of LIWC's validity, correlating human ratings of psychological, emotional, and cognitive content to those produced by the software, establish that the word lists within the categories of interest do

⁴ Since, as one would expect, several of the actions undertaken by Britain's adversaries occur before crisis-relevant debate ensues, those actions are not included in the analysis. Only 62 actions undertaken by crisis adversaries are included in the dataset.

⁵ <http://www.liwc.net/>

⁶ Described in "LIWC2007 Manual: The Development and Psychometric Properties of LIWC2007" available at http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/pennebaker/reprints/LIWC2007_LanguageManual.pdf

pertain to the theme of the category, and therefore suggest that LIWC successfully measures the psychological states manifested in texts (Pennebaker et. al 2007). LIWC has been successfully used to study legislative debate for several purposes: to measure the level of emotion in debates in the U.S. Congress, to evaluate the complexity of political motivations expressed by U.S. state legislators (Mooney 2012), and to identify differences in speech patterns between male and female legislators (Yu 2013). Overall, LIWC has been viewed as a reliable and valid indicator of sentiment for political texts (Stuart and Soroka 2012).

We used the LIWC software to produce one observation for each day of debate on a particular crisis with scores for each of three psychological states: *anger*, *anxiety*, and *certainty*.⁷ Previous research has shown that increases in the level of *anger* in the messages conveyed by political actors are significant predictors of increased political aggression on the part of those actors, especially as it pertains to the use of political violence against archival opponent out-groups (Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank, 2013). Crisis opponents of the UK who observe greater levels of anger in Commons debates may be more confident that elite discourse favors the use of force, or at least is clearly predisposed to standing firm. Increased levels of the negative emotion *anxiety*, which generally reflects worry or nervousness, may indicate a general increase in an actor's concern over the ramifications of a developing situation (e.g., Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010) and, in the context of our tests, also affect the likelihood of escalation by the adversary.

Increased levels of *certainty* often indicate two different but equally relevant predispositions. First, certainty has been viewed by some social and political psychologists as an indication of *emotional stability* (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010), indicating that actors are dealing with situations in

⁷ LIWC produced scores on these three dimensions with means and standard deviations of .798 and .774 (*anger*); .205 and .279 (*anxiety*); and 1.229 and .779 (*certainty*), respectively. These scores are comparable only within each dimension. The fact that a particular document scores higher for *anxiety* than for *anger* does not necessarily mean that it emphasizes anxiety more than anger. However, if one text has a higher *anger* score than another text, it does indicate that the text with the higher score manifests more anger.

a more level-headed and calculated fashion than if they evinced high levels of emotional instability (such as might be associated with anger or anxiety). Second, recent work in behavioral psychology clearly ties increased certainty with higher levels of *risk-seeking behavior*, and especially in contexts where potential *losses* are great and/or losses have already been incurred (Moons et al., 2013) – behavior which broadly conforms to the predictions of prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In aggregate, then, *certainty in debates regarding foreign policy crises should indicate a predilection toward calculated risk-taking, especially when potential losses are great.* Thus, given the arguments of the signaling literature, which generally contend that clear signals by democracies of unified resolve to stand firm should dissuade escalatory behavior on the part of adversaries (Schultz, 2001), especially when the stakes of a crisis are high (Gibler and Hutchinson, 2013), one should expect certainty to be negatively related to escalatory behavior on the part of Britain’s adversaries.

In addition to estimating the direct effects of these variables on the likelihood of opponent escalation, we include (in separate models) the interaction of the variables with the ICB project’s “gravity” score for each crisis as a measure of the UK’s stakes in the crisis. Crisis opponents may simply pay more careful attention to debates surrounding high-stakes crises (such as those involving territorial integrity or national survival) than those involving lower stakes (such as economic or lesser policy disputes). More importantly, the introduction of a stakes measure allows us to gauge variations in the degree or severity of potential loss facing the UK and its effects upon risk-taking, and the likelihood that legislative signals are indeed informative. The ICB *Gravity* measure is an increasing-ordinal scale, ranging from zero (economic threats) to six (threats to the existence of the UK). A negative and significant relationship between these interaction terms (and especially *Gravity* * *Certainty*) should provide basic support for the general predictions of the signaling arguments outlined above.

Finally, we include four control variables. The first, *Word Count*, is a simple measure of the numeric size (in words) of the debate immediately preceding the crisis. Since shorter debates are less likely to garner the attention of international actors, this measure allows us to account for the likely influence of a given debate on crisis dynamics. Second, since British crises occurring in the context of *World War II* tend disproportionately to deal with high stakes, and since the tenor of the Commons debates surrounding these crises may exert less influence on crisis adversaries who are already involved in a war, we include a dichotomous control variable, coded one if the crisis occurs during the period 1 September 1939 to 8 May 1945 and zero otherwise. Third, we include a relative power variable between the crisis opponent and the UK, using the Correlates of War Composite Index of National Capabilities score in a fashion consistent with Bremer (1992). We expect this measure to be negatively associated with opponent escalation. Lastly, we include the ICB increasing ordinal measure of the distance from the UK to the crisis, with the expectation that the likelihood of escalation diminishes with distance.

Empirical Results

Before conducting our tests of the influence of the psychological measures upon opponent escalation, we attempted to gain some insights into the validity of our measures by assessing the relationship between the variables and the likelihood of *British* escalation. Simply put, if there is little evidence that the UK does not escalate when its legislative debates indicate a greater likelihood of UK escalation, one should question the validity of the measures as signals of British crisis resolve. Table 2 reports the findings of this effort.

