

Domestic diversion: Selective targeting of minority out-groups

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cmp**Graig R. Klein¹**

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Abstract

Domestic political use of force is a strategy for political leaders to divert the public's attention away from economic instability and rebuild political capital. But, diversionary incentives are not the only motivation; the targeted vulnerable minority's capabilities are important. We analyze how the combination of diversionary incentive and out-group mobilization capabilities influences leaders' decision-calculus. Embattled leaders make strategic decisions about both the target and the adequate severity of force to accomplish diversion without risking conflict escalation. We empirically test the resulting hypotheses using the Minorities at Risk dataset from 1998 to 2003 and find support for our expectations. Incentive alone does not determine domestic political use of force; the same incentive produces variance in the severity of force dependent on the targeted out-group's mobilization capability. Governments match the severity of domestic force to political survival goals and the costs and risks of political use of force.

Keywords

Coercion, domestic diversion, in-group–out-group, mobilization, political use of force, political violence

The June 2015 Turkish Parliament election results weakened the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) and threatened the leadership's political survival. In response, AKP announced new elections for November 2015 and in the interim dramatically changed its policies toward the Kurdish minority (Andy-Ar Survey, 2015; Girit, 2015; Tures, 2015). AKP replaced negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with bellicose rhetoric and use of force. Opposition parties and dissidents claim that the policy shift was an attempt

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to divert public attention from Turkey's poor economic performance and accusations of fraud against the AKP to create a rally around nationalist sentiment (Arango and Yeginsu, 2015; Schwartz and Sirin, 2015), all with the purpose of increasing AKP's vote share. As a result of the November 2015 elections, AKP retained power by winning 49% of the vote share.

The domestic political use of force² against an out-group is an established tool for fending off threats to political survival (Tir and Jasinski, 2008). Similar political use of force by incumbent governments against out-groups, e.g. ethnic minorities, is well documented in Kenya, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Spain and Yugoslavia (Cederman et al., 2013; Collier, 2011; Gagnon, 1995; Martínez-Herrera, 2002; Tir and Jasinski, 2008). In all of these cases, political elites manipulated ethnic and religious identities, taking advantage of existing social cleavages to divert criticism and improve their prospects of political survival.

Political use of force is the outcome of a strategic cost–benefit calculation and is an instrumental application of violence (Davenport, 2007a, b; Wood and Kathman, 2014). It protects elites' preferences and staves off threats to political survival and is most likely to occur when the costs are low and the likelihood of success is high (Davenport, 1999). Leaders pursue their policy and personal preferences through the most cost-effective means available such as distributing private or public goods or inducing violence. The expected effectiveness of any one strategy is considered against the costs and benefits of alternative options. In times of economic instability, political use of force is comparatively less costly because it does not rely on the ability to purchase compliance through the distribution of public or private goods when government coffers are dwindling or depleted. It also generates benefits by diverting criticism away from instability and building political capital by exploiting societal cleavages.

The costs and benefits of domestic political use of force are defined by more than economically linked diversionary incentives; the targeted out-group's mobilization and organization capabilities also determine the costs—risk of retaliation or conflict escalation—and benefits—divert the public's attention from economic instability, boost in-group approval and bolster political survival. We analyze how the combination of economic turmoil and out-group mobilization and organization capabilities influences leaders' domestic political use of force decision-calculus.

Domestic political use of force occurs in an active strategic environment where the combination of economic incentive and a potential target out-group's mobilization capabilities calibrates the type and target of violence. Governments can target random members of an out-group, activists engaged in collective action, or leadership figures. The type of violence can range from arrests or restrictions on movement, to more intermediate force such as violent harassment or torture, to lethal force, i.e. killing of activists or systematically randomized killings of out-group members, to deploying militarized force. The combination of diversionary incentive and out-group mobilization and organizational capabilities causes variation across both dimensions—target and type—of use of force. Conceptualizing domestic political use of force as a scale, rather than a binary decision—to use force or not (Tir and Jasinski, 2008)—provides significantly greater theoretical and empirical leverage for understanding how diversionary incentives and out-group capabilities influence leaders' decision-calculus. Embattled leaders strategically select, “from the full repertoire of coercive activities” (Davenport, 2007b: 3), the severity of force necessary to accomplish diversion and political survival benefits and minimize the costs.

In this article, we explore the circumstances in which leaders engage in use of force to accomplish political objectives. We demonstrate that incentive and out-group capabilities define leaders' cost–benefit calculations for determining the severity of domestic political use

of force. We test the resulting hypotheses using the Minorities at Risk Project (MAR) (2009) dataset from 1998 to 2003³ in all countries with at least one vulnerable minority group. We find support for our expectations. When confronted with economic instability, a principle incentive for domestic political use of force, if a leader resorts to the behavior, there is distinct variance in the severity of use of force depending on an out-group's mobilization and organization capabilities. We include suggestions for further research on the strategic calculations underlying domestic political use of force.

Political use of force

In an ideal world, leaders operate as utility-maximizers making crucial decisions for the well-being of their country. In reality, leaders pursue career goals such as re-election or high popularity and are willing to engage in nearly any behavior that aids their personal ambition. Political survival is the fundamental goal. As a result, threats to political survival are a domineering influence on leaders' decision-making (Young, 2012). Leaders' rationality implies that the least costly method of political survival is utilized first; and in the face of economic instability that depletes the state's coffers, the political use of force becomes comparatively less costly. Because political use of force punishes out-groups, it is an attractive means of handling short-term popular discontent without having to alter the in-group's and elites' supporters' preferred policies (Fordham, 1998). When political survival is threatened, the short-term benefits provided by political use of force are preferred to implementing long-term solutions (Foster, 2006).

Sometimes international politics provide an opportunity for avoiding costly domestic policy changes because embattled leaders can challenge an adversarial out-group using the state's military and foreign policy apparatus. The benefits of political use of force abroad are greater and the costs lower during economic instability at home because success diverts the public's attention and demonstrates a leader's competence (Downs and Rocke, 1994; Fordham, 1998; Levy, 1988; Ostrom and Job, 1986). The goal is to divert the public's attention and turn criticism for domestic failure into support for international success (Levy, 1988; Ostrom and Job, 1986).

Political use force abroad is also likely to boost presidential popularity and re-election prospects by creating nationalistic sentiment, "rally around the flag" effect, or, "patriotic fervor" (Blechman and Kaplan, 1978; Foster and Keller, 2010; Mueller, 1973; Russett, 1990). If the net benefits of provoking conflict with foreign adversaries are greater than the net costs, political elites have incentive to pursue political survival with international conflict rather than altering the status quo domestic policy (Gagnon, 1995; Gelpi, 1997). But, leaders with incentives to divert are *sine qua non* for use of force abroad (Clark, 2003; Clark et al., 2011; Fordham, 2005; Leeds and Davis, 1997; Meernik, 2000; Smith, 1996); the benefits also motivate domestic political use of force (Tir and Jasinski, 2008).

