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To cite this article: Erin Baggott Carter (2019): Diversionary cheap talk: economic conditions and US foreign policy rhetoric, 1945-2010, International Interactions, DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2020.1688319

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2020.1688319

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Diversionary cheap talk: economic conditions and US foreign policy rhetoric, 1945-2010

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ABSTRACT
This study explains how the economy affects the foreign policy rhetoric used by American presidents. When economic conditions deteriorate, presidents criticize foreign nations to boost their approval ratings. Presidents use this “diversionary cheap talk” in response to the misery index of unemployment plus inflation, which poses a unique threat to their popularity. They target historical rivals, which make intergroup distinctions most salient. Diversionary cheap talk is most influential for and most frequently used by Democratic presidents, whose non-core constituents prefer hawkish foreign policy but already expect it from Republican presidents. I test the observable implications of the theory with the American Diplomacy Dataset, an original record of 50,000 American foreign policy events between 1851 and 2010 drawn from a corpus of 1.3 million New York Times articles.

KEYWORDS
Diversionary conflict; international relations; domestic politics; political psychology; political communication; social identity theory; text analysis; computational social science

Introduction
In his first year as president, Bill Clinton won broad acclaim for his tough statements on China. He blamed China for American job losses and criticized the “butchers of Beijing” for the murders in Tiananmen Square. Yet a year later, news outlets deemed his China policy “almost identical to his Republican predecessor’s.” After “days of anguished deliberation,” Clinton renewed China’s most favored nation trading status and “ended the annual linkage between China’s trade benefits and human rights performance” (Fletcher 1994). Congress accused Clinton of “turning his back” on China’s freedom fighters, but his poll ratings remained strong.

This paper argues that Clinton’s China policy is an example of a larger phenomenon: diversionary cheap talk, defined as hostile foreign policy rhetoric that targets other nations. Leaders use diversionary cheap talk to offset declines in their
domestic popularity and are most likely to do so during times of economic hardship. This rhetoric is diversionary because it is a strategic response to domestic unpopularity, and cheap because it lacks the explicit commitments that incur audience costs.

There is a large literature on diversionary conflict in international relations, but it focuses on material conflicts like militarized interstate disputes rather than foreign policy rhetoric. It is based in social identity theory, which suggests that leaders can increase ingroup affinity by making intergroup distinctions more salient (Coser 1956; Simmel 1955; Tajfel and Turner 1979). A recent review concludes that though the internal logic of diversionary conflict is “compelling and theoretically well supported,” the empirical evidence is “decidedly mixed” (Baum and Philip 2008, 48). Several studies find evidence of diversionary aggression in US foreign policy (Clark 2003; DeRouen 2000; DeRouen and Peake 2002; Fordham 1998a,b; Hess and Orphanides 1995; Howell and Pevehouse 2005; James and Hristoulas 1994; James and Oneal 1991; Levy 1989a, 1989b; Clifton and Bickers 1992; Ostrom and Job 1986) and elsewhere (Bennett 2000; Dassell and Reinhardt 1999; Davies 2002; Enterline and Gleditsch 2000; Gelpi 1997; Heldt 1999; Lebow 1981; Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Oneal and Tir 2006; Russett 1990; Sobek 2007; Tir 2010). Yet skeptics have amassed opposing evidence (Chiozza and Goemans 2003, 2004; Foster and Palmer 2006; Gowa 1998; Johnston 1998; Leeds and Davis 1997; Lian and Oneal 1993; Meernik 2004, 2000; Meernik and Waterman 1996; Moore and Lanoue 2003; Potter 2007). Some cases are hard to reconcile with the theory: in Britain, there were rallies in the Falklands War and the Gulf War but not in other cases in which rallies would be expected, such as the Korean, Suez, and Kosovo wars (Lai and Reiter 2005). Some go so far as to call diversionary aggression a “myth” (Meernik and Waterman 1996).

Others have developed scope conditions for diversionary aggression. It is more likely between states with pre-standing rivalries (Mitchell and Prins 2004), when leaders are accountable (Carter 2018; Kisangani and Pickering 2011), and in mature democracies, consolidating autocracies, and transitional polities (Pickering and Kisangani 2005). It is less likely when states avoid provoking troubled rivals (Clark 2003; Fordham 2005; Leeds and Davis 1997; Miller 1999). Diversion appears more likely to produce a rally when supported by Security Council authorization (Chapman 2011; Chapman and Reiter 2004), when the White House draws attention to a dispute (Baker and Oneal 2001), and in conditions of media attention, popular leadership, divided government, non election years, and first terms (Colaresi 2007). Most recently, scholars have asked whether diversion occurs outside democracies. They find some autocracies, especially single party regimes, divert as well (Carter 2018; Pickering and Kisangani 2010).
This study extends the logic of diversionary conflict to foreign policy rhetoric. There is surprisingly little research on rhetoric in international relations. The international relations literature deems talk “cheap” (Fearon 1995; Kydd 2005). The audience cost literature considers rhetoric meaningful, but only if it invokes audience costs through explicit, public threats (Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001; Smith 1998; Tomz 2007).

However, if foreign policy rhetoric can activate ingroup identity, then it may be appealing for leaders who wish to improve their ratings without incurring the substantial risks of militarized interstate disputes. Domestic political factors like low presidential approval ratings can lead otherwise rational states to choose “suboptimal” foreign policies (Fearon 1998). Diversionary rhetoric represents optimization inside the bounds of domestic political constraints. While it might be “outlandish” for presidents to engage in the impeachable exercise of diversionary war (Meernik and Waterman 1996), hostile foreign policy rhetoric is far less outlandish a risk.

To develop a theory of diversionary cheap talk, this paper draws upon research in political psychology and political communication. These literatures find persuasive evidence that elite statements influence citizen beliefs (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006; Brody 1991; Cohen 1995; Jentleson 1992; Zaller and Chiu 2000). I draw on social identity theory to argue that diversionary cheap talk highlights intergroup differences between nations and leads citizens to evaluate their leader favorably. When a leader criticizes foreigners, she cues ingroup identity, which increases citizens’ social attachment to the nation and to herself as its leader. This is a “solidarity mechanism,” through which “[c]ollective group goals and common group identity are highlighted, norms of group-based altruism are strengthened, punishment and rejection of defectors are increased, and perceptions of the in-group and out-group are manipulated” (Halevy, Bornstein, and Sagiv 2008, 405).

The theory generates observable implications about when leaders use diversionary cheap talk and who they target. I follow the consensus in the diversionary conflict literature in focusing on poor economic conditions as the most important source of public disapproval for leaders. Low approval ratings limit leaders’ ability to advance their domestic agenda. Therefore, when the economy deteriorates, leaders will criticize foreign nations to improve their approval ratings and restore the political capital necessary for them to govern.

