

# Hawks, doves, and opportunistic opposition parties

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## Abstract

Parliamentary regimes offer the unique opportunity for opposition parties to react to foreign policy by proposing no-confidence motions (NCMs). The threat of an NCM bringing down the government may be enough to induce pacific behavior by the executive. Yet, this simplistic characterization neglects the possible electoral motivations of opportunistic opposition parties. I develop a theory that opposition parties respond to involvement in international conflict by proposing NCMs as a tool to influence voters' opinions with an eye toward the next election. I develop two expectations based on *policy disagreement* and *issue ownership* that I use to explain the electorally motivated decision to propose NCMs following conflict. I test these expectations with a dataset of 14 European parliamentary democracies from 1970 to 2001. The empirical evidence suggests that the partisanship of both the government and opposition parties interact to create varying electoral incentives to propose NCMs based on issue ownership. Right-wing opposition parties are more likely to challenge than left-wing parties, and this effect is exacerbated when facing left-wing governments. This study has important implications that underpin a number of theories of the domestic causes of international conflict as well as implications for the study of party strategy.

## Keywords

elections, international conflict, no-confidence motions, opposition, parliaments, partisanship

## Introduction

Previous research has posited that the threat of a no-confidence motion (NCM) increases the degree of ex post accountability, which induces more pacific behavior on the part of leaders of parliamentary regimes compared with those of presidential regimes (e.g. Maoz & Russett, 1993; Reiter & Tillman, 2002). Based on this logic, we would expect to only rarely observe NCMs in response to conflict, either because the motions induced peaceful behavior by the government, or because the opposition rescinded the motion when its failure was clear. Yet, history is littered with examples of opposition parties publicly challenging governments involved in international conflict. Our current understanding of ex post accountability in parliamentary regimes offers no satisfying explanation for this puzzling behavior.

This study examines how opposition parties respond to international conflict. I develop a theory that opposition parties use NCMs – even if they are likely to fail – to improve their electoral fortunes. We can expect variations in the usage of this tool based on the partisanship of the government and the opposition party. Since their behavior is motivated by electoral concerns, I expect that opposition parties' choices should reflect well-known patterns of voting behavior. I find that right-wing opposition parties are more willing to challenge governments involved in hostile disputes than are left-wing opposition parties. Moreover, right-wing opposition parties are more aggressive when facing a left-wing government. These patterns are consistent with theories of voting behavior, and reflect a desire for

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right-wing parties to appear more competent and to 'own' the issue of national security.

Outside of studies in a few areas of international relations<sup>1</sup> we have surprisingly little guidance from systematic empirical studies of the domestic consequences of international conflict. Yet, at the same time, assumptions about domestic consequences – including the reactions of the domestic public and political opposition – occupy key parts of these theories. Since these assumptions buttress a number of theories dealing with domestic politics and war (such as diversionary theory or domestic audience costs), it is worthwhile to explicitly test the viability of these assumptions. Ultimately, partisan preferences matter when it comes to domestic politics and international conflict. I find that foreign policy aggression does not silence the domestic opposition, but instead often pushes opportunistic opposition parties to publicly challenge the government based on their own electoral prospects. This warrants a re-examination of the role of legislative responsibility in *ex post* accountability, and ultimately the sources of varying patterns of conflict behavior among presidential and parliamentary regimes (e.g. Prins & Sprecher, 1999).

I first survey the literature connecting the responses of domestic actors to international conflict. I then derive two hypotheses based on theories of voting that produce different expectations for the propensity to propose NCMs. The 'Research design' section discusses the empirical testing procedure. I then provide the empirical results. The final section concludes by discussing a number of implications for the study of conflict as well as democratic representation.

### **No-confidence motions and *ex post* accountability**

Assumptions about the domestic consequences of international conflict buttress a large number of transformative theories of international conflict. Thus, it seems natural for scholars to explore the political impacts of foreign policy. No consensus has thus far been reached. While Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson (1995) show that democratic leaders face higher removal hazards after defeat in a costly war than autocratic leaders, Chiozza & Goemans (2004) find no effect of crisis outcomes on democratic leaders' tenure. Contrary to the 'rally 'round the flag effect'

(e.g. Mueller, 1973), international aggression may not improve domestic conditions, but may instead threaten the political stability of the executive (Chiozza & Goemans, 2003; Sprecher & DeRouen, 2002). Moreover, the longer that a conflict continues and the more casualties that occur, the more likely the public will turn against the government and oppose the conflict (e.g. Gartner & Segura, 1998). Other scholars have examined how economic conditions (Williams, Brule & Koch, 2010) and the opposition parties' stances (Arena, 2008) condition the electoral consequences of conflict for government parties. Perhaps this explains why we see fewer interstate wars prior to elections (Gaubatz, 1991).

Scholars have used these insights to explore the notable differences in foreign policy behavior between presidential and parliamentary systems (e.g. Prins & Sprecher, 1999). One explanation for these differences is the threat of *ex post* accountability. The structural model of the democratic peace explains that variation in terms of constraints on the executive; 'presidential systems should be less constrained than parliamentary systems, in which the government is far more dependent on the support it gets from the legislature' (Maoz & Russett, 1993: 626). In parliamentary systems, the government relies on the parliament's support for both the formation and continuation of government, so 'substantial disagreements may lead to the dissolution of parliament or to a parliamentary vote of no confidence and the replacement of the government' (Reiter & Tillman, 2002: 815). The often implicit threat of removal and possibly early elections due to a successful NCM offers a meaningful constraint on politically motivated executives (Laver & Shepsle, 1996). In parliamentary regimes, the executive anticipates whether the opposition party's threat of an NCM is credible, and assesses its chances of mustering a majority to defeat the motion. When the chance of getting punished *ex post* increases, the executive is more reluctant to use force.

