State Visits and Leader Survival*

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Abstract

Why do political leaders travel abroad? In this paper, we propose an informational mechanism linking in-person diplomacy to leader survival. A foreign power visits an incumbent in order to reap a future policy concession; the visit is only worth the effort if the incumbent remains in power long enough to deliver on the deal. A diplomatic visit thus provides a visible and credible signal of the visitor's high confidence in the incumbent's stability in office. Domestic opponents, facing incomplete information as to the incumbent's strength, observe the signal and are deterred from mounting a challenge. Using data on US diplomatic visits from 1960-2013, we find strong empirical support for our predictions: a visit with the US President substantially reduces the risk of a leader's removal from office.

Why do political leaders travel abroad? Recent US Presidents have spent one third of their days in office visiting or hosting foreign heads of state (Figure 1); other world leaders conduct visits with similar frequency (Nitsch 2007). Top-level diplomatic visits are the culmination of intensive planning by leaders and their staffs, with great care given to every detail of the exchange and its potential implications. Among political actors and observers, these events seem to wield outsize influence, often prompting policy and political activism and captivating the attention of the popular press. Yet the very practice of face-to-face diplomacy involves behavior on the part of political leaders that political scientists should find puzzling.

First, why are diplomatic visits conducted by leaders themselves, rather than by their agents? Given the high opportunity costs of leaders' time, and the disparity in policy-specific knowledge between heads of state and the specialists who staff their bureaucracies, a face-to-face conversation among leaders is unlikely to be the most efficient means of achieving a given policy objective. Second, why are diplomatic visits conducted in-person, despite the proliferation of technology that facilitates long-distance communication? The general upward trend in frequency of visits over time, reported in Figure 1, suggests that in-person visits are serving a function beyond mere exchanging of ideas and information, which can increasingly be done via phone call or video conference. Relatedly, why do visits so often involve a public component, such as a joint press conference, a photographed handshake, or a tour of an iconic landmark or monument? And finally, why are visits treated as a thing of material value which can be proffered or withheld as part of an international exchange?

In this paper, we propose a novel theory to resolve these questions, centered around the publicness of a visit, the information it reveals, and the impact of that information on domestic political contestation. Recent literature has made considerable advances in explaining the functions of face-to-face diplomacy within the context of international conflicts and hostilities, from its role in deterring foreign aggression (McManus 2018) to its efficacy in facilitating peace agreements through interpersonal empathy (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2016). Yet crisis diplomacy is only one piece of the picture. The shaded

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Figure 1: Diplomatic Visits by US Presidents
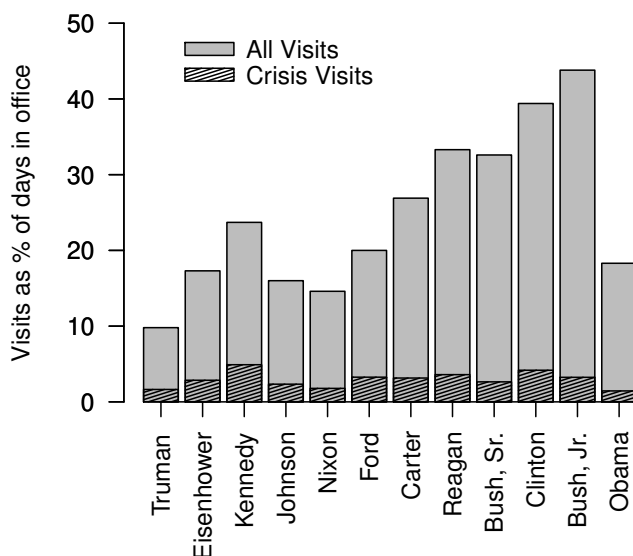
Note: Gray bars represent total days spent visiting abroad, plus total days spent hosting visitors, divided by total days in office. Diagonal lines indicate presidential visits conducted with a leader who is experiencing an international crisis.

bars in Figure 1 represent the proportion of US Presidential visits conducted with foreign leaders in the midst of international crises;[1] we see that an overwhelming majority of top-level US visits occur as part of the routine conduct of diplomatic relations, outside the context of crisis situations, and thus remain largely unaccounted for by existing theories of in-person diplomacy. To explain this pervasive and puzzling phenomenon, we develop a theory that relates diplomatic exchange to political survival. With evidence from US diplomatic visits from 1960-2013, we show that a visit with the US President dramatically reduces an incumbent's risk of removal from office.

Our theory conceptualizes the state visit—defined here as any face-to-face diplomatic meeting between foreign leaders[2]—as a signal of the recipient leader's strength in the face

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[1]Specifically, we code a US visit with a foreign leader as occurring during a crisis if that leader's country is listed as an actor in any crisis, as defined by the International Crisis Behavior Project, at any point in the same calendar year as the visit. A similar analysis reveals that only a small minority of visits occur in the same year as a Militarized Interstate Dispute.

[2]Our use of the term "state visit" is a slight abuse of terminology. In diplomatic circles, state visits carry a distinct meaning from other forms of bilateral exchange between leaders, such as "official visits" or "working visits". Our usage here is simply intended to capture any in-person meeting between

of domestic opposition. Across the spectrum of regime types, the decision to challenge an incumbent leader requires forming an assessment of the leader's security in office under incomplete information. For a citizen participating in a protest, an elite member orchestrating a coup, or an interest group or voting bloc switching political loyalties, a challenge against the incumbent is beneficial if it succeeds but costly if it fails. The likely outcome of such a challenge depends on the strength of the incumbent's hold on power, which a potential challenger cannot know with certainty.

Interstate diplomacy always occurs in the shadow of this domestic competition. When an incumbent leader receives a visit from a foreign power, that leader's domestic opponents learn something from the occurrence of the visit: namely, they learn that the foreign power determined the leader to be worth visiting. The foreign power might hope to extract some future deal or concession from the incumbent, or view the incumbent as a valuable partner (or a necessary if undesired collaborator) in some international policy objective. In any case, the visit represents a investment made by the visitor in pursuit of a future political benefit, the enjoyment of which depends on his diplomatic counterpart remaining in office. And because a visit entails a substantial opportunity cost for the visitor—as well as a potential reputational cost, in the case of an adverse outcome—observers cannot dismiss the visit as mere "cheap talk". Rather, the visit credibly reveals the visitor's private assessment of the incumbent's stability in office.

