

# Move First to Avoid the Worst: Leadership Turnover and the Targeting of New Leaders

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**Abstract:** Are leaders more likely to face militarized challenges earlier in their tenure? Existing studies posit contradictory hypotheses: new leaders can both invite challengers to take advantage of their inexperience, and deter challengers by their strong incentive to establish a reputation for resolve. This paper seeks to reconcile these competing propositions by developing an argument that centers on the direction of foreign policy preference change associated with leadership turnover. I argue that foreign adversaries are likely to challenge a new leader in their rival state only when the newcomer is perceived to be more hawkish than the predecessor. The perception of a heightened risk of conflict accompanied with the emergence of a more hawkish leader in the rival state gives foreign adversaries stronger incentive to seek for an early confrontation in which they can (re)demonstrate their own position to the new hawk. In contrast, when the newcomer is perceived to be more dovish than the predecessor, optimistic expectations of future interactions tend to restrain foreign adversaries from provoking the new dove whose reputation concern is high. A series of statistical analyses on post-WWII dyadic-rivalries with democratically elected leaders on the target side yield strong evidence that supports this conditional hypothesis.

**Key Words:** Leadership Turnover, Crisis Initiation, International Security

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**Data Availability:** The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>. Supplementary material for this article is available in an online appendix.

## Introduction

On October 19, 2008, Joe Biden reportedly told a group of campaign contributors at the Seattle Sheraton Hotel: “Mark my words. It will not be six months before the world tests Barack Obama like they did John Kennedy...we’re going to have an international crisis, a generated crisis, to test the mettle of this guy” (Abramowitz 2008). Although Biden sought to rally support for the young Democrat candidate, his words were turned against Obama by the Republicans — “it doesn’t have to happen, Vote McCain” says the Republican campaign ad (Lane 2008). The Obama team then quickly fired back, claiming that those potential challengers “are going to find this guy’s got steel in his spine” (Smith 2008).

This episode of the 2008 presidential campaign mirrors two conflicting propositions in the literature on leadership turnover and international crisis. On one hand, it seems intuitive, as Biden warns, that relatively inexperienced new leaders are likely to be perceived as weak targets, and therefore attract challenges from foreign adversaries (Gelpi and Grieco 2001). On the other hand, research that focuses on leaders’ reputation-building incentives suggests, as Obama’s team claims, that new leaders not only have strong incentives to stand firm against challenges, but they may even welcome crises (as opportunities) to build a reputation for resolve that will stave off future troubles (Wolford 2007; Lupton 2018; Wu and Wolford 2018; Wu, Licht, and Wolford 2021). In other words, new leaders could (or should) be unattractive targets as they will predictably resist and potentially escalate any brinkmanship into an unexpected conflict.

How can we weigh these competing tendencies to better understand the pattern of dispute initiation against new leaders? If new leaders can both encourage a potential challenger to take advantage of their inexperience and deter a potential challenger by their strong incentives to establish a reputation for resolve, then we lack an equilibrium. This study attempts to fill this gap.

The central argument of this paper is that this lack of consensus results from an important missing variable: the preference change associated with leadership turnover. Changes

from dovish to hawkish leaders (or the reverse) lead foreign adversaries to form different expectations about the future strategic environment and, by extension, different assessment of the benefits and costs of an early confrontation.

Specifically, I argue that when the new leader in a rival state is perceived to be more hawkish than her predecessor, a pessimistic expectation about the future strategic environment characterized by a heightened risk of conflicts is likely to arise. Such pessimism is rooted in the fear that this new hawk may have stronger incentive to revise the status quo that used to be acceptable to the dovish predecessor. Driven by this fear, adversaries are more willing to forcefully confront the new hawk early, which is seen as a necessary costly signal that (re)demonstrates their own positions to the relatively less informed newcomer. In contrast, when a dove replaces a hawk in the rival state, fears about severe deterioration of the strategic environment is unlikely to arise. Instead, optimism about future interactions tends to restrain the foreign adversary from provoking, or embarrassing, a new dove whose reputation concern is high at the onset of his or her tenure.

Statistical analysis of democratic leadership turnover in countries that have at least one foreign rival during the post-WWII period yields strong evidence that supports this conditional hypothesis. Relying primarily on the left-right spectrum of political ideology as an operationalization of the hawkishness of leader's policy preference, this paper finds that only leaders who are more right-leaning than their predecessor tend to face early challenges, while there is no significant variation in the probability of being challenged over one's tenure for leaders who do not experience party change and for leaders who are more left-leaning than their predecessor. The pattern is robust against using different samples, model specifications, and alternative measures of preference change.

This simple innovation—bring the direction of preference change back into equation—allows this paper to make a major contribution to the research program on leadership turnover and international crisis. It offers a theoretically and empirically compelling explanation for why we previously did not have a consensus on whether new leaders are more

“trouble-attractive”. That is, when new leaders are incorrectly treated as a homogeneous group, the resulting theoretical expectations are overgeneralized and empirical models are underspecified. The right question that we should be asking is: what types of new leaders are more trouble-attractive?

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I first discuss the extant research on leadership turnover and international conflicts, highlighting the unsolved puzzle about targeting of new leaders. I then detail the theoretical logic underlying the argument that the direction of preference change matters in influencing the potential challenger’s calculation. The fourth section discusses the research design, which is followed by key findings, robustness checks, and a brief discussion of alternative explanations. I conclude by summarizing key findings and discussing directions for future research.

## **Leadership Turnover and International Conflicts**

In a recent review essay, Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018) argue that leader-centric approaches have regained momentum in the international relations scholarship. Much of this new wave of leader-centric research seeks to understand how leaders’ conflict participation behavior varies over their tenure, and pays special attention to the consequences of leadership turnover.<sup>1</sup>

### **Weak new leaders**

One line of research attributes the disturbing nature of leadership turnover to the attractiveness of new leaders as targets. These works suggest that relatively inexperienced new leaders are likely to be perceived as weaker than their longer-serving counterparts. For example, Gelpi and Grieco (2001, 795) argue that “domestic political incentives may make resistance costly relative to concession for inexperienced leaders”, and find that the length of time leaders have been in office is negatively related to their probability of being targeted

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1. Earlier works that are more skeptical of the state-centric approach tend to focus on how individuals’ cognitive limitations and misperceptions shape their decision-making (Jervis 1976; Lebow 1981).

in international crises. Potter (2007) reveals a similar pattern in the case of U.S. presidential turnovers, which is partially attributed to the weak management structures of new administrations.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that new leaders are weak is also supported by findings that show leaders are more likely to initiate crisis as their time in office increases (Chiozza and Goemans 2003; DiLorenzo, McBride, and Ray 2016; Bak 2020). According to political survival logic, leaders may face higher risks of office removal earlier in their tenure, which discourages them from using military force (De Mesquita and Siverson 1995).

These findings, however, encounter empirical challenges from other studies. For example, while Chiozza and Goemans (2004) find that the time a leader has been in office reduces her probability of becoming a target of international crises, the effect is only statistically significant at 10% level. Bak and Palmer (2010, 266) find the tenure effect is at best conditional: “target leader’s length of time in office has positive effects on the likelihood of being a target for younger leaders but no or negative effects for older leaders.” Besides, both challenger tenure and target tenure have also been included as control variables in several studies, but neither of them appears to be a significant predictor of MID initiation (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005; DiLorenzo, McBride, and Ray 2016).