Yet, there has been little research exploring the motivations of those in the opposition. In his analysis of the effects of domestic politics on crisis bargaining, Schultz (2001) informs our understanding of opposition parties' behavior during crises. While it is clear that government parties try to 'deliver good outcomes' in a crisis, Schultz (2001: 79) argues that opposition parties 'by their nature seek to highlight and exploit the government's failings in order to convince voters that they would be better off with a change'. If the opposition perceives the crisis as being unpopular or potentially disastrous, then they will publicly oppose using

<sup>1</sup> For example, these studies measure the domestic consequences of international conflict, including those that examine post-conflict changes in government support, election results, and leader duration.

force.<sup>2</sup> Yet politicians also behave strategically out of fear that they will be ‘caught on the wrong side of history’ and will be punished electorally if the military action succeeds (Drew, 1991: 86, quoted in Schultz, 2001: 78). When the benefits of war are high relative to the costs, opposition parties have the incentive to ‘match’ the government’s policy in order to limit the potential electoral benefits the government might derive from a successful mission (Schultz, 2001).<sup>3</sup> This would indicate that vocal opposition to the crisis will occur when the opposition has low expectations for success or perceives strong public disapproval.

On the other hand, opposition parties might be reluctant to publicly oppose the government by pushing for NCMs that are unlikely to pass. Proposing NCMs imposes costs on opposition parties in terms of upsetting future coalition partners, publicly committing to an untenable policy position, or the transaction costs associated with actually tabling the motion (such as the manpower needed to research, frame, and propose the motion). Therefore, if opposition parties use NCMs solely as a method of terminating government, as formal models assume (e.g. Lupia & Strøm, 1995; Laver & Shepsle, 1996), then we will not observe NCMs in response to conflict because either the government will resolve the international situation through nonviolent means or the opposition will refrain from tabling the motion.

Thus, a puzzle arises once we examine these theoretical expectations in tandem with the empirical pattern of NCMs. The literature has been constrained by making the traditional assumption that when opposition parties propose motions they are solely motivated by attempting to bring down the government (Lupia & Strøm, 1995; Laver & Shepsle, 1996). However, we are forced to doubt the validity of this assumption since it leads to the inaccurate prediction that opposition parties never respond to foreign policy actions with NCMs. A more likely explanation is that opposition parties use NCMs as tools for improving their vote shares at the next election. In addition to shedding light on the puzzling

observation that 95% of NCMs fail, this theory can illuminate the behavior of strategic opposition parties in exactly the situations described above. In the next section, I further explore the possibility that opposition parties are trying to influence election results by proposing NCMs.

## Theory

We can look to more recent examples of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for guidance as to the variety of motivations for proposing NCMs. The first and most visible motivation for proposing NCMs is to bring down the government by either passing with majority support in the parliament (typically triggering parliamentary dissolution and early elections), or by forcing the government to pre-emptively resign. It is for precisely this reason that parliamentary regimes have higher levels of ex post accountability (e.g. Reiter & Tillman, 2002). Yet, since over 95% of NCMs fail to muster a majority (Williams, 2011), this motivation cannot fully explain these patterns. The much more common motivation for challenging is the opportunity to benefit from a public policy pronouncement. No-confidence motions represent publicized opportunities for opposition parties to state their positions on salient policies, elevate an issue on the policy agenda, or question the government’s competence or ability. These are especially favorable opportunities to state a party’s position because of the transaction and opportunity costs associated with challenging the government. Therefore, no-confidence motions can represent costly signals that credibly commit the party to positions in front of an attentive public. Opposition parties used NCMs to express their disapproval for their country’s involvement in the wars in Iraq (Australia on 5 February 2003 and 19 October 2006, Japan on 25 July 2003, and Portugal on 27 March 2003) and Afghanistan (Canada on 18 December 2006).

The Japanese NCM in particular illustrates the opportunistic nature of NCMs. The Liberal Democratic Party-led three-party coalition had introduced a bill to send the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq to assist in humanitarian assistance and logistic support. Four opposition parties who were concerned about whether the SDF would participate in combat operations in a manner that would violate constitution provisions proposed an NCM, which ultimately failed. First, this example demonstrates that having more ex ante veto players (in terms of coalition partners, weak internal party cohesion, government responsibility to the parliament does not necessarily always act as a brake on the executive. The

<sup>2</sup> For an opposing viewpoint, Levy & Mabe (2004) provide anecdotal evidence of opposition parties opposing a crisis because they anticipate that the victory will produce an electoral boost for the government. Thus, opposition parties may also speak out against the crisis because they can potentially blunt the electoral benefits that accrue with foreign policy success (see also Brody & Shapiro, 1989: 100).

<sup>3</sup> It is in this way that the domestic opposition can improve the credibility of signals sent during a crisis (Schultz, 2001; see also Ramsay, 2004).

four opposition parties threatened to propose an NCM if the SDF bill passed, then followed through on that threat after its passage, and yet the government still pressed onward with deployment. Second, the major leftist opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), used the NCM to publicly question the wisdom of deployment as well as shift the public's attention to the government's poor economic performance. By staking a clear position, the DPJ 'clarified the points of debate for voters to consider in the next election' (Yoshida, 2003). Finally, while the ruling coalition's goal was the deployment of the SDF, they were especially cognizant of the electoral risks of deployment. In fact, out of fear that casualties would cost the ruling coalition votes in the anticipated election that fall, the government delayed deploying the SDF to Iraq until after the election in January (*Nikkei Weekly*, 2003).

