War Outcomes and Leader Tenure

By Sarah E. Croco and Jessica L. P. Weeks

A growing body of literature argues that war outcomes affect leaders’ tenure in office. But disagreement persists over how domestic political institutions translate performance in war into leader accountability. Some scholars argue that the tenure of democratic leaders is most sensitive to war outcomes, while others posit that autocratic leaders are more likely to be punished or rewarded for the outcomes of conflicts. The authors argue that existing research fails to take into account two important factors: whether the leader is viewed as *culpable* for the country’s entry into the conflict, and whether the country features domestic institutions that make the leader *vulnerable* to removal from office, which varies greatly across nondemocracies. After taking leaders’ culpability and vulnerability into account, the authors show that the tenures of culpable, democratic leaders and culpable, vulnerable, nondemocratic leaders are sensitive to war outcomes. By contrast, the tenures of nondemocratic leaders who are less vulnerable to removal are not sensitive to war outcomes, regardless of their culpability.

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