Two interconnected mechanisms thus induce a relationship between state visits and their recipients' survival in office. First, a *selection* process leads the foreign power to conduct visits with leaders who are ex ante more secure in office. This selection effect follows from the visitor's prospective assessment as to which diplomatic investments will yield the greatest returns in expectation. Second, as a consequence of the selection mechanism and the information it reveals, a diplomatic visit performs a *deterrent* function, which strengthens the recipient leader's hold on power. This deterrent effect follows from the belief among the leader's domestic opponents that the visitor is privy to some relevant information to which they themselves may not be—information pertaining

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political leaders of different states which features some public component.

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to the leader's political health, the nature and severity of the threats he faces, or any international factors which may affect the domestic balance of power.[3] Upon observing the signal of the visit, potential challengers become less optimistic that a challenge against the incumbent will succeed, and so become less likely to take part in one. In short, state visits are both cause and consequence of leader survival.

World powers, of course, have a range of options for supporting their allies' survival in office, and various media of exchange for conducting their international dealings. Why would in-person diplomacy be the weapon of choice in achieving a foreign policy objective? While visits may be accompanied by other forms of material support, the visit itself carries distinct advantages over those other instruments: its costs—opportunity and reputational costs alike—are more directly borne by the visiting leader himself; its targets are more freely chosen at the discretion of the visiting leader;[4] and its occurrence is more immediately observed and understood by an information-constrained domestic audience. The theorized signaling mechanism need not depend on any sort of premeditation or collusion between sender and receiver. The information conveyed by the visit arises naturally from the foreign power's incentive to invest diplomatic capital in relations with stable incumbents.

Our theoretical model gives rise to the central empirical prediction that visits from a foreign power enhance the recipient leader's survival in office. This prediction receives strong support from examination of US diplomatic activity from 1960 to 2013: a leader's risk of removal is reduced by an estimated 50-70% following a visit to the US, or a visit from the US President to that leader's home country. The analyses condition on a wide range of publicly observable measures of leader strength, supporting the notion that visits serve to reveal the visitor's private information. Visits reduce the risk of both regular and irregular removal, for leaders who do and do not receive bilateral US aid, and their impacts persist both on and off the recipient's election years (and more strongly in the

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[3]This informational structure complements existing theories of domestic opponents revealing private information to foreign observers; see Schultz (1998).

[4]This is in contrast to other policy instruments—foreign aid allocations, troop deployments, trade concessions, etc.—which are subject to greater institutional constraints.

latter). Visits are systematically reciprocated with policy concessions, in the form of voting alignment in the United Nations General Assembly and receipts of US exports. And consistent with our theorized informational mechanism, a visit's impact is greatest for those leaders who appear to be the least desirable US diplomatic partners.

Beyond the empirical implications that we test directly, our theory proves consistent with a number of claims and empirical patterns reported elsewhere in the literature. For one, the starting point of our analysis comports with the conclusion of Lebovic and Saunders (2016)'s recent assessment of US diplomatic travel, which finds "some evidence of domestic (including individual-level) influences on diplomacy, but only limited evidence that times of crisis produce distinct patterns in face-to-face encounters." Our theory further provides a microfounded explanation for why visits tend to correlate with economic exchange (Nitsch 2007), why visits are conducted even when they risk inciting a "backlash effect" in public opinion towards the visitor (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009), and why visits can serve as a "trade sweetener" in an interstate exchange, providing the recipient with intangible benefits which prove "advantageous for domestic reasons" (Goldstein 2008). These implications all follow from our theory of the diplomatic visit as a mechanism of strategic information transmission in the context of domestic political contestation. In sum, this study demonstrates that in-person diplomacy is a powerful yet underexamined instrument of statecraft through which world leaders can influence political developments abroad.

State Visits and Leader Survival

We begin with an informal presentation of our theoretical argument, illustrated by a series of case studies.[5] Throughout the discussion, we differentiate between a foreign power who grants a visit, and a domestic incumbent who receives it; our focus is on the political survival of the latter. The primary distinction of interest in our theory pertains to characteristics of the two leaders and the countries they lead, rather than the location of the visit itself, so we apply the same terminology to refer to the respective leaders

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[5]See appendix for additional archival evidence illustrating our proposed theoretical mechanisms.

regardless of where the visit occurs. After formalizing our argument in the subsequent section, we will return to a more precise discussion of the nature of the relationship between the two leaders and the scope conditions under which our theory should apply.

Visits as Exchange

State visits, especially those granted by major world powers, are often highly valued by the recipient. As such, visits can be proffered as one end of an exchange between the two states. One prominent beneficiary of this tactic was Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who was known to place considerable stock in state visits with his European counterparts. In 1978, the British government advised the Queen that granting a state visit was a "mandatory" component of an arms deal with Ceausescu; a trade deal in the automotive industry between France and Romania was likewise smoothed out by a state visit, which French President d'Estaing later described as an "unavoidable calamity" (Goldstein 2008). A series of diplomatic visits in 2007 between French President Sarkozy and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi reveal a similar type of exchange taking place. Publicly, these visits culminated in the announcement of economic deals including Libya's purchase of €10 billion of Airbus planes and a grant of exclusive negotiating rights to French weapons manufacturers for Libya's future arms purchases (Murphy and Gehmlich 2007); more recently it has been alleged (though not yet adjudicated) that preceding the visits, the Libyan government illicitly contributed €50 million to Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign (McAuley 2018). These substantial concessions by Gaddafi do not seem to have purchased anything from Sarkozy beyond the visits themselves. Incidentally, a state visit also played a role in Gaddafi's ultimate removal in 2011. When the Obama administration sought UNSC approval for military intervention in Libya, the African nation of Gabon provided a crucial vote in support of Resolution 1973, which passed with just one vote more than required. In return, Obama granted Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba a White House visit in June 2011, hosting him at the president's private guest residence. Bongo publicly called for Gaddafi to step down during the visit, being the first African leader to do so, and providing an important source of support and legitimation for a

major foreign policy priority of the Obama administration (O'Grady 2016).

The pattern that emerges across these examples is that of an incumbent leader making some material concession to a foreign power in exchange for a diplomatic visit. A natural question that arises, then, is why these leaders find a visit to be something of value. We propose that the answer can be found in the visit's impact on leader survival. In political settings like those governed by Causescu, Gaddafi, and Bongo, citizens or ruling coalition members who wish to overthrow their leader are incompletely informed as to the leader's ability to withstand a challenge to power. Taking subversive action against the incumbent pays off if the attempt is successful and the leader is removed; if the leader survives, unsuccessful challengers should expect to suffer retribution. The decision of whether or not to take part in an opposition effort thus depends on one's belief of the incumbent's strength in office. In this context, any credible, public signal of the leader's strength can serve to deter potential opponents from taking action. So it is clear to see why an incumbent would place considerable value on such a signal.