### **Tough new leaders**

Perhaps more problematic to the weakness-based arguments is that there has been little systematic evidence that new leaders are more likely to make concessions when challenged. On the contrary, anecdotal stories such as Kennedy’s determined rejection to Khrushchev’s ultimatum during the 1961 Vienna Summit indicate that new leaders might be even tougher than their more seasoned counterparts (Wolford 2007).

According to reputation-building logic, these resolute resistances, and in some cases

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2. It is worth noting that Potter (2007) does not differentiate between initiator and target in his statistical models. It is therefore unclear whether inexperience makes new US presidents attract more troubles or create more troubles.

overreactions, tend to be the norm rather than exception (Nalebuff 1991; Chiozza and Choi 2003; Sechser 2010; Lupton 2018, 2020). Wolford (2007) is the first to incorporate leaders' reputation incentive into the dynamic of leadership turnover. He argues that leadership turnover exacerbates informational asymmetry as new leaders hold more private information. The informational asymmetry then incentivizes the challenger to test the type of the newcomer and provides the new leader with a chance to form a reputation for resolve early on. These two forces together result in a higher probability of bargaining failure earlier in a leader's tenure.

Consistent with this proposition, a new wave of empirical studies find that MIDs involving new leaders are significantly more likely to escalate (Wu and Wolford 2018; Wu, Licht, and Wolford 2021) and tend to last longer (Dafoe 2012; Smith and Spaniel 2019). Lab experimental results also suggest that new leaders with longer time horizons should be more willing to pay the short-term costs in exchange for potential longer-term (reputational) benefits (Kertzer 2016).

Nevertheless, although these works have greatly advanced our understanding of why bargaining is more likely to collapse and crises are more likely to escalate in the period shortly after leadership turnover, they are not well positioned to address the *onset* of the dispute. The analytical focus is largely on behaviors once crises are already under way. This framework then begs the question: why does the challenger want to provide the target with a chance to demonstrate resolve? In fact, through detailed investigations of eight U.S. presidential transitions since 1953, Breslauer (1983) finds very little support for the proposition that Soviet leaders tend to test new US presidents. Miura and Weiss (2016) also find that Chinese leaders usually opt for a "wait-and-see" approach when the uncertainty about their new foreign counterpart's policy is high.

In sum, we still lack a clear understanding of whether and why leaders are more likely to be targeted earlier in their tenure. On one hand, while it seems intuitive that relatively inexperienced new leaders are likely to be perceived as weaker and invite challenges, empirical

evidence is at best mixed. On the other hand, although empirical support for the reputation-building proposition is more robust, it is better positioned to address the escalation rather than the onset of crisis.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

I argue that this lack of consensus results from overlooking an important dimension of leadership turnover: the direction of preference change. This preference change, namely from dovish to hawkish (or the reverse), generates different expectations of the future strategic environment for an adversary. When the shadow of future features a heightened risk of conflict, foreign adversaries will be more incentivized to confront the new hawk early, seeking to move first to avoid the worst by (re)demonstrating their position to the relatively less informed new hawk.

### **Preference change and its observability**

This argument is built on two assumptions: (1) leadership turnover can sometimes lead to foreign policy preference change, and (2) such a change is observable under certain conditions.

The first assumption can be somewhat justified by research that shows the existence of partisan foreign policy across a variety of contexts. For example, Quandt (1986, 829) finds that a nonpartisan foreign policy might exist in the U.S. during early years of Cold War, but it is certainly no longer the case since mid-1960s and the trauma of Vietnam. More recently, Myrick (2019) demonstrates that even heightened foreign threat can hardly create partisan unity in American foreign policy today. Beyond the U.S. case, Narizny (2007, 28) finds that “partisan coalitions tend to choose leaders whose policy positions correspond to their aggregated interests”, which leads to persistent differences in foreign policy orientations of parties from election to election. Solingen (2009) finds that economic interests and ideological orientations of partisan coalitions influence nuclear policy. More generally, Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll (2015) have shown that shifts in the party in power significantly correlate with

changes in foreign policy positions of nations manifested in their UN voting patterns. And perhaps what matters more is not the *de facto* change, but foreign adversaries' perception of the potential change. For instance, the then U.S. President Obama set out his last foreign trip shortly after the election of Trump only seeking to reassure the world that America's foreign policy wouldn't change much (Dovere 2016).

The preference change, if any, is then most likely to be observed during democratic leadership transitions.<sup>3</sup> The relatively transparent and competitive nature of democratic system can make "competing political leaders and their supporters use a foreign policy position to differentiate themselves from opponents" during elections (Hermann 1990, 7).

More importantly, although campaign rhetoric is usually considered "cheap", they are not uninformative. This is particularly true when the tone is hostile as any threat or non-cooperative gesture may incur the risk of "a breach in relations" by "altering other states' perceptions of their intentions" (Trager 2010, 347).<sup>4</sup> Recent research also shows that leaders usually find themselves constrained by their campaign statements as "they worry that abandoning past promises will diminish their credibility" (Miura and Weiss 2016, 10). In the case of the U.S., "these first definitions of a president's position, often taken in the midst of the campaign, are typically of considerable importance in setting the administration's initial course" (Quandt 1986, 830).

In sum, the preference change associated with leadership turnover (or at least the perceived change) stands as a meaningful source of variation that has been underexplored.

### **The direction of preference change and foreign adversaries' reaction**

How then might this preference change affect the potential challenger's calculation? I argue that different directions of preference change in a state can give adversaries different expect-

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3. The opaque nature of autocratic politics usually cannot reveal much information about the new leader's policy preference until the newcomer consolidate his position. The sharp contrast between China's more authoritarian turn later and the hot discussion of a potential "neo-liberal Xi administration" before he took office provides one such example (Kroeber 2013).

4. Whether or not a candidate is willing to accept such a risk then becomes a valuable piece of information for foreign adversaries.



tations of the future strategic environment. By extension, they assess the costs and benefits of an early confrontation with the new leader differently.

When the office of a state is passed to a more hawkish successor, foreign adversaries could reasonably fear that this newcomer might be dissatisfied with the status quo reached by his or her more dovish predecessor and seek to revise it. For example, when Israel's leading security hawk Ariel Sharon replaced his more dovish predecessor Ehud Barak in 2001, a senior Palestinian official Nabil Sha'ath voiced that "there is an anxiety among Palestinian people and Palestinian leadership" (CNN 2001). The then Syrian foreign minister Faruq al-Shara concluded more straightforwardly that "this proves that Israel does not want peace."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "newsworthy" prioritized by the press can result in an overemphasis of aggressive and extremist views and downplay moderate gestures in international communications (Finel and Lord 1999), exacerbating the foreign adversary's fear.

