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Gambling with lives for political survival
How democratic governments respond to casualties
during military interventions

Dieuwertje Kuijpers

(SUMMARY)

Foreign policy decisions shape how a nation acts on the international stage. Those decisions are characterized by high stakes, uncertainty, and risk (Renshon & Renshon, 2008). Yet, politicians also face domestic audiences (e.g., the media, voters) who hold them accountable for their actions. Leaders depend on their followers for support since it legitimizes their power. So, why do politicians, if they want to avoid loss of power, follow through on unsuccessful and costly military interventions, such as recent interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq?

The aim of my dissertation is to assess what types of strategies democratic governments and political parties use once confronted with casualties during military interventions. In so doing, I attempt to answer the main research question of this project: how do democratic governments deal with, and respond to, military casualties?

The use of strategies to avoid electoral punishment

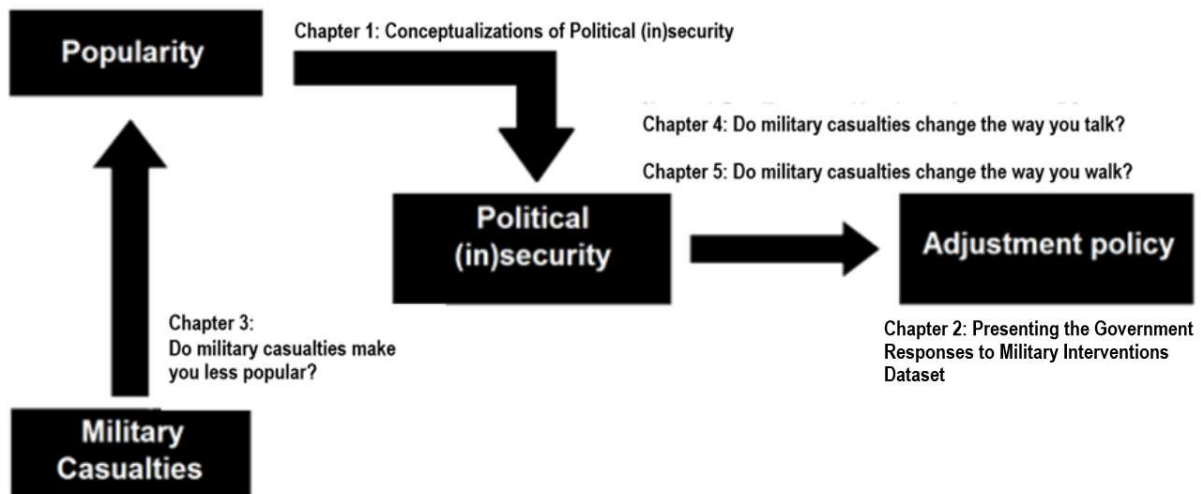
Irrespective of whether public opinion is driven by events or elites, democratic governments can assess their prospects for re-election by tracking public opinion polls. There is ample evidence of governments keeping close track of their popular standing in times of war, such as the Johnson Administration during the Vietnam War (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1999) or the Bush Administration during the Iraq War (Berinsky, 2009). Democratic leaders have used information on public opinion to formulate their strategy. My dissertation aims to investigate what type of strategies both governments and political parties apply once they are confronted with military casualties and the possible public outrage over deadly interventions.

As described in detail in the manuscript, earlier empirical findings suggest that

military casualties affect both the public and government. I assume that negative policy consequences, such as military casualties, can affect incumbent popularity decreasing (in turn) political security – that is, the degree of (un)certainly of being re-elected. I make this assumption based on a comparison I made (together with Barbara Vis and Wolfgang Wagner) between the findings from the diversionary use of force literature and studies employing prospect theory (Chapter 1). However, since most empirical research on this topic is based on the US experience, I draw from the insights of selectorate theory to select a sample of Western democratic governments that operate within similar incentive structures. Thus, I collected data on the set of eleven Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD countries (Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States) in the period 1990-2014. The results of this data collection effort, which maps government responses over time during military interventions, are discussed in Chapter 2.

US-based research has shown that the public does not always respond negatively to military casualties. The aim of Chapter 3 is to establish whether this is also the case outside the United States, by testing when and how military casualties affect incumbent popularity. By so doing, I can ascertain under what circumstances democratic governments become less secure of their position in office. After all, unpopular governments have a smaller chance of being re-elected. I found that democratic governments experience increased popular support during war, in this case a military intervention. This effect is known in the literature as the rally-around-the-flag-effect, and it seems to last longer than the literature anticipates. Governments can reap the benefits for at least one year (and up to 4.5 years) into the intervention.