By making these policy pronouncements at a time of heightened media and public attention, opposition parties can better position themselves for the next election. NCMs give opposition parties the platform to influence the public's valence assessments of the government, which has been shown to play a crucial role in electoral choice (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009). Indeed, Williams (2011) provides evidence that NCMs – even those that fail – result in gains in vote share for the party that proposes them, usually at the expense of government parties. For example, an opposition bill imposing a two-year limit to Canada's combat involvement in Afghanistan shows that opposition parties are motivated by electoral concerns rather than simply taking down the government. Since the Liberal bill had support from the Quebec Bloc, it had majority support in the parliament and could easily trigger the minority Conservative government's downfall. The Liberals, who were in a weakened position in the polls, refused to consider the bill a matter of confidence, which meant that the government's defeat would not warrant its resignation (*National Post*, 2007). This is a clear example of an opposition party refusing to consider a bill an NCM because of fears that an early election would expose its weakness. It also should be noted that all of the NCMs mentioned above failed to bring down the government.<sup>4</sup> Opportunistic opposition parties therefore have an incentive to challenge

government in ways that improve their electoral prospects without necessarily hastening the government's downfall.

The question then, is *how* and *when* do opposition parties react to involvement in international conflict with no-confidence motions? Political parties – in government and in the opposition – are always crafting their strategies to best position themselves for the next election (e.g. Budge, 1994). Parties consistently assess where voters will congregate on the left–right spectrum. It is not enough to simply know where the voters are, but also the calculus that voters use to vote. Since these theories of voter behavior produce different empirical expectations, we can observe the behavior of opposition parties – in this case, the occurrence of no-confidence motions – and infer party strategies based on expected voter support. We can identify two patterns of voting behavior.

First, there is reason to expect that parties react differently to conflict because of the preferences of their constituents. In-depth examination of election manifestos has shown that right-wing parties are more supportive of an expanded international presence and increases in defense spending while left-wing parties favor limited defense spending (Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge, 1994). Left-wing parties typically have more dovish international preferences (e.g. Palmer, London & Regan, 2004; Koch, 2009), which partly explains states' willingness to join the 'coalition of the willing' in the war in Iraq (Schuster & Maier, 2006; see also Mello, 2012).

Opposition parties are reluctant to support motions that run counter to their ideological preferences. In his in-depth examination of the failure of three non-socialist parties' attempts to bring down the Norwegian minority government, Strøm (1994) demonstrates the multiple considerations that opposition parties make. All three parties were staunchly opposed to the government's policy program. If NCMs simply meant aggregating the support of all those who oppose the government, then there would certainly be a greater number of governments that fall because of them. Rather, this example shows the difficulty in reaching a bargain because none of the opposition parties was willing to support an NCM that ran contrary to its party's preferences. This would suggest that proposing an NCM is most likely to arise out of substantial disagreement over the government's policy, as well as an agreement among those in the opposition over the content of the NCM.

Based on this logic, a left-wing opposition party acting on its party's behalf would have the greatest incentive to challenge those governments that take an aggressive international position. Similar to the Japanese example

<sup>4</sup> Only one NCM received a parliamentary majority (Australia, 5 February 2003). However, since the NCM occurred in the Senate, it did not result in the government's termination and was treated as similar to a censure motion. For this reason, I exclude those motions that occur in the upper house from the empirical analysis (described below).

(described above), left-wing opposition parties can use the public debate that accompanies NCMs to draw the public's attention to poor performance on another salient issue (i.e. the economy). Alternatively, right-wing parties have constituencies that are most supportive of an international position that actively projects the state's influence; they should be least likely to challenge governments. If opposition parties' behaviors reflect their supporters' preferences, then we should observe that left-wing parties are more likely to express their opposition with NCMs following conflict than right-wing parties. Indeed, all five of the NCMs in response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (described above) were proposed by left-wing parties.<sup>5</sup>

*Policy Disagreement Hypothesis:* Left-wing opposition parties are more likely to propose a no-confidence motion following international conflict than are right-wing opposition parties.

Another theory of voting that informs this project considers the notion that voters may also have a preference for the party that promises to take policy in a preferred direction. In other words, voters get greatest utility for parties that advocate a preferred policy *and* that propose policies that take policy in a satisfying direction (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Budge & Farlie, 1983). Parties can influence their own vote shares by using public debates and announcements to elevate some issues on the policy agenda (Petrocik, Benoit & Hansen, 2003). Ideally, the elevated issues will be those that the parties have a perceived advantage in dealing with, and can therefore influence voters who prioritize those same salient issues.

Through media coverage and campaigning, parties can increase the accessibility of foreign policy issues for voters by allowing them to distinguish between the policy positions offered by the parties. Thus, voters are able to use foreign policy issues in their voting decisions much like domestic issues (Aldrich, Sullivan & Borgida, 1989). Foreign affairs are particularly salient during times of international conflict (Singer, 2011), which

increases their accessibility to voters (Lavine et al., 1996), so emphasizing these issues potentially causes other parties to shift their campaign rhetoric (Kaplan, Park & Ridout, 2006). Indeed, strategic parties can use their external communications as well as media coverage of those efforts to 'prime' voters and influence their vote choice (e.g. Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

Survey evidence points to voters perceiving right-wing parties as being better able to maintain a strong national defense, deal with international terrorism, and conduct foreign affairs (Petrocik, 1996). Right-wing parties can therefore take a potentially salient foreign policy issue like a dispute, and use an NCM to elevate the issue on the policy agenda and to demonstrate to voters that they are more competent at dealing with the perils of international conflict.<sup>6</sup> This will especially be the case when facing a government that does not 'own' the issue of defense policy, such as a coalition of left-wing parties.

*Issue Ownership Hypothesis:* Right-wing opposition parties are more likely to propose a no-confidence motion following international conflict than are left-wing opposition parties, and left-wing governments are more likely to experience no-confidence motions following international conflict than are right-wing governments.

## Research design

To test my two hypotheses, I create a dataset of 14 European states from 1970 to 2001. I examine these 14 states because they are all advanced democracies who were founding members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Moreover, these are all states where the government is responsible to the parliament, and can thus be removed with a no-confidence motion.<sup>7</sup> Finally, these states have all been involved in a hostile MID during the sample years, so they offer the required variation in the

<sup>5</sup> Both Australian NCMs were proposed by Labor against the Liberal government; three left-wing Japanese parties (Democratic Party of Japan, Japanese Communist Party, and the Social Democratic Party) combined with a centrist party (Liberal Party) to challenge the center-right ruling coalition; four left-wing Portuguese parties (Socialists, Communists, Greens, and Left Bloc) challenged the center-right coalition; and the Quebec Bloc challenged the Canadian Conservative government.