Driven by this fear, foreign adversaries tend to see an early confrontation with the new hawk as a necessary costly signal that (re)demonstrates their own positions. Existing research has been primarily focused on the extent to which newcomers hold more private information (Wolford 2007), but overlooked the other side of the same coin—newcomers may also know relatively little about their foreign counterparts and the practice of complex interstate relations. Yet from Kennedy's mishandling of the Bay of Pig to George W. Bush's misstatement of the US policy position on Taiwan, the initial weak management and lack of knowledge of complex policies have repeatedly proven to be dangerous (Potter 2007). Foreign adversaries therefore have incentive to caution the relatively less informed new hawk against being recklessly aggressive by initiating disputes early.<sup>6</sup> In other words, "a potential defender may actually be the first one to act as a challenger...for [challenger's own] reputation-building purposes" (Clare and Danilovic 2012, 8), especially when there is a heightened risk of future

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5. For a sample of mixed Arab reactions to Sharon's victory in 2001, see Policy Watch #517 (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy 2001).

6. Wiegand (2011) also finds that states involved in territorial disputes are likely to use MID initiation as a way to signal resolve or transfer reputation.

conflict.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, the new leader’s anticipated stronger incentive to resist may not necessarily discourage the challenger under this scenario. On one hand, the challenger might also welcome the potential escalation as an opportunity to reveal more of their own private information to the newcomer. On the other hand, when the risk of conflicts is perceived high, challengers might prefer an early rather later escalation in which they will face a more established hawk. In other words, a potentially more rapid shift in bargaining power against the challenger (due to the new leader’s gaining of experience) when a hawk is in office makes escalation concerns less constraining.<sup>8</sup>

In light of the election of Ronald Reagan who campaigned with a more hawkish tone towards Beijing, Deng Xiaoping once famously commented that “to deal with the US, we must not fear going backward [a deterioration in relationship]...if we do not adopt a hard-line policy now then troubles will emerge in an endless stream in the future” (Wang, Sun, and Liang 2017), which provides a direct illustration of this logic. Admittedly, taking a more hard-line position does not necessarily mean seeking to change the status quo or demanding concessions from a new leader. However, many costly actions taken to strengthen one’s position such as troop mobilization, military exercises, weapon testing, or open verbal threat can usually trigger a *de facto* dispute.

For instance, in 2001, shortly after the inauguration of George W. Bush who promised to revise his predecessor’s policy and treat China as a strategic competitor, China’s handling of US reconnaissance missions became consistently more aggressive (Kates 2001), which eventually caused the mid-air collision between a Chinese J-8 fighter jet and the U.S. spy

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7. It is a widely established feature that a signaler tends to invest more in demonstrating resolve when the opponent is more hawkish (Fearon 1997; Slantchev 2005).

8. Fearon (2018) formalizes how the commitment problem can lead states opt for preemptive attacks when arming to deter is costlier than eliminating the threat. However, the empirical salience of the role of preemption in international conflicts is subject to debate (see, for example, Reiter (1995)). In this paper, we treat this preemptive incentive as a facilitating rather than propelling causal force in dispute initiations. In other words, it might not be the primary driver of challenges against new hawks, but does alleviate challengers’ concerns about escalation.

plan and the detainment of twenty four US crew members.<sup>9</sup> More recently, the sharp increase in both frequency and scale of Chinese military planes flying over and around Taiwan shortly after the election of the pro-independence Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 are also interpreted as efforts to reemphasize “one of the brightest red lines that define China’s core interests” (A. Goldstein 2020, 191). This pattern can also be observed in other rival relationships. In 1996, shortly after Hashimoto (Liberal Democratic) replaced Murayama (Socialist) as the Japanese Prime Minister, South Korea announced that it would conduct previously canceled military exercises near the disputed islands between two countries, which, according to ROK’s official news agency, was a reaction to the “inauguration in Japan of a government led by a rightist leader” (Jordan and Sullivan 1996).<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, if the leadership turnover in a state brings in a new leader who is perceived to be more dovish than the predecessor, optimistic expectations of the future strategic environment—one that is characterized by potentially more negotiation and cooperation—can restrain the foreign adversary from provoking the newcomer whose reputation concern is at the highest. Although it is usually believed that hawks enjoy some advantage in clearing domestic barriers to cooperating with adversaries (Schultz 2005; Mattes and Weeks 2019), several studies have demonstrated that foreign opponents clearly prefer to deal with more dovish counterparts in the long run. For example, Clare (2014, 1315) finds that incentive to “avoid a tougher opponent in the future” makes foreign adversaries more willing to reciprocate cooperative moves from dovish leaders. Wolford (2012) also demonstrates that adversaries has incentives to bolster the dove’s stay in office by granting otherwise unnecessary concessions when the dove is likely to be replaced by a hawk. In short, the opportunity costs of an early confrontation under this scenario—disrupting a potentially benign strategic environment—outweighs the benefits of exploiting the newcomer’s inexperience.

The recent warming relationship between China and Australia after Anthony Albanese and his Labor Party ended nine years of conservative government in Canberra in 2022 seems

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9. This incident is recorded as MID#4280 in MIDv5.0.

10. ROK’s naval exercises triggered MID#4126 recorded in MIDv5.0.

to follow this pattern. In their first meeting in nearly three years, Chinese Foreign Minister reportedly told his Australian counterpart that “China values the fact that the new Australian government has reaffirmed its commitment to the positioning of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries” and that “China is ready to re-examine, re-calibrate, and reinvigorate bilateral ties” (PRC Ministry of Affairs [2022](#)).

In sum, forward-looking actors must calculate not only the immediate gain and loss but also the longer-term consequences of their actions, especially when the new leader carries a longer shadow of future. The direction of preference change, however, can paint the future in different “colors”. While a brighter prospect of future cooperation tends to impose more constraints on the potential challenger today, fear of conflicts may push the challenger to move first to avoid the worst. These tendencies have clear translations into the following hypothesis:

*H1: Leaders are more likely to be challenged earlier in their tenure only when they are perceived to be more hawkish than their predecessors.*

Admittedly, the election of a hawk or a dove is nonrandom. A reasonable counter argument is that the pessimism about future can be mutual, leading to the election of a hawk in the first place. There are two reasons why this potential endogeneity challenge may not fully reject the above hypothesis. First, most existing research shows that voters do not pay much attention to foreign policy issues (Page and Shapiro [2010](#); Saunders [2016](#)). In the case of the United States, earlier polls show that an overwhelming majority of voters considered economy as the most important issue in presidential elections, while only about 5% of the voters care about candidates’ foreign policy views (Drezner [2012](#)). Second, this study seeks to understand the timing rather than the mere occurrence of crises. Thus, even if the mutual pessimism (anticipating a crisis) does lead to the election of a new hawk, that would not entirely undermine the logic that foreign adversaries may have incentive to confront this new hawk early on. In fact, this may reinforce the potential challenger’s fear

that the election of a new hawk manifests the rival state’s preference for a tougher stance, further incentivizing the challenger to move first.

## Research Design

### Data Structure and Sample Selection

To test this hypothesis, following Bak and Palmer (2010), I construct a directed-leader-dyad-period dataset that covers the 1945-2014 period. Each observation consists of a directed dyad between a challenger leader and a targeted leader in a given period, or at maximum one year. The word “period” is used to capture situations where multiple leader-dyads are present in a given year after leadership turnover.

