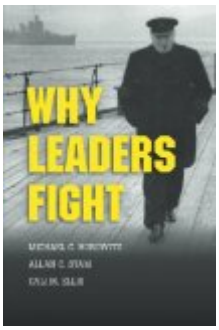
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, Cali M. Ellis. *Why Leaders Fight.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 228 pp. $29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-65567-6.



Reviewed by Elizabeth Saunders

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2016)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

How does a leader's background influence how they conduct foreign policy? In the United States, the 2016 election has put a renewed spotlight on this question. At this writing, the most likely general election matchup will be between a former (and recent) secretary of state, who would also be the first female major-party nominee for president, and a businessman who has no political service in his background. The next president will inherit ongoing challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention a host of other potential conflicts around the world. What will the choice of a new leader mean for the future of American wars?

In *Why Leaders Fight*, Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis significantly advance our knowledge about how leaders matter for international politics. Although we have an intuitive sense that leaders matter, international relations scholars discounted the role of leaders for decades, arguing that structural forces like the Cold War standoff shaped national security choices and ultimately, the outbreak of war.[1] In recent years, many scholars have contributed to a revival of the study of leaders, and there is much wider acceptance that leaders matter.[2] But many of these studies look at one dimension of leaders at a time—a particular type of belief or a specific characteristic—or else examine leaders in only one country or regime type.[3]

While much progress has been made, there are big, unanswered questions about when and how leaders matter. Two of the most important questions concern the role of the institutional context in which leaders are embedded and the nature of leaders' backgrounds. At the level of states, are leaders more important—in terms of their influence on international outcomes—in democracies or authoritarian regimes? And at the level of individuals, how, exactly, does the often-multifaceted nature of a leader's experience shape his or her behavior in office?

Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis's contribution is to help provide systematic answers to these questions. A primary means by which they do so is by

assembling the Leader Experience and Attribute Descriptions (LEAD) dataset, building on the Archigos dataset originally compiled by H. E. Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza.[4] The LEAD dataset will be used by scholars for years to come and is extremely impressive in scope. Personal, family, occupational, educational, and military background characteristics—which are so often employed in off-hand arguments about what does or does not make a good leader—are now available across the globe for the 1875-2004 period, enabling systematic evaluation of these arguments.

The empirical achievement of creating this dataset should not be underestimated. The authors' presentation is admirably clear and sparse on the details, enabling readers to focus on the arguments and results rather than the making of the sausage, but the effort required for such a large-scale data collection project is immense. To be able to compare so many leader characteristics over such a broad swath of space and time is a major empirical contribution to our stock of knowledge about leaders, war, and international security more broadly.

But Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis also make important contributions on the theoretical side. First, they disaggregate leader attributes and background characteristics, generating more fine-grained predictions about how leaders matter. Second, and perhaps most important, they are carefully attentive to institutional context, exploring how the effects of these characteristics vary across regime type. Their approach is most clearly and fruitfully manifest in their analysis of how a leader's prior military service—an often-fraught issue in US presidential elections—can propel or restrain risk taking. Their arguments—that military service without combat, particularly in democracies, leads to more risky behavior, while combat experience can induce caution in some democratic leaders—provide welcome nuance to ongoing debates.

The book does leave several issues unaddressed. One concerns how the characteristics Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis identify function, both individually and collectively, to influence risk. At several points in the book, the authors identify mechanisms through which characteristics like combat, gender, or education might matter. Some of these mechanisms, however, may be independent sources of leaders' behavior in their own right. For example, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis highlight Andrew Kennedy's arguments in ***The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru*** (2011), in which he focuses on national efficacy beliefs, or beliefs about a leader's own state's martial and moral capabilities, as a source of risk acceptance. But are these beliefs doing the real work of nudging leaders toward more risky military adventures? Are there other, or multiple, paths besides the characteristics the authors identify to acquiring such efficacy beliefs? In my book ***Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Intervention*** (2011), on how leaders' beliefs shape their threat perceptions, I argue that the myriad ways leaders could acquire these beliefs—including background experiences like military service or education—show that it was the beliefs, rather than any one background characteristic, that mattered most. Such an argument is not necessarily at odds with the work Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis have done, but might mean that some of the characteristics they identify do their work by influencing other intervening or mediating variables.

Another issue is that at times, it is unclear which characteristics are driving leaders' behaviors. In part, this concern stems from the difficulty of the task the authors have set themselves. Disentangling the effects of some of these beliefs is a major challenge, and they do an admirable job assessing how leader attributes affect conflict, both at the level of individual attributes and in terms of how these attributes function collectively.

