Dictators and Death: Casualty Sensitivity of Autocracies in Militarized Interstate Disputes

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Dictators and Death: Casualty Sensitivity of Autocracies in Militarized Interstate Disputes*

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Why are some authoritarian regimes so quick to surrender amid lower numbers of casualties while others prove willing to incur significant casualty counts to continue their war efforts? In this study, we explore the propensity of different authoritarian regime types to sustain casualties in interstate conflicts. We argue that authoritarian leaders with smaller winning coalitions find it easier to distribute the costs of militarized conflicts outside of those coalitions. This diminishes their sensitivity to casualties. Applying a theoretical model based on an inverse divide-the-dollar game (with respect to the distribution of public “bads”), we find that personalist regimes tend to sustain the highest number of casualties in militarized interstate disputes when compared to other autocracies. Our findings suggest that along with the audience cost abilities of an autocratic adversary, target states should also consider an autocratic regime’s casualty sensitivity in deciding whether to reciprocate with military action.

During the Falklands War, the Argentine military quickly surrendered to British forces after suffering 649 casualties and relinquished control of the Falkland Islands (Ehrmantraut 2011:103). By comparison, during the Gulf War, the Iraqi military suffered more than 20,000 casualties before laying down its arms (Norris 1991:242; Keaney and Cohen 1993:249). What accounts for this stark difference? We argue that the answer lies in the size of authoritarian leaders’ winning coalitions. The smaller the winning coalition size, the easier it is for autocrats to place the costs of militarized conflicts on non-supporters. This, in turn, diminishes autocrats’ sensitivity to casualties.

Why Study Casualty Sensitivity of Autocracies?
A great deal of scholarship explores the sensitivity of democratic regimes to the human costs of war. We know much less about how casualties affect the decisions of autocratic leaders concerning issues of war and peace. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature, as casualty sensitivity plays a major role in shaping conflict processes and behavior. Prior work shows that casualty concerns of democratic leaders influence (i) the probability of using military force (Morgan and Campbell 1991); (ii) their preference for the type of military action—such as the use of air strikes versus ground troops (Jentleson and Britton 1998; Byman and Waxman 2000); (iii) military effectiveness and success (Bennett and Stam 1998; Reiter and Stam 1998); and (iv) the duration of wars and other militarized disputes (Goemans 2000; Slantchev 2004; Sullivan 2008). Casualties also entail political consequences pertaining to public approval and support (Mueller 1973; Gartner 2008), election outcomes (Karo and Miguel 2007; Koch 2011), and the post-conflict fate of leaders (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Gartner, Segura, and Barratt 2004; Croco 2011). Just as casualties affect democratic leaders, we should expect that they also affect autocratic regimes.

Indeed, scholars generally consider casualties as the most salient, visible, and systematic measure of costs associated with military interventions (for example, Gartner et al. 2004). They often use the total number of casualties as a main reference point for determining the magnitude and destructiveness of militarized conflicts (Sensen 1999; Diehl and Goertz 2000:291; Sweeney 2003). Thus, investigating the casualty sensitivity of autocracies likely provides useful information for explaining and predicting the severity of such conflicts.

As a major component of war costs, casualties also constitute an intrinsic part of the literature on bargaining,
particularly with respect to information asymmetries and credible commitment issues associated with war (for example, Fearon 1995; Wagner 2000; Filson and Werner 2002; Powell 2006; Reiter 2009). Specifically, scholars suggest that casualties incurred during war help convey useful, credible information to combatants about the resolve, quality, and strength of an opponent's military and leadership, as well as the relative likelihood of success (Filson and Werner 2002; Ramsay 2008). According to Ramsay (2008:854), "the fact that a country is willing to pay the cost, in treasure and blood, of fighting is also informative about their preferences over changes to the status quo." As for commitment problems, in cases where bargaining parties cannot effectively reassure each other that they will not renegotiate on an agreement, opponents may prefer to endure the high costs of war (including casualties) rather than compromising on an unreliable peace settlement that may hurt them in the long run (Powell 2006; Reiter 2009:31–33). The destructiveness of fighting may enable the warring parties to commit to deterrent threats and terminate the war by increasing the credibility of such threats and decreasing the benefits from continuing the war (Leventoglu and Slantchev 2007). By studying the casualty sensitivity of different authoritarian regimes, we can better explain and predict the onset, duration, and outcome of autocratic militarized disputes.

Casualties play a critical role in connecting domestic and international politics as well (Gartzké 2001; Gartner et al. 2004; Koch and Gartner 2005; Gartner 2008). Research suggests that when compared to authoritarian regimes, democracies fight relatively brief wars with fewer casualties (Siverson 1995). Democratic leaders’ accountability to their citizens makes democracies more sensitive to war costs (Gartner et al. 2004; Valenzino, Huth, and Croco 2010). The ability of democratic leaders to achieve and maintain office depends on winning majority support of the masses and sustaining popular consent for key policy decisions (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith 1999). Because citizens primarily bear the burden of costly conflicts, they tend to withdraw their wartime support amid rising casualty trends (Gartner 2008; Myers and Hayes 2010) and ultimately punish democratic leaders who use military force irresponsibly (Ray 1995; Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow 2003; Leblanc and Chan 2003). As such, scholars closely link casualties to the post-conflict fate of leaders, particularly democratic ones (Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller 1992; Gartner et al. 2004; Valenzino et al. 2010).

