Leadership Experience and American Foreign Policy Crises

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Introduction[1]

Are experienced American presidents better equipped to navigate the difficulties of foreign policy than their newly elected counterparts? Many of those charged with making and interpreting U.S. foreign policy believe so. The media is peppered with comments on the role that presidential experience plays in international affairs. For example, immediately after the September 11, 2001, attacks the *London Times* observed: "This most inexperienced of leaders [George W. Bush] must determine how and against whom the United States will retaliate.…Nothing in Mr. Bush's previous career has remotely prepared him for these vast challenges."[2] Similarly, it is widely recognized that new presidents can disrupt the stability of existing international relationships: "the changes of emphasis in Carter's foreign policy…have perplexed the Russians. 'The Soviets are still trying to figure Carter out,' says a high Administration official."[3] Beltway insiders acknowledge the importance of experience in the offhand way that one treats common knowledge: "Of course experience matters… for the first few months the administration is flying blind, appointees are not necessarily all in place and settled … and the lines of communication are not as good as they will be."[4] If politicians and political observers believe that presidential experience is important, political scientists discount it at their peril.

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1. I would like to thank Catie Bailard, Michael Brecher, James Desveaux, Julia Gray, James Honaker, Patrick James, Deborah Larson, Rachel Potter, Jeff Lewis, and Marc Trachtenberg for their comments and suggestions. All remaining errors and omissions are my own. Replication materials, additional model specifications, robustness checks, and rare events corrections will be made available at http://ppotter.bol.ucla.edu.
2. Martin Fletcher, "Attack on America: Challenge Like No Other," *London Times*, September 22, 2001.
3. Newsweek, "Signals from Moscow," *Newsweek*, April 10, 1978.
4. Interview by author, former Assistant Secretary of State, January 13, 2006.

The issue of experience is particularly salient today. Democratization has become an integral facet of post–September 11 U.S. foreign policy. The recently released update to the 2006 U.S. *National Security Strategy* begins, "It is the policy of the United States to support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."[5] While democracy is attractive for its contribution to rights and freedoms, the rationalization of this policy has been based primarily on the strategic perception that democracies are, from the standpoint of the United States, more pacific, responsible, and manageable. There is, however, a divide between the academic literature that informs this policy, and the widely held perception that American democratic institutions—in particular the presidency—are often ill suited to the task of producing consistent foreign policy. On the one hand, the literature suggests that democracies are a moderating force in the international system because of their transparency, which allows them to signal credibly, and their apparent unwillingness to engage one another in violent conflict.[6] Yet the argument persists that democracies produce inconsistent foreign policy because of the lack of continuity produced by the periodic turnover in their leadership.

I hypothesize here that the inexperience generated by the frequent turnover of the executive branch is important in explaining the genesis of many U.S. foreign policy crises, and I find support for this contention in data gleaned from the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project. The analysis will establish that the number of interstate crises involving the United States varies according to levels of presidential experience, with crises declining as the administration gains time in office. Such an empirical pattern would logically exclude the three

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5. George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, March 2006), http://www.whitehouse/gov/nsc/nss/2006/.
6. Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12 (1984); Kenneth A. Schultz, "Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War," *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Spring 1999).

prevailing theories about the relationship between the American democratic cycle and foreign policy: that there might be a "honeymoon period" immediately following elections in which new presidents are unlikely to become involved in foreign crises;[7] that presidents might systematically use the "rally round the flag" effect to bolster their electoral prospects; and, more generally, that fluctuations in the propensity to become involved in foreign policy crises might be primarily tied to the electoral cycle, with crises occurring least frequently immediately preceding elections when leaders are the most constrained, and most frequently immediately following elections when a leader has the freest hand due to the relatively long period of time until the next election.[8]

Such a finding would also partially contrast recent work by Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam, who demonstrate that, at a global level, experience is an insignificant predictor of militarized interstate dispute (MID).[9] By testing my hypothesis against both ICB and Correlates of War (COW) project data, I demonstrate that, in the United States, experience significantly influences the likelihood of crisis, but has no relationship with MID. The sections that follow

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7. This is to be distinguished from the more common meaning of "honeymoon period," which relates to domestic politics (i.e., the period at the beginning of an administration "when the president's relationships with Congress and the media are at least cordial if not deferential"). Glenn P. Hastedt and Anthony J. Eksterowicz, "The Perils of Presidential Transition," *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001).
8. Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (June1991); Hastedt and Eksterowicz, "The Perils of Presidential Transition"; Patrick James and Jean Sebastien Rioux, "International Crises and Linkage Politics: The Experiences of the United States, 1953–1994," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (September 1998); Jong-Ryool Lee, "Rallying around the Flag," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 252 (1977); and John R. Oneal and Anna Lillian Bryan, "The Rally 'Round the Flag Effect in U. S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950–1985," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December 1995). Considerable literature exists on the rallying effect of foreign engagement on public opinion. For a description of the rally effect see Richard Brody and Catherine Shapiro, "A Reconsideration of the Rally Phenomenon in Public Opinion," in Samuel Long, ed., *Political Behavior Annual* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989). For updates on the classic literature that confirm a rally effect see James and Rioux, "International Crises and Linkage Politics: The Experiences of the United States, 1953–1994"; Oneal and Bryan, "The Rally 'Round the Flag Effect in U. S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950–1985"; C. W. Ostrom and B. L. Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (June 1986). For an argument against the rally effect or its systematic use see Richard J. Stoll, "The Guns of November: Presidential Reelections and the Use of Force, 1947–1982," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 1984).
9. Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C. Stam, "Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (October 2005).

will show that this result is an artifact of the particular definitions of these concepts and a closer relationship between experience and the defining characteristic of international crisis—destabilization.

The principle authors of the ICB and COW projects have gone to great lengths to stress the theoretical distinctions between the concepts of crisis and MID. However, practitioners who use these data to test their hypotheses about international conflict often implicitly assume that these two projects represent operationalizations of a single concept, and expect that results should be consistent (though there are few studies that actually attempt to test this notion.) Thus, aside from discussing the role of experience in the genesis of conflict, this paper will also demonstrate that the choice of measure for international conflict is not nearly as innocuous at it might seem.

