



Diverting the Legislature: Executive– Legislative Relations, the Economy, and US Uses of Force¹

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Given distinct partisan macroeconomic preferences, the partisanship of the president or majority in Congress should influence presidential decisions to use force in the face of poor economic conditions—the diversionary use of force. But previous research posits contradictory accounts of the influence of partisanship. We seek to resolve this debate by developing a game theory model, which predicts that leaders divert when government is divided and economic conditions hurt the opposition party’s constituency. Leaders seek to divert the legislature from the economy in order to prevent the legislature from passing a remedial economic bill. Analyzing US conflict behavior since World War II, we examine the conditional influence of presidential partisanship and the president’s cohesive partisan support in Congress on the effects of inflation and unemployment. Consistent with the model’s predictions, we find that as their cohesive partisan support in Congress declines, Democratic presidents tend to use force in response to inflation and Republican presidents tend to use force in response to unemployment.