Second, a key observation from social identity theory is that the depth of intergroup differences is important for group attachment. Therefore, consonant with recent empirical findings in the diversionary conflict literature (Mitchell and Prins 2004), I expect diversionary rhetoric to be most effective when it targets threatening outgroups. In the context of foreign policy, these are best represented by historical rivals.

Finally, I expect diversionary cheap talk to have differential partisan effects. The solidarity mechanism suggests that because national identity
cues widen the tent of the political ingroup, diversionary cheap talk should be most effective at boosting support among the leader’s nonpartisans: conservative voters for Democratic presidents, and liberal voters for Republican presidents. However, this solidarity mechanism is mediated by citizens’ foreign policy preferences. Liberals prefer more dovish foreign policy and hence might interpret diversionary rhetoric from Republican presidents as too extreme. In contrast, Republicans prefer more hawkish foreign policy and therefore are likely to reward Democratic presidents for hostile rhetoric. Therefore, diversionary rhetoric should be most powerful for Democratic presidents, whose non-core voters are most likely to reward such rhetoric.

I test these hypotheses with the American Diplomatic Dataset, an original record of over 50,000 US diplomatic events between 1945 and 2010 drawn from New York Times articles on foreign affairs. I used tools from computational social science to classify bilateral interstate interactions into hundreds of specific types and four aggregate categories: rhetorical cooperation, rhetorical conflict, material cooperation, and material conflict. This is by far the most historically extensive event dataset. As such, it allows an exploration of US foreign policy behavior across a variety of administrations and economic crises. Crucially, the granularity of the dataset allows me to restrict attention to events which the sitting US president initiated and directed at foreign state actors.

I find robust evidence of diversionary cheap talk in US foreign policy. First, I establish that US presidents face incentives to divert verbally rather than materially: while militarized interstate dispute initiation does not affect presidential approval ratings, hostile foreign policy rhetoric is associated with increased ratings, especially for Democratic presidents among Independent and Republican citizens. Responding to this incentive, Democratic presidents between 1945 and 2010 typically diverted in the form of words, not deeds. Simulations indicate that as the misery index of unemployment plus inflation varies from its observed minimum to its observed maximum, predicted hostile foreign policy rhetoric doubles. Throughout this study, estimates are conservative: I operationalize conflict as events the United States initiated, although findings are robust to a redefinition of conflict as events the United States participated in. The rhetorical statements in the dataset are high profile and likely to be noticed by the American public: all appeared in the headlines of the New York Times, the American newspaper of record in the post-World War II era.

This study contributes to existing scholarship in several ways. First, it demonstrates that US foreign policy rhetoric may be shaped by domestic economic conditions. International relations scholars should therefore continue to focus more seriously on the communicative aspects of foreign policy, and in particular its relationship to domestic politics (Johnston 2001, 2008; Kurizaki 2007; Ramsay 2011; Sartori 2002, 2005; Trager 2010, 2011, 2016).
The American Diplomacy Dataset will enable researchers to further explore the communicative aspects of foreign policy, and their relationships to material and economic factors, in more detail than existing datasets permit.

Second, this study contributes to the diversionary conflict literature by showing that in many cases where diversionary theory predicts conflict initiation, leaders may instead choose rhetorical hostility. In this sense, leaders may have their cake and eat it too: They benefit from an ingroup rally without inviting an international crisis. The mixed empirical findings in the diversionary conflict literature may be partly due to the fact that existing scholarship considers only the most serious forms of diversion like militarized interstate disputes. It is possible that a wide range of diversionary behavior takes place at less extreme levels, such as the rhetorical hostility documented in this paper.¹

Finally, the political communication literature has maintained a curious focus on the influence of elites rather than leaders. There are few studies of whether leaders can use rhetoric to influence approval ratings. One study comments, “Surprisingly, virtually no research has addressed this question – despite widespread recognition that presidents invest substantial resources to perfect their rhetoric ... and clear evidence that approval fundamentally affects the president’s power and policy-making success” (Druckman and Holmes 2004, 755). This study contributes to the political communication literature by showing that leaders, much like party elites, can shape popular opinion. While elites shape opinion with appeals to partisan subgroup identities, leaders may instead shape opinion with appeals to superordinate national identity. In both cases, the ingroup rally mechanism suggested by social identity theory applies.

In the remainder of this paper, Section 2 develops the theory of diversionary cheap talk, Section 3 introduces the American Diplomacy Dataset, Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 concludes.

Theory

There is compelling evidence that ingroup members cooperate more with each other than with outsiders, particularly when intergroup distinctions are strong. Social identity theory suggests that individuals categorize others into groups, identify with a group themselves, and compare between groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Individuals derive self-esteem from their group and evaluate it more highly than others. For example, when individuals are matched with an induced ingroup member in the lab,² they are more altruistic: they show a 47 percent increase in charity concerns and

¹In the language of the foreign policy substitutability literature (Oakes 2012; Clark, Nordstrom, and Reed 2008; Most and Starr 1984, 1989; Scott and Nordstrom 2000), rhetorical hostility, like the development of new economic policies, may be seen as a substitute for diversionary conflict.
a 93 percent decrease in envy. Moreover, they are 19 percent more likely to reward an ingroup member for good behavior and 13 percent less likely to punish him for bad behavior (Chen and Li 2009). Though induced identities are not sufficient to make participants ignore dominant strategies in prisoner’s dilemma games, real world group identities are (Goette, Huffman, and Meier 2006). Even for induced groups, negative outgroup opinion strengthens ingroup identity and cooperation (McLeish and Oxoby 2011).

Ingroup bias is well documented at the subnational partisan level. The political psychology literature understands partisan identities as social identities (Green, Palmquist, and Shickler 2002; Greene 1999, 2002, 2004; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Malka and Lelkes 2010). Characterizing partisans as “sports fans,” Mason (2015) writes, “Partisans feel emotionally connected to the welfare of the party ... and when the party is threatened, they become angry and work to help conquer the threat ... The connection between partisan and party is an emotional and social one, as well as a logical one.” For example, conservative self-identification is stronger when it is a reaction against liberalism, and vice-versa (Zschirnt 2011). Partisan motivated reasoning leads individuals to support policies they otherwise might not (Bolsen, Druckam, and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). For example, party labels induce bias in assessments of candidates with identical platforms (Munroet al. 2013). Ingroup bias is subject to the manipulation of party elites, who cue these social identities for instrumental ends. Citizens form views based on elite statements rather than policy information, especially when their policy knowledge is low (Bullock 2011; Cohen 2003; Iyengar and Valentino 2000; Rahn 1993; Zaller 1992). Without elite cues, the relationship between ideological self identification and policy preferences is weak (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Popp and Rudolph 2011). These elite statements delivered through the media are influential, although a large body of research shows that the media itself plays an active role in shaping citizen views (Page and Bouton 2006; Powlick and Katz 1998).