Figure 1: Causal model describing the expected effect of military casualties on popularity and policy change



As my model shows, I expected the public to respond to military casualties (Chapter 3) and that governments will (sometimes even pre-emptively) account for the public's response, and might consider changing their strategic narrative (the way they "talk," Chapter 4) or even the military deployment itself (the way they "walk," Chapter 5). Empirical research on potential strategies that governments use once confronted with military casualties shows that governments sometimes only give lip service to policy changes. After all, a change can be seen as an admission of guilt over bad policy (Preston, 2011).

By testing hypotheses aimed at political communication and actual policy change, I shed more light on the interplay among military casualties, popularity, and policy. The premise of this research is that governments with military casualties, risk reelection and employ strategies in word and deed to avoid being voted out. In Chapter 4, Gijs Schumacher and I found this to be the case: for opposition parties, increasing military casualties are a good opportunity to talk about the military and the failure of the government to use the military effectively. For government parties it is better not to talk about the military at all and opt to avoid (electoral) blame.

Interestingly, I conclude in Chapter 5 that industrialized democracies all tend to escalate conflicts after having lost military lives. In addition, and contrary to the expectations in the literature, I found that popular governments have an even higher

tendency to escalate and send in more troops once confronted with military casualties.

Implications for future research

My research has shown that even though governing parties do not get punished in the polls for military casualties, they do use blame avoidance strategies during the next election to distance themselves from the military. In addition, governments display the tendency to escalate their commitment to a military intervention (i.e. send in more troops) once confronted with military casualties. Where does this leave us and what are the implications?

Scholars in the field of foreign policy have tried to explain policy outcomes (and strategic decision making) by reconstructing individual level decision making during high profile events, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, and conducted experiments attempting to simulate mechanisms, such as escalated commitment, suspected to underpin decision making during large-scale interventions, such as Vietnam and Iraq. Often these empirical studies are limited to high profile cases from a US sample. Since the United States is an outlier both politically and militarily, scholars are confronted with the difficulty of trying to generalize from an obvious outlier. This is the first study in which political communication, approval rates, and government responses during military interventions are systematically compared across advanced democracies for a longer period of time. Even though it is encouraging that we can indeed identify similar mechanisms across both American and European democracies, the study has some limitations.

Most importantly, I used selectorate theory to outline the incentive structure in which politicians operate, and assumed that similar political incentive structures lead to similar strategies to retain office. And, I have made the case that insights on the inner workings of public opinion during wartime from the individual level data can be systematically tested using aggregate level data, which paints an incomplete picture of decision-making behavior. Combining both aggregate and individual level data (as done by e.g., Berinsky, 2009; Gelpi & Feaver, 2006; Williams, Brulé, & Koch, 2010) permits modeling individual voter choice in response to events, such as military casualties. Are voters more tolerant when losses incur whenever “their” party is in

government, as US-based studies established (e.g., Berinsky, 2007; Fordham, 1998) Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was unable to gather cross-national and cross-temporal individual level data to compare individual attitudes on and during military interventions.

The limitation of aggregate level data, as used in this study, is that it only allows us to make inferences on the entire electorate. Future research will benefit from combining these insights with individual level data. For instance, individual level research led to doubts over casualty aversion, the negative correlation between popular support and military casualties, and brought forward intervening variables, such as group-belonging (in this project: rally effects). Once we can combine these insights more systematically, we can establish a more fine-grained level to determine under what circumstances the winning coalition starts to crumble. In addition, the winning coalition consists of more than voters alone. Politicians need to retain support within their party, and governing parties need to keep (future) coalition partners happy as well. Hence, apart from keeping voters happy, politicians also depend on the ruling elites for their political survival. Just as voters can vote representatives out of office, party leaders can be ousted by their fellow party members. In addition, low approval rates are not necessarily an imminent threat to one's political survival, if in the case of a multiparty system, the politician still enjoys the support of other ruling parties. Once these ruling elites, including the opposition, start to mobilize against the government, the threat becomes more imminent. Future research would benefit from using more fine-grained data, which allows for identify shifts within the winning coalition, to provide a more precise test of the assumptions brought forward by selectorate theory.

I have encountered similar challenges when using individual level decision-making theories to explain patterns detectable in the aggregate, proven especially challenging for prospect theory. Even though I could think about conceptualizations of indicators that can establish domains of gains or losses, they are useless unless the main dependent variable, risk attitude, is conceptualized. However, this should not stop researchers from combining insights from individual and aggregate level studies to take further steps in operationalizing risk attitude on an aggregate level.

In addition, I have argued that this dissertation also brings some practical implications to the table. For instance, the observation that politicians pre-emptively changing policy and outfit soldiers with unpractical force protection-gear to avoid public outrage over military casualties before it even arises. To fully understand conflict escalation, we need to integrate the various theories that show us the incentive structure in which politicians operate. Even though this dissertation is a first attempt to do so, a greater sensitivity to the different stakes in play will allow us to better understand decision making in wartime.