An in-person diplomatic visit provides a credible signal of the visitor's high assessment of the recipient leader's strength because of the conditional costs and benefits associated with the visit. Whatever future benefit the visitor hopes to gain from the visit—be it a direct concession, as in Causescu's grant of Romanian market access to foreign exporters; a mutually beneficial agreement, as in Gaddafi's purchase of Airbus planes; or a more diffuse commitment of support in foreign policy matters, as characterized the US's relationship with Gabon for the remainder of Obama's tenure—its enjoyment will generally be contingent on the recipient of the visit remaining in office. That the foreign power in each case was willing to expend some effort in order to reap some conditional benefit demonstrated their confidence that their diplomatic counterpart would stay in office long enough to deliver that benefit.

Information Conveyed by a Visit

This sort of public vote of confidence in an incumbent will influence his domestic opponents' assessments of his strength insofar as they believe the foreign power to have

access to some relevant information that they themselves do not observe directly.[6] The precise nature of this information will vary by context, but we can consider three general classes. First would be information pertaining directly to the incumbent's political viability. As one colorful illustration, intelligence agencies work strenuously to develop assessments of foreign leaders' personal health—which recent research has found to be an especially strong determinant of coalition loyalty and regime stability (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2018)—through means ranging from behavioral and psychological evaluation to surreptitious collection of biomedical evidence (Windrem 2004; Lewis 2016). World powers may likewise be privately informed on impending scandals or other liabilities that an incumbent faces. Perhaps more typically, the incumbent may simply have shared with the visitor some private (but at least partially-verifiable) information relating to government finances, economic forecasts, internal security and intelligence capabilities, the coherence and loyalty of the ruling coalition, or any other factors that bear on the prospects of regime survival. The diplomatic visit would thus provide an external validation of certain facts which the incumbent would wish to communicate to his opponents directly but would lack credibility to do so.

The informational value of a visit may further arise from the multifaceted nature of the threats that an incumbent faces. Our formal model (presented below) depicts an interaction among an incumbent and a single challenger, but this is of course a simplification; from the perspective of any one challenger, the interests and capabilities of all other would-be challengers constitute an important and unknown determinant of the incumbent's durability in office. Casper and Tyson (2014) argue that regime insiders are incompletely informed as to their leader's ability to withstand a challenge from mass movements, and vice versa, and that each group is keenly attentive to any information revealed by the incumbent's interactions with the other. Previous work has also considered how, in fully democratic settings, voters and party activists alike face challenges in coordinating their decisions to support or oppose a given candidate—and

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[6]This follows a standard result from the information aggregation literature, whereby individual agents observe private signals drawn from a state-dependent distribution and update on the revelation of each other's signals.

how these coordination dilemmas may be resolved by commonly observed public signals (Dewan and Myatt 2007). These theories suggest that, insofar as a foreign power has some insight into the attributes and intentions of any one domestic actor, the diplomatic conduct of the former provides valuable information that may sway the decisions of other domestic actors.

Finally, domestic opponents are likely to believe the visiting power to be especially well-informed with respect to international factors that shape the incumbent's survival prospects. These factors may include the direct assistance—economic and security, covert and overt alike—that the incumbent receives (or will soon receive), from third parties, multilateral organizations, or the visiting power itself.[7] Existing research has shown, theoretically and empirically, that a leader's survival in office can be bolstered by the receipt of foreign aid (Licht 2010); yet domestic observers may not be aware of the extent or kind of foreign support that their incumbent leader enjoys (Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Wood 2014; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017). If the visit communicates to domestic actors that the incumbent receives greater external backing than they otherwise would have expected, that information will perform a deterrent function which discourages opposition efforts and thus bolsters the leader's durability to an even greater extent than would the material support alone.

It is worth noting that domestic opponents need not believe the foreign power to be strictly *better* informed than they are as to their own leader's strength, but simply that he be *independently* informed, drawing his inferences (at least in part) from a separate set of sources and observations. When assessing signals sent by a major world leader, who oversees massive intelligence and diplomatic bureaucracies tasked with gathering information on foreign governments and political developments, such a belief on the part of domestic opponents is certainly well founded. So by our theory, the aforementioned visits played an important role in suppressing, for some time, the discontent that ultimately manifested in Libya's 2011 rebellion, and in securing Bongo's hold on power

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[7]In the latter case, we maintain a conceptual distinction between the material support and the diplomatic visit which publicizes that material support. We discuss this distinction further in the "Visits and Policy Concessions" section below.

shortly after he entered office in the wake of the previous president's unexpected death due to cardiac failure (O'Grady 2016). Had d'Estaing believed Causescu to be less secure in office, a visit with him would not have been an "unavoidable calamity," but an entirely avoidable one—and the decision to avoid it would have been far less discouraging to Causescu's domestic opponents.

Costs of a Visit

A crucial feature enabling the state visit to serve as a credible signal of incumbent strength is that it imposes costs on the visitor. These costs can take various forms. First, there is a simple opportunity cost, which is borne regardless of the outcome of the visit: traveling abroad entails a considerable investment of a leader's time, in addition to that of his subordinates, which cannot then be spent pursuing other political objectives. As will become clear through our formal model, the central claims relating diplomatic visits to leader survival are supported if this opportunity cost is the only cost that the foreign power faces. Yet we can also conceive of the visiting leader facing the prospect of some reputational cost, imposed by his own domestic audience or by other international observers, if the recipient of the visit is removed from office shortly after the visit. We should note that a number of factors render these costs difficult to observe and quantify explicitly: reputational costs can be diffuse, and should rarely be borne on the equilibrium path of play (Schultz 2001). But we might gain some understanding of these costs by considering those cases in which a visit notably does *not* occur.

One telling example can be found in US diplomatic relations with Nicaragua during the latter half of the Cold War. US Presidents exchanged visits with Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza DeBayle in 1967, 1968, 1970 and 1971, and Nixon sent his Secretary of State to Managua in 1973; but in the face of an increasing challenge to power from the Sandinista National Liberation Front, deteriorating economic conditions, and worsening human rights abuses by the Somoza government, visits were cut off for the remainder of Somoza's tenure. Importantly, however, US bilateral aid and covert assistance were maintained at high levels through Somoza's removal in 1979. It does not seem to be the

case that US Presidents no longer wanted Somoza to remain in office after 1973; rather, what they wanted to avoid was any public demonstration of *wanting* him to remain in office after that point.