<sup>6</sup> Notable examples of right-wing opposition parties challenging leftist governments during disputes include the Western blockade following Yugoslav involvement in the Bosnian civil war in 1995 (Spain), NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia in 1999 (France), and a series of disputes with Turkey in 1981 and 1989 (Greece).

<sup>7</sup> France is unique in this sample in that a successful NCM would not remove the executive in charge of foreign policy (the president). On the other hand, the power of the president is directly related to also controlling a majority of seats in the National Assembly (Lewis-Beck, 1997), which is potentially threatened by an NCM. In the online appendix I show that the key findings are not statistically different if we exclude France.

Table I. Number of observations with MIDs and no-confidence motions within the sample

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Hostile MIDs<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>NCMs</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Start date<sup>b</sup></i>
Belgium	134	1	886	1970q1
Denmark	49	8	894	1970q1
France	108	14	530	1970q1
Germany	57	3	274	1971q1
Greece	121	8	294	1977q4
Iceland	24	0	402	1970q1
Ireland	6	8	402	1970q1
Italy	164	18	869	1970q1
Netherlands	63	0	446	1970q1
Norway	60	10	715	1970q1
Portugal	0	13	448	1978q1
Spain	223	5	776	1981q1
Sweden	45	9	609	1970q1
United Kingdom	161	6	460	1970q1
Total	1215	103	8005	

<sup>a</sup> The elements in the MIDs and NCMs columns represent the number of observations with non-zero values.

<sup>b</sup> The start dates are determined by the availability of GDP data from the Penn World Table (Germany), and government data for the states that experienced democratic transitions in this period (Greece, Portugal, and Spain). The end date for all states is 2001q4, which is determined by the availability of MID data.

explanatory variable (described below). The countries and time period under examination are shown in Table I as well as the number of observations with non-zero values of conflict and NCMs.

Since the hypotheses specify the behavior of opposition parties based on characteristics of the parties themselves as well as the governments, the unit of analysis (opposition party/government/quarter) requires some additional explanation. For example, the Liberal Democrats in Britain have two observations for the second quarter of 1992, both for John Major's Conservative government: one for the government elected in 1987 and another for the government formed following the April 1992 election. This research design allows one to determine whether the same opposition party in the same quarter was more likely to challenge one government over the other.

The focus of this article is how and when opposition parties respond to foreign policy behavior by challenging governments with no-confidence motions.<sup>8</sup> I create a binary variable that is coded 1 if a no-confidence motion was proposed by that opposition party against the government (or PM) in that quarter. I collect these data from *Keesing's Record of World Events* (1970–2001), and

cross-check the data with a variety of newspapers, wire services, and official parliamentary records.<sup>9</sup>

I first determine whether a party is in the opposition according to Woldendorp, Keman & Budge (2000), whose dataset contains information on the parties that hold cabinet portfolio positions.<sup>10</sup> All opposition parties that produce election manifestos and gain representation in the parliament are included in the dataset (according to the Comparative Manifestos Project).

To measure conflict, I produce a simple count of the number of *hostile militarized interstate disputes* (MIDs) (coded as 4 and 5 on the dyadic hostility measure) involving that state in that quarter (Ghosn, Palmer & Bremer, 2004). Recall that I theorize that opposition parties respond to international conflict by considering how voters will view the event. I exclude a large number of MIDs that do not reach the level of a use of force because I do not think it is reasonable to expect voters to respond to simple verbal threats (which often are not given prominent coverage by the media). Moreover, coding a state as being involved in conflict (rather than just the quarter of the conflict's onset) allows opposition

<sup>8</sup> This excludes cases where the government proposes confidence motions because they typically reflect efforts to produce cohesion within the coalition (Huber, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> The states with data from official parliamentary records include Great Britain and Ireland. A lack of access to major international newspapers from the 14 states prior to 1970 limits this analysis to the post-1970 period.

<sup>10</sup> These data typically end in the late 1990s but are updated through 2011 in Seki & Williams (forthcoming).

parties to respond to the dynamics of the conflict. Opposition parties have been known to respond to specific foreign policy failures over the course of the dispute, as was the case of the NCM against Prime Minister Churchill following the British defeat at the Battle of Gazala in June 1942 (*New York Times*, 1942). Finally, I make no distinction between whether the state ‘initiated’ the conflict or was ‘targeted’. This decision reflects the potential for differences in public perceptions of who ‘started’ the dispute and the coding procedure of the Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset 3.10, which codes the initiator as the state that takes the first ‘codeable military action’ (Ghosn, Palmer & Bremer, 2004: 138).<sup>11</sup> Requiring voters to distinguish between initiators and targets based on identical coding rules is unrealistic.

Partisanship data are taken from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Budge et al., 2001), which content analyzes party election manifestos to place each party on a left–right continuum. This index represents the most extensive and comprehensive measure of partisanship available, and whose validity has been demonstrated in a wide variety of scholarship (e.g. Budge 1994). To create *government partisanship*, I weight each government party’s left–right score by its percentage of the government’s total parliamentary seats. To test the second hypothesis, I simplify the analysis and create a dichotomous measure indicating whether the opposition party is a *left party*.<sup>12</sup>

I select a number of control variables that could potentially confound this relationship. These control variables are grouped into those that characterize the opposition party, the government, and the state. To characterize the incentives present for the opposition party, I first create *party size*, which is the percentage of parliamentary seats controlled by that party. If NCMs are intended to demonstrate to voters that the opposition party is a credible governing alternative, then I would expect that larger parties would have greater incentives to pay the costs of proposing the motions. I also produce *niche party*, which is coded 1 if the party is a member of the communist, green, or nationalist party families

(Adams et al., 2006). Niche parties usually focus on a single issue and are largely unresponsive to shifts in public opinion (Adams et al., 2006), thus removing an incentive for challenging government.