Targeting vulnerable domestic minorities, out-groups in society (Coser, 1956), provides embattled leaders with an opportunity to divert the public's attention from politically and economically troublesome issues. To deflect criticism, leaders can exploit historical cleavages (Tir and Jasinski, 2008) to ignite, or reignite past, animosities. Similar to justifications for repression, domestic use of force intends to manage, or eradicate, challenges (imagined or real) to political survival (Davenport, 2007b). During periods of economic instability and threats to leaders' political survival, a societal out-group becomes an easy scapegoat for the turmoil (Filindra and Peason-Merkowitz, 2013).

Economic policies influence a government's domestic repression behaviors. Structural changes, such as monetary policy adjustments aimed at increasing exports and economic growth, motivate repression to persuade compliance with unpopular policy decisions (Pion-Berlin, 1989). Economic conditions also affect citizens' perception of in-group–out-group relations. In response to economic recessions, prejudice increases because the in-group perceives the negative changes as a threat to their personal and group privileges (Filindra and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013).

But, incentives for political use of force do not directly translate into kinetic force; there is more to the political use of force calculus, particularly when conflict is restricted to domestic targets. The use of force is the product of a cost–benefit calculation, similar to the decision to repress (Davenport, 2007a). While economic turmoil and decline make use of force comparatively cheaper than other policy options, the cost–benefit calculus is complicated by the mobilization and organization capability of societal out-groups. The severity of political violence varies in accordance with minority groups' size and power distribution within the state (Rørbæk and Knudsen, 2015) and distribution of societal support (Asal and Phillips, 2015), but there is another important determinant—an out-group's mobilization and organization capabilities.

Domestic political use of force

The lack of opportunity for political use of force abroad encourages leaders to seek domestic targets for use of force when they face economic or political predicaments that cannot be recovered in the short term (Tir and Jasinski, 2008). The existence, number and size of out-groups influence the opportunity for domestic political use of force. The more out-groups there are residing in a country, the more opportunity a leader has to turn ethnic identity into a salient political debate in hopes of exploiting in-group–out-group tensions (Tir and Jasinski, 2008).

Building on the in-group–out-group dichotomy (Coser, 1956), conflict with an out-group is anticipated to create in-group unity (McLauchlin and Pearlman, 2012). Ruddell and Thomas (2015: 217) argue that “members of the dominant population lobby for policies that increase levels of coercive social control” against out-groups, making political use of force against domestic out-groups a viable political tool. Targeting domestic out-groups may boost support for the leader in the in-group (Gagnon, 1995; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; Tir and Jasinski, 2008). Elites can make ethnicity politically relevant to provoke violent ethnic conflicts (Gagnon, 1995; Jenne, 2004).

Domestic political use of force framed by in-group–out-group dynamics also enhances the strength and time span of the “rally around the flag” effect as leaders play the ethnic card (Cederman et al., 2013). Defining political issues in cultural or ethnic terms is a cost-effective policy because it avoids changing the status quo, retains the political elites' support and rallies the public around the executive (Gagnon, 1995). If there is an out-group, particularly one that displays organization and mobilization capabilities, during economic declines, it provides a ready target for scapegoating, prejudice and hostility (Filindra and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013; King and Wheelock, 2007). Legitimate, or even perceived, threats to the in-group's well-being generate negative opinions of and support for government policies targeting an out-group (Baughn and Yaprak, 1996; Filindra and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013; Kaiser and Wilkins, 2010).

Changes in a country's economic conditions define the in-group's threat perception of the out-group; routinely, in-groups view threats to their status quo distribution of economic benefits, particularly if an out-group stands to gain, as zero-sum (Filindra and Perason-Merkowitz, 2013; King and Wheelock, 2007). Sometimes the in-group views changes to the status quo as "collective suicide" (Peleg, 2007: 67–68) or "jeopardize(ing) their hegemony" (Peleg, 2007; Rørbæk and Knudsen, 2015: 5), which provides the ruling elite with incentive, and legitimacy, to avoid compromise and antagonize an out-group.

Domestic political use of force is a routine strategy for increasing leaders' reelection prospects, particularly in Africa (Bates, 2008; Cederman et al., 2013). In Kenya and Ivory Coast leaders abused ethnic fragmentation to secure their seats in upcoming elections (Collier, 2011). Small-scale attacks have occurred in Ethiopia, targeting the Kalenjin people, and in Nigeria, targeting the Ibo and Ijaw minorities (Tir and Jasinski, 2008). The behavior is also observed in advanced democratic countries. In Spain, the Aznar government targeted the Basque population to serve Aznar's political ambitions and increase reelection chances despite declining ETA activity (Edles, 1999; Martínez-Herrera, 2002).

Leaders must calculate both the decision to resort to, and, the sufficient severity of use of force. This calculation is determined by the targeted out-group's characteristics—the political and militant organization and mobilization capabilities. The organization capability of the target influences both a leader's decision to pursue domestic political use of force and the sufficient severity of force. Domestic political use of force is the outcome of a complex decision to use force and how much. The objective is to distract criticism from economic problems, not to eliminate a threat. Embattled leaders consider the potential consequences and costs of domestic political use of force when selecting targets and calibrating a sufficient severity of force.

Out-group capability and calculating sufficient force

Through political use of force, leaders want to demonstrate competency via short and decisive military victories and avoid retaliation or conflict escalation. They aim to minimize the costs of aggressive policies and maximize the benefits of political use of force. To this end, leaders strategically select a target and the severity of force that maximizes the goals of diversionary ventures—public approval, low probability of backlash or escalation and comparatively low operational costs.

Choosing low-profile targets limits the potential for retaliation or conflict escalation, but low-profile targets reduce the likelihood of successfully diverting the public's attention and limit the potential for a strong rally effect (Tatar, 2006). Fragmented groups struggle to mount credible challenges to the status quo (Reese et al., 2005), making them a low-profile out-group-scapegoat since the perceived threat is small. The capacity to create threat reflects a group's ability to mobilize which is defined by the group's access to organizational resources and institutional structures (Almeida, 2003; Andrews, 2002; Reese et al., 2005). The ability to compete with other communal interests requires a complex internal political or militant organizational structure.

In general, political violence is less likely and less severe when minority groups struggle to mobilize (Brown and Boswell, 1997). As any minority group consolidates its position in society and presents credible claims to altering the distribution of benefits through mobilization strategies, it also creates conflict with the in-group and the state (Asal and Phillips, 2015).