Target side leaders are those who came into power in or after 1945 in countries covered by the Manifesto Project Dataset (MPD) (Volkens et al. 2018), which are “mostly democracies in OECD and Central and Eastern European countries.” This sample of potential targets is chosen for two main reasons. First, as discussed earlier, the direction of preference change is most likely to be observed during relatively transparent democratic elections.<sup>11</sup> Second, these countries are generally stable regimes that have smooth and peaceful leadership transitions, which allows us to isolate the effect of leadership turnover from other possibly confounding scenarios that can affect the risk of interstate conflicts such as revolutions or coups.<sup>12</sup>

For leaders that could appear on the challenger side, I focus on those who are considered the targeted states’ rivals to avoid aggregation bias (Wu and Wolford 2018). I rely

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11. Several country-years on the target side in the sample are identified by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) as autocracies, which are dropped from analysis. These observations include Russia under Putin, Azerbaijan under Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev, Armenia under Kocharyan and Sarkisyan, Albania under Alia, Bulgaria under Lukanov, and Georgia under Shevardnadze.

12. For the same reason, I further drop several leaders within this sample who either serve as the first leader of a new regime or who came into power through military coups, including Konrad Adenauer who served as the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1963, Ben-Gurion’s first Prime Ministership from 1948 to 1954, and four Turkish Prime Ministers whose entry into the office is coded as Irregular by the Archigos dataset, including Cemal Gursel in 1960, Nihat Erim in 1971, Kenan Evren in 1980, and Mesut Yilmaz in 1997.

on the Peace Data v2.01 (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021) to identify rival-dyads, which defines and codes rivalry relationship as states between which “the sentiments of threat, enmity and competition that remain—along with the persistence of unresolved issues”. (6).

### **Dependent variable**

The binary dependent variable is coded 1 if there is a militarized interstate dispute (MID) between two leaders in a given period. I use the most recently updated MID v5.0 dataset to identify these incidents (Palmer et al. 2020). I use the beginning date of a MID to strictly identify disputes between two specific leaders. Ongoing conflicts are not coded as challenges. For example, if a MID was initiated in 2001 but lasted until 2005, then only the 2001 observation is coded as 1 while all relevant observations in the subsequent years are coded 0.

Besides, it has been argued that MIDs include some incidents that are either too minor to possibly get national leaders involved or too complex to figure out who the real initiator is (Downes and Sechser 2012). Thus, I rely on detailed descriptions of each entry of MID to further extract the most relevant incidents (Gibler 2018). Specifically, there are four types of MIDs that are dropped from the main tests. First, I drop all minor encounters between coast guard vessels and fishing boat trawler or passenger vessels. Second, incidents that are clear collateral damages are dropped. Most of this type of incidents occurred during the Tanker War from 1984 through 1988 when both Iran and Iraq often randomly harassed merchant ships in the area. Third, I drop cases that either do not have a description in Gibler (2018) or do not have a clear distinction between Challenger and Target (e.g., a MID description indicates that two forces exchanged fired over the border without clearly identifying which side opened fire first or how the incident began). Fourth, I drop cases where multiple targets are coded as original targets.<sup>13</sup> This procedure left us with 148 MIDs that target 76 different

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13. Most of these cases are triggered by defense pact or alliance treaties on the target side. Treaty states could automatically become original targets even if the challenger’s decision was not driven by assessments of these states’ leaders, which could introduce more noise.

leaders from 16 different countries.<sup>14</sup>

## Independent variables

In the main tests, I rely on the Left-Right political orientation of leaders' political party as a proxy for hawkishness, with more rightist leaders considered more hawkish. It has been widely established in the IR literature that party ideology has a strong and direct influence on the hawkish or dovish nature of the government's foreign policy (Clare 2014). For example, Schwartz, Caprara, and Vecchione (2010) have shown that liberals are more "prosocial" and more likely to seek compromise internationally, while conservatives tend to be more "proself" and bargain more aggressively. Palmer, London, and Regan (2004) and Arena and Palmer (2009) demonstrate that among developed democracies, governments on the right are more likely to be involved in militarized disputes. Consistent with these patterns, Koch (2009) and Koch and Sullivan (2010) find that governments on the left tend to engage in shorter disputes, while right-wing governments fight longer disputes. More recently, Bertoli, Dafoe, and Trager (2019) also find that electing right-wing candidates increases state aggression.

Certainly, political orientation is not the only dimension that defines a leader's hawkishness. Carter and Smith (2020) have developed more predictive latent measures of leaders' willingness to use force based on a wider range of indicators such as previous experience and psychological traits. There are, however, two major reasons why the simple political orientation might be a more appropriate proxy for assessing adversaries' "perceived preference change" in this study.<sup>15</sup> First, most of the target states are developed and stable polities where party politics and institutional constraints tend to exert strong influence on leaders' behaviors. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume "even when a leader has different foreign policy beliefs and goals than the rest of the party, there may still be pressure to toe

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14. Robustness check models using uncleaned MIDs are reported in Table A3 in Appendix A, which show similar results.

15. That said, in the robustness check section below I conduct exploratory analysis using an alternative measure of direction of preference change based on the latent measures of hawkishness developed by Carter and Smith (2020).

the party line” (Bertoli, Dafoe, and Trager 2019, 4). Second, while a latent measure might better predict a leader’s willingness to use force, party affiliation could still be a stronger indicator for potential fundamental change in policy position, which is of greater concern for an adversary. For example, the 2016 Republican and Democratic platforms critically differed on Iran nuclear deal, with the former vowing to withdraw from the deal and latter signaling solid support (U.S. Institute of Peace 2016). Through this lens, even if Hilary Clinton might differ from Obama in terms of their willingness to use force (in the scenario where Iran violated the deal) due to their different prior experience, gender, and other psychological traits, Tehran would be less worried about a potential hawkish turn in the U.S. should Clinton won the election due to their shared policy position.

I take three steps to construct two measures of foreign adversaries’ perceived direction of preference change (DPC) based on the political orientation of targets’ affiliated party. Step-1: following Clare (2014), I use the thirteen left-wing and thirteen right-wing issues identified by Laver and Budge (1992) to calculate a political party’s ideological position at each election as follows:

$$\text{Party Ideology} = \frac{\text{Right} - \text{Left}}{\text{Right} + \text{Left}}$$

where ”Right” is the percentage of manifesto statement falling under the right-wing categories and ”Left” is the percentage of statement falling under left-wing categories. The outcome is a continuous value ranging from -1 (Left) to 1 (Right). The second measure uses the same formula but focuses exclusively on eight foreign policy related issues included in MPD.<sup>16</sup>

Step-2: I rely on the Change in Source of Leader Support (CHISOLS) Dataset (Leeds and Mattes 2015) to identify whether a leadership turnover involves any defacto change in the leader’s domestic source of support, which is defined as “the set of societal interests whose support allows the leader to gain and maintain power”. In democracies, this change

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16. These factors are: anti-imperialism, negative mention of military, positive mention of peace, positive mention of internationalism, positive mention of EU, positive mention of military, negative mention of internationalism, negative mention of EU.



is largely equivalent to ruling party shift.

Step-3: if there is a source of leader support change identified by CHISOLS, I compare whether the new leader's political party is more or less on the Right than the outgoing leader's political party based on the cumulative average of the two parties' ideological scores over time. I use the cumulative average instead of the current value to capture the possibility that foreign adversaries' understanding and evaluation of the new leader is affected by their long-time interaction with different parties in the target state (Miura and Weiss 2016).