Table 2 about here.

As is clear, the levels of both *Anxiety* and *Certainty* in British debates immediately preceding a given UK crisis action are positively and significantly associated with an increased likelihood that British

action will be escalatory. The UK is also less likely to escalate crises in which it faces relatively strong adversaries and is more likely to escalate WWII crises. These results provide even more confidence that we are accurately identifying the tenor of British debates over decisions to escalate.

Our tests of the correlates of opponent escalation are reported in Table 3. The most obvious trend, in five of the six models, is the absence of statistically significant relationships between the explanatory variables of interest and the dependent variable and also in the models' goodness-of-fit measures. Indeed, the only statistically significant control variable, the distance from the UK to the crisis, demonstrates a positive prediction that contravenes most theoretical conceptions of the effects of distance.

Table 3 about here.

The exception is the final model, which reveals a negative and significant relationship between the *Gravity*Certainty* interaction term. As predicted by signaling models, some aspects of the tenor of legislative debate seem to have a systematic influence on the crisis behavior of adversaries, but this influence is narrower than one would expect. Certainty remains as a predictor of escalation, and the interaction with gravity mutes this effect only somewhat. It would seem that opponents are only slightly more hesitant to escalate over high-stakes issues, but escalation nevertheless remains likely even in these cases.

To confirm this expectation, we estimated marginal effects based on the stakes in the crisis (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). The results are presented in Figures 1-4, arranged according to the stakes in the crisis.

Figures 1-4 about here.

These analyses suggest very important caveats concerning signaling and crisis dynamics. First, it is clear that increasing certainty actually exerts a *positive* and statistically significant influence on the likelihood of enemy escalation at several levels of gravity – not only when pertaining to the

relatively low-stakes issues of economic (Figure 1), limited military, and political threats, but also when territory is at stake (Figure 2), a context explicitly identified by Gibler and Hutchinson (2013) as a high stakes issue.⁸ When the stakes of the crisis were deemed by the ICB project to involve “threats to regional or systemic influence,” the modal gravity value for the sample, the relationship between certainty and escalation is statistically insignificant. The same is true in regards to “threats of grave damage” to the UK (Figure 3), the penultimate level of crisis gravity.⁹ Only at the highest level of gravity – when the crisis involves a threat to the very survival of the UK – is the relationship between certainty and escalation negative and significant. However, there is only one case in the sample that meets this threat level, the Battle of Britain, and most case evidence of this crisis attribute Hitler’s shift in strategy to variables other than the signaling capacity of Britain’s Parliament. Moreover, in an absolute sense, the substantive negative effect found in the context of existential threat is about one-third as great as the positive effect found in the context of economic threat and similar to (though slightly less than) the positive effect found in the context of territorial threat.

In sum, *potential signals of calculated risk-taking propensity on the part of the House of Commons do not, independently, influence the escalatory behavior of the UK’s primary adversaries in interstate crises. Moreover, these signals clearly appear to embolden adversaries in low-to-moderate stakes crises and have no effect on adversary behavior in high stakes crises. Finally, somewhat in line with extant work in prospect theory and clearly echoing the logic of Snyder and Borghard (2011) and Gibler and Hutchison (2013), only in those crises involving the existence of the UK does signaled risk-taking propensity have a statistically significant de-escalatory effect on adversary behavior.*

⁸ Territory in the British sense refers almost exclusively to far-flung conflicts involving colonial territories and former colonies. The UK is of course an island and experience few threats to homeland territories (an exception—the Battle of Britain—is labeled a threat to Britain’s existence by the ICB).

⁹ Eleven of the 44 crises have this gravity level, and five of the eleven are connected to World War II.

Discussion and Conclusion

This note provides systematic tests of the ability of legislatures to signal resolve during conflicts. Our dataset includes complete coverage of that state's foreign policy experience from 1918 to 2004, but, even in this comprehensive sample, signaling opportunities for the democratic legislatures is quite rare. Simply put, democracies do not often face serious threats to their electorates (Gibler, 2012).

Even with the paucity of cases, our findings should recommend caution when assuming that democratic signaling influences foreign policy behavior. The prospect (in economic, policy-related, and even territorial crises) of increased belligerence on the part of adversaries given legislative signals of calculated risk-taking propensity, and the apparent general irrelevance of such signals in crises involving international reputation and grave danger to the signaling state, clearly contradicts current theories of how democratic legislatures signal resolve. In many ways these findings are unexpected and perplexing, but we believe they also imply the need for a greater focus on the context of signaling, including the types of threats that various types of regimes face (Weeks, 2008; Gibler and Hutchison, 2014).

We believe the employment of the LIWC-generated psychology variables employed here represent both a fundamental advancement in the signaling research program and a reasonable test of several arguments advanced in that literature, but much more could be done to refine our models and increase their commensurability with audience costs arguments. Most notably, developing variants of these measures that capture psychological states within and across parties in legislative debates, in order to develop a more comprehensive picture of the degree of overt *opposition party* criticism of or support for government policies, would allow more direct tests of the specific hypotheses of, for example, Schultz (2001). Additionally, efforts to more thoroughly identify the influence of important specific debates (rather than only the debate immediately preceding adversary

actions), beyond controls for the word counts of debates, are likely essential. Finally, following from Smith (1998), future research should undertake to more thoroughly identify ex ante domestic political conditions (such as electoral weakness of the leadership and legislative weakness of the government) that are posited by audience cost arguments to make signaling more or less credible.

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