While the mass public’s punishment of a leader in the face of costly conflicts may seem more elusive in autocracies, domestic elites in such regimes may function in a fashion similar to the voting masses (Weeks 2008, 2012; Frantz and Ezrow 2011:2). Even if domestic elites in autocracies lack any normative concerns about casualties, they may still consider a costly militarized dispute as an opportunity to challenge the leader. Indeed, prior works find evidence that casualties also affect the post-conflict fate of authoritarian leaders (for example, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995). Studying authoritarian leaders’ casualty sensitivity is useful not only for better understanding and explaining conflict processes and behavior, but also for the stability and lifespan of such regimes.

In addition to the differences seen across regime types (that is, democracies versus autocracies), research suggests variation within democracies influences casualty levels. For example, Koch and Gartner (2005:875) show that the diffuseness of political accountability affects the number of casualties a democratic government is willing to tolerate for a given conflict. Such findings reflect the general argument that different democratic structures and contexts (such as presidential versus parliamentary systems, electoral institutions, conscript versus volunteer militaries, and coalition versus single-party governments) produce variations in the political constraints leaders face, thereby affecting their conflict behavior (Ireland and Gartner 2001; Reiter and Tillman 2002; Vasquez 2005). We argue that, as with democracies, casualty sensitivity of authoritarian regimes should also vary in accordance with such regimes’ structural and contextual variations.

**Sensitivity to Casualties: What about Variation within Autocratic Regimes?**

Despite high scholarly interest in examining the sensitivity of democracies to the human costs of war as well as the importance of casualties concerning conflict processes and behavior, little research exists on the casualty tolerance of authoritarian regimes. Recent research largely investigates how variations among authoritarian systems influence conflict initiation. For example, Peceny, Beer, and Sanchez-Terry (2002:16–19) empirically test the possibility of an autocratic peace based on similar institutional constraints, transparency, military capabilities, and shared values. They find interesting variation in the conflict behavior of autocratic regime types (see also Reiter and Stam 2003). Expanding this line of research, Lai and Slater (2006:113) posit that the number of conflicts autocracies initiate varies in accordance with the degree of regime legitimacy and the security of government tenure. Another important contribution is Weeks’ (2008:56) study, arguing that certain types of authoritarian dispute initiators (including single-party and military regimes) possess the ability to generate higher audience costs and are less likely to face resistance from target states compared to regimes with low audience costs (such as personalist regimes). In another study, Weeks (2012:339) finds that oligarchic, elite-constrained civilian regimes (that is, machines) are not more likely to initiate conflict than democracies while other autocracies are significantly more belligerent than both machines and democracies (see also Pickering and Kisangani 2010). In all, these studies call for a more sophisticated conceptualization of authoritarian regimes and their actions in the international arena.

Although recent scholarship on variations among autocracies advanced our understanding of conflict processes and behavior vis-à-vis regime type, key questions remain unanswered regarding the potential link between different types of autocracies and their proclivity to endure casualties in interstate conflicts. Our study addresses this question by examining how and why variations among autocracies—particularly vis-à-vis an authoritarian leader’s winning coalition size—affect the casualty sensitivity of such regimes, and in turn, the number of casualties they are likely to sustain in militarized disputes.

**Theoretical Framework**

We build our theoretical framework based on selectorate theory, which posits that the main incentive for a political leader is to stay in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). According to this theory, any polity includes two relevant sets of people: the selectorate and the winning...
coalition. Those who are part of the leadership selection process compose the selectorate. In other words, the selectorate is “roughly the citizenry” of a country with some chance—be it minimal or substantial—of influencing the choice of a leader (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003:40). The winning coalition, on the other hand, represents a subset of the selectorate that consists of a group of individuals from which a leader needs support for political survival. The size of the winning coalition varies depending on the specific regime type of a country. As Pickering and Kisangani (2010:480) suggest, “the selectorate thus matches conventional conceptions of a country’s mass population reasonably well, while winning coalitions are consistent with common ideas about ruling coalitions and other elites in society.” Following this parsimonious logic, we focus on variations in winning coalition size when discussing the proclivity of different authoritarian regimes for sustaining casualties in militarized disputes. Selectorate theory argues that as winning coalitions grow larger, a leader’s survival in office depends more on the delivery of public rather than private goods (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). As coalition size increases, “it becomes increasingly expensive and difficult for leaders to reward their coalition through private rewards since more people need to be rewarded” (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010:937). While this theory highlights a leader’s ability to distribute goods to her winning coalition, we further argue that the pursuit of goods carries both benefits for the winning coalition and costs in the form of negative externalities (that is, public “bads”). Therefore, both who benefits and who pays the costs influence foreign policy choices. Because institutions create political systems that produce both winners and losers, we posit that leaders prefer to have the losers pay for the costs of their policies in order to mitigate the political ramifications of policy decisions that affect their supporters. The more successful leaders are in distributing policy costs to the losers within the system, the easier it is for leaders to pursue their policy preferences. However, leaders face a problem when forced to distribute these costs among their supporters. Similar to the selectorate theory’s argument that the inability to distribute goods to a winning coalition proves harmful for a leader’s tenure, we expect that a leader’s inability to prevent the distribution of public goods to the winning coalition will also negatively affect her chances of survival in office. By focusing on how a regime distributes costs (as well as benefits), we provide an explanation of why some states tolerate higher casualties than others.