Greater organization increases the threat perception, and greater threat perception increases support for government repression (Asal and Phillips, 2015).

Mobilized out-groups provide a legitimate target because these groups can challenge the status quo distribution of public goods and have the organization structure to, at least marginally, contend in politics. Organization structures are effective mechanisms for coordinating collective action (Tilly, 2003) and mobilizing against an already threatened in-group and diversion-minded political elites.

If an out-group supports a separatist movement, which, by definition, is founded on militant organization capabilities, they pose a legitimate challenge to state authority, increasing the likelihood of repression (Rørbæk and Knudsen, 2015). Militias signal an “institutionalized capacity to engage in violence” representing the potential for attaining political objectives that less organized groups struggle to gain (Asal et al., 2015: 3–4). But, if minority groups achieve at least minimal organization structures and institutions, remaining non-violent garners both domestic and international legitimacy and broadens the group’s appeal (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008). Non-violence makes the out-group less antagonistic and “scary” for the in-group, making government repression less imperative.

The greater an out-group’s threat, as defined by organization or mobilization structure, the greater the group’s capability to retaliate and escalate the conflict. Escalation risks the potential benefits generated by the use of force. Organization structures also define an out-group’s ability to mobilize co-ethnics, which, in turn, increases the risks of retaliation. But, at the same time, militant organized out-groups provide a façade, or excuse, for legitimizing domestic political use of force.

Leaders can use the state’s coercive apparatus against powerless out-groups and minimize both the risk and rally effect or they can target more salient, powerful out-groups and maximize the rally and risk effect. A façade of legitimacy is provided if an out-group is perceived as distrustful, threatening to the status quo or lacking mechanisms for credible commitment to a resolution short of defeat in battle (Lake and Rothchild, 1996; Roe, 1999). Yet even when presented with a legitimate target, embattled leaders must also strategically calculate a sufficient severity of force that maximizes the potential benefits against potential costs. We think of this as strategic capability matching by diversion-minded leaders, a calculation of how best to accomplish diversionary objectives by attacking targets that range from low profile, low legitimacy and low risk to high profile, high legitimacy and high risk.

Strategic capability matching produces a “scaled” outcome of the severity of domestic political use of force. Severe domestic political use of force against a non-threatening out-group creates more costs than benefits, whereas the same use of force against a highly organized and threatening out-group generates political capital and staves off threats to leaders’ political survival.

Non-mobilized out-groups present low costs and risks of both escalation and failure, but few diversionary benefits. Even historically ostracized minority groups lacking the ability to mobilize do not provide suitable targets because attacking powerless out-groups does not dramatize or increase the saliency of in-group–out-group tensions. Attacking a defenseless out-group destroys the legitimacy of the use of force, and might invite third parties to intervene. Once the use of force is illegitimate in the eyes of the public, there is no diversionary benefit to gain and only political capital to lose. We expect the probability that non-mobilized out-groups are targeted with any type of domestic political use of force to remain low as incentives for diversion increase.

Politically mobilized out-groups represent a salient threat to the in-group, but lack the organization capability for reciprocal violence. We expect the probability that these out-groups are the victims of increasingly severe domestic political use of force to increase as incentives increase. But, because they lack armed/militant capabilities, deploying the state's military apparatus against them threatens the perception of legitimate repression; therefore, as incentives for domestic political use of force increase, politically mobilized out-groups are less likely to be targeted with militarized force.

Militant mobilized out-groups signal that violence could be a routine and long-term commitment (Asal et al., 2015; Tarzi, 2005), making them a high-profile, high-legitimacy and high-risk target. The ability to reciprocate violence makes "intermediate" levels of domestic political use of force too risky. Yet an out-group's militancy allows diversion-minded political elites to propagate the out-group as such a phenomenal threat to the status quo and national interests that militarized force becomes credible. When incentives for diversion increase, embattled leaders are more likely to target militant out-groups with militarized force and less likely to target these groups with "intermediate" domestic political use of force. The balkanization of Yugoslavia and the ongoing, as of April 2016, AKP-PKK conflict in Turkey exemplify the impact out-group mobilization has on the severity of domestic political use of force.

In Yugoslavia, Serbian conservative elites led by Milosevic confronted threatening economic and political turmoil and potential reforms with domestic political use of force against a high-profile, high-risk out-group. The politicization of ethnic cleavages and initiation of domestic political use of force ultimately escalated to ethnic war. The initial use of force was a purposeful and rational strategy (Gagnon, 1995). By framing the political debate in ethnic terms, the elite shifted attention from reformist policies toward alleged threats of minority nationalism—Serbian conservatives demonized other ethnic groups, provoked violent confrontations along ethnic lines, accused minority political parties of pursuing policies of ethnic cleansing of Serbs, organized mass rallies, stormed villages to annex the territory and ultimately initiated a campaign of militarized ethnic conflict and cleansing against out-groups (Gagnon, 1995).

When faced with diversionary incentive, the calculated action is engaging in a sufficient level of political use of force, which generates political capital and benefit while also limiting the risk of backlash and conflict escalation. The complex decision calculus produces a "scaled" outcome of the sufficient severity of use of force. Lethal or militarized use of force against a non-threatening minority out-group creates more costs than benefits and is a catastrophic blow to political survival, whereas the same use of force against a highly organized and threatening minority out-group generates political capital. We hypothesize that an interactive relationship between incentive and minority group mobilization capability determines the severity of domestic political use of force. More formally:

Hypothesis 1: As incentive for political use of force increases, we expect the severity of domestic political use of force to increase.

Hypothesis 2: As an out-group's organization capability increases, we expect the severity of domestic political use of force against the group to increase.

Hypothesis 3: The severity of domestic political use of force is determined by an interactive effect of incentive and out-group organization capability.

If elites successfully propagate a vulnerable minority as a threat to society, tensions between that minority and the state become increasingly difficult to resolve and can result in atrocious violence (Lake and Rothchild, 1996). Diversion-incentivized leaders are cognizant of the trade-offs among sufficient use of force, out-groups' organization and mobilization capabilities and the risk of escalation, and to best serve the objectives of domestic political use of force, vary the severity of use of force to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs.

Research design

We conduct a cross-national study of domestic political use of force in a sample of all countries with at least one domestic vulnerable minority group from 1998 to 2003.⁴ Our unit of analysis is out-group–country year dyads; the estimation sample contains 277 dyads in 114 countries and a total of 1633 observations.

