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

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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.

Does partisanship influence presidential decisions to use force in response to a poor domestic economy—the diversionary use of force? Given partisan macroeconomic preferences (for example, Hibbs 1987) and presidential incentives to use force in the face of economic misery (for example, Ostrom and Job 1986), the absence of a partisan influence would be surprising. Consider the following example: Faced with above-average unemployment and a ballooning budget deficit, the 98th Congress (1983) adjourned its first session without passing significant economic legislation. Instead, the Congress seemed preoccupied with foreign affairs—debating the presence of US troops in Lebanon and Grenada, and considering aid levels for anti-communist campaigns in Central America. Although a proposal by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives to increase taxes appeared to be forthcoming, no such proposal to reverse (Republican) President Reagan’s tax cuts was considered (Gerstel 1983).

The example from 1983 is suggestive of partisan incentives to use force—if the opposition is expected to pursue legislation that threatens the president’s partisan constituencies; the president has incentives to use force to preoccupy the opposition. The literature on diversionary uses of force is not silent on this point; several studies indicate that partisanship matters. However, this literature

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1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the North American meeting of the Peace Science Society (International) in Columbia, SC, November 2–4, 2007. Replication files are available at http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/isq.