I proceed with a theoretical introduction to the question of American presidential experience, and then follow with empirical findings on the relationship between experience and conflict.

Placing Experience in Context

While the literature is rich when it comes to the role of democracies in the international system, the nexus between the American electoral system and American foreign policy remains under explored.[10] In the recent academic literature the prevailing view is that democracies are a

10. This is largely because of the dominance of systemic approaches to this question, which, by definition, exclude domestic considerations from their models. However, it should be noted that interest in the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy has been on the rise. For an excellent statement of the "domestic" argument and a review of the recent literature taking this approach see Helen V. Milner, "Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis of International, American, and Comparative Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998). Norrin Ripsman has also investigated a variety of domestic influences on the formation of foreign

positive force for international stability; however, concerns over the ability of democracies to engage in consistent and well-reasoned foreign policy have been consistently voiced since antiquity. 2400 years ago Thucydides observed, "The four hundred…sent to Agis, the Lacedaemonian king, at Decelea, to say that they desired to make peace, and that he might reasonably be more disposed to treat now that he had them to deal with instead of the inconstant commons."[11] The father of modern realism, Hans Morgenthau, was equally concerned: "The thinking required for the successful conduct of foreign policy can be diametrically opposed to the rhetoric and action by which the masses and their representatives are likely to be moved."[12] Related arguments have been made elsewhere. Walter Lippman suggested that democracies, as such, are slow to awaken to threats, and extreme in their responses once roused.[13] In a similar vein, Theodore Lowi argued that domestic political concerns compel democratic leadership to exaggerate threats and oversell possible solutions.[14]

The specific relationship between American democracy and the execution of foreign policy has also long been a source of concern for political observers. Alexis de Tocqueville commented that, "in the conduct of foreign relations … democratic governments appear to me to

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policy. See Norrin Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effect of State Autonomy on the Post–World War Settlements* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2002). The praise or blame (depending on the methodological perspective of the commentator) for the tendency in political science to avoid explanations based on domestic variables is often placed at the feet of Kenneth N. Waltz, as the originator of structural realism. This is not entirely fair. While Waltz is best known for a model that excludes domestic considerations, this is but one approach that he takes. In an often overlooked volume, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, Waltz takes a close look at the influence that domestic politics can have on foreign policy outcomes. Much of what is found in that book can be considered trailblazing for projects like the one attempted here. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967). However, Waltz did not build on the analysis of domestic factors he set out in his 1967 book; to the contrary, his central work, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), consciously excludes the domestic dimension of foreign policy analysis from its model. This paper hopes to fill this void in Waltz's work by building on his previous attention to domestic influences on foreign policy.

11. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1954), chap. 25.

12. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 168.

13. Walter Lippman, *The Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little Brown, 1955).

14. Theodore Lowi, "Making Democracy Safe for the World," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

be decidedly inferior to governments carried on upon different principles … Democracy is unable to regulate the details of an important undertaking, to persevere in a design, and to work out its execution in the presence of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy, and it will not await their consequences with patience.[15]

More recent scholarship has also explored whether democracy is the best system for achieving the United States' foreign policy goals. Miroslav Nincic argued that American attitudes toward the Soviet Union were shaped not by capacities and behavior, but rather by the electoral cycle, and concluded that presidents are inclined to tailor their foreign policies around electoral concerns.[16] George Breslauer also investigated the role of new American presidents in Cold War foreign relations.[17] He attempted to test the widely held belief that Soviet leaders routinely tested new American presidents and concluded that little evidence existed to support this supposition, but that available evidence did suggest that new presidents had a tendency to test Soviet resolve.

As it did in Nincic's and Breslauer's work, the lens of the Cold War colored much of the literature on the foreign policy capacity of the United States. Joseph Nye questioned whether "the United States is institutionally or politically capable of following a consistent and coherent policy toward the Soviet Union."[18] He envisioned multiple challenges for foreign policy in the American democracy: "in the area of foreign policy, the Constitution establishes the open, "invitation to struggle" … complicated by the federal and relatively geographically dispersed nature of the political elite; the weakness and poor discipline of the national political parties; the

15. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Library of America, [1835] 2004), pp. 61–262.
16. Miroslav Nincic, "U.S. Soviet Policy and the Electoral Connection," *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (April 1990); and Miroslav Nincic, *Democracy and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
17. George W. Breslauer, "Do Soviet Leaders Test New Presidents?" *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1982/83), pp. 83–107.
18. Joseph S. Nye Jr., ed., *The Making of America's Soviet Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 3.

strength and legitimacy of economic, ideological and ethnic pressure groups; the depth and frequency of political turnovers in the executive branch after elections; and the almost constitutionally entrenched role of the press as a virtual fourth branch of government.[19]

Nye's laundry list of domestic influences on American foreign policy is indicative of the disorganized state of scholarly knowledge on this subject. His suggestion that the concern of this investigation (presidential turnover and the resulting loss of experience) is but one of many challenges to consistent foreign policy gives some indication of where this issue fits into the larger question.

Kurt Gaubatz statistically tied the incidence of war to election cycles in democracies. Gaubatz's regressions demonstrate that, in the past 200 years, democratic states have become involved in more wars at the beginning of election cycles than at the end. He attributes this observation to the increasing proximity of democratic constraints as elections near.[20] In contrast, Joanne Gowa argued, "U.S. recourse to force abroad responds neither to partisan politics nor to the domestic political calendar. It responds only to changes in U.S. power status and to the advent of general wars."[21]

Thus, while many have touched on the issues raised here, none has systematically attacked the question of presidential experience. Particularly lacking is a strong empirical inquiry into whether the foreign policy of the United States is significantly influenced by presidential experience.

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19. Ibid.
20. Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War."
21. J. Gowa, "Politics at the Water's Edge: Parties, Voters, and the Use of Force Abroad," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (1998), p. 307.

Why Might Experience Matter?