The Inverse Divide-the-Dollar Game

Given the potential negative effects of policy costs on a leader’s ability to retain office, we can envision policy choices vis-a-vis militarized disputes by employing an inverse of the divide-the-dollar game. Scholars often apply the divide-the-dollar game to budgetary and spending decisions (Baron and Ferejohn 1987; Shepsle, Van Houweling, Abrams, and Hanson 2009). In this game, the actors must determine exactly how to divide a dollar among themselves. Will they divide it equally? Will some actors get more of the dollar than others? The ideal outcome for each actor is to end up with the whole dollar, but this option is generally not viable. In the inverse version of the game, the ideal outcome for each actor would be to avoid being stuck with any amount of the dollar by trying to minimize, rather than maximize, how much of the dollar to take. A leader’s winning coalition likely pays some costs in a militarized interstate conflict. The size of the winning coalition in part determines whether leaders will be able to divert the costs of such conflict to the losers in the system and provide benefits to their supporters at no additional cost. Distributing the costs outside of one’s support base in an inverse divide-the-dollar game becomes more difficult as one’s winning coalition gets larger. We argue that the easier it is for leaders to distribute costs outside of their winning coalitions, the greater the leeway for those leaders to sustain casualties—one of the most salient costs associated with militarized conflicts. We expect that leaders with small winning coalitions are more likely to engage in costly conflicts if they believe that they can provide additional benefits to their supporters at minimal cost. The benefits of engaging in a militarized conflict take two forms: psychological and material. The potential to bolster social cohesion constitutes one of the key psychological benefits of conflict (Simmel 1955:98–100; Coser 1956:95; Sirin 2011). Conflict helps define the boundaries of in-groups and out-groups, thereby creating an “us versus them” mentality (Desch 1996:242–244), which may help solidify one’s support base. For example, Gibler, Hutchison, and Miller (2012:1658) find that territorial conflicts boost national and ethnic identities, which may in turn decrease unrest and increase unity (see also Wiegand 2011:37). In addition to social cohesion, external conflict can divert people’s attention away from more pressing domestic issues (Pickering and Kisangani 2010). Militarized conflicts also hold the promise of material benefits. Such benefits may come in the form of private goods (such as the acquisition of new territories or raw materials) distributed directly to supporters.

While single-party regimes generally enjoy a cushion of ideological legitimacy that binds the populace together and reduces the incentive for external conflict (Lai and Slater 2006), personalist regimes often have little ideological basis and instead rely on the cult of personality to legitimize their rule (Chehabi and Linz 1998:13–15; Way and Weeks 2014). Therefore, the potential benefits of social cohesion via conflict would likely be greater for personalist regimes. As for material benefits, given their smaller winning coalition size, personalist leaders more easily retain a larger share of the spoils of conflict than do other autocracies. Personalist leaders can thus afford to provide more private goods to their supporters to help bolster their tenure (Peceny and Butler 2004; Pickering and Kisangani 2010). Therefore, the leaders of personalist regimes can take better advantage of the benefits of interstate conflict than other autocratic leaders.

Militarized interstate conflicts potentially increase a leader’s hold on power (Chiozza and Goemans 2011:54–61). For example, some analysts argue that the Iran–Iraq War allowed both Ruhollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein to consolidate their powers and reorganize their militaries (Karsh 2002:29). Interstate conflict can also help delay regime change. Serbia during the 1990s provides a good illustration of this dynamic. Milosevic used ethnicity as a tool for redefining Serbian identity in order to remain in charge of what was once a multi-ethnic Yugoslav state (Gagnon 1994/95). He also shifted many of the potential costs of a conflict to those outside of his winning coalition; most of the Serbian fighters in Croatia and Bosnia belonged to Serbian militia and paramilitary
gangs rather than the regular Serbian army (Woodward 1995:254).

Although leaders may provide benefits to supporters and shift the costs to parties outside of their winning coalitions, they must also prove able to repress—or, at least, politically manage—potential opposition generated by doing so.\(^1\) If leaders believe that they can manage such opposition, then it is rational for them to distribute costs away from their winning coalitions. Yet if a leader does not have the ability to repress potential opposition, then such a distribution may threaten her political survival. As such, the risk of facing credible opposition that could challenge the leader’s tenure, and her capability to use various tools of repression to deal with such potential threat, may influence the link between an authoritarian leader’s winning coalition size and casualty sensitivity.