Three government characteristics effectively capture the likelihood that a government is vulnerable to an NCM. *Majority government* is coded as 1 if the governing parties collectively control over half of the parliamentary seats (these include single-party, minimal-winning coalition or surplus coalitions, according to Woldendorp, Keman & Budge, 2000). I expect that minority governments will attract NCMs. By definition, minority governments have to rely on the support of non-government parties to maintain their governing status (see Strøm, 1990 for a review). The difficulty is that without distributing portfolios to these non-government parties, there is no strong mechanism for ensuring voting cohesion within the coalition parties. I create another variable, *ideological complexity*, which is the standard deviation of all the left–right party scores (CMP) for the parties in government. My expectation is that ideologically complex coalitions (with large standard deviations) tend to be less stable than single-party governments, whether they have a legislative majority or not. A reason for this is that multiparty governments increase the risk of policy deadlock due to the increase in potential veto players. Finally, I create a variable called *government tenure*, which measures the tenure (in quarters) of the government. I anticipate that younger governments will experience more NCMs precisely because they may not have demonstrated that they have properly consolidated the support within their coalition.

The four state variables capture the circumstances at the state level that change the attractiveness of challenging government. The state of the economy has been closely tied to the performance of governing parties in elections (e.g. Powell & Whitten, 1993). To control for the propensity for opposition parties to change their behaviors in response to economic conditions, I use *real GDP per capita growth* from the Penn World Table 6.2 (Heston, Summers & Aten, 2006). For elections occurring in the first two quarters of the year, I utilize the lagged value. I create a variable called *time left in the constitutional inter-election period* (CIEP), which counts the number of quarters left before a constitutionally mandated election has to occur (Woldendorp, Keman & Budge, 2000). Early in the election cycle, opposition parties derive few benefits from the current government so they are more ambitious about proposing NCMs. I therefore expect a positive relationship (i.e. NCMs are more likely at higher values of *time left in CIEP*). The

<sup>11</sup> This coding practice means that the USA initiated the MID that became the Cuban Missile Crisis and that Poland initiated the MID that became World War II (Ghosn, Palmer & Bremer, 2004: 139).

<sup>12</sup> I follow the lead of Adams & Somer-Topcu (2009) and code parties belonging to the ecology, communist, or social democratic party families (according to the Comparative Manifesto Project) as being leftist. The excluded category includes both center and right-wing parties.

final two variables measure the *time (in quarters) since the last NCM* by the opposition and the *number of previous NCMs* for that state. With the use of these variables, we can paint a picture of the general propensity for opposition parties to challenge governments in that state.

## Empirical findings

Since the dependent variable (*NCM*) is a binary outcome, I estimate a logit model. To control for possible heteroskedasticity caused by the variation across states, I estimate robust standard errors clustered on the state. I also have reason to believe that the data are temporally dependent, or that the error processes are correlated across time. One methodological solution is to include the *time since the previous NCM* as well as the *number of previous NCMs* as additional variables in the model (Beck, Katz & Tucker, 1998).

This project broadly examines how expectations of voter support modify opposition parties' responses to salient foreign policy behavior. Through an examination of the theories of electoral support, I derived two hypotheses regarding party strategy. In order to examine whether international conflict has an additive effect on the probability of an NCM, I estimate a simple logit with the inclusion of the *hostile MID*s variable (Model 1). I present these results in Table II.

The *hostile MID*s coefficient is positive, though not close to conventional levels of statistical significance. This indicates that there is no statistical effect of being involved in a hostile dispute on the probability of proposing an NCM.

To provide a more intuitive understanding of the substantive effects, in Table III I present the changes in probabilities (and 95% confidence intervals) for substantively interesting changes in those independent variables that obtain statistical significance in Model 1. For each variable, I present the change in probabilities given three scenarios of the other variables. In the 'worst' scenario, the opposition party has little incentive to propose motions; in the 'best' scenario, the government is vulnerable and proposal costs are low. The descriptions of these scenarios are also given in Table III; average values represent either the mean (continuous) or mode (binary) while the worst and best scenarios are based on the 5th and 95th percentiles.

The *hostile MID*s coefficient is not statistically significant. Becoming involved in a hostile MID increases the probability of being challenged across the worst, average, and best scenarios (+0.0007, +0.003, and +0.005, respectively), but since all of the confidence intervals

overlap zero I conclude that international conflict has no independent, additive effect on NCMs.

Three of the control variables are statistically significant with signs in the expected direction. *Party size* is positive, which suggests that larger opposition parties are more willing to challenge the government. More substantively, increasing an opposition party's size from controlling 10% of parliamentary seats to 22.3% (sample mean plus one standard deviation) increases the probability of an NCM by up to 0.016. While taken by itself this increase may not seem impressive, when one considers that the baseline probability of an NCM in a given quarter in the best scenario is only 0.021, this is a considerable increase. *Majority government* is negative (statistically significant at the 90% level) and produces a drop by over one-half in the worst scenario (from 0.003 to 0.001) and over one-third in the best scenario (from 0.021 to 0.012). Finally, increasing the *time since the previous NCM* by one standard deviation from its mean decreases the probability of an NCM by a meaningful amount in each scenario.

Recall that the Policy Disagreement Hypothesis suggests that left-wing opposition parties will be more likely to object to international conflict because it runs contrary to their supporters' preferences. To test this hypothesis, I create an interaction of *MID*s x *partisanship*, which will show if opposition parties respond to disputes differently based on their partisanship (as shown in Model 2). One way of interpreting an interactive relationship such as this is through the use of figures.