These steps yield two three-value categorical variables that capture the direction of preference change based on a wide range of issues (*DPC-General*) and only foreign policy related issues (*DPC-FP*) respectively:

**DPC-General/DPC-FP=0:** the new leader shares the predecessor's source of leader support (No Preference Change).

**DPC-General/DPC-FP=1:** the new leader is more on the left than his or her predecessor (Right to Left).

**DPC-General/DPC-FP=2:** the new leader is more on the right than his or her predecessor (Let to Right).

The second independent variable, *Target Tenure*, is straightforwardly operationalized as the targeted leader's length of time in office. This variable is measured as the number of days since the leader took office to (a) the day the leader left the office in a given dyad-period, or (b) the last day of a given year provided no leadership turnover or MID happened, or (c) to the starting day of a MID. Logged value of these numbers are used in the model to account for the highly skewed distribution. According to Bak and Palmer (2010, 263), this measure "captures the length of leadership experience more precisely and accurately" than do other measures such as the number of years in office (Bak 2020) or the number of days in office by the end of the observation period (Chiozza and Goemans 2003; Wu and Wolford 2018). Finally, an interaction between the *DPC* and *Target Tenure* is included to examine the conditional nature of the hypothesis.

## Controls

A number of control variables are also included. To begin with, *Challenger Tenure*, which is measured in the same way as *Target Tenure*, is included to account for the possibility that the timing of challenge is primarily driven by the challenger rather than the target (DiLorenzo, McBride, and Ray 2016). Both *Challenger Age* and *Target Age* are included in the model to control for their impact on leaders' conflict participation pattern (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005). Both *Challenger Gender* and *Target Gender*, which is coded 1 if the leader is male and 0 otherwise, are included because gender stereotypes can exacerbate information asymmetry (Post and Sen 2020). I also include in the model a dummy variable, *Previous Experience*, to capture whether or not a leader had served as national leaders (or in the U.S. case served as Vice President) before. These leader level factors can also be correlated with the election of certain types of targeted leaders either directly by influencing the targeted leaders' political orientation, or indirectly by affecting their states' threat perception. *Pre-Turnover MIDs (5-year)* is a count of the total number of MIDs experienced by the target state in the last five years prior to the leadership turnover, which is included to control for the possible worsening external environment that may affect both the election of a hawk and a greater likelihood of another MID.

Several dyadic level variables that have been widely proved relevant to the onset of interstate conflicts are also included.<sup>17</sup> A dummy variable, *Joint Democracy*, which is coded 1 if both sides of the dyads are democracies, to account for democratic peace effect (Doyle 1983).<sup>18</sup> I control for relative power by creating a continuous variable, *Relative Capability*, using the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score from the National Material Capabilities v5.0 (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972), which is calculated by dividing the challenger's CINC score by the sum of the capabilities of both states.<sup>19</sup> The *Bilateral Trade*

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17. These factors can also indirectly affect DPC by influencing target's threat perception.

18. Polity IV data (Marshall, Gurr, and Jagers 2017) is used to identify regime type, and states with a polity score equal or greater than 6 are coded as democracies. States that are under transition are coded as non-democracies.

19. CINC is only updated to 2012. The 2013 and 2014 data are imputed by multiplying the previous year's

variable is included to account for the level of economic interdependence between two states, which uses the smoothed total trade values from Correlates of War Trade Data (Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins 2009).

In addition, spatial and temporal factors are also crucial in determining the strategic environment facing a state and the likelihood of disputes (Gleditsch and Ward 2001). Thus, I control for *Distance*, which captures the level of contiguity between two states and takes values ranging from 1 (separated by a land or river border) to 6 (separated by more than 400 miles of water) (Stinnett et al. 2002). *Cold War*, a dummy variable coded 1 if the period is before 1991, is included to account for the unique international environment during that period. Finally, to account for time dependence driven by temporal correlation in the binary dependent variable, I include the number of peace years between the challenger and target states and a cubic polynomial expansion into the model Carter and Signorino (2010)<sup>20</sup>.

## Results

Table 1 presents results from a series of Logit models. Target state fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered on directed-leader-dyads are used in all models.<sup>21</sup> Model 1 represents the conventional empirical approach to the study of the targeting of new leaders, in which targeted leaders are treated as a homogeneous group. Model 2 provides the basic test of the interaction effect between targets' tenure and their types without adding any control variables. Model 3 and 4 further add leader-level controls and all other control variables respectively. Model 5-7 replicate Model 2-4 but with *DPC-FP* as the measure of the direction of preference change.

Results from Model 1 are consistent with findings from Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam (2005), Bak and Palmer (2010), and DiLorenzo, McBride, and Ray (2016) in the value by the average changing rate of a country's CINC score in the past decade.

20. Summary statistics and descriptive analysis are provided in Table A1 and Figure A1 in Appendix A

21. In Table A2 in Appendix A, I show that results hold with no fixed effects, challenger state fixed effects, and including both challenger state and target state fixed effects.

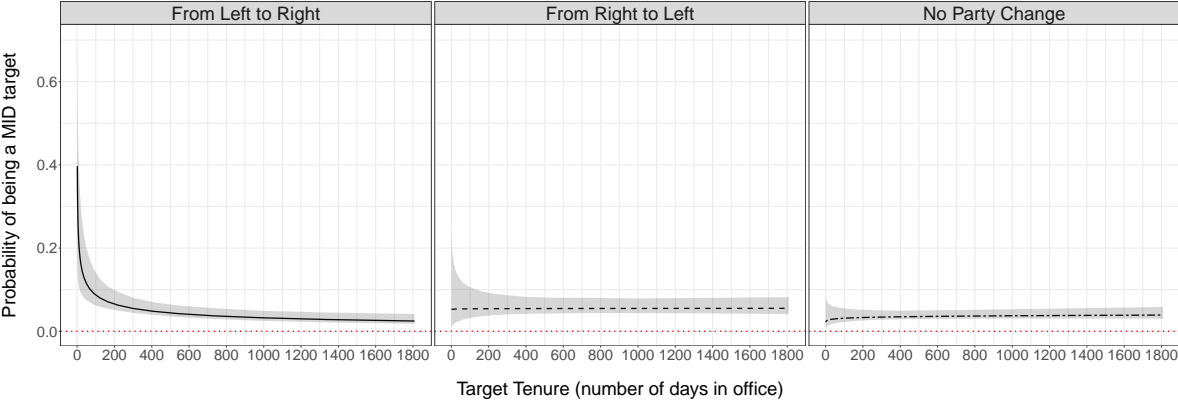
Table 1: Logit Model Results on the Targeting of Leaders