Dependent variable

We utilize MAR's (2009) coding of 23 government repression tactics on minority groups variables and the target of repression to generate our dependent variable, *Domestic Force*.⁵ By definition, for *Domestic Force* to serve political use of force purposes, the action must be "viewable" or be public knowledge; therefore, we first categorize the 23 tactics into public and private actions, and then classify public actions as non-violent, non-lethal, lethal, or militarized.

Domestic Force is an ordinal scale ranging from 0 to 12. Zero indicates no observable *Domestic Force* (incidents of domestic spying are coded as 0). Higher values of the scale represent increasingly repressive and indiscriminate uses of force. Values from 1 to 3 classify non-violent actions; increases in value reflect the targets of domestic political use of force ascending from group members engaged in collective action, group members engaged and not engaged in collective action, and group members not engaged in collective action, respectively. Values from 4 to 6 indicate non-lethal actions; values from 7 to 9 are lethal actions; and values from 10 to 12 are militarized actions (see Figure A1 in the Online Appendix⁶). Each set of actions follows the increasingly indiscriminate scale of targeting. Some 50.5% of observations are coded as 0; 13.2% range from 1 to 3; 13.5% range from 4 to 6; 8.9% range from 7 to 9; and 14.0% range from 10 to 12.

Independent variables

To test hypothesis 1, we rely on *Unemployment Rate* (World Bank, 2015b) as an indicator of economic turmoil and instability. Members of the in-group latch onto the unemployment rate as a macro-level indicator of threat and challenges to the status quo privileges by an out-group as an increasing rate symbolizes job competition (Filindra and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013; King and Wheelock, 2007; Quillian, 1995). Job competition is a leading threat to in-group economic benefits and privileges (Quillian, 1995).

We rely on *Minority Mobilization* to test hypothesis 2. It is a five-category ordinal scale of MAR's (2009) measure of group organization for joint political action; 1 = non-mobilized (no political movements or organizations); 2 = political (an umbrella, or, one or more political groups represent the vulnerable minority); 3 = mostly political and some militant;

4 = mostly militant and some political; and, 5 = militant. Approximately 8.7% of observations are non-mobilized; 56.5% are political; 18.5% are mostly political and some militant; 12.0% mostly militant and some political; and 4.4% are militant.

Unemployment Rate and *Minority Mobilization* are the constituent terms for the multiplicative interaction variable we create to test hypothesis 3. Both constituent terms are expected to have a positive effect on *Domestic Force*, but it is the interactive effect of *Unemployment* × *Mobilization* that motivates variation in the severity of *Domestic Force*.

Control variables

We account for competing incentives and disincentives for domestic political use of force. Civil war is a tangible threat to political survival and likely motivates government behavior, in particular, high “levels” of use of force, irrespective of competing threats to political survival such as unemployment. We control for this competing incentive with a binary measure of *Ongoing Civil War* from the PRIO/UCDP’s Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Themner and Wallensteen, 2014); a value of 1 indicates an ongoing internal or internationalized civil war, 0 indicates no conflict.

Status quo respect for human rights is a disincentive for domestic political use of force because it violates political and social norms, which intensifies, rather than diminishes, threats to political survival. We include a measure of *Human Rights*, which is the CIRI Data measure of Physical Integrity Rights (Cingranelli et al., 2014); higher values correspond to increased respect for human rights.

We control for three conditions that influence the cost–benefit analysis and decision calculus of domestic political use of force. Higher levels of *Political Discrimination* (MAR, 2009) and *Economic Discrimination* (MAR, 2009)⁷ likely reduce the costs of *Domestic Force*. Higher *Polity* scores correspond to greater democracy and likely increase the costs of *Domestic Force*. We rescale Polity IV to range from 0 to 20 (Marshall et al., 2014). We also account for a country’s *Youth Bulge* population [ratio of the 15–24 year olds to 15+ year olds] (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015) because the proportion of the population with less to risk from escalating or retaliating conditions the costs and risks of *Domestic Force*.

A government’s ability to survive economic stagnation also influences the cost–benefit analysis. Wealthier states may be better capable of surviving economic downturns without reverting to domestic political use of force. Therefore, we include the natural log of *GDP per Capita* (World Economic Outlook Database, 2014).

The *Number of Minority Groups* (MAR, 2009) and *Relative Excluded Population* (Wimmer et al., 2009) are both measures of opportunity for domestic political use of force (Tir and Jasinski, 2008), and the size of the excluded population influences political elites’ ability to frame a minority group as a legitimate threat to the status quo or majority’s benefits. We include a one-year lag of our dependent variable, *Domestic Force*_(t-1). Table A2 in the Online Appendix includes descriptive statistics of all variables.

Estimation technique

Our dependent variable, *Domestic Force*, is an ordinal scale with non-negative values. We test our expectations using ordered probit regression analysis.⁸ This technique

measures the effect of predictor variables on the probability of each value of an ordered dependent variable. We employ robust standard errors clustered by out-group–country year dyads.

Results

We find mixed support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 is only supported when the interactive effect of incentive and mobilization capabilities is not included. Models 1 and 2 show positive linear relationships between minority organization capability, economic turmoil and the severity of *Domestic Force*. The interaction hypothesis (Hypothesis 3) is supported in Model 3 and we reject the null.⁹ Minority group mobilization capability conditions the effect of political use of force incentive, i.e. high unemployment rate, on domestic political use of force. Table 1 presents the results.

Incentive alone does not determine domestic political use of force; the same incentive produces variance in the severity of force dependent on the targeted out-group's mobilization capability. Governments match the severity of domestic force to political survival incentive and the costs and risks of political use of force. This validates our argument that the decision to employ domestic political use of force is a nuanced calculation of alternative severities of force, and not a binary decision between force and no force. We focus our discussion of the results on substantive interpretations.

The predicted probability of no *Domestic Force* across unemployment (ranging from the 5th to 95th percentiles; 2.6–21.5%) increases from 55.7 to 65.1% for non-mobilized out-groups. It slightly decreases for political mobilized out-groups from 47.9 to 43.8% and significantly decreases for mostly political and some militant, mostly militant and some

Table 1. Determinants of the severity of domestic political use of force

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	0.001 (0.008)	0.013* (0.006)	−0.031 (0.020)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	0.693*** (0.071)	0.290*** (0.067)	0.147 (0.096)
<i>Unemployment × Mobilization</i>			0.018* (.008)
<i>Political Discrimination</i>		0.155*** (0.035)	0.165*** (0.034)
<i>Economic Discrimination</i>		0.066** (0.022)	0.064** (0.022)
<i>Human Rights</i>		−0.052* (0.030)	−0.047 (0.029)
<i>Number of Groups</i>		−0.020 (0.019)	−0.018 (0.019)
<i>Polity</i>		−0.001 (0.009)	−0.001 (0.009)
<i>Excluded Population</i>		0.012 (0.036)	0.008 (0.036)
<i>GDP per Capita</i>		−0.033 (0.051)	−0.042 (0.051)
<i>Youth Bulge</i>		−0.463 (0.793)	−0.515 (0.788)
<i>Ongoing Civil War</i>		0.213* (0.110)	0.238* (0.113)
<i>Domestic Force_(t−1)</i>		0.261*** (0.018)	0.261*** (0.018)
<i>N</i>	1633	1383	1383
Wald χ^2 (probability > χ^2)	95.84 (0.0000)	559.90 (0.0000)	569.62 (0.0000)
Pseudo R^2	0.085	0.264	0.265
Clusters	277	260	260

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. Two-tailed significance.

