War, Public Preferences, and Survey Experiments

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INTRODUCTION

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In "A Preference for War," Matthew Gottfried and Robert Trager use a survey experiment that assesses public willingness to use force to challenge some commonly used assumptions about state preferences in international crises. They show that respondents wish to reward apparent fairness in reaching bargains with opposing states, yet they also indicate a willingness to reward their own leaders' bellicosity in response to aggressive rhetoric from those same opposing states. To the extent that public preferences dictate leader preferences in crises, these patterns could challenge the usefulness to common premises that "more is always better", that risk preferences are constant over possible shares of disputed goods, and that the rhetoric used by other states has little impact on support for war.

In this symposium, **Roseanne McManus** and **Philip Arena** offer some brief assessments on the implications of these findings for the literature on international crises, domestic politics, and war. McManus focuses mainly on the findings over foreign rhetoric, speculating on how to square these experimental results with her own observational work that belligerent rhetoric can effectively signal a willingness to fight (and thus secure a peaceful resolution of disputes). Arena's discussion confronts the authors' proposed fairness heuristic, noting that some key results are still consistent with predictions made by models in which "more is better," and suggesting possible ways to develop still-more informative experiments.

In their response, **Gottfried and Trager** close with a productive discussion of the two contributions, pushing back against come criticisms and highlighting new areas for further research---especially as, following the pattern here in which experimental meets formal-theoretic meets observational work in the future.

Aggressive Rhetoric and Effective Coercion

Roseanne McManus
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Matthew Gottfried and Robert Trager's article provides fascinating new insights into the impact of both fairness heuristics and adversary rhetoric on public approval for conflict bargaining outcomes. In keeping with my own research interests, I will focus on the findings regarding adversary rhetoric. Gottfried and Trager are not the first to propose that tough rhetoric can be counterproductive by raising audience costs for the opposing side, but they provide the strongest evidence of this to date. Their survey experiment, administered to US adults, shows that more aggressive adversary rhetoric substantially increases the number of respondents who approve of successful war and decreases the number of respondents who approve of peaceful bargains in which the United States receives less than 50 percent of disputed territory. This suggests that rather than persuading the United States to back down, aggressive adversary rhetoric might give US presidents greater public opinion incentives to fight.

What does this mean for leaders who seek to coerce an adversary? As Gottfried and Trager point out in their conclusion (254), leaders involved in international disputes may feel pulled in two different directions, wanting to use rhetoric to establish their own credibility but fearing to provoke the other side. Can employing aggressive rhetoric be a successful strategy for leaders in this situation? My research indicates that it often can. My published work and forthcoming book about US presidential statements of resolve present both quantitative and qualitative evidence that resolved statements are helpful in persuading US adversaries to back down in disputes. How can my findings be squared with the findings of Gottfried and Trager, which are indeed quite convincing? I would like to point to two reasons why we might still expect resolved or even aggressive statements to be effective conflict bargaining tools, despite the potential to raise audience costs on the opposing side.

One reason is the relative size of audience costs. We know that the size of audience costs generated by statements is probably larger in experiments than in the real world because in the real world there are bigger time lags and more distractions that might make people forget or not even hear a leader's words. Given that people will hear and remember leadership statements imperfectly in the real world, we must ask which people are most likely to hear and remember a particular leader's statements. The answer is probably that the leader's own citizens are more likely to hear and remember than foreign citizens because of media organizations' natural tendency to focus on the leader of their own country. This might allow a leader to make resolved or aggressive statements that generate more audience costs in the leader's own country than in an adversary country.

A second reason why resolved statements may be effective for coercion, despite the findings of Gottfried and Trager, relates to the role of reputational costs. My forthcoming book presents some evidence, in keeping with Sartori (2002), that leaders' concern with maintaining a reputation for honesty on the international stage may be a more important reason that resolved statements are costly and credible than domestic audience costs. While a leader's resolved or aggressive statements might be viewed as an insult to the adversary's

honor, they do not have any potential to damage the adversary's reputation for honesty, regardless of how the adversary responds. Only a leader's own words can put into play his or her reputation for honesty. Therefore, international reputational costs offer a way for leaders to tie their own hands using statements, without simultaneously tying their adversary's hands.