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Target Tenure	-0.071 (0.078)	0.111 (0.105)	0.083 (0.109)	0.081 (0.109)	0.110 (0.105)	0.088 (0.109)	0.086 (0.109)
<b>DPC</b>							
DPC-General=1 (Right to Left)		0.698 (1.214)	0.864 (1.223)	0.929 (1.168)			
DPC-General=2 (Left to Right)		3.359*** (0.981)	3.859*** (1.011)	3.766*** (1.023)			
DPC-FP=1 (Right to Left)					0.869 (1.189)	1.042 (1.221)	1.113 (1.176)
DPC-FP=2 (Left to Right)					3.292*** (0.990)	3.786*** (1.038)	3.697*** (1.049)
<b>Interaction Terms</b>							
DPC-General=1 × Target Tenure		-0.070 (0.183)	-0.056 (0.184)	-0.072 (0.175)			
DPC-General=2 × Target Tenure		-0.501*** (0.151)	-0.575*** (0.157)	-0.568*** (0.159)			
DPC-FP=1 × Target Tenure					-0.097 (0.179)	-0.088 (0.184)	-0.104 (0.176)
DPC-FP=2 × Target Tenure					-0.488** (0.153)	-0.559*** (0.162)	-0.552*** (0.164)
<b>Controls</b>							
Challenger Tenure	-0.025 (0.073)		-0.024 (0.070)	-0.023 (0.074)		-0.021 (0.070)	-0.019 (0.074)
Challenger Age	-0.010 (0.009)		0.001 (0.008)	-0.009 (0.009)		0.001 (0.008)	-0.009 (0.009)
Target Age	0.024 <sup>+</sup> (0.013)		0.031* (0.012)	0.035** (0.013)		0.028* (0.012)	0.032* (0.013)
Challenger Gender	-0.736 (0.654)		-1.105 <sup>+</sup> (0.612)	-0.869 (0.632)		-1.077 <sup>+</sup> (0.622)	-0.858 (0.637)
Target Gender	-0.573 (0.427)		-0.863* (0.409)	-0.805 <sup>+</sup> (0.423)		-0.847* (0.409)	-0.780 <sup>+</sup> (0.423)
Previous Experience	-0.061 (0.224)		-0.303 (0.243)	-0.245 (0.247)		-0.307 (0.244)	-0.252 (0.248)
Pre-Turnover MIDs (5-year)	0.014 (0.020)		0.033 (0.021)	0.023 (0.021)		0.035 <sup>+</sup> (0.021)	0.025 (0.021)
Relative Power	1.427** (0.518)			1.457** (0.524)			1.455** (0.525)
Joint Democracy	0.093 (0.336)			0.091 (0.344)			0.107 (0.342)
Bilateral Trade	-0.007 (0.021)			-0.009 (0.020)			-0.009 (0.021)
Distance	-0.296*** (0.081)			-0.295*** (0.078)			-0.296*** (0.079)
Cold War	-0.398 <sup>+</sup> (0.219)			-0.281 (0.216)			-0.237 (0.215)
Peace Year	-0.056 (0.043)		-0.085* (0.043)	-0.057 (0.044)		-0.083 <sup>+</sup> (0.043)	-0.055 (0.044)
Peace Year <sup>2</sup>	0.002 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Peace Year <sup>3</sup>	-0.000 (0.000)		-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)		-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	-0.101 (1.483)	-3.908*** (0.736)	-3.406* (1.413)	-1.681 (1.518)	-3.906*** (0.733)	-3.360* (1.422)	-1.646 (1.523)
Observations	3,696	3,696	3,696	3,696	3,696	3,696	3,696
Log Likelihood	-555.614	-578.062	-562.240	-547.684	-578.530	-563.195	-548.598

Note: Robust standard errors clustered on directed-leader-dyads are in parentheses. Target state fixed effects are included in all models  
<sup>+</sup>p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

sense that these targets' time in office is not a significant predictor of their probability of being targeted in militarized disputes. This pattern, however, changed dramatically after the direction of preference change is taken into consideration. In all models with the interaction terms between *Target Tenure* and *DPC* (Model 2–Model 7), the coefficient of  $DPC-General/DPC-FP=2 \times Target Tenure$  is negative and significant at 5% level, while the coefficients of both *Target Tenure* (the baseline type where there is no party change) and  $DPC-General/DPC-FP=1 \times Target Tenure$  remain insignificant.

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of being Challenged



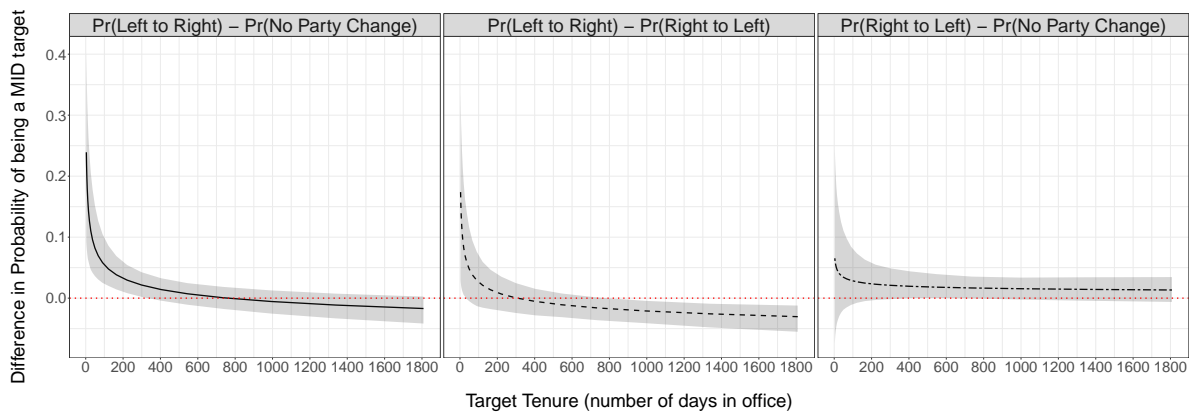
Note: shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals generated through 1000 draws of new coefficients from the posterior.

Since it is difficult to interpret the substantive effect of interaction terms in logit models by simply inspecting the coefficients, I present and discuss the results graphically by using a set of post-estimation simulations based on the coefficient and variance-covariance matrices associated with Model 4 (Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013). Figure 1 plots how the predicted probabilities of being challenged varies over the tenure for three types of targeted leaders in an approximately 5-year span. Following the suggestion of Wu and Wolford (2018), I de-log the tenure variable and present results strictly in terms of the number of days since taking office.<sup>22</sup> It clearly demonstrates that only the *Left to Right* type shows a significantly decreasing trend in the probability of being challenged as the target's time in office increases,

22. Logged values of *Target Tenure* are still used in the simulation. This de-log transformation is only conducted after the calculation of the quantity of interests to re-scale the x-axis of Figure 1.

while the lines for other two types of leaders are largely flat. Substantively, for the *Left to Right* type, the probability of being challenged on the 6th day after taking office is about 0.24, which is about two times higher than two months later (about 0.1 on the 66th day) and about 4 times higher than after taking office for more than a year (about 0.05 on the 404th day).

Figure 2: Difference in Predicted Probability of being Challenged



Note: shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals generated through 1000 draws of new coefficients from the posterior.