Robust standard errors clustered by minority group–country year dyads.

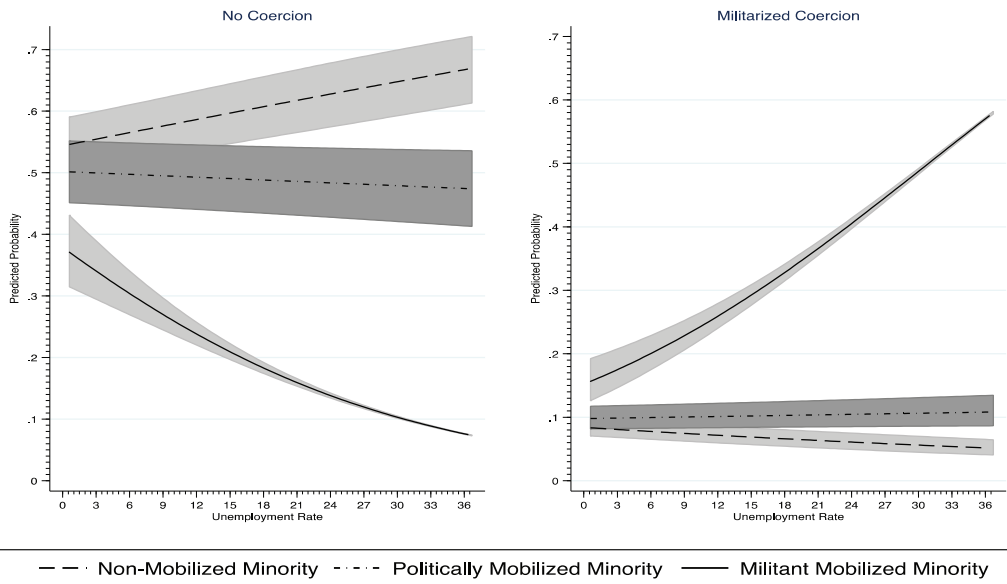


Figure I. Predicted probabilities of no domestic force and militarized actions.

political and militant mobilized out-groups from 40.2 to 24.2%, from 32.9 to 10.7% and from 26.2 to 3.7%, respectively.

When we change the predicted outcome of interest to militarized actions against out-group members engaged in collective actions (the most common “level” of militarized action in the estimation sample, a value of 10 in our scale), it is evident that the combination of opportunity and incentive motivates domestic political use of force. As changes in unemployment increase from the 5th to 95th percentiles, the predicted probability for non-mobilized, political mobilized, and mostly political and some militant out-groups remains relatively stable, 0.9–0.4, 1.4–1.8, and 2.3–6.0% respectively. Greater variation, and an ominous increasing trend, is predicted for some political and militant and mostly militant mobilized out-groups—3.5–14.8 and 5.3–28.0%, respectively.

To coherently plot the predicted probability of *Domestic Force* across our interaction term, we collapse our ordinal scale to reflect each “level” of domestic political use of force without intra-level variation based on the collective action of the victims. Figure 1 compares the predicted probability of the trade-off of no *Domestic Force* and militarized actions. The shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals. For clarity, we focus on the effect of three different minority group mobilization capabilities—non-mobilized, political, and militant. Considering this binary decision, the influence of incentive and opportunity is clear; as the incentive for domestic political use of force increases, embattled governments are significantly less likely to refrain from domestic political use of force against militant out-groups than non-mobilized or political out-groups. Governments appear willing to risk the costs of retaliation and escalation when the economic threat to political survival is high.

Figure 2 presents the nuanced trade-off we theorize. We plot the predicted probability of targeting non-mobilized, political, and militant mobilized out-groups with non-violent, non-

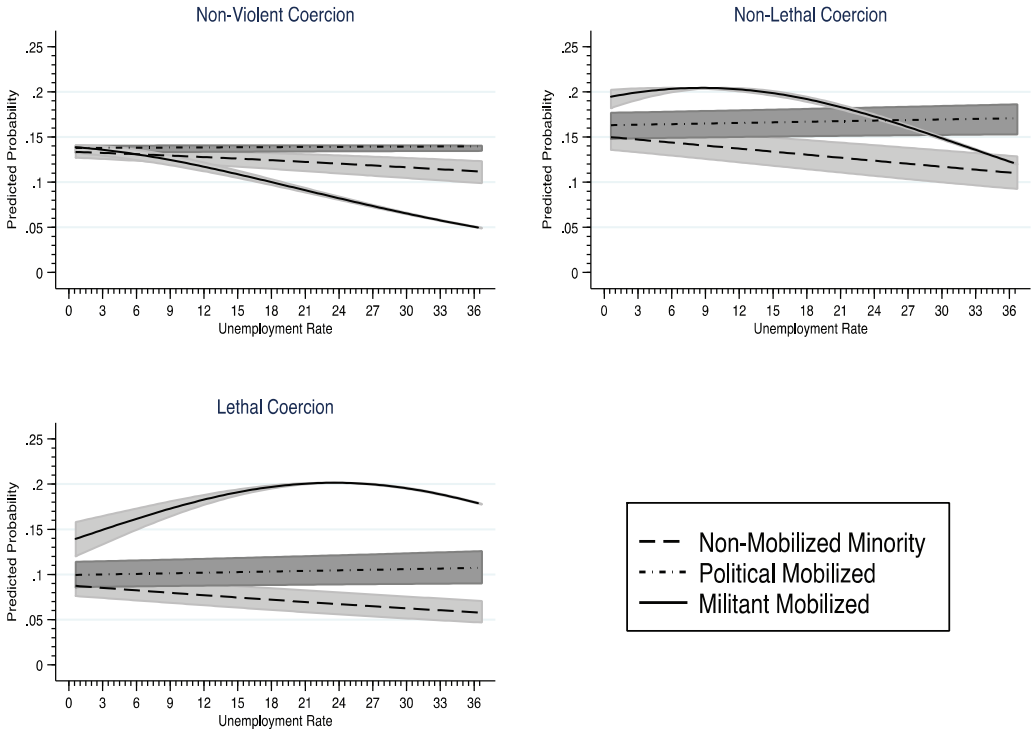


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of non-violent, non-lethal and lethal actions.

lethal, and lethal actions. Again, the shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals. The predicted probability plots demonstrate an intricate decision calculus and cost–benefit analysis by the government. An out-group’s mobilization capability generates significant differences in the severity of domestic political use of force across identical measures of incentive.