Gottfried and Trager have greatly advanced the research agenda on aggressive rhetoric by providing convincing evidence that this rhetoric can have counterproductive consequences. While acknowledging the potential downsides of aggressive rhetoric, this post has offered some reasons not to dismiss it too fast as an effective coercive tool. More research, using survey experiments as well as observational data and historical case studies, is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of how leaders can best resolve the tradeoff between the benefits and costs of aggressive rhetoric.

TEMPERING THE CONCLUSIONS OF 'A PREFERENCE FOR WAR'

Phil Arena

In their article, Matthew Gottfried and Robert Trager offer experimental evidence against some of the foundational assumptions of crisis bargaining models; namely, that preferences over outcomes are weakly concave and non-satiable (i.e., that more is always better). They find that the US public is likely to reward leaders who secure 50% of some disputed territory more so than it would a leader who secured any other amount, implying that leaders may have satiable and non-monotonic utility functions. They also find that leaders will face greater incentives to reach negotiated agreements (of any form) when foreign rhetoric is more accommodating than when it is aggressive. The implications of these findings, according to these authors, are twofold: if the rhetoric adopted by the governments involved in the conflicts over Jammu and Kashmir, the South China Sea, or other areas turns bellicose, the risk of violence is likely to increase; and the factors emphasized by the bargaining literature (namely the incentive to misrepresent private information and commitment problems) may not help us understand many real-world conflicts. Gottfried and Trager have made a valuable contribution to the literature, and I applaud *ISQ* for publishing this article. Many important questions are raised by their results, and I truly hope that they will be explored by future work. I will highlight a few of what I believe to be the most pressing ones below. I will also note a few concerns I have about the conclusions drawn from the evidence provided.

First, as Gottfried and Trager note several times throughout the article, previous work indicates that people gravitate towards 50-50 splits in the absence of other strong frames. However, leaders constantly seek to frame international crises. How sensitive are the results provided here to messaging by the president? Recently, Horowitz and Levendusky (2012) demonstrated that the audience cost effect identified by Tomz essentially disappears if the president simply tells the public that new considerations came to light forcing him/her to back away from an initial threat. It appears that if public threats to use force tie a leader's hands, they do so with very loose knots. Will future work reveal that leaders are pulled towards even splits by forces that are equally easy to overcome via prime-time speeches from the Oval Office? I don't mean to suggest an answer to that question. It is entirely possible that norms of fairness are stronger than concerns about tarnishing the national reputation. I do, however, think it valuable to attempt a replication of these results with a treatment for presidential rhetoric offered in justification of larger claims.

Second, Gottfried and Trager argue that foreign rhetoric can become an explanation for war, and they set this up in opposition to those emphasized by the bargaining literature. However, to arrive at this conclusion, they treat the terms of a negotiated agreement as fixed, and even then find only that leaders who expect to secure military victory with great probability will face an incentive to choose war over negotiated agreements that leave them with a very small share of the disputed good. But this isn't at odds with standard models, nor do the authors answer the question of why leaders who expect to secure military victory with great probability would be forced to choose between war and negotiated agreements that leave them with a very small share of the disputed good. While I certainly would

not *encourage* bellicose language on behalf of any of the leaders involved in ongoing territorial disputes, I am not convinced that the evidence summarized in Figure 5 constitutes a novel explanation for war.

Finally, Gottfried and Trager claim that if preferences are both satiable and sensitive to foreign rhetoric, then information and commitment problems do not deserve their privileged place in the theoretical approaches to the study of conflict. It is not clear that this is the case. While the authors are certainly right to say that most models continue to assume that preferences are non-satiable, exceptions have started to emerge (see, for example, this article by Spaniel and Bils 2016); and while these new models challenge some of the conventional wisdom in the bargaining literature, they do not undermine the primacy of information problems. (As of yet, the implications for commitment problems have not been explored.) Rather, they suggest that wars stemming from information problems may have different dynamics than we had previously thought, and that those dynamics are evident in the historical record. In other words, I see great value in relaxing the assumption that leaders' utility functions are non-satiable, and am delighted to see that some of my fellow game-theorists have begun to explore such models. But further work is needed to determine what the full implications of relaxing these assumptions are. It is not yet clear that information and commitment problems will (or should) occupy any less central a role in the preeminent theoretical models of tomorrow. Perhaps they will (and should)! But it will take more to convince me of that than I see here.