**Applying the Inverse Divide-the-Dollar Model to Autocratic Regimes**

Geddes (2003:48–49) provides a three-part typology of autocracies—personalist, single-party, and military regimes—based on “different procedures for making decisions, different characteristic forms of intra-elite factionalism and competition, different ways of choosing leaders and handling succession, and different ways of responding to societal interests and opposition.” Geddes (2003:51) codes a regime as personalist if a single leader marginalizes or reduces the influence and functions of any other sources and thus has primary control over policy, recruitment, and the security apparatus. In certain cases, “the leader may be an officer and may have created a party to support himself, but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler” (Geddes 2003:51; see also Chehabi and Linz 1998:4–45). Single-party regimes, on the other hand, are those where only one party has influence over policy (even if other parties may legally exist and compete in elections), controls most access to political power and government jobs, and has functioning local-level organizations (Geddes 2003:72). Last, military regimes are “governed by an officer or retired officer, with the support of the military establishment and some routine mechanism by which high-level officers could influence policy choice and appointments” (Geddes 2003:72).

Geddes’ (2003) classification scheme suggests that personalist, single-party, and military regimes vary with respect to the size of their winning coalitions. Among these three autocratic regime types, personalist regimes have the smallest winning coalition composed of “a small group of cronies who benefit from the dictator’s largess” (Geddes 2003:53; Peceny and Butler 2004:574; Pickering and Kisangani 2010; see also Mattes and Rodríguez 2014). By comparison, single-party regimes are considered to have the largest winning coalition given that the incumbent’s tenure depends on the support of the party (Geddes 2003:52; Peceny and Butler 2004; Pickering and Kisangani 2010). Military regimes may lie somewhere between these two poles since the continuation of military rule relies mainly on the support of the officer corps within the armed forces (Geddes 2003:51–52; Peceny and Butler 2004; Pickering and Kisangani 2010).

One may argue that winning coalitions are similarly small across different types of autocracies. However, several studies find evidence that different authoritarian regime types do display consequential variation in their winning coalition size, which further reflects on their provision of private/public goods and conflict behavior (for example, Peceny and Butler 2004; Kinne 2005; Magaloní 2008; Wright 2008; Pickering and Kisangani 2010). For instance, Pickering and Kisangani (2010:480) find that given their larger winning coalition size, single-party regimes provide “a significantly higher quality and quantity of public goods than personalist regimes, with the performance of military regimes resting somewhere in the middle.” In another study, Mattes and Rodríguez (2014:536) find that having greater leader accountability, limited policy flexibility, and higher transparency, single-party and military regimes engage in more international cooperation than personalist regimes.

Does such variation in the winning coalition size of autocracies also reflect on the casualty sensitivity of such regimes and, if so, why? Scholars find that the smaller the size of the winning coalition to whom leaders owe their power and legitimacy, the more discretion they likely have in deciding foreign policy (for example, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995). Democratic regimes—having the largest winning coalition compared to all other regime types—are the most constrained with respect to foreign policy decisions. As previously mentioned, democratic leaders are particularly sensitive to war costs because citizens who primarily bear such costs are likely to punish their leaders in cases of imprudent and excessive use of force. Challenging the conventional argument that autocratic rulers generally lack such concerns, Weeks (2008:46–47, 2012:330–331) asserts that most authoritarian leaders—particularly oligarchic ones—require the support of domestic elites for political survival who may indeed function as audiences in a way comparable to voting publics in democratic regimes (see also Frantz and Ezrow 2011).

Building on prior work on autocratic regime types and applying our inverse divide-the-dollar model, we argue that the casualty sensitivity of autocracies varies depending on the ability of leaders to distribute the costs of war outside their winning coalition to keep their base of support intact. Autocratic leaders with smaller winning coalitions should be more willing to tolerate higher levels of casualties in militarized disputes because it is easier to distribute the costs outside their support base compared to those with larger winning coalitions.

One concern, however, is whether an autocratic regime can survive in the face of rising casualties. Research on democratic regimes and casualties suggests that as casualties rise, public opinion is likely to turn against the government since those casualties are likely to affect not only the opposition but also members of the winning coalition (Koch and Gartner 2005). Therefore, as casualties mount, disapproval with the existing regime could rise as well. If such dissent does emerge, can the regime repress or at least co-opt the opposition to survive?