A similar pattern can be observed in recent US relations with Egypt. Prior to the unanticipated revolution of January 2011, Egypt was a frequent recipient of US diplomatic visits, accompanied by broad declarations of partnership and support and regular deliveries of military assistance. Yet with the outbreak of large-scale protests, despite deep interest in the political outcome, the Obama administration was careful not to engage directly with Mubarak. President Obama did not meet with Mubarak during this time, nor did his Secretary of State, nor any other current State Department officials; instead, the administration sent a former ambassador, who had been out of government service for over a decade, as an envoy to communicate US views (Stolberg 2011). This tactic, we argue, was employed so as to avoid any impression of showing support to the imminently collapsing Mubarak regime. In contrast, Obama did not hesitate to extol his strong relationship with King Abdullah II of Jordan during a televised visit in the Oval Office in May of 2011, amidst several months of major antigovernment protests throughout the kingdom. Sure enough, King Abdullah proved capable of weathering that particular political storm.

Generalizing from these examples, we suggest that powerful world leaders expect to face some reputational cost for engaging diplomatically with incumbents who are soon to be deposed. A large body of research considers how domestic audiences can draw inferences regarding a leader's competence from observing his performance in international crises, and punish and reward him accordingly (Smith 1998; Tarar 2006). We suggest that a leader may be similarly sanctioned by his domestic audience for more routine diplomatic missteps. By this logic, US Presidents did not want to be seen investing energy in relations with Somoza or Mubarak, or in trying to support their survival in office, when it would soon be revealed that those efforts were for nought. Alternatively, a leader's reputational incentives may be shaped by the audience's normative concerns. While voters in the US, for instance, generally prefer to promote democracy and human

rights abroad, they understand that other priorities can override these cosmopolitan motives (Brancati 2014); diplomatic engagement with dictators is often accepted as a necessary evil. However, once an undemocratic leader is removed from office, any support he received from the US President appears, in retrospect, to have been less necessary and less morally justifiable. World leaders, not wanting to find themselves on the "wrong side of history," will avoid public displays of support to illegitimate regimes on the verge of collapse. Thus the combination of Somoza's human rights violations and his tenuous hold on power rendered him a prime candidate for material assistance but a toxic partner for diplomatic visits.

Formal Model

We now turn to a formalization of our argument linking diplomatic visits to leader survival. Due to space constraints, we offer a stylized treatment here, with a full analysis deferred to the appendix.

Our model features two strategic actors. The first, labeled F for *Foreign Leader*, can either visit or not visit the incumbent who is at risk of removal. The second, labeled C for *Citizen*, can attempt to remove the incumbent, or abstain from doing so. This C player might represent a group of citizens who can participate in a protest or rebellion; a member or faction of a ruling coalition who can take part in a coup; an interest group or voting bloc within a political coalition that can endorse an electoral challenger; or any other actor who may be pivotal in unseating an incumbent. Our model of the domestic interaction between the citizen and incumbent draws from the literature on global games of regime change, in which individual agents must coordinate under incomplete information regarding a state of the world in order to upend a status quo (Morris and Shin 2003; Dewan and Myatt 2007; Casper and Tyson 2014; Malis and Smith 2019). We simplify our model to include only a single citizen; the substantive intuition is similar to that of the many-agent game, though in the latter case the impact of a diplomatic visit would be amplified by the citizens' strategic coordination.

Whether a challenge against the incumbent succeeds depends on the state variable, θ: if C attempts to remove the incumbent and $\theta < 0$, regime change (RC) occurs; but if C attempts removal and $\theta \geq 0$, or if C does not attempt removal, the status quo (SQ) is maintained. This latent θ, which we refer to as regime strength, captures a multitude of incumbent characteristics—his control over resources or over the security apparatus, his latent popularity among the elites or masses, his ability to promote economic growth, or even the degree of foreign backing he enjoys—and reduces them to a single dimension for analytical tractability. In keeping with the global games literature, neither F nor C observes θ directly, but rather each receives noisy public and private signals. The sequence of the game is as follows: both players observe their signals and form beliefs about θ; F decides whether or not to visit; and, having observed F's decision, C decides whether or not to challenge the incumbent.

The players' payoffs are represented as follows:

Citizen	$\theta < 0$	$\theta \geq 0$
Challenge	δ	$-\kappa$
Abstain	0	0

Foreign Power	Status Quo	Regime Change
Visit	$\psi + \eta - \omega$	$-\lambda - \omega$
Not Visit	ψ	0

An individual who participates in a successful challenge enjoys a benefit δ, which can represent either selective benefits awarded by the incoming leadership, or the expressive utility of participating in political change. An unsuccessful challenge against the ruler yields (in expectation) a retaliation cost of κ. The foreign power's payoff is likewise a function of the action he takes and the outcome of the domestic power struggle. F enjoys an unconditional benefit ψ from the incumbent retaining office, regardless of whether or not F visits; this can either reflect a genuine affinity for or policy alignment with the incumbent, as compared to his likely replacement, or a simple preference for avoiding instability and disruption of the status quo. The η term represents the additional payoff from whatever deal, concession, or future favor the incumbent can offer in exchange for the visit. Regardless of whether the incumbent survives in office, F pays a cost of ω for visiting, representing the opportunity cost of F's time and resources that the visit

consumed. F pays an additional reputational cost of λ if the incumbent is removed following the visit. From this payoff structure, we observe that a citizen will only participate in a challenge when she is sufficiently confident it will succeed, and a foreign leader will only visit when he is sufficiently confident the incumbent will survive.

Of central interest in our model is the impact of a diplomatic visit on the citizen's posterior belief of regime strength. Given that F is incentivized to visit strong incumbents, and given that F's decision is based partly on his private information, F's decision of whether or not to visit has the effect of credibly revealing that private information. The citizen incorporates this revelation into her own private assessment of regime strength; and for a range of citizen types, the observation of a visit deters her from challenging the incumbent when she otherwise would.

Hypotheses

Equilibrium analysis yields a number of testable empirical implications, which we discuss here and derive formally in the appendix.

Hypothesis 1 (Selection). The foreign power is more likely to visit (i) incumbents whom he believes, on the basis of private and public information, to be stronger in office; (ii) incumbents with greater policy concessions to offer; and (iii) incumbents with whom F has a higher baseline affinity.