THE WEAKNESS OF DECISIONMAKING PROCESSES IN NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATIONS

Inexperience extends beyond the president himself—it can extend to advisors and immature presidential management structures. New U.S. administrations may not be as competent in their internal practices, or as established in their relationship with the bureaucracy and legislature. In addition, the lag that accompanies the nomination and confirmation of political appointees leaves the bureaucracies without leadership and direction. These factors can both limit the flow of critical information and short-circuit checks on imprudent decisions that would normally exist. For example, historians have attributed the botched handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion to the lack of adequate safeguards and decisionmaking structures in a very young Kennedy administration.[22]

Although many of the men responsible for approving the Bay of Pigs invasion had years of foreign policy experience individually, together they allowed an ill-conceived and defective operation to proceed. Some time after the crisis Kennedy asked, "How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"[23] The answer that Kennedy himself seems to have given was inexperience and the lack of established decision making structures within his administration. Kennedy, a new and relatively young president, believed that he was in no position to question such experienced men as Allen Dulles and outgoing President Eisenhower. As a result, he went along with the plan and suffered for it. Although not all of Kennedy's advisors were in favor of

22. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990), William B. Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5 (1986).
23. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 309.

the invasion, their unfamiliarity with one another and the lack of established procedures to encourage the voicing of minority or unpopular opinions resulted in a breakdown in the transmission of alternative options and critiques. The result was an ill-advised invasion that, in all likelihood, would not have been approved later in the administration.

Peter Wyden describes a meeting of Kennedy's advisors prior to the invasion, which perfectly illustrates these challenges to good judgment in young presidencies. Speaking of this meeting, Secretary of State Dean Rusk claimed that the inexperienced President Kennedy had "a very informal sense of administration." Wyden describes the atmosphere in the room as being "acutely uncomfortable," as there was a general (though unstated) objection to the style of this meeting. Kennedy went around the room asking those present for a simple "yes" or "no" position on the invasion. The result was that most felt that they were not in a position to speak their minds. By not allowing them to justify their answers, Kennedy in effect forced "yes" to be the prevailing response because most were eager to "close ranks with the President" and be a "good team player."[24]

Furthermore, the actual composition of this meeting had the effect of silencing its participants—it also reflected President Kennedy's inexperience, and was not something that he would replicate in his presidency. First, the meeting had an unusually large number of attendees. Second, it combined high-level cabinet members with both a senator (William Fulbright) and lower-level advisors. This had a chilling effect both on the upper-level individuals who, from practice with previous presidents, were unaccustomed to expressing their opinions frankly when in a "significant group," and on lower-level officials who were unaccustomed to challenging the

24. Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 146–148.

views of their superiors. Furthermore, those from the executive branch were uncertain whether they should speak openly with a member of the legislative branch in the room.[25]

The mishandling of the Bay of Pigs invasion spurred changes that resulted in the more sophisticated, streamlined, and effective decision making process used by the administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This learning process is integral to the experience argument, because it demonstrates not only how inexperience leads to crises, but also points the way toward the mechanism that reduces crises as the administration ages. Lucien Vandenbroucke argued that, after the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy was almost automatically suspicious of any operation that was universally agreed upon, was much less reluctant to question "experts" and bureaucrats, and nearly institutionalized the role of a "devil's advocate" when making important decisions.[26]

The contrast between experience and inexperience can be clearly seen in a private conversation, recounted by Richard Reeves, between former President Eisenhower and President Kennedy immediately following the Bay of Pigs invasion.[27] Kennedy invited Eisenhower to Camp David to "bring him up to date on recent events and get the benefit of his thoughts and experience."

KENNEDY: No one knows how tough this job is until after he has been at it a few months.
EISENHOWER: Mr. President, if you will forgive me, I think that I mentioned that to you three months ago.
KENNEDY: I have certainly learned a lot since.
EISENHOWER: Mr. President, before you approved this plan did you have everybody in front of you debating the thing so you got the pros and cons yourself and then made the decision, or did you see these people one at a time?"
KENNEDY: Well, I did have a meeting… I just approved the plan that had been recommended by the CIA and by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I just took their advice.
EISENHOWER: Mr. President, were there any changes in the plan that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had approved?

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25. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); and Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*.
26. Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, "Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Autumn 1984).
27. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 102–103.

KENNEDY: Yes there were…we did want to call off one bombing sally.
EISENHOWER: Why was that called off? Why did they change plans after the troops were already at sea?
KENNEDY: Well, we felt it necessary to keep our hand concealed in this affair; we thought that if it was learned that we were really doing this and not these rebels themselves, the Soviets would be very apt to cause trouble in Berlin.
EISENHOWER: Mr. President, that is exactly the opposite of what would really happen. The Soviets follow their own plans, and if they see us show any weakness that is when they press us the hardest. The second they see us show strength and do something on our own, that is when they are very cagey.
KENNEDY: Well, my advice was that we must try to keep our hand from showing in this affair.
EISENHOWER: Mr. President, how could you expect the world to believe that we had nothing to do with it? Where did these people get the ships to go from Central America to Cuba? Where did they get the weapons? Where did they get all the communications and all the other things that they would need? How could you have possibly kept from the world any knowledge that the United States had been involved? I believe that there is only one thing to do when you go into this kind of thing, it must be a success.
KENNEDY: Well, I assure you that, hereafter, if we get into anything like this, it is going to be a success.
EISENHOWER: Well I'm glad to hear that.

Throughout this exchange are references to experience and learning, the core concepts that underpin the argument made here.

THE LOSS OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DECISIONMAKERS

Personal ties between world leaders are broken when there is a change in the U.S. administration. Foreign leaders do not know how to relate to the incoming president, and the new leader lacks the previous administration's accumulated foreign policy knowledge and personal relationships. Furthermore, any tacit understandings or informal agreements may not survive the transfer of power, further undermining diplomatic relationships. For example, it has been argued that the Polish Crisis of 1945 emerged, in part, from Truman's initial ignorance of Roosevelt's unwritten understandings with Stalin as well as personality conflicts between the Soviet leader and the incoming president.