Among autocratic regime types, personalist regimes—despite having the smallest winning coalition—might be the most vulnerable or the least able to repress a growing wave of opposition to the regime. This concern hinges on how personalist regimes form. Personalist regimes tend to arise when the party structure and the military are not

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\(^1\) For instance, Gallagher and Hanson (2015:28) emphasize the important role that authoritarian political institutions (such as legislatures and parties) play in determining a ruler’s capability to grapple with threats arising from the elite and the masses.
sufficiently developed or autonomous enough to prevent a leader from taking personal control of government (Geddes 1999). Afterwards, the fear of potential rivals leads personalist rulers to undermine any potential challengers that could emerge from the winning coalition (Chehabi and Linz 1998; Geddes 1999). In fact, personalist leaders frequently rotate high-level regime officials to different posts to prevent them from developing autonomous bases of power while unceremoniously dismissing (or even executing) dissidents (Geddes 1999). One outcome of this is a less reliable and less effective military for repressing dissent. However, while it may be difficult for these regimes to point the guns inward, recent research suggests that personalist regimes have other tools of repression at their disposal to avert opposition from occurring in the first place, with little potential damage to their tenure in office (see Escriba-Folch 2013).

To elaborate, authoritarian regimes have two major avenues to address growing unrest: They can either attempt to co-opt the opposition or choose to repress it (that is, carrots or sticks; see Fjelde 2010; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Ritter 2014). Escriba-Folch and Wright (2010:340–341) argue that single-party and military regimes can more easily shift revenue streams and are more capable of co-opting potential opposition with credible promises of future payments to further placate such opposition. Consistent with these arguments, Davenport (2007:500) finds strong evidence that single-party governments are the least repressive form of autocracy across the board while military regimes are less repressive than others when it comes to civil liberties restrictions. By comparison, because personalist regimes rely largely on what Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010:957) call free resources, such as natural resource rents and foreign aid (see also Wright 2008), they are less likely to shift revenue streams (given such resources are generally fixed) and instead more likely to engage in a variety of repressive measures (Escriba-Folch and Wright 2010).

When it comes to different forms of repressive measures, leaders have both violent and nonviolent tools at their disposal to stave off removal from office. Escriba-Folch (2013:546–548) suggests that while violent tools of repression can at times forestall an early exit from office, less violent tools such as the contraction of coordination goods (such as restricting civil liberties to hinder the ability to organize in the first place) are usually more effective in extending a ruler’s tenure (see also Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010:938) find support that regimes with small winning coalitions are much more likely to engage in the contraction of coordination goods and extend their tenure especially if they rely on non-tax revenue streams for their wealth. Therefore, rather than depending on the military to repress, personalist regimes are more likely to engage in the contraction of coordination goods such as limiting the press, altering the transparency of law, and repressing the means that allow people to organize and coordinate (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2006). Personalist leaders thus have more than just the tools of direct violence in their repertoire, which enables them to avoid the occurrence of threats to their tenure in the first place (Frantz and Ezrow 2011).

In short, personalist leaders have the smallest winning coalition size, face a much lower risk of credible threat to their tenure even in the presence of unpopular policies (barring a mass revolution), and generally use a variety of repressive tools to suppress dissent. Accordingly, we expect that personalist leaders are least sensitive to casualties suffered in militarized disputes. Meanwhile, the leaders of single-party and military regimes with larger winning coalitions should be more reluctant to sustain high numbers of casualties because the distribution of such costs will be not only among the losers in the system but probably among members of their support base. High levels of casualties suffered in a MID may present a window of opportunity for the elites of single-party and military regimes who seek to challenge and sanction their leaders. In contrast, as Weeks (2008:47) puts it, “For elites in personalist regimes, keeping a poor leader in office is more often preferable to ousting the incumbent and risking one’s own career; the leader does not face a credible threat of removal.” With these considerations in mind, we hypothesize that compared to single-party and military regimes, personalist regimes are likely to display the lowest sensitivity to casualties suffered in MIDs.

Data and Research Design
To test our hypotheses, we generate a continuous measure of casualties by combining the MID data with the Correlates of War (COW) data for the period 1946–2001. The MID data provide an ordinal measure for military casualties incurred in an interstate dispute, where a code of “0” is given to militarized disputes with no casualties, “1” for 1–25 casualties, “2” for 26–100 casualties, “3” for 101–250 casualties, “4” for 251–500 casualties, “5” for 501–999 casualties, and the maximum value of “6” for casualties of 1000 and over. For observations with no available data on the exact number of casualties (mainly lower-level disputes with less than 1000 casualties), we calculate the mid-values of the casualty ranges provided in the ordinal-level MID measure while using COW data on the actual number of casualties for interstate wars. This allows us to maximize the number of observations in our analyses. For further exploration of autocratic casualty

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2 Furthermore, Bose and Brauner (forthcoming) point out that while militaries in personalist regimes are often ill-equipped, personalist dictators tend to have multiple, heavily indoctrinated paramilitary forces recruited from the groups most loyal to them.

3 One should note that the degree of differences between single-party and military regimes regarding their proclivity to sustain casualties may not be as theoretically discernible as compared to personalist regimes. Although military regimes tend to hold smaller winning coalitions than single-party regimes (Peceny and Butler 2004:574), leaders of military regimes may nevertheless find it harder to distribute the costs of war outside of their supporters because military costs are intrinsically tied to their military-based winning coalitions. As such, while we expect that personalist regimes are least sensitive to casualties, the ranking ordering of single-party and military regimes may not be as clear-cut since heightened sensitivity of military regimes to war costs may confound the proposed effects of the winning coalition size on casualty levels. Therefore, we choose to refrain from formulating a priori theoretical expectations about the casualty sensitivity of single-party and military regimes.