Because the foreign power faces conditional costs and benefits from a visit, the desirability of the visit increases in the size of the benefits and in the likelihood of the incumbent remaining in office long enough to deliver them. An important implication of this hypothesis is that, after perfectly conditioning on all public information of regime strength and all measures of costs, benefits, and baseline affinity, we would still expect to observe variation in F's visit decision that is driven by F's private information. This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (Deterrence). A visit from a foreign power reduces an incumbent's risk of removal from office.

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A visit credibly reveals F's confidence in the incumbent's survival; because F has some private information, this revelation deters (some subset of) the incumbent's opponents from mounting a challenge; and challenges may be deterred even when they would have succeeded in unseating the incumbent.

The next hypothesis relates to factors that moderate the effects of visits on regime survival.

> *Hypothesis 3 (Ex ante likelihood).* A visit has a greater impact on regime survival when public information indicates that a visit is ex ante less likely to occur.

This relationship is depicted graphically in Figure A1 in the appendix, and the intuition is straightforward. If publicly observable conditions suggest that an incumbent is likely to receive a visit, the occurrence of a visit is unsurprising; so the domestic opponents do not substantially revise their posterior beliefs of regime strength relative to their prior beliefs, and the visit reduces the risk of removal only slightly. If, on the other hand, prior conditions indicate that the foreign power is extremely unlikely to visit, the occurrence of the visit is highly informative, as the citizens infer that the foreign power must have observed an especially positive private signal of regime strength. A visit under such conditions should have a significantly greater effect in reducing the incumbent's risk of removal. Finally:

> *Hypothesis 4 (Policy concessions).* Conditional on surviving in office, the recipient of a visit reciprocates the visitor with a policy concession.

That visits constitute one end of a material exchange between leaders is central to our explanation of why visits occur with the frequency that they do, and the conditional nature of that exchange explains why visits provide credible public signals of incumbent strength.

Scope

Having formalized our theoretical argument, we can now consider more explicitly the scope of its applicability. First, in what types of political setting does a "citizen" face a payoff structure like the one we have presented? While the nature of political contestation varies drastically across regime types, a unifying feature is the incentive of political actors to fight on the winning side. Dissatisfied citizens want to participate in successful protests and uprisings; power-hungry elites want to enlist in successful coup plots; opportunistic activists and organized interests want to align themselves with successful leadership challenges; and each of these activities is far less desirable ex-post when it proves unsuccessful in unseating an incumbent. It is this feature of political contestation that we foreground in our model of domestic politics.

The payoff structure we describe may be most obviously applicable in a non-democratic context, where the political status quo is widely undesirable and the costs of a failed challenge are severe. But these incentives are certainly not unique to autocratic systems. A similar logic drives the decisions of actors in democratic settings—individual voters, communities, interest groups, or parties in parliamentary systems—in which targeted provision of public benefits is conditioned on past political support. In these contexts, the cost of backing a failed challenger ($-\kappa$, in the model) may be better understood as the foregone benefits, in the form of pork, patronage, or favorable policy, which the C player would have enjoyed had she supported the incumbent. Schwartz (1987) models an individual's decision to vote as being driven not by her expected pivotality in the electoral outcome, but rather by her expectation of being pivotal in determining the size of rewards that the electoral winner later delivers to her community. For a voter in this situation, regardless of her true ideological position, it is ex-post preferable to have been supportive of the winning candidate. Adida, Gottlieb, Kramon and McClendon (2019) likewise theorize voters in developing democracies as facing coordination dilemmas in moving away from inefficient clientelistic equilibria, and show that public information helps overcome these dilemmas. A diplomatic visit, we argue, can serve a similar role in coordinating voters' decisions. The logic of public

benefits being conditioned on electoral support may be an even better characterization of the behavior of organized interests, firms, unions, or minority parties within a coalition, whose political efforts during a campaign are more visible and more likely to be decisive in the electoral outcome (as compared to individual voters). The necessary condition for our model's applicability is that the "citizen" in a given context have an incentive to support whichever candidate proves successful, but must make her decision in the face of uncertainty.

The next question to consider is what types of foreign leader can be represented by our model's F player. The model first requires that the foreign power have some private information about the incumbent's strength. Recall that F's action can be informative and influential even if his private information is less precise than the private signal observed by the domestic opponents. That the US federal government, for instance, has spent \$75 billion per year in intelligence over the last decade (DeVine 2018) suggests that its private signals should actually be quite precise, and hence, that a US diplomatic visit should be quite informative.

In addition, the model requires that the foreign power have a wide range of foreign policy objectives which a concession (η) from another leader can help accomplish. The formal results do not depend on a strictly positive value of ψ, meaning that our theory can account for visits that occur when the foreign power has no baseline affinity for the incumbent. In fact, a sufficient condition for the existence of an informative equilibrium is simply that $\eta > \omega > 0$: a visit is ex-post beneficial for the visitor if and only if the incumbent survives. While our model allows for F to be susceptible to a reputational cost for backing failed incumbents, the results do not require it; the central claims hold if the foreign power is only constrained by the opportunity cost of his time.

Intuitively, it would seem that if the above conditions hold for any major power, they would do so to the fullest degree for the US. As such, we focus our empirical analysis on diplomatic visits of the US President.

Empirical Analysis

Our theory gives rise to the central empirical implication that leaders who receive diplomatic visits from major foreign powers face a lower risk of removal from office than those who do not. This prediction arises from two intrinsically related mechanisms: a selection effect, whereby stronger leaders are more likely to receive a visit, and a deterrent effect, whereby the visit itself enhances the recipient leader's survival. The remainder of the paper seeks to provide empirical evidence in support of these two mechanisms and the additional hypotheses presented above.

Data and Estimation

We test our theoretical predictions with data on diplomatic visits by US Presidents from 1960 to 2013. These data are available on the website of the State Department's Office of the Historian, with visits listed separately by travels of the President abroad, and visits of foreign leaders to the US. We construct our main independent variables of interest as a series of indicator variables at the leader-year level: *Visit in US*, *Visit from US Pres.*, and a pooled measure, *Any Visit*, which takes on a value of 1 if either type of visit occurs. The primary dependent variable in our analysis is leader survival in office, for which we use Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza (2009)'s Archigos dataset.