I argue that much like party elites, heads of state can use political communication to cue ingroup identity. The diversionary literature argues that a “dramatic” international crisis which directly involves the president is necessary for a rally. Yet social identity theory and the empirical findings above suggest that elite statements that highlight intergroup distinctions are sufficient to cue ingroup identification. Just as party elites issue partisan cues to increase their popularity, I expect the president to issue national cues to

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2Group identity is artificially induced with artwork preferences; these are known as minimal groups.
3See e.g. Baker and Oneal (2001); Mueller (1973, 209).
consolidate hers. When the leader criticizes an outgroup, she makes group identity more salient, and group members evaluate her more highly.

Of course, hostile foreign policy rhetoric may not automatically result in hardened group identity and higher approval ratings. Given significant information asymmetries between the public and the leader on national security issues, why would the public not simply discount the leader’s rhetoric as diversionary? For instance, perhaps rhetorical diversion should only occur in countries where leaders are constrained by strong opposition parties and competitive media environments, because these reduce national security information asymmetries (Baum and Philip 2015).

This is a promising avenue for future research in a cross-national context, but two factors mitigate this concern. Carter and Carter (2019) find that in even in countries with weak opposition parties and struggling private media, autocrats can build credibility capital by fostering generally accurate reporting in state media, which they then spend by spinning coverage during crises. Second, despite profound information asymmetries in national security issues, US citizens typically express high levels of trust in government foreign policy making (Gallup 2019). Over the 1997–2019 period, roughly 60% of respondents trusted the federal government to handle international problems. This figure is much higher than trust in government itself, which fell from 40% to 17% over this time.

Several explanations have been proposed for this. Foreign policy is typically not a key issue for US citizens compared to domestic policy (Busby and Monten 2012; Druckman and Leeper 2012). Therefore, citizens may prefer to index their views based on leaders they trust. Additionally, there are significant retrospective oversight mechanisms in foreign policy that foster trust. These condition leader behavior and public expectations about leader behavior. Accordingly, many scholars have noted US citizens’ willingness to view presidential statements on foreign policy as credible. Jentleson (1992) argues that even after Vietnam and Watergate, the public “look[s] to the president first and foremost for leadership on foreign policy.” Almond (1950) called this a “permissive” pattern in foreign policy, while Mueller (1973) referred to it as “followership.”

Therefore I expect ingroup appeals to win popularity for the president, just as they do for party elites. This yields the first observable implication of the theory: by cueing national social identification through tough talk on foreigners, the leader increases individual social attachment to the nation, and to the leader herself. This provides a rally effect that increases the leader’s popularity. Thus,

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4 There are clear partisan divides. For instance, during the Obama administration, approximately 80% of Democrats (and 50% of Republicans) trusted the federal government to handle international problems. During the Trump administration, approximately 80% of Republicans (and 35% of Democrats) trusted the federal government to do the same.
H1: Hostile rhetoric about foreign countries increases presidential approval ratings.

Rhetoric is particularly effective when it targets traditional rivals, because these render intergroup differences most salient. The political psychology literature finds that threats to a group anger group members and increase group identification (Huddy 2015; Mackie, Davos, and Smith 2000; Smith, Seger, and Mackie 2007). The rivalry literature suggests that histories of conflict often produce enduring antagonisms that affect conflict initiation, crisis management, and arms racing, among other areas.\(^5\)

In general, the rivalry literature attempts to measure ongoing competition via militarized interstate disputes (Klein, Goertz, and Diehl 2006) or threat perceptions (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2008). I include these forms of competition in my definition of rivalry, but also include the remembered legacy of past competition, which has been shown to motivate subsequent conflict in many contexts. This broader definition of rivalry better captures the potential targets of diversionary rhetoric. Between 1945 and 2010, the United States had rivalries with several nations that meet these criteria: China, North Korea, Japan, Russia, Germany, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Cuba. With the exception of Afghanistan, which became a rival after their study ended, Klein Goertz, and Diehl (2006) rank each of these countries among America’s key rivals between 1945 and 2001.\(^6\) Because Americans perceive these rivals as especially threatening, rhetoric targeting them should produce larger rallies than rhetoric targeting neutral countries or allies. This yields the second hypothesis,

H2: Hostile rhetoric about foreign countries is particularly effective in increasing presidential approval ratings when it targets historical rivals.

An important difference between this paper and existing research on the influence of party elites is that party elites preside over relatively well-defined partisan identities, while the president presides over a superordinate national identity composed of partisan subgroups. Partisan identity should mediate national identity depending on whether citizens share party identification with the president. Specifically, national identity cues will most increase

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\(^5\)This is a large literature but see, for example, Colaresi Rasler, and Thompson (2008); Diehl and Goertz (2000); Findley, Piazza, and Young (2012); Goertz and Diehl (1993); Mitchell et al. (2004); Uzonyi and Rider (2017); Wiegand (2011).

\(^6\)Klein Goertz, and Diehl (2006) include several other countries as rivals to the United States between 1945 and 2001: Canada, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Peru, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. I excluded these from my set of rivals because despite some episodic tension, none posed a serious threat to US interests and thus are less relevant for generating a rally, per Mitchell et al. (2004). I then updated Klein Goertz, and Diehl (2006)’s US rivalry data through 2010.
presidential approval among citizens who do not share the leader’s partisan-ship. Absent national cues, citizens tend to think of politics as competing partisan teams, and they oppose the outgroup president. However, when politics are recast as a competition between the national group and foreign outgroups, the president is cognitively reassigned to their own team, and their support for the president as group leader increases. For leaders, there is a large potential gain to be had, because baseline presidential approval among noncore voters is lower than among core voters.

This hypothesis parallels theories about traditional diversionary conflict. Baum (2002, 263) explores the constituent foundations of rallies and finds that “individuals who are closest to the point of ambivalence between approval and disapproval are most likely to change their opinion in response to external circumstances.” As such, he finds that diversion typically targets swing voters and opposition party members. This is related to Fordham (1998a)’s point that core constituents should never be satisfied by a diversionary use of force, because they want their major economic concern addressed directly. For the same reason, hostile foreign policy rhetoric should be most effective among noncore voters.

However, diversionary foreign policy rhetoric may have differential partisan effects. Schultz (2001) suggests that hostile rhetoric might benefit Democrats by allowing them to telegraph their toughness to moderates and conservatives, but hurt Republicans by making them seem extreme to moderates and liberals. In short, the solidarity mechanism is likely mediated by citizens’ baseline foreign policy preferences. Because Republicans prefer more hawkish foreign policy and already expect it from Republican presidents (Fordham 1998a), Democratic presidents stand to gain the most by delivering it.

H3: Hostile foreign policy rhetoric is most effective in increasing presidential approval among members of the subnational outgroup (swing voters and opposition party members), and especially for liberal leaders.