After Roosevelt's death in 1945, Truman came into office without significant experience in foreign policy and knowing very little about Roosevelt's postwar plans, particularly his verbal commitments and unwritten understandings with Stalin. After reviewing wartime agreements—which were structured as they were more to appease American legislators and the public than to

accurately represent the understanding on the ground—Truman concluded that Stalin was breaking his Yalta Agreement obligations to allow for an open and democratic Eastern Europe. Truman adhered to a code of political behavior that emphasized keeping one's word and commitments. For Stalin, dealing with Truman was a radical departure from the working relationship he had established with the more politically sophisticated Roosevelt. Whereas Roosevelt's personality allowed him to overlook the Soviet abrogation of the details of agreements, and instead judge the Soviets on the substance of their policy, Truman was inclined to give style and substance equal weight. Thus, this shift in personality resulted in a major change in what was expected from the Soviets, for which they were not prepared.[28]

As he gained experience, Truman came to better understand Roosevelt's agreements and the reality of the Soviets' strategic position. In response, he sent Harry Hopkins on a mission to the USSR to signal the end of his "get tough" approach. Unfortunately, by this time significant damage had been done to the relationship between the superpowers. Roosevelt had been able to control tensions largely by relying on his personal relationship with Stalin. The loss of this relationship and the entrance of a new, inexperienced president had the effect of immediately raising tension and spawning international crises.

THE MASTERY OF COMPLEX POLICY STANCES

It can be difficult for new leaders to master complex policies. In the previous example, it could be argued that Truman failed to initially grasp the intricacies of Roosevelt's Grand Design. Another example might be found in the steep learning curve faced by new presidents when it

28. Deborah W. Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

comes to the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity with regard to the defense of Taiwan against aggression from mainland China (PRC).

The current President Bush's misstatement in his first hundred days that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan initially signaled to the Chinese a dramatic change in American policy toward Taiwan. During an interview with Charles Gibson of *Good Morning America* regarding U.S. policy toward China in the aftermath of the 2001 conflict over the U.S. spy plane, the following exchange took place:

GIBSON:	I'm curious, if you, in your own mind, feel that if Taiwan were attacked by China, do we have an obligation to defend the Taiwanese?
BUSH:	Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would.
GIBSON:	With the full force of American military?
BUSH:	Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.

This was apparently a misstatement, as the State Department later corrected it by asserting that U.S. policy toward Taiwan had not changed, although not before some tension was added to the already fraught Chinese/American relationship. Though relatively insignificant, this incident clearly illustrates the learning curve new presidents face when it comes to the mastering nuanced foreign policy positions, and the damage that even very minor errors of inexperience can cause. George W. Bush was caught between appearing "tough on China" to the conservative constituency—toward which he had just geared his campaign and owed his election—and geopolitical realities with which, as the Governor of Texas, he had had little previous experience.

There are, without doubt, additional mechanisms by which experience influences foreign policy aside from the three briefly outlined above. For example, it is possible that foreign leaders test the resolve and strength of new American presidents, resulting in foreign policy crises. It is

equally possible that American presidents spur crises at the beginning of their administrations in order to signal strength to the rest of the world.[29]

Furthermore, the inevitable shifts in policy or ideology that take place between administrations may lead to both confusion on the part of foreign leaders who count on continuity, and to imprudent behavior on the part of American presidents who assume that others recognize that the rules of the game have changed. For example, while our understanding of Saddam Hussein's strategic thinking in the period leading up to the current war is still evolving, it is possible that he failed to recognize the magnitude of the Bush administration's change in policy toward Iraq, assuming instead that the United States would continue with the same policies that it employed in the decade following the first Persian Gulf war.[30]

American presidents tend to view their shifts in policy as being perfectly transparent to other states; however, this is often not the case. It can be difficult, especially for nondemocracies, to separate electoral rhetoric from actual shifts in policy. Furthermore, foreign leaders often lack reliable information about American intentions and are confused by the decisionmaking process. It has been argued that the domestic debates and disagreements, which routinely precede any major decision in a democracy, create "noise" that causes leaders of nations interacting with the democracy to either misjudge the resolve of the eventual decision or fail to recognize that a decision has been made at all.[31] Absent established personal relationships with a new administration, this situation may worsen.

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29. Breslauer, "Do Soviet Leaders Test New Presidents?"
30. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006); and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Spies, Lies, and Weapons: What Went Wrong," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 293, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 2004).
31. Bernard I. Finel and Kristen. M. Lord, "The Surprising Logic of Transparency," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June 1999).

Does Experience Matter?

The issue of interest here is the relationship between an administration's accumulated experience and the stability of the United States' international relationships, as measured by the prevalence of conflict in these relationships. The preceding sections outlined a number of theoretical mechanisms by which experience might influence foreign policy outcomes; the remaining task is to establish empirically whether it does.

For the purpose of this study, experience is operationalized as the time (in years) from the date of the administration's first (and perhaps only) inauguration. This gives a simple measure of experience, and is treated as the primary independent variable. Table 1 shows inauguration dates for each president from 1918–2001. Time in office is an admittedly crude proxy for the more inclusive concept of experience. However one chooses to think about the nature of and ingredients to presidential experience, it can hardly be debated that Dwight Eisenhower came to his first day at work with more experience in foreign policy and military matters than did Bill Clinton. Despite these reservations, the simplification is justified for two primary reasons. First, for the conception of experience laid out in the previous section, the institution of the presidency is at least as responsible for the relationship between experience and conflict as the personal attributes of the man occupying it. Immature presidential management structures, breaks in consistency with past policy, and the loss of personal relationships result from the properties of the executive branch itself, and are largely independent of the amount of prior experience that a new president may bring with him to office. Second, time in office can be feasibly operationalized with little controversy, and this operationalization allows the findings presented here to be compared to those of the piece by Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam. To complete the comparison with the findings in this article, the age of each president is included in

the regression.[32] Finally, a control variable for the length of time until the next election is included to address the validity of the electoral arguments (i.e., the "honeymoon period" argument, the "rally around the flag" argument, and the "electoral constraint" argument.)

Table 1. Presidential Inaugurations and Time in Office

President	**1st Inauguration**	**2nd Inauguration**	**Days of Presidency**
Woodrow Wilson	March 4, 1913	March 4, 1917	2922
Warren Harding	March 4, 1921	-	882
Calvin Coolidge	August 3, 1923	March 4, 1925	2040
Herbert Hoover	March 4, 1929	-	1461
Franklin Roosevelt*	March 4, 1933	January 20, 1937	4422
Harry S. Truman	April 12, 1945	January 20, 1949	2840
Dwight D. Eisenhower	January 20, 1953	January 21, 1957	2922
John F. Kennedy	January 20, 1961	-	1036
Lyndon B. Johnson	November 22, 1963	January 20, 1965	1886
Richard M. Nixon	January 20, 1969	January 20, 1973	2027
Gerald R. Ford	August 9, 1974	-	895
Jimmy Carter	January 20, 1977	-	1461
Ronald Reagan	January 20, 1981	January 21, 1985	2922
George H. W. Bush	January 20, 1989	-	1461
William J. Clinton	January 20, 1993	January 20, 1997	2922
George W. Bush	January 20, 2001	January 20, 2005	-

*Roosevelt served a third and part of a fourth term in office.

32. Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam, "Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations."

It is more complicated and potentially controversial to define and operationalize the dependent variable—international conflict. The neorealist tradition typically equates the frequency and intensity of militarized violence among the major powers—especially between the superpowers in the post World War II era—with system stability (e.g., Gaddis's "long peace" thesis, which focuses exclusively on U.S.-USSR relations).[33] Other authors have operationalized stability by turning to the prevalence of war as a proxy. This approach suffers from the practical limitation that, from the perspective of any individual country, wars do not occur often enough to allow one to draw statistical inferences. Therefore, relying on war as a proxy for international stability is only appropriate for research questions that allow for the aggregation of wars across large numbers of states or significant periods of time. For example, in his investigation of the relationship between electoral cycles and leaders' foreign policy behavior, Gaubatz examined wars over a period of 200 years and across many nations to build a sample capable of producing statistically significant results.[34] The approach taken here follows Gary King and Lyn Ragsdale's advice that those researching the presidency should seek to uncover smaller actions that occur relatively frequently.[35]

In the analysis that follows, I test the relationship between the independent variables—age, experience, and time to election—and the two primary operationalizations of international conflict available to quantitative researchers—"international crisis" (as described by the

33. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 99–142; and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
34. Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War."
35. Gary King and Lyn Ragsdale, *The Elusive Executive: Discovering Statistical Patterns in the Presidency* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1988).

International Crisis Behavior project), and "militarized interstate dispute" (as described by the Correlates of War project).

The International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project specifies two defining conditions for a crisis "(1) a change in type and/or an increase in intensity of disruptive, that is, hostile verbal or physical, interactions between two or more states, with a heightened probability of military hostilities; that, in turn, (2) destabilizes their relationship and challenges the structure of an international system—global, dominant, or subsystem."[36] The ICB dataset is a databank of post World War I crises, and, at present, contains 440 crises from 1945 through 2002. For this project, the dataset has been reduced to crises in which the United States participated as an actor.[37] It does not suffice to look exclusively at crises initiated by the U.S. because inexperience could cut either way; foreign leaders may be tempted to test or bully an inexperienced American president, leading to an international crisis, and inexperienced presidents may blunder into a crisis themselves or needlessly test their boundaries.[38] With this in mind, it should be made absolutely clear that the president does not have the option to avoid all crises, or that the timings of all crises are related to issues of experience. For example, neither the timing nor the initiation of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War or the June 1967 Six-Day War (both included in the dataset) was

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36. Michael Brecher and Hemda Ben-Yehuda, "System and Crisis in International Politics," *Review of International Studies*, No. 11 (1985). For more on the International Crisis Behavior project, see Michael Brecher, *Crises in World Politics: Theory and Reality* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1993); Michael Brecher, "Toward a Theory of International Crisis Behavior: A Preliminary Report," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1977); Michael Brecher and Patrick James, *Crisis and Change in World Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986); Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *Crisis, Conflict, and Instability* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989); Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Patrick James, *Crisis and War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988).
37. See Project Variable 24, "USACTOR," ICB System Level Codebook, available at www.icbnet.org.
38. Directed dyads are not used in this analysis for two reasons. First, the dyadic version of the ICB dataset does not contain this information. See J.J. Hewitt, "Dyadic Processes and International Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (October 2003). Second, in many instances, it can be nearly impossible to confidently identify the initiator of a crisis. Both sides often provoke crises through a back and forth exchange, making the identification of the actual crisis "trigger" somewhat arbitrary. The argument that the particular side initiating a crisis is essentially irrelevant for studies of this type, is supported elsewhere. See, for example, Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War."

the result of actions taken by the United States. It is not a heroic assumption, however, to expect that such events should be equally distributed across the values of the explanatory variables, and, as a result, should not obscure the relationship investigated here. Finally, the scope of this inquiry has been limited to the period from 1918–2001. This is the period of overlapping coverage by the ICB and MID datasets and therefore allows for the cleanest comparison.[39]

Two definitions were developed by the Correlates of War (COW) project in the 1980s, namely, a "militarized interstate dispute" (MID), and a "militarized interstate crisis" (MIC). The former was defined as: "[A] set of interactions between or among states involving threats to use military force, displays of military force, or actual uses of military force... these acts must be explicit, overt, nonaccidental, and government sanctioned."[40] This "evolves into a militarized inter-state crisis when a member of the interstate system on each side of the dispute indicates by its actions its willingness to go to war to defend its interests or to obtain its objectives." These are steps two and three along a four-step ladder of growing belligerence, beginning with an "interstate dispute" and culminating in an "interstate war."[41] The MID dataset contains 2,331 militarized disputes from 1816–2001; however, identical limitations to those applied to the ICB dataset were employed here as well.

Part of the reason that a debate has managed to persist around the seemingly straightforward relationship between experience and conflict is the structure of the data itself. Figure 1 is a frequency distribution of international crises on length of time in office, and it