To sum up, I think the evidence provided in Gottfried and Trager's article is quite interesting and I am glad that *ISQ* has provided a venue for such work. It deserves to be widely read and cited. However, I hope that the conversation continues. I am curious to see how robust the results are empirically (particularly to attempts by leaders to apply new frames) and eagerly await future theoretical work that further traces the implications of alternative assumptions regarding the role of fairness, foreign rhetoric, and other factors for that matter, in shaping utility functions.

Response from the Authors

Matthew Gottfried and Robert Trager
University of California, Los Angeles

We are grateful for these thoughtful and incisive reflections on our piece from Philip Arena and Roseanne McManus. We find we agree with many of their conclusions, but our thinking diverges in some important respects as well.

We agree that leaders try to frame and reframe conflicts, and that they can be effective to varying degrees. We further agree that the degree to which public preferences constrain leaders continues to be a fascinating area of research across the discipline. Does Franklin Roosevelt's ability to bring the United States into the Second World War in spite of isolationist public sentiment demonstrate leaders' freedom of action (Trachtenberg 2006, Schuessler 2010)? Or do the great lengths that he went to, including perhaps intentionally provoking Japan and Germany, instead demonstrate the extent to which leaders are constrained except in the most exceptional circumstances (cf. Reiter 2012)?

The balance of scholarship, however, does not back Arena's unconstrained leader view. John Zaller, who is the author of the canonical work on elite determination of mass opinion (Zaller 1992), has changed his view of the matter. Today, he argues that political leaders often only *appear* to determine opinion because they anticipate where it will go and try to get there first (Zaller 2012). Polling data further demonstrates that some international events cannot be spun by elites. When China entered the Korean War, for instance, popular approval of the conflict immediately dropped by over 20 percentage points (Berinsky 2009:16).

Further, leader rhetoric alone probably cannot often reverse the tenor of mass opinion. The Horowitz and Levendusky (2012) study shows that audience costs disappear after a threat is made when the president "receive[s] new intelligence suggesting involvement is not in America's interests" and "military experts [therefore agree] that the U.S. should not become involved in this crisis." (Horowitz and Levendusky 2012, Supplementary Appendix:2) Thus, it is not presidential speech, a factor under presidential control, which frees the president from a commitment, but an exogenous change in the situation itself. Presidents cannot count on such good fortune should they decide to back down. Trager and Vavreck (2011) tested whether presidential rhetoric alone could make an audience cost disappear and did not find this to be so.

In our view, the questions for the field are therefore when and how public opinion influences elite incentives in foreign policy decisions. What situational factors influence the magnitude of costs associated with abrogating commitments? How are expected popular reactions to foreign policy refracted through elite posturing and bargaining (Saunders 2015)? Under what conditions does the availability of a political narrative influence leaders and how do such availabilities vary across time and across societies (Stein 2015)?

We suspect that when feelings of fairness are evoked in a crisis, it may be difficult for leaders to change that narrative entirely. Moreover, it will be challenging for leaders to accept less than what the public perceives to be fair. In our study, we examine a situation where there are no priming cues over who has a right to the territory in question, thus evoking public

beliefs that an even division is fair. Leaders could challenge this sense of fairness by making a stronger claim, on historical or cultural grounds for instance. In these cases, which we hope will be examined in future research, leaders would probably have even more difficulty reshaping or controlling the narrative of the conflict.

Arena and McManus both note that while we show that fairness heuristics imply that leader political incentives are not of the form commonly assumed in the rationalist conflict process literature, there are many questions left to answer about how these findings should be incorporated into the broader theoretical perspectives of the field. One area of particular interest, pointed to by McManus, is evaluating the usefulness of aggressive statements of resolve in light of the tradeoff between generating a commitment domestically and heightening adversary resolve internationally. While it does not answer this question, we stand by our claim that aggressive rhetoric can shift the political incentives of foreign leaders toward war, and indeed never argued that this factor alone would determine outcomes. We also found that leader political preferences are satiated and convex (i.e. leaders are in fact risk acceptant) in some situations. Under risk acceptance, and particularly when foreign rhetoric is aggressive, incentives for conflict can arise without a commitment problem and possibly without incomplete information, depending on what causes leaders to employ bellicose rhetoric. Thus, the evidence we present, alongside other scholarship, shows that political framing may be of great significance in the causal processes that lead to conflict. This does not preclude the material and informational factors addressed in rationalist literatures from playing important roles, and we too look forward to future scholarship that addresses how these varied factors relate and interact.

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