Robustness checks

We perform several robustness checks validating the strength of the results. Election cycles can structure the costs and benefits of domestic political use of force as any threat to political survival is likely greatest as an election approaches. In addition, a “rally around the co-ethnic” effect may be short-lived. The risk of conflict escalation is also different in election years. High-risk targets may be significantly less risky during election years as the majority of political costs associated with civil war are contingent on remaining in office. Extra risky behavior, targeting out-groups with militant mobilization structures, becomes increasingly acceptable when one’s political future is on the electoral chopping block. The mix of diversionary incentive and group organization capabilities could be significantly more toxic in election years. If so, it provides evidence that leaders are “extra” strategic and calculated in their domestic political use of force.

We re-run each model on estimation samples restricted to election years—*Executive Election Years*, *Legislative Election Years* and *National Election Year* (International Institute

for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2015). We account for the three types of elections because our sample includes both parliamentary and presidential democracies as well as autocracies with elected legislatures.

The interactive relationship may be strongest in executive election years because the executive is fighting for his own political survival. Our expectation regarding legislative election years is not as straightforward; while winning the Parliament is critical for sustaining political survival, creating an incentive for domestic political use of force, the distribution of power among parties can make domestic political use of force risky since parties outside the majority or ruling coalition can manipulate the government's use of force into a signal of desperation and illegitimacy, thus further threatening the majority party's, and the Prime Minister's, political survival.

The results in Table 2 do not evidence a statistically significant "extra" strategic cost-benefit calculation of domestic political force during election years, but the coefficients' direction largely remains consistent with the main results. The small sample size may inhibit statistically significant relationships from presenting, but the data we use to construct our dependent variable and the minority mobilization independent variable restrict us to this small sample.

We account for an additional incentive (terror attacks) and opportunities (country size and mountainous terrain) for *Domestic Force*. Changes in state-sponsored violence could be motivated by counterterrorism rather than political survival. Geography can influence a minority's mobilization capability, limit the public awareness of domestic political use of force, and limit the government's accessibility to minority populations. To conserve space, further discussion and results (Table A1) are included in the Online Appendix; the results continue to provide support for our hypotheses.

We also consider an alternative regression model. Ordered probit regression analysis assumes that relationships between each pair of outcomes in the ordinal scale are the same; that is, the parallel regression, or proportional odds, assumption holds. Using a likelihood ratio test, we check if Model 3 conforms to the proportional odds assumption. The result is significant indicating that we violate the assumption (Table A4). To account for this, we re-run Model 3 using a generalized ordered probit regression because it constrains all variables to meet the proportional odds assumption.

Generalized ordered probit regression is not a foolproof fix though. Some values of *Domestic Force* are comparatively rare, making the estimator inefficient. This is not a mechanical problem with the model, but the standard errors are misleading because the model is estimating as many parameters as there are clusters; the model reports 159 degrees of freedom and 160 minority group-country year dyad clusters. To address this, we rescale *Domestic Force* to range from 0 to 4 (no action, non-violent actions, non-lethal actions, lethal actions, militarized actions). This eliminates much of the nuance our original scale provides, but increases the number of observations per group. In turn, the generalized ordered probit regression efficiently converges. Table 3 presents the results; complete results are included in Table A5 in the Online Appendix.

The results continue to support our expectations. The interactive measure of incentive and opportunity increases the probability of any "level" of *Domestic Force* compared with the baseline of no action. For non-violent actions, lethal actions and militarized actions, the effect of our interactive explanatory variable is statistically significant. For non-lethal actions, the coefficient is in the expected direction, but does not achieve statistical significance.

Alternative measures of economic incentive

We substitute two alternative measures of economic incentive for domestic political use of force. First, to account for cross-national variation in the “normal” unemployment rate, we operationalize *Unemployment Difference*, the independent variable, as the deviation of the unemployment rate in country X at time t from the mean value of the variable in country X across the sample. This standardizes unemployment across countries and accounts for country-specific standards. It also better generalizes trends in economic turmoil because the unemployment rate between two years may remain stagnant, yet be extremely high, or low, in comparison to the “normal” national rate.

Unemployment is a common measure of incentive for use of force, but the relevant studies typically analyze use of force abroad. For domestic political use of force, unemployment plausibly creates problems of endogeneity. Economic downturns weaken the government, and in turn, make recruitment into anti-government organizations easier. Furthermore, out-groups may be most impacted by economic decline, making anti-government sentiment increasingly fervent in the out-group community. Increased mobilization and recruitment may incentivize government repression regardless of leaders’ diversionary incentives. Alternatively, once an out-group mobilizes enough support, it may be more likely to attack the government; therefore, use of force may be a response out of necessity rather than for diversion.¹⁰

We substitute a more exogenous measure of economic turmoil and threat to political survival— Δ *Exchange Rate* (World Bank, 2015a). We operationalize the measure as the change in *Exchange Rate* from time $t-1$ to time t . *Exchange Rate* affects the value of currency and

Table 2. Election cycle effect on the severity of domestic political use of force

	Model 4 Executive Election Years	Model 5 Legislative Election Years	Model 6 National Election Years
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	0.020 (0.065)	-0.052 (0.047)	-0.008 (0.040)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	0.012 (0.278)	-0.054 (0.171)	0.089 (0.167)
<i>Unemployment</i> \times <i>Mobilization</i>	0.019 (0.030)	0.028 (0.021)	0.018 (0.018)
<i>Political Discrimination</i>	0.041 (0.083)	0.150* (0.082)	0.172** (0.073)
<i>Economic Discrimination</i>	0.103 (0.073)	0.013 (0.045)	0.017 (0.041)
<i>Human Rights</i>	-0.082 (0.079)	-0.113* (0.060)	-0.099* (0.056)
<i>Number of Groups</i>	0.019 (0.045)	0.029 (0.038)	0.022 (0.035)
<i>Polity</i>	-0.014 (0.027)	0.020 (0.019)	0.018 (0.018)
<i>Excluded Population</i>	-0.080 (0.115)	-0.009 (0.066)	-0.031 (0.058)
<i>GDP per Capita</i>	0.072 (0.161)	-0.131 (0.117)	-0.082 (0.095)
<i>Youth Bulge</i>	2.96 (2.32)	-1.58 (1.88)	-0.529 (1.55)
<i>Ongoing Civil War</i>	0.039 (0.316)	-0.272 (0.242)	-0.170 (0.232)
<i>Domestic Force</i> _($t-1$)	0.315*** (0.045)	0.306*** (0.040)	0.297*** (0.033)
N	160	303	369
Wald χ^2 (probability > χ^2)	123.25 (0.0000)	184.31 (0.000)	224.82 (0.0000)
Pseudo R^2	0.259	0.276	0.277
Clusters	139	225	225

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. Two-tailed significance.