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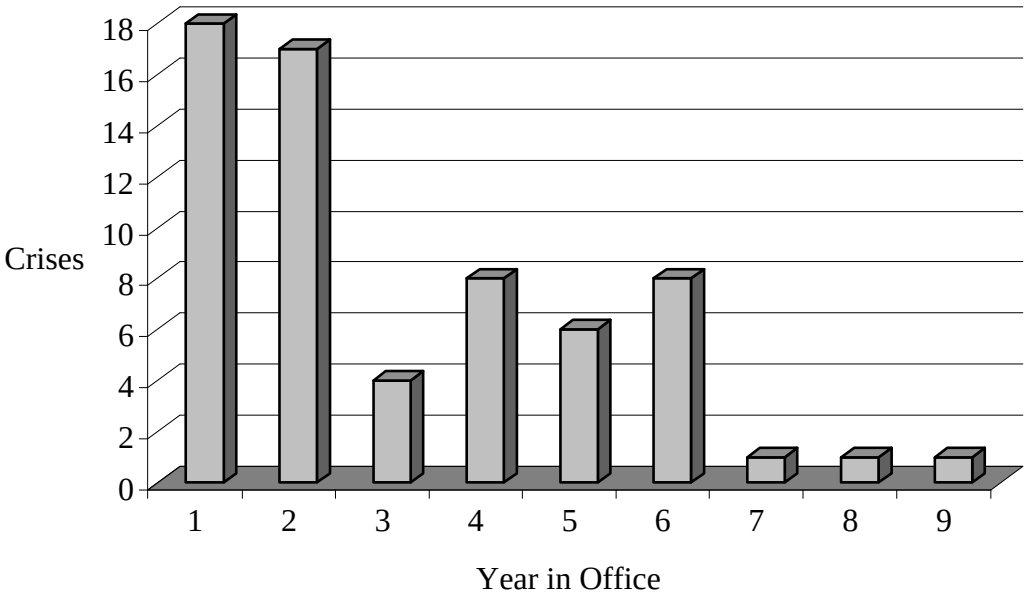
39. Intrawar crises (IWCs), or crises that erupted in the context of an existing war, have been included in this inquiry Brecher and Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*. Some ICB studies exclude these crises on the premise that they are in some sense inevitable and that their timing may be less related to the systemic factors under investigation. In addition, crises occur with considerably greater frequency in the context of ongoing war, leading to the potential for obscuring trends otherwise consistent across war and nonwar periods. The model was tested with and without these crises with very similar results. As a result, IWCs are included in the analysis for the sake of simplicity.
40. Charles S. Gochman and Zeev Maoz, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1976: Procedures, Patterns, and Insights," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 1984), pp. 585–615.
41. Russell J. Leng and J. David Singer, "Militarized International Crises: The BCOW Typology and its Applications," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 155–173.

shows a strong downward trend in the prevalence of crises as time progresses from inauguration; however, most of this result can be attributed to the varying lengths of presidential administrations, as each president did not have equal opportunity to experience a crisis on all the days represented in the figure. For example, Kennedy and Ford were in office less than three years, while Eisenhower, Reagan and Clinton served two full terms, and Roosevelt was the only president to serve more than two terms. Thus, a downward trend would be observed even if crises were perfectly distributed across presidential administrations.

Figure 1 - Crises Per Year in Office



To address this issue, I treat each day in the period of analysis (1918–2001) as an independent observation with either an event (crisis/MID) or nonevent. This produces a dataset of over 30,000 observations with an arrangement that lends itself well to a logistic regression. Some readers may be concerned that the resulting preponderance of nonevents might lead to a

suspicious result. I account for this possibility for by replicating the analysis using the rare events techniques suggested by Gary King among others.[42] The results (which are nearly identical to those presented below) appear in the appendix.

A logistic regression (Table 2) was used to explore the effect of a president's experience (in years), time to next election (in years) and age (in years) and on the likelihood of crisis and MID.

TABLE 2 . Logit Equations for the Impact of Presidential Time in Office, Time to Election, and Age on the Initiation of Crises and Militarized Interstate Disputes

	International Crises		*Militarized Interstate Disputes*	
Time in Office	-0.127**	(0.064)	-0.042	(0.028)
Time to Election	0.022	(0.117)	0.027	(0.058)
Age of President	-0.0033	(0.019)	0.026**	(0.009)
Constant	-5.675***	(1.104)	-6.279***	(0.551)

Crises: Observations 30,686, Wald χ^2 (3) = 5.95, Prob > χ2 = 0.1139, Pseudo R^2 = 0.0067, Log Pseudo Likelihood = -443.635.
MIDs: Observations 30,686, Wald χ^2 (3) = 8.62, Prob > χ2 = 0.035, Pseudo R^2 = 0.0030, Log Pseudo Likelihood = -1413.4819.
*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.025.

In line with expectations, Table 2 indicates that experience has a significant negative influence on the probability of crisis. In contrast, age has a very slight and statistically insignificant positive effect on the likelihood of crisis. Similarly, the coefficients for time to election in both models provide no support for a relationship between the electoral cycle and the likelihood of crisis or MID, thereby discounting the honeymoon, rally, and electoral constraint arguments.

42. Gary King and Lanche Zeng, "Logistic Regression in Rare Events Data," Research Paper No. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Burden of Disease Unit, December 2000), Relogit: Rare Events Logistic Regression Ver. 1.1.

Of particular interest is the statistically significant finding for the effect of age on the likelihood of MIDs, combined with the lack of statistical significance and low coefficient for experience in this model. Overall, the findings on MIDs replicate the coefficients found by Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam, who argue that "increasing leader age in democracies increases the relative risk propensity for conflict initiation."[43]