Figure 1 shows the 95% confidence intervals for the probability of an NCM by that party in a given quarter across the sample range of values of opposition party partisanship for the average scenario. The shape of the relationship is positive, which supports the first part of the Issue Ownership Hypothesis rather than the Policy Disagreement Hypothesis. With the use of confidence intervals, we can determine whether the probabilities of an NCM at different values of *opposition party partisanship* are statistically different from each other. For example, the figure shows that left-wing opposition parties (when *partisanship* = -50) have statistically lower probabilities of proposing an NCM than those center or right parties (when *partisanship* is greater than 10). Moreover, far-right parties (when *partisanship* = 50) have statistically higher probabilities than more moderate parties (when *partisanship* = -10). This would suggest that right-wing opposition parties are more willing to publicly challenge the government in response to international conflict than left-wing parties.

Table II. Partisanship, hostile disputes, and no-confidence motions

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Hostile MIDs	0.21 (0.18)	0.11 (0.21)	-0.18 (0.28)
Left party			-0.23 (0.31)
Government partisanship			-0.01 (0.01)
Partisanship		0.01 <sup>†</sup> (0.006)	
MIDs × Partisanship		0.012* (0.005)	
Left × MIDs			-0.90 <sup>†</sup> (0.54)
MIDs × Gov't partisanship			-0.04 <sup>†</sup> (0.018)
Left × Gov't partisanship			0.025* (0.012)
Left × MIDs × Gov't partisanship			0.064* (0.02)
Party size	5.81* (0.85)	6.03* (0.88)	5.64* (0.80)
Niche party	0.14 (0.30)	0.31 (0.31)	0.31 (0.36)
Majority government	-0.59 <sup>†</sup> (0.37)	-0.60 <sup>†</sup> (0.37)	-0.58 <sup>†</sup> (0.35)
Ideological complexity	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.004 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)
Government tenure	-0.003 (0.05)	0.002 (0.05)	-0.011 (0.03)
Real GDP per capita growth	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)
Time left in CIEP	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)
Number of previous NCMs	0.01 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)	-0.003 (0.09)
Time since previous NCM	-0.006* (0.003)	-0.006* (0.003)	-0.006 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Constant	-5.02* (0.56)	-5.10* (0.53)	-5.07* (0.57)
Observations	8,005	8,005	8,005
Pseudo $R^2$	0.09	0.10	0.11

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

Table III. Change in predicted probabilities of no-confidence motions (Model 1)

	<i>Change in predicted probability probability</i>		
	<i>Worst</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Best</i>
Baseline probability	0.003 [0.001, 0.006]	0.011 [0.007, 0.017]	0.021 [0.011, 0.035]
Hostile MIDs (0→1)	+0.0007 [-0.0004, 0.002]	+0.003 [-0.002, 0.016]	+0.005 [-0.004, 0.014]
Party size (0.10→0.22)	+0.004 [0.002, 0.008]	+0.011 [0.007, 0.015]	+0.016 [0.009, 0.025]
Majority government (0→1)	-0.002 [-0.005, 0.0006]	-0.005 [-0.010, 0.001]	-0.009 [-0.022, 0.003]
Time since NCM (55→107)	-0.0009 [-0.0025, -0.0001]	-0.003 [-0.006, -0.0003]	-0.004 [-0.008, -0.0003]
	<i>Values of explanatory variables in scenarios</i>		
	<i>Worst</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Best</i>
Hostile MIDs	0	0	0
Party size	0.02	0.10	0.14
Majority government	1	0	0
Time since NCM	92	55	14

95% confidence intervals are in brackets. Since the confidence intervals in all scenarios except for *hostile MIDs* do not overlap zero, all these changes are statistically significant (at 95% level or higher). Other control variables are held at their means (continuous) and modes (binary).

A more comprehensive test of the Issue Ownership Hypothesis requires the creation of a three-way interaction between *hostile MIDs*, the opposition party's

*partisanship*, and *government partisanship*. To ease interpretation of this interaction, I simplify the opposition party's ideology and use a simple dichotomous

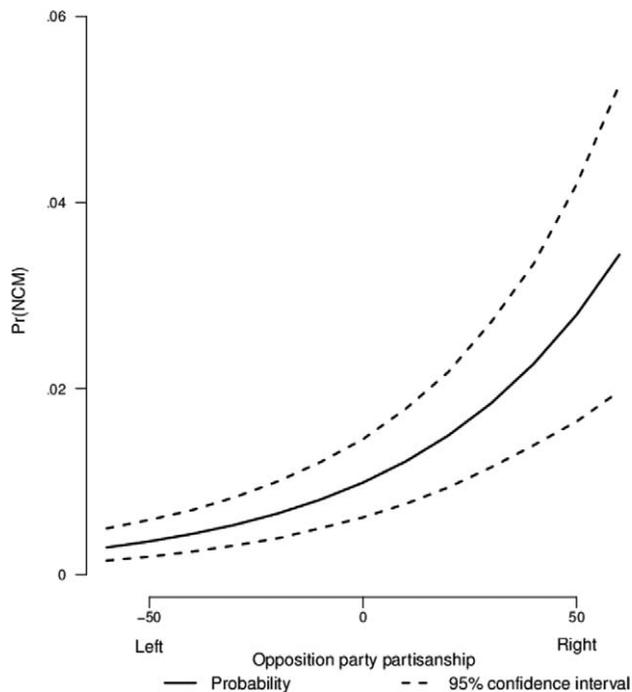


Figure 1. Predicted probability of a no-confidence motion following international conflict across the range of opposition party partisanship (Model 2, average scenario)

variable denoting whether it is a left-wing party or not. The three-way interaction, the two-way interactions and the lower-order coefficients are included in Model 3. Model 3 can therefore show if there is a difference between how left- and right-wing opposition parties respond to conflict, if specific types of governments are more susceptible to NCMs, and whether the opposition parties' and governments' partisanship interact to influence NCMs. A full exploration of this relationship is given in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of an NCM (depicted as circles) and 95% confidence intervals across the sample range of *government partisanship*. A left-wing opposition party is denoted with the solid line and a dashed line shows the values for a center/right-wing opposition party. The predicted probabilities for both types of opposition party are calculated at the same value of *government partisanship*, but the confidence intervals are shifted slightly so that they are distinguishable from each other. Previously, I showed that right-wing opposition parties are more inclined to use NCMs than left-wing parties. This figure shows that the probability of a right-wing opposition party challenging a government decreases as the government drifts to the right (this decrease is nearly statistically significant). Alternatively, the probability of a left-wing party challenging the government increases as