Robust standard errors clustered by minority group–country year dyads.

is more likely to impact governments and political elites than the general populace. By devaluing the national currency, in comparison to the international market, the export–import market is affected and the government may have significant trouble purchasing, or borrowing, the resources to provide public or private goods necessary to avoid political backlash and stave off threats to political survival. Because negative shocks to the exchange rate are likely to impact elites before out-group members—reducing concerns of out-group recruitment and mobilization in response to economic turmoil measured by unemployment rate—the threat to political survival emanates from the in-group.

When substituting measures of economic incentive for political use of force, if the results remain consistent, then we demonstrate that variation in the severity of use of force is motivated by a calculated cost–benefit analysis that includes diversionary incentives and out-group mobilization capabilities, and not potential endogenous out-group increased recruitment capabilities stimulated by economic decline. The results are presented in Table 4.

In Models 8 and 9, tests of the alternative measure of unemployment rate, we continue to find support for Hypothesis 2. Incentive alone does not dictate the severity of domestic political use of force; out-group mobilization capabilities influence embattled leaders' calculated decisions. When incentive for domestic political use of force is measured by Δ *Exchange Rate*, Models 10 and 11, we find support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 3. Determinants of “rescaled” severity of domestic political use of force, generalized ordered probit

	Model 7
Government Coercion = Non-Violent (1)	
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	−0.020 (0.029)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	0.060 (0.120)
<i>Unemployment × Mobilization</i>	0.020* (0.012)
Constant	−0.520 (0.550)
Government Coercion = Non-Lethal (2)	
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	0.005 (0.033)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	0.126 (0.136)
<i>Unemployment × Mobilization</i>	0.002 (0.014)
Constant	−1.50** (0.620)
Government Coercion = Lethal (3)	
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	−0.080* (0.045)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	0.009 (0.167)
<i>Unemployment × Mobilization</i>	0.033* (0.017)
Constant	−3.15*** (0.810)
Government Coercion = Militarized (4)	
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	−0.332*** (0.076)
<i>Minority Mobilization</i>	−0.101 (0.220)
<i>Unemployment × Mobilization</i>	0.104*** (0.027)
Constant	−4.00*** (1.08)
N	1383
Wald χ^2 (probability > χ^2)	835.51 (0.0000)
Clusters	260

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. Two-tailed significance.

Robust standard errors clustered by minority group–country year dyads.

While Hypothesis 3 is not supported in Models 10 and 11, the interaction term's coefficient changes direction and the negative effect is statistically significant, but substantively small, and the logic underlying our expectation is reinforced. Because the economic threat to political survival primarily challenges elites rather than the entire in-group or the general populace, it is the elites' ability to generate revenue or borrow capital for purchasing support or coalescences in the face of economic turmoil that increases the likelihood of domestic political use of force yet decreases the severity of force. If capital is stretched thin for the distribution of public and private goods, the risks of escalation from confronting high-risk out-groups with domestic political use of force may be too great because the government or elites lack the ability to fund extended or escalated conflict while already struggling to provide public and private goods. Because these models function as a robustness check and political use of force scholarship has not established a strong casual relationship between exchange rate and political use of force, the results of Models 10 and 11 are not irrefutable support or repudiation of our argument and primary results in Table 1.

Together, the main results and the robustness checks evidence that an intricate relationship between embattled leaders' incentives and vulnerable out-groups' mobilization capability determine the severity of domestic political use of force. When leaders are confronted with political use of force incentive, they do not blindly attack domestic out-groups; rather, when making the decision about how to recover from threats to political survival or divert the public's criticism, leaders will sometimes repress their domestic population, and when they do, they calculate an efficient severity of force.

Alternative "story"

When governments are faced with economic turmoil, diversion is a low-cost policy tool compared with direct policy action. We show in examples from Yugoslavia and Turkey that domestic political use of force is relevant for both strong and weak countries. It is not a strategy reserved for weak economic countries that have no alternative options. During times of economic decline, in both economically weak and strong states, direct policy actions are comparatively costly, making domestic political use of force a viable substitute. The empirical results and interpretation are congruent with established domestic and foreign political use of force studies. Yet there are potential alternative stories. Our interpretation, while well supported in extent scholarship, is but one plausible explanation for these results. Future research could further test if diversion is driving the empirical trend by undertaking a cumbersome text analysis project. When leaders are confronted by a declining economy, analyzing the language used in official remarks could evidence whether scapegoating and diversionary incentives or out-group targets' behaviors motivate political use of force.

Economic downturn could create opportunities for out-group recruitment, thereby increasing the out-group's mobilization capability. Militarized out-groups may become more threatening when unemployment is high. This raises questions about the threat perception and mobilization capability an out-group has on repression regardless of diversionary incentives. We consider this and perform empirical exploration. Theoretically, this potential relationship does not threaten the validity of our argument because diverting the public's attention can both serve political survival goals and minimize potential out-group recruitment effects of economic downturn. It is important to note that *Minority Mobilization* and *Minority Mobilization*_(t-1) are correlated at 0.951 during our study's temporal domain; there is minimal variation in mobilization across years, suggesting that the alternative story of

Table 4. Robustness check, substitute economic incentives for severity of domestic political use of force