We seek to operationalize a range of other quantities from our theoretical model. First, our empirical analysis must, to the extent possible, take account of the publicly observable information regarding regime strength. If we could condition perfectly on all factors that constitute this public information, then any systematic relationship that remained between visits and leader survival would be attributable to the visitor's private information and the revelation thereof. To this end, the subsequent analyses include controls for GDP growth, income, and population; political institutions; leader age and resource rents, which have been found to be strong predictors of survival in office (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2018; Wright, Frantz and Geddes 2015); rotating UNSC membership, which has been shown to yield a range of survival-relevant benefits for

member-state leaders (Vreeland and Dreher 2014); and incidence of protests, strikes, riots, and government purges, all of which indicate some degree of political instability. Because we wish to identify the *informational* impact of visits, independent of any material benefits that may accompany them, we include controls for trade with and aid from the visiting foreign power, as well as the recipient's status as a mutual defense ally with the foreign power. We also want to avoid any spurious correlation that would arise from foreign powers refraining from visiting an incumbent during the latter's election year, so we control for the occurrence of elections for the office of the national leader.

From Archigos's record of leaders' dates of birth, we create the control variable *Relative Age*, which is normalized by subtracting from a leader's age in a given year the life expectancy in Sweden at that time, as a proxy for life expectancy under the best available medical care. We use Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson and Morrow (2003)'s Selectorate (S) and Winning Coalition (W) size as measures of political institutions. W represents the relative number of supporters a leader needs to remain in office, and S denotes the pool of potential replacements for the winning coalition. A larger W corresponds to more democratic systems, and a lower W/S ratio indicates that a leader has a more secure hold on power. From Hyde and Marinov (2012)'s NELDA dataset, we create a dummy variable indicating whether an election occurred for the office of the national leader during a given leader-year observation (attributing an election only to the outgoing leader in the case of a transition). For the remaining data sources, see Table A1 in the appendix.

Our unit of observation is the leader-year. To test the first hypothesis regarding the selective assignment of visits, we estimate logit models with visits as the outcome. For Hypotheses 2 and 3, the primary outcome of interest is leader survival, so we conduct hazard analyses to estimate the impact of state visits. Specifically, we use a Weibull proportional hazards model, of the form $h(t_j) = p t_j^{p-1} e^{(X'_{jt}\beta)}$, where leaders are indexed by j, t indicates a leader's year in office, and X_{jt} is a vector of covariates, including the visit indicators. We specify the shape parameter p as a function of W, the winning coalition size, with $p = e^{(\alpha + W_{jt}\gamma)}$; this allows a leader's baseline hazard rate, $h_0(t_j) = p t_j^{p-1}$, to

vary by regime type. Finally, we examine whether visits are reciprocated with policy concessions using a series of fixed-effects OLS regression models.

Main Results: Selection and Deterrence

We first consider the factors that predict US diplomatic visits, as per Hypothesis 1. The three columns of Table 1 report the predictors of visits from the US President, visits to the US, and the pooled measure of visits in either location. The results across all three models are largely consistent with our theoretical predictions. US Presidents are more willing to grant visits to countries with larger economies, to those that receive more imports from the US, and to those serving on the U.N. Security Council, as those are the countries with more valuable concessions to offer. The US conducts more visits with leaders for whom they have a stronger baseline affinity, as reflected in UNGA ideal point distance and bilateral economic and military aid. Presidents are reluctant to conduct visits with incumbents whose survival in office is uncertain, as indicated by the incumbent's age, election timing, and measures of instability,[8] but eager to visit leaders whose security in office is buoyed by high economic growth. A country's winning coalition size (a close analog to measures of democracy or autocracy) is not a robust predictor of visits; however, holding W constant, a larger selectorate size—which enhances a leader's security in office—does increase the likelihood of a visit. That visits are positively predicted by imports *from* the US, but negatively predicted by exports *to* the US, suggests that visits do not merely follow economic activity, but rather serve as a thing of value offered by the President in exchange for a grant of market access.

The tests of our second hypothesis—that visits enhance the recipient's survival—are reported in Table 2. Columns 1 and 2 report the effects of visits differentiated by location. These results show that visits to the US and visits from the US President are strong predictors of leader survival in office, significant at $p < 0.001$. Columns 3 and 4 pool these different types of visit into a single explanatory variable, *Any Visit*. In all

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[8]The instability measure used here is an inverse covariance weighted index, constructed from counts of protests, riots, strikes, purges. See appendix for details.

Table 1: Predictors of US Presidential Visits (Logit)

DV:	Visit From US Pres. (1)	Visit In US (2)	Any Visit (3)
Rel. Age	-0.011$^+$	-0.017***	-0.018***
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
W	-0.438	0.511$^+$	0.451
	(0.467)	(0.310)	(0.292)
S	0.572	0.549**	0.494*
	(0.480)	(0.206)	(0.206)
Election	-0.326$^+$	-0.496***	-0.539***
	(0.167)	(0.118)	(0.110)
Ln(Pop)	0.163	-0.020	-0.004
	(0.100)	(0.086)	(0.081)
Ln(GDP)	0.117	0.181*	0.192*
	(0.121)	(0.079)	(0.081)
Growth	0.029*	0.024***	0.027***
	(0.014)	(0.007)	(0.008)
UNGA Ideal Pt. Dist.$_{t-1}$	-0.453***	-0.435***	-0.451***
	(0.120)	(0.097)	(0.094)
UNSC (rotating)	-0.180	0.320**	0.310*
	(0.179)	(0.123)	(0.125)
Instability Index$_{t-1}$	-0.201	-0.201**	-0.243***
	(0.137)	(0.069)	(0.069)
Ln(Imports from US$_{t-1}$)	0.427***	0.394***	0.414***
	(0.117)	(0.065)	(0.067)
Ln(Exports to US$_{t-1}$)	-0.022	-0.125**	-0.113*
	(0.087)	(0.045)	(0.046)
Ln(Econ Aid$_{t-1}$)	0.004	0.046***	0.045***
	(0.017)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Ln(Mil Aid$_{t-1}$)	0.027*	0.012	0.013
	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Ally$_{t-1}$	-0.216	-0.316$^+$	-0.304*
	(0.187)	(0.163)	(0.155)
Resource Rents$_{t-1}$ (% GDP) (imputed)	-0.003	-0.008	-0.010
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	No	No	No
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	5864	6023	6023

Note: Observations are leader-years. Standard errors clustered by country. $+p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001$

models, the magnitude of the effects is substantial: the exponentiated coefficients yield proportional hazard estimates ranging from 0.48 to 0.30, meaning that, all else equal, a visit is associated with a 51-70% reduction in the risk of removal from office. As reported in the online appendix, and discussed further below, these results are robust to a range of alternative measures and specifications, and hold across various subsets of the sample.