Some of the difficulty, however, stems from occasional confusion in the discussion of individ-

ual leaders. While the authors deserve tremendous credit for simplifying the presentation of their statistical models and enriching and enlivening the text with real-world examples of leaders to illustrate their arguments, perhaps consolidating some of the discussion of individual leaders, rather than highlighting the same leader at multiple points in the text, might have helped the reader better understand how certain characteristics mattered. For example, the first major discussion of John F. Kennedy mentions his military experience and the *PT-109* incident during World War II, but does not delve into the possibility that this experience might have induced caution in his future crisis decision making, although the importance of combat to the theoretical framework had already been discussed. In a later chapter, of course, the authors address Kennedy's combat experience in light of the thesis that combat experience leads to military conservatism, but without the previous, rich discussion of other background characteristics alongside, it is more difficult to form an impression about which aspects of Kennedy's background and military experience mattered.

Similarly, the discussion of Margaret Thatcher sometimes makes it somewhat more challenging to assess the role of gender. When they discuss Thatcher's lack of experience with war, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis note that Thatcher was young during World War II and thus did not travel outside England until after the war was over and did not serve in the military or women's auxiliary. Still, while observing the war's effects on the home front, she "developed a set of firm beliefs from which she rarely wavered" (p. 169). They quote one of Thatcher's biographers, John Campbell, who argues that "'her sex was really beside the point. What really made Mrs. Thatcher a successful war leader ... was the clarity of her purpose. She had an unblinking singlemindedness about achieving her objective.... It was this moralistic certainty, not her gender, which set her apart from her male colleagues'" (p. 170).

But Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis conclude that "her lack of direct experience with war, which was only as a result of her sex, apparently made her significantly more risky than most leaders would have been under similar circumstances" (ibid.). Yet Campbell's discussion rejects the gender thesis in favor of her "moralistic certainty." Of course, her lack of war experience may have contributed to the development of her views, but many women did serve in some capacity, and presumably not all those who stayed out of service developed the same "single-mindedness" that Thatcher did. Indeed, earlier in the book, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis highlight Thatcher's upbringing, economic circumstances, and education as contributing to her "sense of moral conviction" and uncompromising nature (p. 68), which seems to dovetail with Campbell's interpretation. Of course, it may be that gender and these other features of Thatcher's background point in the same direction or reinforce each other, and disentangling them is a herculean task. But consolidating the discussion might shed more light on the role of gender versus other characteristics.

These quibbles do not, however, detract from the overall contribution of the book—and indeed, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis do an excellent job painting an appropriately cautious but nuanced picture of the role of gender, contributing to an emerging line of research on gender and conflict. [5] Given that the United States may elect its first female leader in 2016, interest in the topic will only grow, and Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis's discussion is an important benchmark. More generally, their theoretical and empirical contribution to the study of leaders will be felt for years—and many more presidential election cycles—to come.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth N. Waltz's theoretical arguments most directly privileged structural factors. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New

York: Columbia University Press, 1959); and Kenneth N. Waltz, ***Theory of International Politics*** (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[2]. See, among others, Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," ***International Security*** 25, no. 4 (2001): 107-146; Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, ***Leaders and International Conflict*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Elizabeth N. Saunders, ***Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Intervention*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Sarah E. Croco, "The Decider's Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment," ***American Political Science Review*** 105, no. 3 (2011): 457-477; Andrew B. Kennedy, ***The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru: National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Jeff D. Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict," ***World Politics*** 65, no. 4 (2013): 656-690.

[3]. For example, many studies examine leaders in democracies (e.g., in my own work, ***Leaders at War***) or authoritarian regimes (e.g., Jessica L. P. Weeks, ***Dictators at War and Peace*** [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014]; and Caitlin Talmadge, ***The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*** [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015]). Exceptions that examine leaders in broader institutional context include Chiozza and Goemans, ***Leaders and International Conflict***; and Jeff D. Colgan, ***Petro-aggression: When Oil Causes War*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[4]. H. E. Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza, "Introducing Archigos: A Dataset of Political Leaders," ***Journal of Peace Research*** 46, no. 2 (2009): 269-283.

[5]. For an overview, see Dan Reiter, "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations," ***Journal of Conflict Resolution*** 59, no. 7 (2015): 1301-1326.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Elizabeth Saunders. Review of Horowitz, Michael C. ; Stam, Allan C.; Ellis, Cali M. *Why Leaders Fight.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45573


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.