Is Victory Enough? The Complementary Effects of the Economy and War Outcome on Postwar Leader Survival*

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Keywords: Postwar tenure, Survival of Political Leaders, War Outcome, Economic Voting, Duration Model, Democracy, Regime Types

Which matters more to a democratic leader seeking to stay in power: Success in the economy or success in foreign policy? When a leader wins a war and manages the economy well, such successes not only confirm the competence of a leader to the public but also boost his/her political future. The war outcome and the economy are, thus, complementary signals of leader competence

* A previous version of this paper was presented at the Southwestern Political Science Association 2007 meeting in Albuquerque, NM. The Holloway Dissertation Fellowship at the University of Mississippi funded this research. I thank Andrew G. Long, Timothy Nordstrom, and Harvey Palmer for their suggestions and insights. I also thank Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans for providing the data for this paper. Research assistance, provided by Bernard Ng and Cameron MacDougall, was invaluable. Any mistakes and omissions are my own.
to the public. However, which one matters more? To test this, a series of the Cox proportional hazard model are employed. The data set, Archigos, includes key information on political leaders. The data analysis covers 2049 leaders of 166 countries during the period between 1919 and 1999. I find that while victory in war and the good economy at home contribute positively to the duration of postwar tenure, victory and the economy at are complementary signals of leader competency to the public. Thus, to democratic leaders victory alone is not beneficial unless they succeed in managing the economy at home as well. This, thus, suggests that the economy at home is a more dominant signal of leader competence to victorious leaders.

Submitted: 2012,11,15 / Reviewed: 2012,12,09 / Accepted: 2013,06,01

I. Introduction

If a leader is successful in managing the domestic economy and wins a war abroad, it is likely for the public at home to approve of the leader and thus increase the odds of that leader staying in power. However, when a leader fails to live up to public expectation in one way or another, which failure hurts a leader more? This paper uses the duration of postwar tenure to examine which kind of success matters more to political leaders seeking to stay in power. Postwar tenure research is noteworthy since it is a unique opportunity to investigate the aftermath of international conflicts and its effects on domestic life “after the shooting stops” (Van Raedonck and Diehl 1989, 249).

Previous research on postwar tenure considers the outcome of war as the single most important determinant of tenure duration. However, this may not be sufficient to explain the political futures of leaders. For example, only months after a victory in the Gulf