Table 3 considers the effect of diplomatic visits on different means of leader removal, as coded by the Archigos dataset. Regular removals are defined as cases in which "the leader is removed in accordance with explicit rules or established conventions of his or her

Table 2: Weibull Hazard Analysis of Leader Removal

	By Visit Type		Pooled	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Visit from US Pres.	-0.731***	-0.898***		
	(0.184)	(0.213)		
Visit in US	-0.984***	-1.118***		
	(0.108)	(0.118)		
Any Visit			-1.083***	-1.242***
			(0.107)	(0.118)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Year FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	6023	6023	6023	6023
Number of Leaders	1156	1156	1156	1156
Failures	955	955	955	955
LogLikelihood	-976.063	-738.729	-972.825	-735.581

Note: Observations are leader-years. Failures are removal from office by any means. Covariates included but not reported: Rel. Age, W, S, Ln(Population), Ln(GDP), Growth, Ln(Riots$_{t-1}$), Ln(Purges$_{t-1}$), Ln(Strikes$_{t-1}$), Ln(Protests$_{t-1}$), Ln(Imports from US$_{t-1}$), Ln(Exports to US$_{t-1}$), Ln(Econ Aid$_{t-1}$), Ln(Mil Aid$_{t-1}$), Rotating UNSC Member, UNGA Ideal Pt. Distance$_{t-1}$, Ally$_{t-1}$, Resource Rents$_{t-1}$. Full specification reported in appendix. Standard errors clustered by country. *$p < 0.05$,** $p < 0.01$,*** $p < 0.001$.

particular country," with all other removals coded as irregular. Visits dramatically reduce the risk of both regular and irregular removal, and the impact is substantially larger for irregular removal (though less precisely estimated, given the relative infrequency of irregular removal). This finding is consistent with the notion that coordination dilemmas are especially acute when it comes to removing a leader by irregular means, and that public signals are especially important in overcoming the inherent risk and uncertainty that accompany such an effort. In a similar vein, the relationship between visits and survival is substantially weaker during the recipient leader's election year, as compared to off-election years, indicating that visits are most effective in deterring extra-institutional challenges against the incumbent.

The Informational Mechanism

To examine more thoroughly the informational mechanism linking visits to regime survival, we seek to test Hypothesis 3: that the impact of a visit on leader survival is greatest when a visit is ex-ante least likely to occur. Tests of this hypothesis are

Table 3: Weibull Hazard Analysis of Leader Removal, by Means of Removal

	Regular (1)	Irregular (2)	Any Removal (3)
Visit from US Pres.	-0.869***	-1.800*	-1.420***
	(0.212)	(0.797)	(0.380)
Visit in US	-1.156***	-1.583***	-1.273***
	(0.123)	(0.423)	(0.161)
Election	1.804***	0.631**	1.589***
	(0.128)	(0.241)	(0.114)
Visit from US Pres.			0.874^{+}
× Election			(0.451)
Visit in US			0.226
× Election			(0.207)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	6193	6193	6193
Number of Leaders	1183	1183	1183
Failures	791	182	975
LogLikelihood	-607.419	-210.557	-738.292

Note: Observations are leader-years. All controls from Table 2 included but not reported. Standard errors clustered by country. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

complicated by the fact that multiple factors—public knowledge of regime (in)stability, baseline affinity, reputational costs, and potential concessions—contribute to the ex ante likelihood of a visit, and that we lack direct measures of each. We can, however, employ various proxy measures. Table 4 uses the incidence of strikes, protests, riots, and purges as indicators of the common prior knowledge of regime instability. In particular, the first column uses a composite index of these incidents, while the second uses a binary measure indicating whether any such event occurred in the year before the visit. Following the H3 prediction of a conditional effect of diplomatic visits, we repeat the hazard analyses from Table 2 while interacting the instability measures with the visit indicators. The magnitude and precision of the interactive estimates varies somewhat by specification, but all results point in the same direction: in the absence of a visit, instability increases the risk of removal; but if a visit occurs in the midst of political instability, the impact of the visit is substantially larger than the impact of a visit granted to a regime perceived to be stable ex ante.

Table 4: Weibull Hazard Analysis of Leader Removal, by Regime Instability

	(1)	(2)
Visit from US Pres.	-1.002***	-0.817***
	(0.235)	(0.235)
Visit in US	-1.137***	-0.876***
	(0.119)	(0.130)
Instability Index$_{t-1}$	0.149*	
	(0.065)	
Visit from US Pres.	-0.751*	
$\times$ Instability Index$_{t-1}$	(0.330)	
Visit in US	-0.268	
$\times$ Instability Index$_{t-1}$	(0.200)	
Any Instability$_{t-1}$		0.185*
		(0.092)
Visit from US Pres.		-0.224
$\times$ Instability Index$_{t-1}$		(0.350)
Visit in US		-0.648***
$\times$ Any Instability$_{t-1}$		(0.190)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	6023	6023
Number of Leaders	1156	1156
Failures	955	955
LogLikelihood	-738.662	-737.027

Note: Observations are leader-years. Failure is removal by any means. All controls from Table 2 (except for individual instability measures) included but not reported. Standard errors clustered by country. $^{+}p < 0.1,$ $^{*}p < 0.05,$ $^{**}p < 0.01,$ $^{***}p < 0.001$

As additional evidence in support of H3, we show that the impact of a visit is highest for leaders towards whom the US is especially critical in its human rights reporting. (This analysis is reported in Table A2 in the appendix but omitted here due to space limitations.) Visiting such an incumbent is, ceteris paribus, less desirable for the US President, and is ex ante less likely to occur. A visit under these conditions therefore reveals the US assessment of the incumbent as an inevitable diplomatic partner, and thus provides an even stronger deterrent signal than does a visit with an incumbent towards whom the US has a higher baseline affinity.