While leaders might be tempted to bluster constantly to sustain high approval ratings, it is likely they do so selectively. Elites (particularly those who do not share the leader’s partisan affiliation) gain points by exposing false messaging by leaders. Citizens are more skeptical about leader statements when there is elite or media disagreement (Berinsky 2007; Brody 1991; Graber 2002; Groeling and Baum 2008; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kroshick and Kinder 1990; Kuyper 1997; Larson 2000; Lee 1977; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Mueller 1973; Paletz 2002; Rahn 1993). Leader statements reach the national audience faster than elite statements due to the leader’s prominence, but the leader’s information dominance does not last forever. Therefore, the leader is forced to use hostile foreign policy rhetoric as
a short-term tactic. She blusters in front of the national audience, wins approval points, and moves on before partisan elites sow doubt.

The diversion literature generally assumes that poor economic conditions are the most serious challenge to leader popularity.\(^7\) It is difficult for leaders to address unemployment and inflation in the short run. During this time, it threatens their popularity and political capital. Because they must maintain political capital to advance their policy agenda, leaders turn to hostile foreign policy rhetoric to increase their approval ratings. Thus,

**H4:** *When the economic misery index rises, leaders are more likely to adopt hostile foreign policy rhetoric.*

Finally, leaders should prefer hostile foreign policy rhetoric to dispute initiation. In the language of foreign policy substitutability, rhetorical diversion is preferable to material diversion because it is less costly and risky. Though Baum (2002) argues that skeptical voters require tangible measures like international crises to change their evaluation of the president, the political communication literature shows that politicians routinely influence public opinion through statements. This generates a final observable implication,

**H5:** *Leaders prefer hostile foreign policy rhetoric to dispute initiation, since rhetoric allows them to increase their approval ratings without risking war.*

### The American Diplomacy Dataset

To test these hypotheses, I created the American Diplomacy Dataset. It is drawn from the *New York Times*, the newspaper which has won more Pulitzer Prizes than any other, which has the second highest circulation in the United States, and which journalists consistently rank as the highest quality US newspaper (de Vise 2011). It gained prominence due to its coverage of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and its status as the US newspaper of record was cemented by its coverage of the two World Wars (Augustyn 2019; Diamond 1995). This status informs a modeling assumption that follows: that the *New York Times* shapes general public opinion, either directly or by setting the agenda of other media that cite it or are influenced by it.\(^8\) The *New York Times* is also unique in that it has the broadest historical coverage of any digitized paper of record. I used computational methods to download all

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\(^7\)Some scholars focus on unemployment as a source of diversion (Ostrom and Job 1986). I follow the long tradition of studying the “misery index” which combines unemployment and inflation (DeRouen 1995; James and Hristoulas 1994; James and Oneal 1991; Meemik 1994; Meemik et al. 1996; Ostrom and Job 1986).

\(^8\)A large literature shows that news coverage appears to shape readers’ attitudes. See for example, Baum (2004); Brewer, Graf, and Willnat (2003); Chiang and Knight (2011); Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Moring (2007); Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan (2009); Ladd and Lenz (2009); Miller and Albert (2015).
1.3 million articles published between 1851 and 2010 with nation states in the title. The dataset records all day-level events in which the United States was the source or target or an interstate interaction. The United States participated in 54,305 events between 1945 and 2010; this study focuses on the 24,274 events it initiated in that period.9

Transforming news articles into data about interstate interactions took three steps: eliminating duplicate articles, eliminating irrelevant articles, and extracting events from the remaining articles. While existing studies have implemented the third step, the first two represent methodological advancements and greatly reduce the amount of noise in the dataset.

The elimination of duplicate and near duplicate articles has been a challenge for event data scientists. Duplicate articles can be a serious source of bias if events are reported multiple times per day or on consecutive days, particularly if they are described somewhat differently and cannot be eliminated with the “one per day” filter.10 I eliminated exact duplicates with list matching: I created a list of all 1.3 million articles in Python and compared each to the remaining articles in the list. I eliminated near duplicates with fuzzy matching, a method that counts the number of changes it would take to make two strings identical. I deleted temporally proximate articles that were more than 90% similar.11 All in all, 31,255 duplicate and near duplicate articles were deleted.

I then used supervised learning methods to identify and delete irrelevant articles. Because I searched for articles with nation-states in the title, I collected many reports on international sports matches, the arts, obituaries, and so on. In order to discard these articles, I randomly drew 1,000 documents from the corpus, read them, and coded them as political/military, economic, or irrelevant in topic.12 I then used a linear support vector classifier to use the relationships between the words and labels in my 1,000 document training set to generate topic labels for the rest of the documents in the corpus.13 The classifier was 75.3% accurate in ten-fold cross

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9All documents were downloaded in accordance with terms of service policies. The document texts cannot be released due to copyright reasons, but the event data generated from texts will be made available on my scholar webpage. Each document is a 2–4 sentence summary of the news article. For technical reasons related to event extraction, short summaries are preferable to long articles.

10In a recent review, Schrodt calls this a “very difficult problem” (Schrodt 2012b, 554).

11Technically, “similarity” here reflects string matching, not n-gram similarity. For fuzzing string matching, the Levenshtein ratio is used, the number of changes it would take to make two strings identical, divided by the length of the string. Fuzzy string matching is implemented with the fuzzywuzzy module.

12All articles were processed per standard procedure: words were lowercased and stemmed; symbols, numbers and stop words were removed.

13These relationships were captured in a term frequency–inverse document frequency matrix.

14Accuracy fell rapidly with the inclusion of additional topic labels; separating political affairs from military affairs, for example, decreased the classification accuracy to 64.7%. The support vector machine classifier performed better than random forest and neural network classifiers, which had accuracy rates of 65.3% and 68.0%, respectively. For more, see Caruana and Niculescu-Mizil (2006).
validation. All in all, nearly 300,000 articles were identified as irrelevant by the classifier; I discarded them all. The final corpus consists of 969,398 documents, all unique articles about economic, political, or military affairs in the world. Table A1 in the appendix shows the distribution of topics in the training and test sets.

Having pruned the corpus, I then extracted interstate events with software that has been widely used in the event data field. Textual Analysis By Augmented Replacement Instructions (TABARI) is computational linguistic software that recognizes country-verb-country patterns in sentences: for example, US praises Canada or China condemns Japan (Gerner, Schrodt, and Yilmaz 2009; Schrodt 2012c). I extracted data on over 300 types of interstate interactions: everything from rhetorical exchanges to routine diplomacy to war.15

Like previous event data research, I make a distinction between rhetorical and material events: those that are speech acts versus actions. Material cooperation is cooperation in deed rather than speech, and includes things like providing aid or yielding to another state’s demands. Rhetorical cooperation includes things like consultation and appeals. Material conflict includes MID-type violent interactions, but also sub-MID actions such as coercion, halting aid, canceling negotiations, expelling observers, or imposing trade sanctions. Rhetorical conflict is conflict in speech and includes things like protestations, demands, criticism, blame, and rejections. Rhetorical conflict constitutes my chief dependent variable, theoretically described above as hostile foreign policy rhetoric. Sample news stories and the events generated from them are shown in Table A3 in the appendix.