4 The descriptive statistics are available in the Supporting Information document that accompanies the online version of this article (see Table S1).

5 In military parlance, the term “military casualties” includes those killed in action, wounded in action, missing in action, and prisoners of war. However, in the literature on militarized disputes and war, casualties refer more specifically to military battle deaths (that is, fatalities). This study follows the latter usage of the term.

6 It is possible that taking the median value of the MID casualty levels may skew the data. However, excluding the MID observations and using only COW data would leave us with an insufficient number of observations. As part of our robustness checks, we run the models using the minimum and maximum values of the MID casualty levels instead of the median values. The results are fully consistent with our main findings (see Table S2).
sensitivity, we generate two alternative, dichotomous versions of our dependent variable: (i) militarized disputes with casualties versus no casualties (that is, MID casualty levels 1–6 versus level 0) and (ii) militarized disputes with high casualties versus low or no casualties (that is, MID casualty levels 5–6 versus levels 0–4).

We should note that theoretically, we are investigating an authoritarian regime’s sensitivity to casualties and we operationalize this concept as the actual number of casualties an autocracy suffers during a MID. As research on the conflict behavior of democracies shows, leaders with heightened casualty sensitivity tend to engage in less costly militarized disputes with lower casualty tolls (Gartner et al. 2004; Koch and Gartner 2005). The actual number of casualties sustained thus constitutes a valid empirical measure of casualty sensitivity.

Our main independent variable is the autocratic regime type. For this measure, we employ Geddes’ (2003) data on three key types of autocracies—personalist, single-party, and military regimes. In addition to our main autocratic regime-type variables, we control for several factors that may have an impact on the number of casualties incurred in a militarized dispute. To begin with, we control for relative capabilities by calculating the ratio between the authoritarian state’s composite index of national capabilities (GINC) score and the combined GINC score of the dyad (see Bennett 1998). Given that weak states are less likely to exact a toll on stronger states, we expect that the greater the power disparity between warring parties, the fewer casualties incurred in a military conflict (see Valentino et al. 2010). As such, we expect a negative relationship between relative capabilities and the number of casualties autocracies suffer during militarized disputes. In addition, we control for population size and total number of military personnel. We expect that autocracies with smaller populations and military forces are likely more sensitive to casualties due to the gravity of their losses relative to their size, whereas autocracies with larger populations and militaries have more human resources to expend during interstate conflicts (Vasquez 2005; Valentino et al. 2010).

We include a dummy variable for “democratic adversary.” Because democracies tend to select themselves into fighting relatively short and less costly wars (Reiter and Stam 1995; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999), being in a militarized dispute against a democracy may affect the number of casualties an autocratic state suffers (Siverson 1995). To measure this factor, we refer to Polity IV’s 21-point autocracy–democracy scale that ranges from −10 (most autocratic) to 10 (most democratic) and assign a value of “1” for states scoring 7 or higher on the scale or “0” otherwise (Marshall and Jaggers 2002).

We also control for whether the parties in dispute are in a formal alliance with other states since several scholars suggest that states with allies are more likely to succeed in militarized disputes and incur lower costs (for example, Fariss, Gartzke, and Graham 2011). In addition, we control for contiguity because we expect that the mobilization of troops to the front is easier for contiguous dyads, making it more likely that a dispute will involve casualties (Vasquez 1995; Sweeney 2003). Some scholars further suggest that states are not likely to initiate militarized conflicts for which they expect to suffer very heavy losses (for example, Valentino et al. 2010). Others argue that leaders may be more determined to fight harder to win (and thus more willing to sustain higher casualties) for disputes they initiated in the first place (for example, Downs and Rocke 1994).

With these possibilities in mind, we control for whether the autocratic regime in dispute was the initiator or target. Because longer militarized disputes likely result in a higher accumulation of casualties, we also control for dispute duration measured in days (see Goemans 2000; Regan and Stam 2000).

Last, we control for an autocratic state’s level of economic development, which we measure by using the log of energy consumption per capita (Dixon 1994; Mousseau 1998; Hegre 2000; Peceny et al. 2002). There are two possible effects of economic development, each with a different theoretical underpinning. The first possibility is that as the economic power of an autocracy increases, the regime becomes less likely to get involved in costly conflicts since the leader may be hesitant to undermine economic development. The second possibility is that with higher economic power, an autocracy may be able to “afford” costly military endeavors, resulting in a higher number of casualties the regime will sustain.

### Results

We estimate GLS random-effects linear regression models for the analyses of our main dependent variable “number of casualties.” Rather than trying to specify a laundry list of possible country-specific factors, random effects (as a panel-estimated approach) control for country-specific effects likely to be present in the error term. The unit of analysis is the militarized dispute. The sample of disputes tested are all those involving at least one autocratic regime between the years 1946 and 2001. We use the more conservative two-tailed tests in assessing statistical significance.