Furthermore, Figure 2 plots how the difference between different types of targeted leaders' probability of being challenged varies over the course of their tenures, showing that the positive difference (in the left and middle panel of the figure) becomes insignificant as their time in office increases. These graphs further demonstrates that while the *Left to Right* type is more likely to be challenged than the other two types, the difference is only significant in the period shortly after leadership turnover.<sup>23</sup>

23. In fact, the difference between *Left to Right* and *Right to Left* types becomes negative and significant as their time in office continues to increase, suggesting that the former type becomes less likely to see a challenge than does the latter type later in the leader's tenure. However, this result does not necessarily indicate that *Right to Left* types are more likely to see challenges much later in their tenure, for results from all models in Table 1 suggest that their probability of being challenged does not significantly vary across their tenure. Instead, this pattern is likely driven by the fact that once the *Left to Right* type gains more experience and becomes more established, adversaries might be deterred from challenging the hawk, which is consistent with realist arguments and rational deterrence theories (Mearsheimer 2001; Huth, Gelpi, and Bennett 1993).

## Robustness Check

To establish the robustness of these findings, I reassess the relationship between the direction of preference change, leaders' tenure, and the targeting of new leaders with additional confounding factors, different samples, different model specifications, and alternative measures of *Target Tenure* and *DPC*.

### Additional Controls

Chief among many concerns about the validity of above findings is the potential omitted variable bias. Particularly lacking is a more thorough control for factors that may affect the election result of the target state (and by extension *DPC*). As discussed above, domestic issues, especially economic conditions, usually dominate the election results (Drezner 2012). There has been strong evidence that recession can bolster support for right-wing parties (Arzheimer 2009). Economic slowdown may also generate diversionary incentives for the newcomer, which could further exacerbate the potential challenger's fear. To address this effect, I control for *Target GDP Growth*, which uses data from World Bank.<sup>24</sup> I also control for *Predecessor Tenure*, which accounts for the possibility that voters in the target state may simply desire a change of leadership after a long-time rule under a particular party.

Further, *Pre-Turnover MIDs (5-year)* may also fall short in accounting for the potential impact of external environment on election result as these MIDs may not be especially salient to the public. Thus, I further control for *Predecessor FP Failure*, which is a count of the total number of crises experienced by the target's predecessor that are coded as *Compromise or Defeat* by the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data (Brecher et al. 2021). I also control for *Ongoing Interstate War* and *Ongoing Intrastate War* on the target side, both of which are drawn from the Correlates of War project.<sup>25</sup>

These additional controls are included in Model B1 (using *DPC-General*) and B6

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24. GDP growth rate data is only available since 1960.

25. Interstate war data is only updated through 2007

(using *DPC-FP*) in Table B1 and Table B2 in the Appendix B, which show similar results as those reported above.

## Different Samples

I also reassess the hypothesis with different samples. To begin with, empirical models above track the entire tenure of each leader. This setup could be a source of bias that drives the null finding associated with the other two types of targeted leaders ( $DPC=0$  and  $DPC=1$ ) if these leaders tend to stay in office for longer. The occurrence of a challenge during the very late time of their tenure might overwrite the any turbulence shortly after leadership turnover.<sup>26</sup> To address this concern, Model B2 and B3 reassess the targeting of new leaders by focusing on the first year and first-three years of the targeted leaders' tenure respectively. Results show that *Left to Right* types are more likely to be challenged in the first year of their tenure, and are more likely to be challenged earlier in their tenure in the three-year tenure span.

Besides, the timing of the targeted leaders' entry into the sample can be another source of bias. There are several cases in which targeted leaders had already been in power for a while before they enter the sample. These cases arise mainly because the rival relationship between this leader's state and the challenger state developed in the middle of their stay in power. This can be a problem if these targeted leaders are selected into the sample by some militarized disputes (earlier in their tenure) that are screened out by the sample selection criteria. I take two approaches to address this issue. First, in Model B4, I use a subsample in which the year of the target leaders' first entry into the sample is equal to the year they begin their tenure. Second, in Model B5, I focus on a sample that only include dyads whose rival relationship lasts for more than thirty years.<sup>27</sup> Results from these two models are consistent

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26. For example, Tage Erlander served as Swedish PM for 23 years from 1946 to 1969. He is coded as *No Preference Change* type as he took the office from his own party, but he was targeted in a MID initiated by Soviet leader Brezhnev 6560 days after taking office in 1964.

27. While thirty-year is a rather arbitrary choice, I also assess models with twenty- and ten-year cut points, which show similar results.



with the main tests.

Models B7–B10 in Table B2 replicate these models with *DPC-FP* as the measure of preference change, which show similar results.

### Different Model Specification

Moreover, a new leader’s *(in)experience* might not be adequately captured by the above model specifications. Indeed, not all “new” leaders can be considered equally inexperienced at the beginning of their tenure (e.g., George W. H. Bush vs. George W. Bush). The hypothesized pattern should be more likely to present for leaders with no or less prior experiences.

I assess the extent to which the target leaders’ previous experience matters by exploring several three-way interaction models—*Target Tenure*  $\times$  *DPC*  $\times$  *Previous Experience*. I examine three types of experience: (1) whether or not the target side leader had served as the head of government before (e.g., Prime Ministers or Vice Presidents in the U.S. case); (2) whether or not the target side leader has military experience; (3) the number of years the target side leader had been in politics.<sup>28</sup>

Models B11, B12, and B13 examine the effect of previous head of government experience, military experience, and experience in politics in general respectively using *DPC-General* as the measure of preference change, while Models B14, B15, and B16 use *DPC-FP*. These results are presented in Table B3 in Appendix B.

There are two important findings emerging from this analysis. First, only experience of serving the head of government appears to have a significant influence on the hypothesized pattern. Second, leaders who are more right-leaning than their predecessor are still more likely to be challenged earlier in their tenure, but only when they have no prior experience serving as the national head (see Figure 3). In other words, a veteran “new” hawk may effectively close the window of opportunity, discouraging challenges.

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28. The last two measures are drawn from the Leader Experience and Attribute Descriptions dataset (LEAD) (Ellis, Horowitz, and Stam 2015), which only covers leaders who came into power before 2004.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of being Challenged (Model B11)



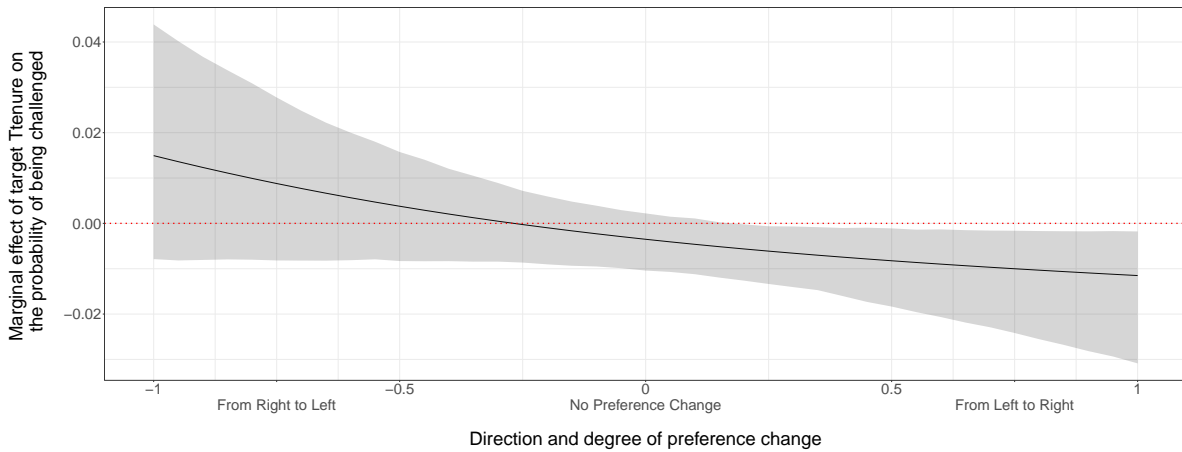
Note: shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals generated through 1000 draws of new coefficients from the posterior.