Processing in this manner yields 54,305 events involving the United States between 1945 and 2010. Of these, 24,274 were initiated by the US executive branch toward foreign states: these events are the subject of this study. The unit of observation is the month. For each month, I record the number of episodes of material conflict, rhetorical conflict, material cooperation, and rhetorical cooperation initiated by the United States.

Considerations

It is appropriate to discuss the strengths and limitations of any new dataset. Its strengths include the following. First, it is by far the most historically comprehensive event dataset to date. Other day-level IR event datasets exist, such as Gary King and Will Lowe’s Ten Million Events (King and Lowe 2003), but they lack historical range, with most extending back only into the

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15Event types are taken from the CAMEO ontology, which focuses on interstate behavior (Schrodt 2012a). A list of all 300 event types is available at http://web.ku.edu/~ked/cameo.dir/CAMEO.SCALE.txt.

16DARPA’s Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS) covers 1998–2010 and focuses on Asia; the Kansas Event Data System (KEDS) covers 1979–2011 but uses a dated ontology and focuses on the Middle East. There are several event datasets of political violence, but these too date generally from the 1990s, except for the Global Terrorism Database which covers 1970–2010 and Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo
IR datasets with great historical range do exist, such as the Militarized Interstate Dispute project (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004), but they are censored in the sense that they only contain violent conflicts. This is the first dataset that permits comprehensive study of cooperation and conflict in American foreign policy over 1945–2010. Long-term coverage of foreign policy rhetoric is important not only because of potential heterogeneity in such rhetoric but also because it enables one to make generalized inferences in a longitudinal context.

This is important, because material and rhetorical interactions between states have changed significantly since World War II. Diplomatic missions have grown more numerous, international organizations have institutionalized the manner in which states interact, the internet has increased the speed of communication, and the growth of private media has increased the public’s involvement in foreign policy. These factors may generate variation in interstate interactions that a study limited to the internet era would miss. In particular, the verbal and cooperative aspects of international relations remain profoundly understudied. The American Diplomacy Dataset will enable scholars to study these phenomena in the future.

Second, introducing topic classification to event data has a number of advantages – first among them, eliminating nonrandom biases. Existing event datasets have done an insufficient amount to eliminate duplicate and especially irrelevant articles. I find that when sports articles are included, annual material conflict counts are slightly higher, but annual CAMEO conflict scale averages are way off, as shown in Figure 7. Other event data scientists have pointed to the problem of sports articles before, but this analysis highlights the tremendous bias they introduce to conflict scale averages. Keyword searches to eliminate sports articles – occasionally but not always used in the event data field – do not perform nearly as well as classification. Other topic labels – such as cultural activities – can also eliminate several common problems in event data. For example, World War II commemorations often appear in event datasets as annual military conflict between the United States and Japan. Picking up on words like “parade,” “honor,” and “veterans,” classification notes these articles as cultural and deletes them from the corpus.† Failing to exclude these events inflates conflict records, as shown in Figure 7 in the appendix. And finally, a wide range of scholars have pointed out that states face different incentives for cooperation and conflict in high and low politics.

The American Diplomacy Dataset faces several limitations. First, it is important to consider how a newspaper’s partisan bias might affect the

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16 IR datasets with great historical range do exist, such as the Militarized Interstate Dispute project (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004), but they are censored in the sense that they only contain violent conflicts. This is the first dataset that permits comprehensive study of cooperation and conflict in American foreign policy over 1945–2010. Long-term coverage of foreign policy rhetoric is important not only because of potential heterogeneity in such rhetoric but also because it enables one to make generalized inferences in a longitudinal context.

This is important, because material and rhetorical interactions between states have changed significantly since World War II. Diplomatic missions have grown more numerous, international organizations have institutionalized the manner in which states interact, the internet has increased the speed of communication, and the growth of private media has increased the public’s involvement in foreign policy. These factors may generate variation in interstate interactions that a study limited to the internet era would miss. In particular, the verbal and cooperative aspects of international relations remain profoundly understudied. The American Diplomacy Dataset will enable scholars to study these phenomena in the future.

Second, introducing topic classification to event data has a number of advantages – first among them, eliminating nonrandom biases. Existing event datasets have done an insufficient amount to eliminate duplicate and especially irrelevant articles. I find that when sports articles are included, annual material conflict counts are slightly higher, but annual CAMEO conflict scale averages are way off, as shown in Figure 7. Other event data scientists have pointed to the problem of sports articles before, but this analysis highlights the tremendous bias they introduce to conflict scale averages. Keyword searches to eliminate sports articles – occasionally but not always used in the event data field – do not perform nearly as well as classification. Other topic labels – such as cultural activities – can also eliminate several common problems in event data. For example, World War II commemorations often appear in event datasets as annual military conflict between the United States and Japan. Picking up on words like “parade,” “honor,” and “veterans,” classification notes these articles as cultural and deletes them from the corpus.† Failing to exclude these events inflates conflict records, as shown in Figure 7 in the appendix. And finally, a wide range of scholars have pointed out that states face different incentives for cooperation and conflict in high and low politics.

The American Diplomacy Dataset faces several limitations. First, it is important to consider how a newspaper’s partisan bias might affect the

---

(UCDP/PRIO) dataset on political instability covering 1946–2011. For a comparison of the American Diplomacy Dataset to other event datasets, see Connelly et al. (2019).

† On both these problems, see Schrodt (2012b).
event history extracted from it. If a newspaper has a pro-government bias, it may overreport US cooperation and underreport foreign cooperation. Conversely, if a newspaper has an anti-government bias, it may underreport US cooperation and overreport foreign cooperation. While it is impossible to dismiss this theoretical possibility, Groseclose and Milyo (2005) estimate the partisan biases of US newspapers and find that the New York Times is relatively neutral. Future research might focus on building similar datasets from other newspapers and comparing the event histories that are extracted to identify patterns of bias. Because the American Diplomacy Dataset is extracted from a single source, it should be understood as a starting point for measuring strategic rhetoric.

Second, because of how the New York Times has digitized articles, the American Diplomacy Dataset is most useful for the post-World War II era. Many pre-1945 articles were digitized as abstracts rather than full articles. Because of the abbreviated language used in the abstracts, the TABARI software has difficulty identifying grammatical structures. As such, fewer events are extracted from pre-1945 text. For the purposes of this study, this is irrelevant because my explanatory and control variables start in 1945; however, future analyses of the American Diplomacy Dataset should bear this in mind.

Third, journalists may focus on attention-grabbing high politics more than mundane economic dealmaking. Below, I find that American diplomats engage more frequently in political-military affairs than economic affairs, but this may reflect journalists’ preference for covering the former rather than the latter.