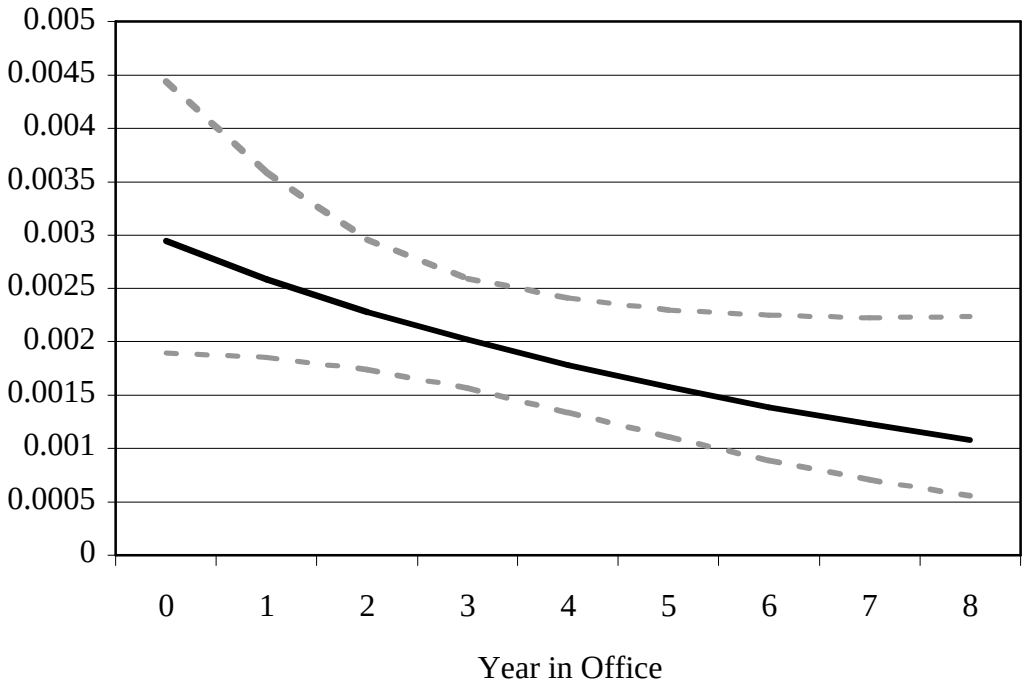
It appears that the validity of arguments about age and experience is highly sensitive to the choice of the dependent variable. The results in Table 2 support the position taken here that the likelihood of crisis is a better measure of the effect of experience than the likelihood of militarized interstate dispute. It also confirms, however, Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam's, choice of dependent variable (MID) in their exploration of the relationship between leader age and militarized conflict. Why might this be? It is likely that the lower-level, nonviolent, nonmilitarized, incidents that are captured by the ICB dataset—but not by the COW dataset —are precisely the ones most determined by inexperience. In addition, there is some distinction between crises and MIDs in the degree to which these incidents would be better characterized as intentional and strategic, or as a loss of control. The key attribute of a MID—that is, that it is militarized—is an attribute that could be driven by the biological forces dictating aggressiveness described by Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam. Furthermore, it is a definitional requirement of a MID that it be "nonaccidental." In contrast, the key attribute of an international crisis, that it destabilizes, represents a better approximation of the sort of diplomatic breakdown that would accompany the previously described mechanisms of inexperience. Thus, crisis is a more theoretically sound measure of the effect of experience, while MID is the theoretically superior measure of the influence of age—and this distinction is captured in the empirical findings. The

43. Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam, "Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations."

key insight is that the particular operationalization of conflict chosen to test a hypothesis must be driven by something more than convenience, familiarity, or preference.

The relationship between experience and crisis can be better observed in Figure 2, which shows the daily probability of crisis as presidents gain experience, with age and time to election fixed at the mean values.[44]

Figure 2 - Daily Probability of Crisis Over a Two-Term Presidency with .95 Confidence Interval



While the actual probability of a crisis occurring on any given day is quite small (as is to be expected of rare events), the substantial decline in the probability of crisis over a hypothetical

44. I used the CLARIFY software package to derive the daily probability of crisis by Monte Carlo simulation, while holding age and time to election constant at the mean. Gary King, Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg, "Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2000), Clarify: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results Ver. 2.0, Cambridge, MA. The outside curves in Figure 2 are the borders of the .95 confidence interval. The almost linear curves in Figure 2 are the result of a very lazy logistic curve.

eight-year presidency provides support for the hypothesized relationship between experience and crisis. Put in more concrete terms, the probability of an international crisis involving the United States has declined by 25 percent by the first midterm election, decreases by approximately 50 percent by the end of the first four year term, and by 66 percent by the end of a two-term presidency—a pronounced and substantively important decline.

To determine whether the decline in the likelihood of crisis is continuous or concentrated, I repeated the regression with dummy variables for the year in office. The results closely replicate the findings in Table 2, implying a relatively continuous decline in the probability over the entire time in office. Interestingly, this contrasts Richard Neustadt's expectation in his chapter on the hazards of presidential transitions that the transitional period "stretches on until about the time, two years after election, when the 'new' administration has experienced both sessions of a Congress, along with friends and adversaries overseas, and begins to see the shape of the events, hence commitments, that will dominate the presidential term."[45]

Taken in conjunction with the small and statistically insignificant coefficient for time to election, the negative slope of the curve in Figure 2 also discredits the notion that presidents systematically use the "rally round the flag" effect to boost their electoral prospects. This is not to say that no president has ever used the "rally round the flag" effect to influence an election, but rather that these tactics are not used systematically. Furthermore, there seems to be no support for a "honeymoon period" at the beginning of administrations, as this is precisely the period of highest crisis involvement.

Replacing the time to election variable with a dichotomous variable for term allows one to both describe the magnitude of the decline in an intuitive and interesting way and to directly address the electoral constraint argument.

45. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 240

TABLE 3. Logit Equation for the Impact of Presidential Time in Office, Term, and Age on the Initiation of Crises and Militarized Interstate Disputes

	International Crises	
Time in Office	-0.2363**	(0.1201)
Term	-0.4579*	(0.2473)
Age of President	-0.0024	(0.0180)
Constant	-5.0191***	(1.0339)