Table 5: Policy Concessions Following a Visit (OLS)

| | UNGA Ideal Pt. Dist.$_{t+1}$ | | Imports from US$_{t+1}$ (ln) | Exports to US$_{t+1}$ (ln) | Econ. Aid from from US$_{t+1}$ (ln) | Mil. Aid from US$_{t+1}$ (ln) |
	(All votes)	(Important)				
Visit from US Pres.	-0.024**	-0.041***	0.056**	0.033	-0.017	-0.242
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.021)	(0.030)	(0.252)	(0.228)
Visit in US	-0.024**	-0.037***	0.030*	0.056**	0.129	0.459**
	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.108)	(0.149)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4981	3374	5005	5005	5005	5005
R^2	0.963	0.971	0.963	0.952	0.803	0.742

Note: Observations are leader-years. Controls included but not reported: W, S, Ln(Population), Ln(GDP), Growth, Ln(Econ. Aid$_{t-1}$), Ln(Mil. Aid$_{t-1}$), Ally$_{t-1}$, Ln(Imports from US$_{t-1}$), Ln(Exports to US$_{t-1}$), UNGA Ideal Pt. Dist.$_{t-1}$. Standard errors clustered by country. $^{+}p < 0.1,^{*} p < 0.05,^{**} p < 0.01,^{***} p < 0.001$

Visits and Policy Concessions

As a further test of our theory's implications, we examine whether visits systematically yield policy concessions from the recipient leader. The first three columns of Table 5 report the results of separate tests with three outcomes: measures of ideal point distance from the US in UNGA voting, using both a measure based on all UNGA votes and a measure based only on the subset of votes the US State Department has identified as important; and the volume of imports received from the US. Note that the outcome variables are measured with a one-year lead relative to the regressors, and that the units in the panel structure are leaders rather than countries; this provides us with an estimate of concessions following visits, conditional on the visit recipient remaining in office, which is precisely our theoretical quantity of interest. All three models find visits to be systematically reciprocated with concessions. While the concessions reaped from diplomatic visits may often be case-specific and difficult to observe or quantify, we are able to identify concessions in these domains that apply broadly across countries in their relations with the US.

The latter three columns of Table 5, however, provide more nuanced insight into the bilateral exchange that a diplomatic visit entails. Each of these outcomes—exports to the US, and bilateral economic and military aid from the US—represents a material benefit that the US can offer the recipient leader along with the visit; and each one

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increases following a visit *to* the US, but not following a visit *from* the US. In light of this observation, we can interpret a visit from the US President as a more pure case of our theorized exchange: the US President visits an incumbent, gives that incumbent little in the way of material support, but reaches an agreement for a future policy concession from the incumbent—and as a result, the incumbent's risk of removal is substantially decreased. This sequence of events is fully consistent with our theory, and difficult to reconcile with other candidate explanations. The survival benefits of a visit *to* the US, on the other hand, reflect a confluence of factors: the revelation of the US President's private information, as well as expectation among the incumbent's constituents of future material benefits from the US. This may help account for the fact visits to the US have a slightly larger coefficient in Table 2, despite the fact that a US President traveling to the incumbent's country might incur a greater opportunity cost and thus carry a more informative signal.

That a visit to the US may occur as part of a mutual exchange of material goods, however, does not obviate the importance of our theorized informational mechanism. At a basic level, an account focusing only on the material exchange would still need to provide some explanation as to why the leaders choose to publicize that exchange through a state visit. There may well be complementarities between public visits and material support; indeed, in related work we demonstrate theoretically how publicity can serve as a force multiplier for material support, drawing attention to it and discouraging opposition efforts to a greater extent than would discreetly delivered assistance (Malis and Smith 2019). In any case, however, the role of the visit itself is fundamentally informational. As a robustness check we split the sample by leaders who do and do not receive any bilateral military or economic aid from the US, and find that the effects of visits (both in and out of the US) persist across each subsample (see Table A3 in the appendix).

Robustness and Alternative Explanations

The main results reported in Table 2 are robust to a range of alternative specifications, including: using a Cox rather than a Weibull proportional hazards model (Table A4);

replacing the winning coalition (W) measure with Polity score (Table A6); measuring covariates in t rather than $t-1$ (Table A7); imputing missing covariate values (Table A8); and disaggregating visits by their State Department classification (Table A9). In addition, we conduct an instrumental variable analysis that leverages exogenous shifts in priorities between first- and second-term presidents (Tables A11 and A12). Results of all robustness tests are consistent with those reported in the main tables.

Given the robust evidence of a relationship between state visits and leader survival, and specific evidence consistent with our theorized mechanism, we finally consider whether other potential explanations could account for the same empirical findings. Perhaps the most natural line of criticism against our central claims is to argue that the observed relationship between visits and leader survival is driven entirely by a selection effect, and that no deterrence is in fact occurring. However, there are certain empirical patterns that are difficult to reconcile with a pure-selection interpretation. First, consider the evidence in Table 4, examining whether the relationship between visits and incumbent removal is conditioned by domestic instability. By a pure-selection argument, a leader's risk of removal would seem the most uncertain (and thus, the hardest for F to predict) under high instability; if he does visit under such conditions, the higher variance in potential outcomes would imply that he faces a higher risk of miscalculating, and visiting an incumbent who is subsequently removed. This would imply that domestic instability weakens the relationship between visits and leader removal. In fact, we observe the opposite: according to Table 4, the relationship between visits and the risk of removal is strongest (that is, negative and greatest in magnitude) when the visit occurs in the midst of domestic instability, consistent with our deterrence hypothesis. The findings in Table 3 speak to a similar point: insofar as regular removal is easier for an outside observer to anticipate than irregular removal, a selection-only argument would predict a stronger relationship between visits and regular removal, than between visits and irregular removal; and again we observe the opposite.

Conclusion

Political leaders' time is severely limited and extremely valuable. When they spend substantial portions of their tenures traveling to foreign countries and engaging in seemingly symbolic acts of in-person diplomacy, analysts of international politics should take that behavior seriously. This is what we have endeavored to do in the present study.

We put forward a rationalist explanation for state visits, built from an account of foreign powers' incentives to invest in relationships with strong incumbents and challengers' incentives to participate in successful opposition efforts. A foreign power selectively assigns visits to incumbents who are more likely to survive in office, and this selection process publicly reveals the foreign power's private assessment of regime strength. Because domestic challengers are incompletely informed as to the incumbent's strength, they respond to the visit by lowering their expectation of the probability that a challenge will prove successful, and become less likely to take action. This incentive structure and informational environment can characterize political competition across institutional contexts, whether a challenge against the incumbent entails orchestrating a coup, participating in a mass protest, or withdrawing electoral support. State visits enhance regime survival because they deter potential challengers, who must balance risks and rewards under fundamental uncertainty.

Our findings speak to broader questions of how major world powers can influence political contestation abroad. We contribute to the body of "second-image reversed" accounts of international determinants of domestic politics (Gourevitch 1978) with a novel interpretation of a widely practiced form of statecraft, placing leaders' survival incentives at the core of our theory. Akin to such widely studied phenomena as development aid, loans, arms transfers, and military intervention, the US President's choice to invest time and reputation into symbolic support for a foreign leader proves to be a powerful instrument for securing that leader's hold on power. The ability of world leaders to shape foreign political developments through their diplomatic engagements is a largely unexplored feature of international politics, and one that is rich with opportunities for future research.

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