Table 1 presents the results regarding the link between the autocratic regime type and the number of casualties. Employing the “personalist regimes” variable as the reference category, the results indicate that the coefficients for single-party and military regimes are both significant.

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-Statistic</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Single-party regimes</td>
<td>−14,881.50</td>
<td>4,345.13</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military regimes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative capabilities (ln)</td>
<td>−2,741.84</td>
<td>1,781.84</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (ln)</td>
<td>−6,505.97</td>
<td>2,107.80</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military personnel size (ln)</td>
<td>5,129.29</td>
<td>1,832.60</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic adversary</td>
<td>−2,424.62</td>
<td>1,115.22</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>−4,699.47</td>
<td>5,232.98</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>.380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contiguity</td>
<td>7,800.68</td>
<td>4,182.32</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>8,324.42</td>
<td>4,966.71</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>45.06</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>12.83</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic development (ln)</td>
<td>1,604.41</td>
<td>1,017.89</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>17,530.11</td>
<td>16,389.86</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald χ²</td>
<td>267.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes. “Personalist regimes” is the reference category. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; †p < .10. Two-tailed tests.)
and negative ($p < .001$). More specifically, both single-party and military regimes sustain less casualties than personalist ones in MIDs, *Ceteris paribus*, single-party regimes sustain about 14,881 less casualties and military regimes sustain about 32,282 less casualties as compared to personalist regimes. The analytical findings thus corroborate our hypothesis that personalist regimes have the lowest sensitivity to casualties in MIDs.

Concerning our control variables, the results show that autocracies with larger populations actually have lower numbers of casualties. By comparison, autocracies that have larger militaries are likely to sustain higher casualties. As expected, militarized disputes between contiguous dyads involve higher casualties. Furthermore, the initiation and duration variables both display positive and moderately significant effects on the number of casualties, suggesting that casualties tend to be higher if the autocratic regime is the initiator of the dispute and when it is involved in protracted militarized conflicts.

Table 2 presents the results of binary logistic regression analyses with our two alternative dependent variables: casualty versus no-casualty militarized disputes and high versus low or no-casualty militarized disputes. The results of Model 2 indicate that compared to personalist regimes, single-party regimes are significantly less likely to engage in militarized disputes with casualties ($p < .01$). Military regimes do not significantly differ from personalist ones in their propensity to get involved in disputes where at least some casualties are incurred. However, both single-party and military regimes are significantly less likely to engage in high-casualty disputes than personalist regimes (see Model 3), consistent with the results of our GLS random-effects linear regression model that employs our continuous casualty measure.

| Table 2. Replicating the Analyses with Alternative Casualty Codings (Binary Logistic Regression) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Casualty versus No-Casualty Disputes (Model 2)** | **High versus Low or No-Casualty Disputes (Model 3)** |
| Single-party regimes | —0.759 (0.296)** |
| Military regimes | —0.348 (0.34) |
| Relative capabilities (ln) | —0.454 (0.12)** |
| Population (ln) | 0.722 (0.15)** |
| Military personnel size (ln) | —0.412 (0.13)** |
| Democratic adversary | —0.618 (0.27)* |
| Alliance | —0.565 (0.33)** |
| Contiguity | 2.107 (0.58)** |
| Initiation | —0.282 (0.30)** |
| Duration | 0.003 (0.00)** |
| Economic development (ln) | —0.104 (0.06)** |
| Constant | —7.609 (1.23)** |
| LR $\chi^2$ | 259.15*** |
| Observations | 723 |

(Notes. “Personalist regimes” is the reference category. **$p < .001$; *$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; †$p < .10$. Two-tailed tests).

To further verify that the results are robust to alternative casualty codings, we generate a “casualty rate” variable by dividing the total number of casualties per the number of months for which a militarized dispute continued. We also generate a “casualty per capita” measure by calculating the ratio of casualties to total population. The results from our models employing these additional alternative measures are fully consistent with our main findings (see Table S3).  

**Selection Model**

The number of casualties an autocracy suffers during a given militarized conflict may depend on the dispute selection process. For example, single-party and military regimes might selectively initiate militarized disputes against relatively easy targets such that the number of casualties they tend to sustain is partly a function of dispute selection. Given this possibility, we run a two-stage Heckman selection model, which allows us to obtain estimates for conflict initiation as our first stage and save a selection bias term to correct the estimates in the conflict outcome stage—here, the number of casualties suffered.

To estimate the conflict initiation stage of our selection model, we adopt Weeks’ (2012:337–338) model for directed-dyad analysis of dispute initiation. The variables in Weeks’ model include new/unstable regime, each side’s military capabilities, Side A’s proportion of dyadic capabilities, trade dependency, major power status of the dyad, Side B democracy, contiguity, logged distance between capitals, alliance portfolio similarity, similarity of alliance portfolio with the United States, and years since last conflict initiation.