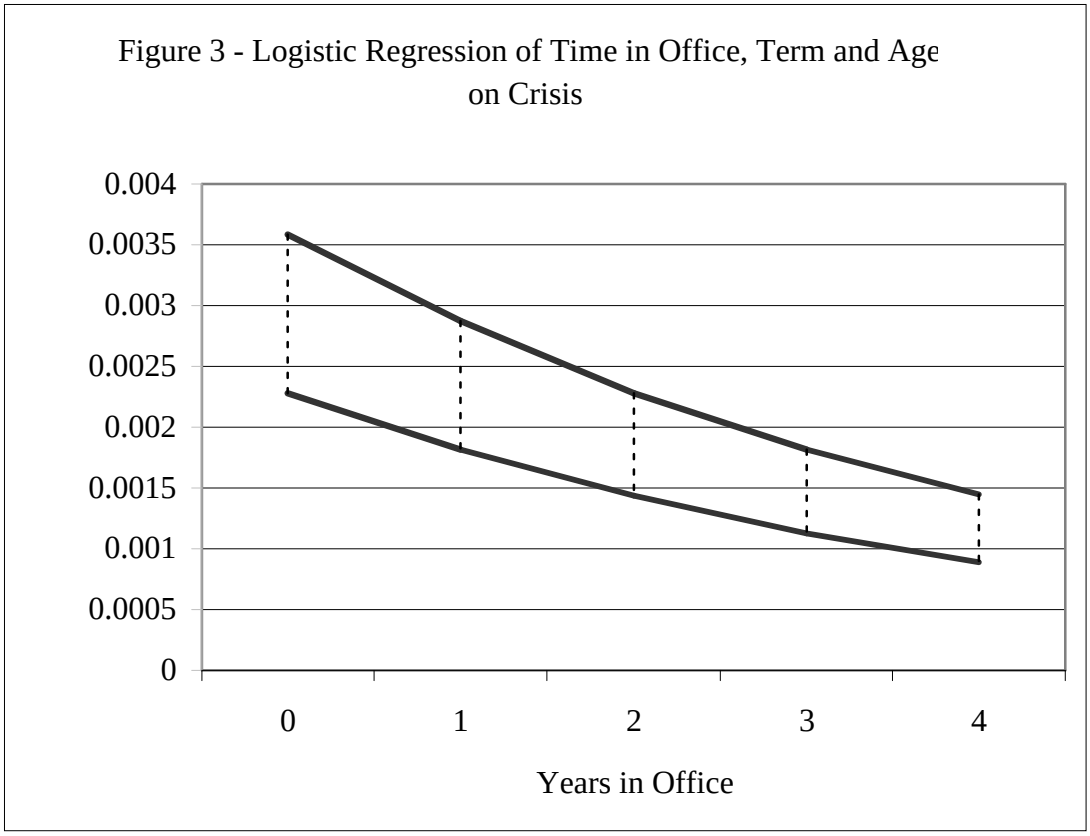
Crises: Observations 30,686. Wald χ^2 (3) = 8.83.

Prob. > χ^2 = 0.0316. Pseudo R^2 = 0.0099.

Log Pseudo Likelihood = -442.1957.

*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.025.

The dichotomous term variable allows for a shift in the intercept (resulting in the two curves in Figure 3). If the second term of a president's time in office were simply a mirror of the first (as the electoral argument would suggest), then the two lines in Figure 3 should be quite close together; however, this is not the case.



The substantial gap between the two lines in Figure 3 indicates that more is at work here than an electoral effect. The size of this gap (and its substantive importance) can be accounted for by taking the integral of the first line from 1 to 1461 (the duration, in days, of a single presidential term) and subtracting the integral over the same interval of the second curve. The integral of each curve is the area under that curve, and thus the subtraction produces the area of the space between the curves.

$$function: f(x) = \frac{1}{1+e^x}$$

$$area\ between\ curves: \int_1^{1461} f(x_{1st\ term})dx - \int_1^{1461} f(x_{2nd\ term})dx$$

$$3.675 - 2.313 = 1.362$$

This result of approximately 1.4 has a concrete and intuitive interpretation. The area under a probability distribution represents the number of expected crises in that interval, meaning that the area approximates the number of crises that a typical two term president avoids in the second term that cannot be explained by an electoral cycle argument and are attributed here to the benefits of experience. Given that crises are rare, significant and destabilizing events, the absence of 1.4 crises from a hypothetical four year period is a phenomenon that is significantly influencing United States foreign policy and one that is worthy of further attention.

Conclusion

International crises are not evenly distributed across the terms of presidential administrations. The concentration of foreign policy power in the executive branch, combined with the loss of accumulated experience that results from the periodic turnover in that branch, produces instability. In addition, the cyclical nature of instability cannot be attributed to the electoral cycle itself because, empirically speaking, there is a distinction between the behavior of new presidents and those who win a second term in office. I have argued here that this empirical observation is best explained by the inexperience of new presidents, the learning process that takes place throughout an administration, and the maturation of presidential management structures.

The contrasting findings generated by the International Crisis Behavior project crisis data and Correlates of War MID data suggest that there are important practical distinctions between these operationalizations of conflict that have gone unnoted and unappreciated. Most existing work has tested hypotheses against one or another of these datasets without a theoretical justification for doing so, or a robustness check against the alternative operationalization. While

the scope of this analysis has been intentionally limited to the United States in the hope of both rendering it more relevant to foreign policy and beginning the process of uncovering microfoundational mechanisms, future work would benefit from a system-level exploration of the relationships between experience, age, and electoral cycle and international crisis. Even this preliminary analysis should, however, give pause to anyone loyal to a particular operationalization of conflict regardless of the question at hand, as it strongly suggests that the choice between crisis and MID can significantly influence findings, and as a result should be driven by theory rather than preference or familiarity.

Appendix

Rare Events

Other studies have demonstrated that dichotomous data where the preponderance of observations is null may result in biased results and inflated levels of statistical confidence.[46] This is particularly problematic in instances where the null data contains no real information. Theoretically, this should not be an issue in this analysis where the null observations are days on which no crisis/MID took place for two reasons. First, there is no selection effect because we are not sampling, but rather have the full population of days. Second, there are enough positive observations to justify the asymptotic assumptions required for the analysis.

As an added measure of insurance the rare events corrections suggested by Tomz, King, and Zeng were used to generate appendix Table 1.[47] The findings are remarkably similar to those in Table 2 above, supporting the nonuse of the rare events correction. Further support for nonuse is found if 1,000 null events are randomly selected and deleted.

APPENDIX TABLE 1. Logit Equations for the Impact of Presidential Time in Office, Time to Election, and Ag on the Initiation of Crises - Includes Rare Events Correction and 1000 Zeros Randomly Removed

	International Crises		*Rare Events Correction*		*1000 Zeros Randomly Sampled and Excluded*	
Time in Office	-0.1274**	(0.0636)	-0.1214*	(0.0624)	-0.1278**	(0.0637)
Time to Election	0.0223	(0.1169)	0.0253	(0.1210)	0.0220	(0.1169)
Age of President	-0.0033	(0.0186)	0.0031	(0.0197)	-0.0031	(0.0186)
Constant	-5.6747***	(1.1043)	-5.6784***	(1.1646)	-5.6479***	(1.1050)

*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.025.

46. Gary King and Lanche C. Zeng, "Explaining Rare Events in International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (September 2001); and Gary King and Langche C. Zeng, "Logistic Regression in Rare Events Data."
47. Relogit: Rare Events Logistic Regression.

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