Fourth, the American Diplomacy Dataset does not record secret diplomacy or covert operations that are later disclosed as historically important. For example, in the US-Iran case study below, it appears that nothing hostile occurred in the relationship prior to the hostage crisis, while in fact, the CIA overturned the Mossadegh regime in the 1950s. Because the press was not aware of this, this hostility is not in the dataset. Scholars should bear in mind that the American Diplomacy Dataset records only what the press knows in the present, not retrospectively. Due to limitations in the automated coding method, when secret events like the Mossadegh affair are subsequently declassified, they are not backfilled into the dataset. Conversely, scholars should be aware that when documents are declassified, they may show up in the dataset as present-day events. Anniversaries of major events that are subsequently commemorated in newspapers, like World War II battles, also occasionally generate error.

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18 This is related to research on elite theory, which finds that partisan media outlets actively shape public opinion (Baum and Philip 2008).

19 For more discussion, see Schrodt (2012b).
Finally, several studies have addressed the general limitations of text as data; analyses of the Global Diplomacy Dataset should be aware of these as well (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Schrodt 2012b; Schrodt, Van, and Brackle 2013).

**A Descriptive Exploration**

In this section I descriptively introduce the American Diplomacy Dataset in order to demonstrate its face validity with the historical record of US foreign policy. The data show that American conflict is directed at traditional rivals, while American cooperation is directed at friends and rivals alike. Rhetorical cooperation is far more prevalent than material cooperation. And finally, the *New York Times* reports that American diplomats engage more frequently with high politics than low.

Figure 1 shows the top five targets of American conflict and cooperation over 1946–2010. The top panel shows the countries toward which the United States launched the most net material conflict, measured as the number of conflictual events less the number of cooperative events. Here we find traditional American rivals: Vietnam, followed by Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia, and Cuba. The bottom panel shows the top recipients of net American rhetorical cooperation, measured as the number of cooperative rhetorical events less the number of hostile rhetorical events. Here three of America’s primary allies appear: Great Britain, Israel, and Japan. So too do competitors, China and Russia. While material conflict targets traditional foes, rhetorical cooperation targets both friends and rivals.

![Net Material Conflict Recipients, 1946–2010](image1)

![Net Rhetorical Cooperation Recipients, 1946–2010](image2)

*Figure 1.* Net US interactions with main partners, 1946–2010.
Figure 2 shows four event history case studies: US diplomacy toward Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and China since 1945. The Afghanistan case is simplest. The United States barely interacted with Afghanistan until the Soviet invasion in 1979, when rhetorical cooperation rose. Rhetorical cooperation rose again in 1989 when the Soviet Union withdrew, drawing US praise. Engagement spiked with the US invasion in 2001 – both material conflict and rhetorical cooperation. This is consonant with the widely observed burstiness of event data: during Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, for example, both conflict and cooperation soar, because the frequency of interactions of all types skyrockets (Schrodt and Gerner 2004; Clark, Nordstrom, and Reed 2008, 772; Goldstein and Freeman 1990).

US actions toward Iraq also comport with the historical narrative. The United States interacted very little with Iraq on any metric until the first Gulf War, when material conflict spiked. Conflict peaked with the 2003 invasion, again with the surge, and fell in the late 2000s as the United States withdrew.

The US-Iran event history also lends credence to the project. The relationship spiked in intensity during the 1980–1981 hostage crisis. During the crisis, material and rhetorical conflict rose to all time highs. However, there
was also much rhetorical cooperation, reflecting President Carter’s attempts to solve the crisis diplomatically.

A final test is presented for a more complicated relationship: US-China relations. Here, too, the data tell a familiar story. US conflict initiation toward China was highest during the Korean War. Conflict initiation rose again during the Cultural Revolution, presumably as a response to anti-imperialist propaganda. Rhetorical cooperation skyrocketed during the move toward normalization in the 1970s, reaching a global maximum during Nixon’s 1972 visit and rising again with normalization in 1979. After the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, rhetorical cooperation fell nearly to zero. It rose in the next decade as Presidents Bush and Clinton sought to repair the relationship. Cooperation fell in the early 2000s, reflective of the cooling in relations due to the EP-3 spy plane collision crisis and China’s criticism of the Iraq war. Overall, these four event histories suggest that the American Diplomacy Dataset accurately captures dyadic conflicts, crises, and diplomatic overtures.

The dataset also captures monadic trends well. As shown in Figure 3, post-World War II American diplomacy is characterized by heightened engagement of all forms during the Vietnam War, a gradual decline thereafter, and increased engagement – particularly conflictual engagement – after 9/11. Rhetorical cooperation is by far the most prevalent mode of international action – at least twice as common as the next most common event type, rhetorical conflict. Material and rhetorical conflict track each other closely, though rhetorical conflict is more common than material conflict. In the

![Figure 3](image-url.com)

*Figure 3. US diplomacy toward world.*

trend lines shown with 5 year moving averages, material conflict was only
more common than rhetorical conflict twice: during the height of the Vietnam War, and after 9/11. Material cooperation is least common of all.

And finally, there are differences in the topic of diplomacy. As shown in Figure 4, American diplomats more frequently engage in high politics than low. The proportion of activity devoted to each has remained fairly constant since 1945. However, readers should note the tendency of journalists to cover high politics more frequently than low politics; this is a source of potential bias.

**Empirics**

This section tests the hypotheses outlined above about the relationships between US economic conditions, hostile foreign policy rhetoric, and presidential job approval. Section 4.1 introduces the explanatory and control variables. Section 4.2 models the relationships between the misery index, hostile foreign policy rhetoric, and presidential job approval in a monthly setting with administration fixed effects. The evidence suggests that Democratic presidents use hostile foreign policy rhetoric more often when the misery index is high. The evidence is consistent with the theoretical expectation that the rally effect is
strongest among the leader’s nonpartisans. Section 4.3 reviews robustness checks, including simultaneous equation models.

**Explanatory and Control Variables**

The explanatory variable is the monthly economic misery index (of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), which is the sum of the unemployment rate plus the inflation rate. I adopt the standard controls in the literature, including dummy variables for second terms, election years, and unified government (Berlemann and Enkelmann 2012; Pickering et al. 2005, 31). To account for temporal dependence, I include lagged values of the outcome variables. I include administration fixed effects to account for unmeasured factors distinct to individual administrations that could influence their conflict behavior, such as presidential priorities or staff. Descriptive statistics appear in Table A4 in the appendix.

**Analysis**

First, I establish that US presidents face incentives to engage in hostile foreign policy rhetoric. I estimate the relationship between the number of rhetorical conflicts in month $t - 1$ and presidential approval ratings in $t$ with ordinary least squares regression. Results appear in Table 1. Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests show that presidential approval, hostile foreign policy rhetoric, and hostile foreign policy rhetoric directed toward rivals are all stationary. Model (1) shows that hostile foreign policy rhetoric in $t - 1$ is correlated with higher approval ratings in $t$ in a simple bivariate setting. This relationship is insignificant when controls are added in Model (2), but regains significance with administration fixed effects in Model (3).

