LEGISLATIVE SIGNALING AND THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE

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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT: The project aims to determine the credibility of legislative signaling of a democratic leader's perceived resolve by using textual analysis software to measure the tenor of British Parliamentary debates during international crises from 1918 to 2004 and aligning those psychological findings with the record of militarized action by and against Britain. Results show that certainty and anxiety in debate increase the probability of an escalation within the conflict both by Britain and its adversary.

Source: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk

The term **democratic peace** refers to the trend of crises between two democracies culminating in peaceful resolution rather than escalating to war. Studies have demonstrated that **militarized interstate disputes (MIDs)** initiated by democracies are less likely to be reciprocated. This is popularly attributed to **audience cost advantages** and **legislative signaling**, two strategic advantages held by democracies in international relations. **Audience costs** are the domestic penalties, usually exacted via elections, that democratic leaders fear should they back down from a publicly-issued threat during an international crisis. As adversaries know that democratic leaders have added incentive to follow through with their threats, they attach more credibility to their stated intentions and attribute greater resolve to that leader. Beyond assessment of military capabilities, this helps to solve the problem of **incomplete information** that often prevents bargaining from resolving conflicts short of violent means. **Legislative signaling** is another strategic tool of democracies in bargaining, as greater credibility is attached to signals sent when the opposition party publicly backs the leadership's position. This is only possible because open debate and competitive domestic political environments are prevalent in democracies, where both active opposition parties and a media system advertising their platforms exist. However, the level of support and unity of the opposition and therefore certainty of debate is an often unaccounted-for factor in conflict reciprocation..

METHODS

This study uses **Language Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)** software to analyze the content of 592 crisis-relevant debates in the British House of Commons between 1918 and 2004. By mapping individual words from debate transcripts into particular emotional and cognitive categories, as well as by collecting grammatical information, the software measures the psychological states of speakers. It produces one observation for each day of debate on a particular crisis for each of 50 categories. Of these, the psychological states *anger, anxiety,* and *certainty* were focused on. *Angry* debates indicate an increased likelihood of a violent British response and therefore decrease the likelihood of conflict escalation by adversaries. *Anxious* debate indicates an increase in concern over the political ramifications of a crisis and may increase the likelihood of escalation by an adversary. *Certainty* carries two meanings: first, as an indication of emotional stability and levelheadedness; second, as an indicator of risk-seeking behavior especially in context of great losses or potential losses. This certainty should decrease the risk of conflict escalation by an adversary. To test the hypothesis that **all else equal, rivals will be more likely to escalate a crisis when legislative debate is uncertain while debate certainty will correlate with de-escalation,** the debate scores are temporally matched with the within-crisis actions of Britain's opponents. These 419 actions in 44 crises are taken from the **International Crisis Behavior** database and coded according to the **Correlates of War MID** project's 22-point ordinal scale (see below) to test for escalation or de-escalation within the conflict.

RESULTS

Both the level of *anxiety* and *certainty* in debates preceding a British crisis action are positively and significantly associated with the likelihood of an escalatory British action. Historically, the UK is also less likely to escalate crises in which it faces strong adversaries and more likely to escalate World War II crises. Apart from this, the obvious trend in the models is the absence of statistically significant relationships between the variables of interest, or psychological states, and the dependent variable of opponent crisis escalation or de-escalation. The exception to this is the observation of a negative and significant relationship between the *Gravity*Certainty* interaction term. Increasing certainty exerts a significantly positive influence on the likelihood of enemy escalation at low-stakes levels of gravity, but also when territory, a high-stakes issue, is at stake. It is insignificant when "threats to regional or systemic influence" are at stake. At the highest level of gravity, involving the very survival of the UK, primarily a WWII issue, the relationship between certainty and escalation is negative and significant. In the only case in the sample meeting this threat level, the Battle of Britain, Hitler's change in strategy is attributed to variables other than the signaling capacity of the British Parliament. Also, the significant negative effect found in the context of existential threat is only about one-third as great as the positive effect found in the context of economic threat and is slightly less than the positive effect found in the context of territorial threat.

CONCLUSIONS

Potential signals of calculated risk-taking propensity by the British House of Commons do not, on their own, influence the escalatory behavior of the UK's primary adversaries in interstate crises. Moreover, in low-to-moderate stakes crises, these signals seem to embolden adversaries to escalate conflict, and in high-stakes crises have no effect on adversary behavior. Only in crises involving the existence of the UK does signaled risk-taking propensity have a significant de-escalatory effect on adversary behavior.
The study would benefit from the accumulation of statistical analyses of other cases, as well as from an alteration to LIWC software to give a clearer picture of opposition party criticism or support of government policies. Identification of ex ante domestic political conditions, such as leader or legislative weakness, that might make signaling more or less credible, should also lend clarity to results.

Source: www.pbs.org

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CASE STUDIES

0 No militarized action
1 Threat to use force
2 Threat to blockade
3 Threat to occupy territory
4 Threat to declare war
5 Threat to use CBR weapons
6 Threat to join war
7 Show of force
8 Alert
9 Nuclear alert
10 Mobilization
11 Fortify border
12 Border violation
13 Blockade
14 Occupation of territory
15 Seizure
16 Attack
17 Clash
18 Declaration of war
19 Use of CBR weapons
20 Begin interstate war
21 Join interstate war

254	5/14/1973	Icelandic gunboats fire on British trawlers	16	1
254	5/16/1973	British fishers threaten to leave disputed waters if unassured of protection	7	1
254	5/19/1973	U.K. dispatches Royal Navy ships to Icelandic waters	12	1
254	5/20/1973	Iceland bans RAF aircraft from landing at Keflavik NATO base	7	1
254	10/2/1973	Prime Ministers begin talks	0	1
254	11/13/1973	Parliament of Iceland approves agreement to set aside areas for British fishers	0	1

UK Involvement in Action
(1: Yes; 0: No)