	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Unemployment Difference	-0.017 (0.029)	-0.008 (0.089)	0.000 (0.000)	0.0002* (0.000)
Δ Exchange Rate	0.282*** (0.066)	0.282*** (0.066)	0.264*** (0.070)	0.276*** (0.071)
Minority Mobilization				
Unemployment Difference \times Mobilization				
Δ Exchange \times Mobilization				
Political Discrimination	0.151*** (0.035)	0.152*** (0.035)	0.144*** (0.035)	-0.00005* (0.000)
Economic Discrimination	0.067*** (0.022)	0.066** (0.022)	0.062** (0.023)	0.143*** (0.035)
Human Rights	-0.049* (0.029)	-0.049* (0.029)	-0.052* (0.030)	0.063** (0.023)
Number of Groups	-0.022 (0.019)	-0.022 (0.019)	-0.026 (0.019)	-0.050* (0.030)
Polity	-0.003 (0.009)	-0.003 (0.009)	-0.003 (0.010)	-0.026 (0.019)
Excluded Population	0.004 (0.036)	0.004 (0.036)	0.004 (0.037)	-0.003 (0.010)
GDP per Capita	-0.015 (0.051)	-0.016 (0.051)	-0.024 (0.051)	0.004 (0.037)
Youth Bulge	-0.248 (0.776)	-0.259 (0.774)	-0.192 (0.793)	-0.027 (0.051)
Ongoing Civil War	0.214* (0.110)	0.214* (0.110)	0.225* (0.112)	-0.260 (0.794)
Domestic Force _(t-1)	0.261*** (0.018)	0.260*** (0.018)	0.264*** (0.019)	0.227* (0.112)
N	1383	1383	1297	1297
Wald χ^2 (probability > χ^2)	558.46 (0.0000)	560.99 (0.0000)	534.19 (0.0000)	533.94 (0.0000)
Pseudo R ²	0.263	0.263	0.270	0.271
Clusters	260	260	246	246

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. Two-tailed significance.

Robust standard errors clustered by minority group-country year dyads.

economic downturn increasing out-group recruitment and thus mobilization capabilities is not a threat to the diversionary mechanism we propose. This suggests that an out-group's threat to the government is relatively constant across time and that a declining economy provides the catalyst for use of force, not an out-group's cross-annually near-constant mobilization capability. We include an additional robustness check with *Minority Mobilization*_(t-1) in Table A9 in the Online Appendix. The results are consistent with our main models. Threat is near constant and therefore the political use of force we measure is conditional on a declining economy.

Conclusion

We theorize that, and find empirical support for, when leaders pursue domestic political use of force in response to a declining economy, they strategically vary the severity of force contingent on the targeted out-group's mobilization capability. The article confirms previous scholarship exploring the process of domestic diversion. Leaders who encounter a declining economy employ domestic political use of force in an attempt to divert the public's attention from either the state of the economy or the leader's inability to fix the problem with direct policy tools. It also provides new empirical evidence that leaders are strategic in their target selection and subsequent severity of force when engaging in domestic political use of force.

By selectively targeting out-groups with a calculated severity of force, leaders limit the risk of conflict escalation and maximize the likelihood of successful diversion. The article explores this strategic cost–benefit calculation and shows that the severity of domestic political use of force is conditioned by the combination of economic incentive and the targeted out-group's mobilization capability. When out-groups lack organization and mobilization structures or are incapable of political or militant mobilization, leaders routinely refrain from excessive use of force. The ability of an out-group to achieve political mobilization increases the state's severity of domestic political use of force. However, militarized actions are primarily reserved for militant organized out-groups. Domestic political use of force must sufficiently grab the public's attention in order to serve diversionary purposes, but cannot be excessively violent and risk public backlash or spur an escalatory path of violence between the state and an out-group culminating in civil war.

The casual pathway from economic incentive to domestic political use of force is not as straight as previous scholarship suggests. Intersecting this previously hypothesized path is the overwhelming influence of a potential target out-group's mobilization capability. The mix of incentive and out-group capabilities causes this espoused straightforward casual pathway to deviate into substantially variant severities of domestic political use of force. The variation in severity of domestic political use of force encourages further research about potential targets.

One potential future research agenda could analyze how terror organizations' unique set of mobilization skills beyond the political and militant capabilities considered here impacts the severity of domestic political use of force. When acting on diversionary incentives, leaders may opt for targeting terror groups because any use of force is legitimate and less costly in terms of transaction costs, institutional norms and rules and potential legitimate threat to the state and public. In addition, because terrorism places citizens in the crosshairs, terror organizations provide equal threat to citizens and the government, making such targets high profile, high legitimacy and *comparatively* low risk.

Our findings demonstrate leaders' strategic calculations when confronted with diversionary incentives. Political leaders are utility maximizers and choose their targets carefully. Moreover, because leaders are risk averse and the public submits diversionary actions to ex-post evaluation, the strategic cost–benefit calculation of the severity of domestic political use of force, defined by the combination of incentive and targeted out-group mobilization capability, is a rudimentary, yet routinely overlooked, calculation. We address this question.

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Supplemental material

All data, replication materials, and instructions regarding analytical materials upon which published claims rely are available online through the SAGE CMPS website: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0738894218793135>

Notes

1. Authors listed alphabetically.
2. Political use of force encompasses a variety of repressive government behaviors. To avoid confusion with normative and analytical definitions of repression that focus on human rights violations, civil liberties restrictions or personal integrity violations, we use the broad term “political use of force.” Political use of force is coercive policy motivated by poor domestic political or economic environments. The intention of political use of force is to divert the public's attention away from economic turmoil, policy failures or political scandal and toward a policy success (Meernik, 1994; Ostrom and Job, 1986).
3. Data availability limits the time period to six years. This does not bias our results. The time period is not unique for observing more or less domestic use of force compared with alternative date ranges. For measurement validity and reliability, we rely on the original MAR dataset (see note 4).
4. Prior to 1998, one of the constituent terms we utilize to generate our interactive independent variable is not recorded in the MAR (2009) dataset, and when the data was updated to include 2004–2006 the coding of government repression changed. MAR (2009) combined the 23 categories of repression into a six-point ordinal scale for three classes of minority group members. To maintain validity and reliability in our measure of *Minority Mobilization* we do not attempt to match the coding schemes across time periods.
5. MAR (2009) codes the target of repression as none reported, against group members engaged in collective action, against group members engaged and not engaged in collective action, and against group members not engaged in collective action.
6. Supplementary and replication materials are available in the Online Appendix on SAGE's CMPS website and on the authors' websites.
7. We rescale the Economic Differentials Index to range from 1 to 7 to simplify post estimation interpretation. In the MAR (2009) dataset it ranges from -2 to 5 .
8. We also conduct ordered logit regression analysis. The results confirm the models we present in the paper and are in the Online Appendix; the model results and predicted probabilities are correlated ≥ 0.9795 .
9. We conduct two post-estimation hypotheses tests—mean comparison tests and joint hypotheses tests—to see if the coefficients associated with the constituent terms and interactive measure are different from one another. The tests provide statistically significant evidence that the effects of

Unemployment Rate, Minority Mobilization and the interactive measure are statistically distinguishable (Online Appendix Table A3).

10. Tir and Jasinski (2008) use economic growth rate to measure economic performance and use of force incentive. But, like unemployment rate, economic growth risks endogeneity.

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