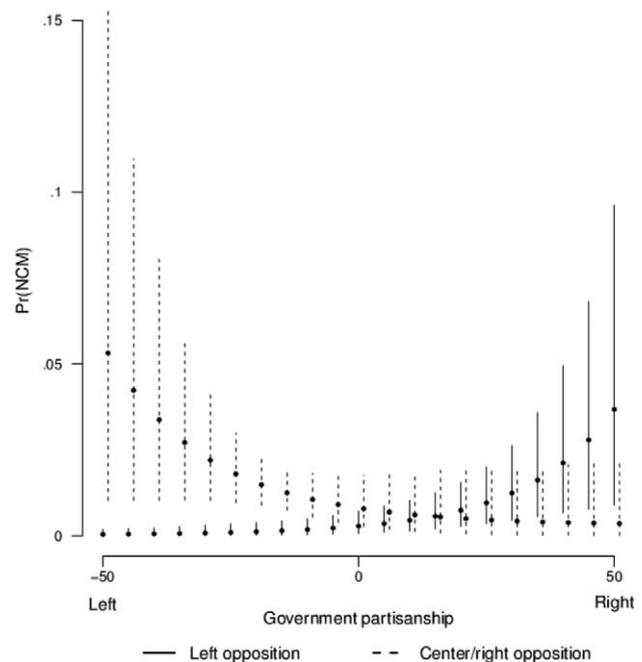


Figure 2. Predicted probability of a no-confidence motion following international conflict for left- and center/right-wing opposition parties across the range of government partisanship (Model 3, average scenario)

the government shifts to the right.<sup>13</sup> While this is consistent with the *policy disagreement hypothesis*, it is also consistent with the possibility that opposition parties are more likely to challenge those governments that are ideologically dissimilar, whether a dispute occurs or not. To assess whether involvement in conflict increases the risk of an NCM, I calculate the marginal effect of *hostile MID*s. These marginal effects suggest that *hostile MID*s do not increase the likelihood of left-wing opposition parties challenging right-wing governments, but they do increase the willingness of right-wing opposition parties to challenge left-wing governments.<sup>14</sup>

The perceived competence of the government when it comes to dealing with national security affairs influences the behavior of opposition parties as well.

<sup>13</sup> Since the confidence intervals for left-wing opposition parties at -50 do not overlap with those at about 25, then we can say that the predicted probability of an NCM at those two values is statistically different.

<sup>14</sup> While the marginal effect for a hostile MID for a left-wing opposition party is positive when government partisanship is quite far to the right (greater than about 40), it is far from being statistically significant at conventional levels. Alternatively, the marginal effect for a hostile MID for a right-wing opposition party is positive and statistically significant (at the 90% confidence level) when government partisanship is less than about -20.

For right-wing governments, there is no statistical difference in the likelihood of being challenged by an opposition party on the left or the right. On the other hand, left-wing governments face a much higher risk of an NCM from the center/right-wing opposition than those parties in their party family. This would point toward not only right-wing parties being more likely to respond to conflict by proposing NCMs, but also that, once in office, they are more immune to the negative repercussions of using force. Since they are perceived to ‘own’ the issue of national security, center/right-wing opposition parties take advantage of conflict by being more likely to propose NCMs than left-wing parties. I therefore find support for the Issue Ownership Hypothesis.

The increases in probability of an NCM following international conflict appear to be rather small, but upon closer examination the substantive effects are quite large. Opposition parties are cautious about when to utilize NCMs, so their rarity reduces their probability in a given quarter to 0.021 in even the most vulnerable scenarios (see Table III).<sup>15</sup> Precisely because the baseline probability is so small, these changes in predicted probabilities – though small in magnitude – are quite large substantively. This is compounded by the presence of situations where multiple hostile MIDs occur in the same quarter. Governments should take these constraining effects seriously, especially given that this model predicts the probability that any *one party* proposes an NCM. Governments facing multiple opposition parties must be cognizant of the risks of foreign policy aggression from the accumulation of these challenges. Additionally, if the conflict is enough to trigger an NCM, then the effects of conflict will be felt for many subsequent periods. Since the series exhibits temporal dependence, an NCM at time  $t$  changes the subsequent values of *time since previous NCM* and *number of previous NCMs* for time  $t+1$  and beyond. The change in probabilities discussed above thus represents only the short-term effect of conflict, which is only one part of the overall effect. Therefore, the effects that we observe here, substantively meaningful as they are, represent a small part of the overall influence that opposition parties have on foreign policy behavior. Lastly, I performed

a series of robustness checks that account for the characteristics of the conflicts. These results, which are discussed in depth in the online appendix, provide additional support for the Issue Ownership Hypothesis.

## Discussion and conclusion

This project addressed whether opposition parties respond to salient foreign policy actions by proposing non-confidence motions in the government. Challenging government can increase public attention to the policy and potentially lead to the pre-emptive termination of government. I argue that politically motivated, opportunistic opposition parties can take advantage of these situations to demonstrate their ownership of foreign policy issues. Indeed, I find greater empirical support for the Issue Ownership Hypothesis rather than the Policy Disagreement Hypothesis. Right-wing opposition parties are more likely to challenge government in the face of conflict because they want to stake a claim to the foreign policy realm in the minds of voters. Right-wing parties are especially active when facing a left-wing government, possibly because they are able to highlight the profound differences in foreign policy platforms and potentially provide voters with a better governing alternative moving forward.