A robust relationship appears when the focus is restricted to hostile foreign policy rhetoric that is directed toward rivals in Models (4) through (6). Using Model (5), I simulate the effect of moving from the minimum number of rhetorical conflicts directed at rivals in the sample to the maximum, holding other variables at their means. Predicted approval at different levels of hostile foreign policy rhetoric is shown in Figure 5. The dotted line indicates the average amount of hostile rhetoric targeting rivals each month. Moving from 0 to 7 episodes of hostile rhetoric toward rivals in a month is associated with a two percentage point increase in predicted presidential approval.

Across all models, material conflict initiation has no clear relationship with presidential approval. This corresponds with mixed empirical findings in the diversionary war literature.

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20The approval rating indicates the fraction of respondents answering “approve” to the question, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [first & last name] is handling his job as President?” (Gallup 2013).
Table 2 explores who rallies. The dependent variables in Table 2 are presidential approval ratings among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, respectively. Models (1) through (6) restrict the focus to Democratic administrations and Models (7) through (12) restrict the focus to Republican
Table 2. Hostile foreign policy rhetoric and partisan approval.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic presidents</th>
<th></th>
<th>Republican presidents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approval$_{t}$</td>
<td>Approval$_{t}$</td>
<td>Approval$_{t}$</td>
<td>Approval$_{t}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conflict</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>0.240</td>
<td>1.100**</td>
<td>0.440*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rivals$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>(0.390)</td>
<td>(0.250)</td>
<td>(0.430)</td>
<td>(0.250)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D approval$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>0.560***</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I approval$_{t-1}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.780***</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R approval$_{t-1}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material conflict$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>-0.270**</td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery index$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>(0.590)</td>
<td>-0.450</td>
<td>(0.570)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second term$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>1.500</td>
<td>(1.700)</td>
<td>-0.490</td>
<td>(1.600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified government$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>-5.300***</td>
<td>(1.700)</td>
<td>-4.400***</td>
<td>(1.700)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>56.000***</td>
<td>29.000***</td>
<td>41.000***</td>
<td>16.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.500)</td>
<td>(3.900)</td>
<td>(1.700)</td>
<td>(3.800)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration fixed effects</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td>0.870</td>
<td>0.460</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
administrations. Doing so makes clear that the results in Table 1 are driven by Democratic presidents. The evidence from Table 2 suggests that for Democratic presidents, hostile foreign policy rhetoric is associated with increased approval ratings among nonpartisans.

For Democratic presidents, hostile foreign policy rhetoric is associated with increased approval ratings among Independents, in both a bivariate context in Model (3) and with a full battery of controls in Model (4). There is strong evidence of increased approval ratings among Republicans as well in both a bivariate context in Model (5) and with a full battery of controls in Model (6). These results are suggestive but consistent with the theoretical expectation that national identity cues are most effective in increasing support among voters who do not share partisan identification with the leader.

For Republican presidents, the relationship is in the expected direction but misses significance. Hostile foreign policy rhetoric is insignificantly positively associated with increased approval ratings among Republicans (Models 7–8), Independents (Models 9–10), and Democrats in the model with full controls (Model 12). This supports the argument that the effect of tough rhetoric may be somewhat attenuated for Republican presidents. Their core voters already expect such rhetoric, and more liberal voters may interpret it as too extreme.

Table 3 explores when presidents employ hostile foreign policy rhetoric. Here, I employ negative binomial models because hostile foreign policy rhetoric is a count variable.21 Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests confirm that the misery index and material conflict are stationary. Models (1) through (6) focus on Democratic administrations, whereas Models (7) through (12) focus on Republican administrations.

For Democratic presidents, there is a strong and robust relationship between the misery index and rhetorical conflict. Higher values on the misery index are associated with more rhetorical conflict in general (Models 1–2) and toward adversaries (Models 3–4). As expected, there is no relationship between the misery index and material conflict in Models (5) and (6).

For Republican presidents, there is no clear relationship between the misery index and rhetorical conflict. The misery index is associated with insubstantially less rhetorical conflict in general (Models 7–8), but insignificantly more rhetorical conflict toward rivals (Models 9–10). Interestingly, there is some evidence that Republicans initiate less material conflict when the misery index rises. This requires further study, but would be consistent with the theory of appealing to outgroup foreign policy preferences.

Figure 6 visualizes the results based on Model (4) for Democratic presidents. The figure simulates the predicted number of hostile statements directed toward rivals in month $t$ based on the misery index in month $t - 1$, holding all other

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21Outcome variables are over-dispersed but not zero inflated: only 5% of months have zero material conflicts and only 3% have zero verbal conflicts.
Table 3. Misery index and hostile foreign policy rhetoric.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic presidents</th>
<th></th>
<th>Republican presidents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical conflict₁</td>
<td>Material conflict₁</td>
<td>Rhetorical conflict₁</td>
<td>Material conflict₁</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery index₁₋₁</td>
<td>0.390***</td>
<td>0.340**</td>
<td>0.250***</td>
<td>0.230**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.150)</td>
<td>(0.170)</td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conflict₋₁</td>
<td>0.190**</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.100*</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
<td>(0.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified government₁₋₁</td>
<td>−0.660</td>
<td>−0.200</td>
<td>−0.500</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.520)</td>
<td>(0.300)</td>
<td>(0.550)</td>
<td>(0.380)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material conflict₋₁</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.120***</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second term₁₋₁</td>
<td>−0.420</td>
<td>−0.098</td>
<td>−0.110</td>
<td>−0.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.450)</td>
<td>(0.260)</td>
<td>(0.470)</td>
<td>(0.270)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election year₁₋₁</td>
<td>−0.270</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>−0.510</td>
<td>−0.250</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.350)</td>
<td>(0.200)</td>
<td>(0.380)</td>
<td>(0.270)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.700**</td>
<td>2.700**</td>
<td>3.700***</td>
<td>3.700***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.100)</td>
<td>(1.200)</td>
<td>(1.070)</td>
<td>(1.200)</td>
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<td>Administration fixed effects</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

INTERNATIONAL INTERACTIONS
variables at their mean. Shaded bands represent 95% confidence intervals. While presidents vary considerably in their baseline propensity to direct hostile foreign policy rhetoric toward rivals, all do so more when economic conditions are poorer. As the misery index rises from its minimum observed value to its maximum observed value, presidents direct approximately twice as much predicted hostile foreign policy rhetoric toward traditional rivals.

Figure 6. Misery index and hostile foreign policy rhetoric.