### Alternative Measures of DPC and Tenure

Lastly, I assess the robustness of above findings with alternative measures of the target leader’s direction of preference change (*DPC*) and leaders’ tenure. To explore whether the size of preference change matters, I use two continuous measures in Model B17 (*DPC-General*) and B18 (*DPC-FP*). In these measures, leaders who did not experience party change are still coded as zero, but for leaders who did experience party shift, I use the raw value of the difference between the two leaders’ left-right score to measure both the direction and degree of change in preference (without transforming it to a categorical variable). Larger positive (smaller negative) values of these variables indicate that the new leader is more right-leaning (left-leaning) than her predecessor. Figure 4 shows that the marginal effect of *Target Tenure* on the probability of being challenged only becomes significantly negative (leaders are more likely to be challenged earlier in the tenure) when the value of *DPC* is positive and large enough. This suggests that adversaries may indeed be sensitive to the size of preference change in their rival states, and have more incentive to confront the target when the newcomer is significantly more right-leaning than her predecessor.

A more general concern that has yet to be addressed is whether adversaries’ assessment

Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Target Tenure over Continuous DPC (Model B17)



Note: shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals generated through 1000 draws of new coefficients from the posterior.

of the preference change in the target state is primarily based on the new leader’s political orientation or is also sensitive to other features. Toward this end, I conduct exploratory analysis with the latent hawkishness measure developed by Carter and Smith (2020). As mentioned earlier, Carter and Smith (2020) develop four measures of leaders’ latent hawkishness—CM1, CM2, CM3, and CM4—based on each leader’s “risk related” background experience, risk-related characteristics plus political orientation and psychological characteristics, all types of background experiences, and all background experiences plus political orientation and psychological characteristics, respectively.

I take two steps to construct four measures of *DPC* using these four latent measures. First, I calculate the difference between a leader’s hawkishness score and his or her predecessor (*Diff-CM*). Second, I then code leaders whose absolute value of *Diff-CM* is smaller than one standard deviation of the country-specific distribution of *Diff-CM* as *DPC*=0 (No Significant Change); code leaders whose *Diff-CM* is negative and the absolute value is greater than one standard deviation of the country-specific distribution of *Diff-CM* as *DPC*=1 (Significantly More Dovish); and code leaders whose *Diff-CM* is positive and the absolute value is greater than one standard deviation of the country-specific distribution of *Diff-CM* as *DPC*=2 (Significantly More Hawkish).

Models B19–B22 use these four alternative measures of *DPC* respectively.<sup>29</sup> The results are reported in Table B4 in Appendix B, which show that the hypothesized pattern is only present when the CM2-based preference change is used (see Figure B1 in Appendix B). The implication of this finding is that while incorporating a wider range of indicators can produce better predictors of leaders’ willingness to use force, political orientation may indeed be the key indicator that informs foreign adversaries’ assessment of their rivals’ preference change. The hypothesized pattern is not present when this information is not included (CM1- and CM3-based models) or when too much other information is included (CM4-based model).

In addition, while the measurement of leaders’ tenure appears to be more straightforward, it is not flawless. The granularity of the measurement adopted in the main tests comes with the risk of endogeneity as the time in office (IV) is partially affected by whether there was a dispute in a given year (DV). To address this concern, I reexamine the hypothesis with two other commonly used measures of leaders’ tenure: the number of years in office and the number of days in office by the end of the observation period (both are in logged values). The results are reported in Table B5 in Appendix B, which are consistent with those reported in the text.

## Alternative Explanation

Before concluding the analysis, it is worth briefly discussing a plausible alternative explanation of the observed pattern. It might be the case that when a new hawk came into power they initiated more aggressive or threatening policies (short of MIDs) that force their adversaries’ hands, causing the challengers to instigate conflict. To examine this possibility, I rely on the Cline Center Historical Phoenix Event Data (CCHPED) (Althaus et al. 2019) to generate a yearly measure of the degree of hostility of actions initiated by the target-side leader towards the challenger.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, I extract all hostile interactions that are coded

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29. In these models, I drop several control variables including *Target Age*, *Target Gender*, and *Previous Experience* as they are already included in the latent measure of the target’s hawkishness.

30. For a more detailed introduction of the data, see the coding manual (Althaus et al. 2019).

as occurring between *Governments*, and then collapse the data into directed-dyad-year format to get the yearly average of the intensity score of these interactions.<sup>31</sup> The resulting variable, *Target Hostility*, is a continuous variable ranging from -10 to 0, with greater values indicating less hostile.

I then use *Target Hostility* as dependent variable in additional OLS models to examine whether actions taken by a certain type of target leaders in their first year in office are more hostile (Model C1 and C2) and whether their behavior significantly changes over the tenure (Model C3 and C4).<sup>32</sup> Results from these models are reported in Table C1 in Appendix C, which show that actions taken by *Left to Right* types in their first year are not more hostile than the other two types and that their behavior does not significantly vary over time.<sup>33</sup> These findings can be considered suggestive evidence that this alternative explanation might be ruled out.

## Conclusion

The primary conclusion that can be drawn from this study is straightforward. Whether leaders are more likely to face international challenges earlier in their tenure depends largely on what preference change may ensue. This paper finds that only leaders who are perceived to be more hawkish than their predecessor are more likely to be challenged earlier in their tenure. I argue that this is because the direction of preference change associated with leadership turnover in a state can affect foreign adversaries' assessment of the costs and benefits of an early confrontation. Fear that a new hawk may pursue reckless changes of the status quo incentivizes adversaries to seek for early confrontations in which they can demonstrate their own positions to the newcomer. In the absence of such a fear when a dove

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31. Each incident in the dataset has been assigned an intensity score for conflict and cooperation generated by J. S. Goldstein (1992), ranging from -10 (most conflictual) to 10 (most cooperative). Leeds (1999) has adopted a similar approach with other event datasets to study international cooperation.

32. Note that since *Target Hostility* is a yearly measure, both target and challenger tenure are re-coded as the number of years the leader has been in office

33. In fact, actions taken by *Right to Left* types become significantly less hostile as their time in office increases.

replaces a hawk, adversaries tend to be more cautious as early quarrels may damage the prospect of a potentially warmer relationship in the future.

This research program can be further developed through at least two avenues. First, one important extension of this research program will be exploring additional measures of the direction of preference change. While it is a widely adopted approach to operationalize hawk versus dove on the left-right spectrum of political ideology, such a measure may not be granular enough to capture the complexity and evolution of interstate relations. For instance, Putin's clear preference for Trump over Biden poses a serious challenge to the simple measure adopted here. Thus, future work may consider constructing dyad-specific measures of the perceived preference change. Second, the empirical analyses in this paper focus on directed-dyads. However, the increasingly complex network of interstate interactions makes it worth further exploring whether leadership turnover in state  $A$  can affect state  $B$ 's policies and actions toward state  $C$ .

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