This project also has implications for the study of party strategy. Electorally motivated NCMs proposed by opportunistic opposition parties reflect elements of party strategy, most notably the decision to emphasize ownership of salient foreign policy issues. I find evidence that parties promote policy in a manner that is entirely consistent with their campaign promises to voters. Thus, we can add responses to international disputes to the list of policy actions that reflect party positions (e.g. Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge, 1994). With this knowledge comes a glimpse into the parties’ understanding of how voters decide. By demonstrating that left-wing governments are more vulnerable to NCMs following conflict than right-wing governments, I can conclude that right-wing opposition parties expect an electoral benefit for proposing NCMs in that situation. My extension of issue ownership theory suggests that proposing NCMs in a policy area where the opposition party is considered competent will provide long-term benefits.<sup>16</sup>

I echo more recent research (e.g. Schuster & Maier, 2006; Mello, 2012) by concluding that party politics

<sup>15</sup> An explanation for the rarity of NCMs is the ‘restraining effect’ that Schultz (2001: 8) identifies: ‘actual or anticipated dissent by opposition parties induces caution in democratic decision makers, making them hesitant to threaten force’. Since the threat induced pacifism by the government, there is little incentive to actually propose the motion.

<sup>16</sup> In the online appendix, I show that center/right-wing opposition parties stand to gain votes when they propose NCMs related to national security issues against left-wing governments.

matter in foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> This conclusion sheds light on four disagreements within the study of domestic politics and international conflict. The first disagreement is based on producing a convincing explanation for the finding that right-wing governments are more prone to conflict than left-wing governments (Palmer, London & Regan, 2004; Foster & Palmer, 2006). Scholars explain this finding with various credible mechanisms: left-wing parties are more peaceful because that more closely represents the preferences of their constituents (Palmer, London & Regan, 2004), or because they face higher risks of removal after the conflict (Koch, 2009). The empirical evidence contained herein supports the latter explanation. Left-wing governments face a higher risk of NCMs because they typically face multiple right-wing opposition parties that want to claim ownership of the issue. Considering that these NCMs could trigger the government's downfall, left-wing governments should exercise caution when deciding whether to become embroiled in conflict.

The second disagreement is between those who suggest that domestic political institutions – such as minority governments or parliamentary regimes – constrain governments because they increase the difficulty of going to war (e.g. Ireland & Gartner, 2001) or they increase the vulnerability of the government (or leader) to removal after the war (Reiter & Tillman, 2002). The dilemma is that it is difficult to disentangle the empirical evidence to determine whether the pacifism was due to ex ante obstacles that blocked the conflict, or the fear of ex post accountability that constrained the government. Since this project takes a unique approach by examining the effects of conflict on parliamentary behavior, the evidence can point toward the appropriateness of the ex post credible mechanism. In this case, I conclude that left-wing governments facing strong right-wing opposition may be reluctant to behave aggressively lest they have to face an NCM.

I find that opposition parties use one of the few tools at their disposal – the NCM – in response to foreign policy behavior in reasonable ways. While empirical analyses such as this cannot address the effectiveness of the threat of ex post accountability in deterring aggression (due to strategic interaction), this project can shed light on the use of NCMs for another purpose. If opportunistic opposition parties use NCMs to improve their vote shares, then it is possible that this exerts yet

another ex post constraint on using force. Given the strong connection between being challenged and losing votes (Williams, 2011), it is likely – though empirically unobservable – that the threat of an NCM – even one doomed to fail – constrains the use of force. By examining the alternative motivations for proposing NCMs we are left with another explanation for different conflict behavior between presidential and parliamentary systems.

Next, this theory adds nuance to our understanding of the role of opposition parties and crisis bargaining. Schultz (2001) argues that the behavior of opposition parties sends a credible signal to the adversary about expectations of success as well as the level of domestic opposition, thus reducing the threat that private information will prevent the sides from reaching a negotiated settlement. It is in this way that the opposition's threat to take the government to task may limit the government's ability to misrepresent information. My research has important implications for this literature. Not only does it represent the first cross-national, systematic empirical test of the 'restraining effects' of opposition parties, but it also adds another dimension to how electorally motivated opposition parties respond to crises based on a combination of their own and the government's partisan preferences. While I theorize that there are potential electoral benefits to such a strategy, opposition parties must also be aware of the costs. Beyond the risk of misjudging the expectations for success and ending up on the 'wrong side of history' (Drew, 1991: 86; quoted in Schultz, 2001: 78), domestic opposition limits the strategic options available to the state (e.g. Schultz, 2001: 220) and encourages being targeted in conflict (Foster, 2006), especially for left-wing presidents (Foster, 2008).

Finally, this project has implications for the disagreement over how democratic actors respond to international conflict. The assumptions that scholars make vary widely with the theory. For example, in their study of crisis bargaining, Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman (1992) assume that all conflict is a sign of foreign policy failure. Some diversionary studies assume that involvement in international conflict silences the domestic opposition's criticism (Levy, 1989). The democratic public in the audience costs literature is one that punishes leaders for making public threats in a crisis and then backing down (Fearon, 1994). These assumptions are each reasonable in isolation; the problem is that there is little systematic evidence in favor of any of them. The results from this study point toward the opportunistic nature of

<sup>17</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this unifying contribution.

opposition parties, which certainly casts doubt on the diversionary assumption that the domestic opposition rallies around the flag. Indirectly, these findings suggest that scholars should be cautious about making assumptions about the responses of domestic actors without careful consideration of the nuances of party politics.

### Replication data

All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata 11. The online appendix, replication dataset, and do-files can be found at <http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets>.

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