Figure 7. Number of global material conflicts according to different corpora (counts and means).
**Robustness Checks**

Pickering and Kisangani (2010, 484) call for using simultaneous equations to “estimate the reciprocal relationships that exist among diversionary force and its domestic consequences.” I oblige by reestimating a diversion model (in which diversion is caused by the misery index) alongside an approval model (in which approval is caused by the misery index and diversion). The results are robust, as shown in Table A5 in the appendix.

Results are also robust to focusing on unemployment, rather than the misery index of combined unemployment and inflation. These appear in Table 2 through 4 in the online appendix. Because of the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon arguably faced unique diversionary pressures. Figure 1 in the online appendix presents a violin plot that shows that Nixon was not an outlier among presidents in terms of either hostile or cooperative rhetoric. Tables A1 through 7 in the online appendix confirm that the results are robust to excluding Nixon from the analysis. Finally, the theory would be called into question if diversionary pressures were associated with cooperation rather than conflict. Tables A5 through 10 in the online appendix confirm this is not the case.

**Conclusion**

This study argues that when economic conditions deteriorate, Democratic presidents use hostile foreign policy rhetoric to build domestic support. By cueing national identity, they elicit an ingroup rally that boosts their popularity. The quantitative evidence is consistent with the theory. Poll data show that citizens evaluate leaders more highly after they engage in hostile foreign policy rhetoric. The effect is strongest for Democratic presidents among Independent and Republican voters. Economic data suggest that leaders are more likely to engage in hostile foreign policy rhetoric when unemployment and inflation are higher. Further strengthening the notion that this behavior is strategic, rallies only materialize when leaders target traditional rivals, since threatening outgroups render intergroup distinctions most stark. I find no evidence for diversion in the form of material conflict initiation. For leaders choosing between hostile rhetoric, economic reform, and international conflict to increase domestic popularity, hostile rhetoric is the least costly and risky option, even though it is a short term solution because sustained rhetorical belligerence may invite criticism from party elites. For Democratic presidents, cheap talk pays.

Future research should proceed in several directions. While the theory suggests that we should expect a causal link between hostile foreign policy rhetoric and presidential approval, the empirical analysis is a proof of

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22I do not use a GMM dynamic panel estimator as Pickering and Kisangani do; this would be inappropriate as the method is designed for small T, large N panels.
concept that demands future research, ideally in an experimental setting. This could help advance several theoretical debates. For instance, how does the information environment surrounding a leader influence her rhetorical strategy and its persuasiveness? Baum and Philip (2015) argue that strong opposition parties and competitive media environments make leader statements more credible, yet Carter and Carter (2019) find that leaders can generate credibility even in institutionally weak environments. More cross-national research is needed to explore how domestic constraints influence leaders’ foreign policy rhetoric. In particular, there is relatively little research on political rhetoric in autocracies, despite anecdotal evidence that it is profoundly important. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez gained popularity in part because of their anti-American rhetoric. Chinese policymakers routinely bluster about the South China Sea to increase their domestic legitimacy.

Most broadly, scholars have devoted relatively little attention to rhetoric in international politics partly because of data limitations. The American Diplomacy Dataset is a step toward addressing that paucity. While rhetorical and material behavior are theoretically and empirically distinct, the rhetorical aspects of international politics remain under-theorized and under-explored.

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References


### Appendix

**Table A1.** Classification report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Training Set Documents</th>
<th>Test Set Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political-military</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>668,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>301,326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA (sports, culture, obituaries)</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>189,818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,159,211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table A2.** CAMEO general event codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Value</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Provide aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Engage in material cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Yield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Express intent to cooperate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Engage in diplomatic cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Consult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>Make public statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2.0</td>
<td>Investigate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2.0</td>
<td>Disapprove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−4.0</td>
<td>Reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−5.0</td>
<td>Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−6.0</td>
<td>Threaten*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−6.5</td>
<td>Protest (demonstrate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−7.0</td>
<td>Coerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−7.2</td>
<td>Exhibit force posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−9.0</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−10.0</td>
<td>Fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−10.0</td>
<td>Engage in unconventional mass violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Threats are considered rhetorical conflict in CAMEO; I remove them from rhetorical conflict for theoretical reasons.
Table A3. Illustrative events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Story</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Event(s)</th>
<th>Target</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States trade with China this year is surging tenfold from the 1972 level. Exports to China will reach $840 million by year end while imports from China will total $60 million.</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>cooperates economically</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile's military Government has named a former finance minister to negotiate with United States copper companies over compensation for property nationalized by the previous Marxist Government.</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>cooperates diplomatically</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Upset Over US Investments: The Canadian Government is increasingly concerned about American corporations.</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>makes pessimistic comment</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba Indicates Interest in Talks If US Ends Economic Blockade.</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>expresses intent to meet or negotiate</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran Due to Buy 30 Jet Fighters: Total Cost of the Grumman Planes Is 900 Million … Iran has reportedly accepted a United States offer.</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>agrees to cooperate materially</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko arrives in Washington tomorrow for the first broad Soviet American talks in nearly eight months.</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>cooperates diplomatically</td>
<td>Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia and Kuwait Give Syria Pledge on Oil Embargo … Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have given President Hafez al-Assad of Syria firm pledges to continue the oil embargo against the United States.</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>imposes embargo, boycott, or sanctions</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A4. Descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Val</th>
<th>Null</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean CAMEO score</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>−4.12</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conflict</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material conflict</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical cooperation</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>67.00</td>
<td>19.00</td>
<td>19.69</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material cooperation</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery index</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>11.27</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer price inflation</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21.48</td>
<td>231.75</td>
<td>76.90</td>
<td>95.88</td>
<td>67.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential approval rating</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>88.00</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>53.14</td>
<td>12.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP growth</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>−2.18</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;P 500</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>40.33</td>
<td>1539.66</td>
<td>169.63</td>
<td>465.90</td>
<td>483.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic administration</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election year</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold War</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swing vote</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis involvement</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified government</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All statistics are at the monthly level. Event variables indicate the number of events in a given category per month.
Table A5. Simultaneous equation model of diversion, unemployment, and approval.

(1) Diversion Model (DV: Rhetorical Conflict)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misery index_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.103*</td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conflict (\rightarrow) rivals_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.087**</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material conflict_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second term_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election year_{t-1}</td>
<td>−0.028</td>
<td>(0.137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified government_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.229</td>
<td>(0.190)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td>(0.407)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Administration fixed effects ✓

Observations 627
Multiple R-Squared 0.113

(1) Approval Model (DV: Approval Rating)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misery index_{t-1}</td>
<td>−0.769***</td>
<td>(0.187)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conflict (\rightarrow) rivals_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.294**</td>
<td>(0.128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.881***</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material conflict_{t-1}</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second term_{t-1}</td>
<td>−1.74***</td>
<td>(0.471)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified government_{t-1}</td>
<td>−1.70***</td>
<td>(0.589)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>11.19***</td>
<td>(1.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Administration fixed effects ✓

Observations 627
Multiple R-Squared 0.90

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .1.