Table 3 presents the results of our two-stage selection model. With regard to the conflict initiation stage (that is, Stage 1), single-party regimes are less likely to initiate militarized disputes compared to personalist regimes. Military regimes, on the other hand, do not differ from personalist ones, consistent with Weeks’ (2012:340–341) findings. The results of the conflict outcome stage (that is, Stage 2) demonstrate that single-party and military regimes still tend to suffer a lower number of casualties than personalist regimes throughout such disputes even after correcting for potential selection bias. In sum, the results remain robust to the two-stage model specification that takes into account any possible selection effects.

**Sensitivity Analyses**

To further check the robustness of our findings, we conduct various sensitivity analyses. First, we estimate variance inflation factors (VIF) for the independent variables in our models to test for multicollinearity. The mean VIF is less than 2 and the individual VIF scores are below 3.5 (see Table S5), all of which fall well under the VIF value of 10 that scholars consider to be the excess point (Guaraldi and Porter 2009:340). We also consider the possibility of endogeneity between our dependent variable (the number of casualties) and our main independent variable.

---

8 Including population on the right-hand side yields statistical results nearly identical to incorporating it into the dependent variable as part of the "casualty per capita" measure. That said, by having population as a control variable and the total number of casualties as the dependent variable, we avoid potential problems that scholars caution against, particularly in terms of spurious relationships arising from per capita data transformations (for example, Uslaner 1976).
Stage 1: conflict initiation

Regimes (2014:4) point out, “leaders of the two personalist for the implementation of policies are juntas. As Chyzh power are machines and those that rely on the military oligarchic regimes, the civilian ones that rest on party depend on military enforcement are strongmen. Among down commands are bosses, whereas the ones that list regimes, those that rely on a party to execute top-bossism, strongman, machine, and junta. Among person-based. This typology generates four distinct regime types: military versus party dimension that builds on and expands Geddes’ our analyses by employing Lai and Slater’s (2006) two-machines and juntas—operate (for example, politburos, cabinets, juntas)” (see restraints of the power-sharing institutions in which they are in chronological order.9 The results with the lagged values of our regime-type variables to ensure the factors sality, we re-estimate our models by employing the lagged autocratic regimes. Given such a possibility of reverse causality (autocratic regime type) since more severe militarized dis-sferences may potentially lead to greater personalization in autocratic regimes. Given such a possibility of reverse causality, we re-estimate our models by employing the lagged values of our regime-type variables to ensure the factors are in chronological order.9 The results with the lagged measures are fully in line with the results of our main models (see Table S6).10 These post-diagnostic checks indicate that multicollinearity and endogeneity do not pose a concern for bias in our estimates. As part of our robustness checks, we replicate all of our analyses by employing Lai and Slater’s (2006) two-dimensional typology that builds on and expands Geddes’ classification (see also Slater 2003). The first dimension revolves around despotic power (that is, who decides?): personalist (unconstrained) versus oligarchic (elite con-strained). The second dimension centers on infrastructural power (that is, who executes?): military versus party based. This typology generates four distinct regime types: bossism, strongman, machine, and junta. Among personalist regimes, those that rely on a party to execute top-down commands are bosses, whereas the ones that depend on military enforcement are strongmen. Among oligarchic regimes, the civilian ones that rest on party power are machines and those that rely on the military for the implementation of policies are juntas. As Chyzh (2014:4) points out, “leaders of the two personalist regimes—bosses and strongmen—face smaller winning coalitions than leaders of the two oligarchic regimes—machines and juntas—as the latter experience the constraints of the power-sharing institutions in which they operate (for example, politburos, cabinets, juntas)” (see also Weeks 2012:334–335). The results are fully in line with our findings that employ Geddes’ typology, demonstrating that personalist, unconstrained regimes (particularly bosses) have lower sensitivity to casualties (see Tables S7–S11).

Another alternative autocratic regime-type measure we use for robustness purposes is the variable “dictator” that we adopted from “The Institutions and Elections Project (IAEP)” (Regan and Clark 2011). This dichotomous measure codes a ruler as a dictator if coercion (either actual resort to use of force or the threat to do so) is the primary method to attain and maintain executive power. Relying on such coercive capability, a dictator governs without the normal set of political constraints and without the voluntary support of a wide selectorate (Regan and Clark 2011). Dictator-type rulers thus have the smallest winning coalition size compared to other autocratic rulers, which we expect leads to lower sensitivity to casualties. The results indicate that dictator-type rulers are indeed likely to suffer a significantly higher number of casualties (approximately 11,206 more, ceteris paribus) in MIDs (p < .05; see Table S12).

Next, we run a model that includes monarchical as well as hybrid autocracies that display the characteristics of more than one regime type. The hybrid categories are single-party/military, single-party/personalist, military/personalist, and single-party/military/personalist amalgam regimes. In our main analysis, we exclude these hybrid categories to more directly test our hypotheses, which focus on the link between pure regime-type characteristics and autocratic casualty sensitivity. As Peceny and Butler (2004:574) point out, the size of the winning coalition in hybrid regimes is difficult to assess because of the mixed nature of regime characteristics in such systems, especially without knowing which characteristic dominates the system. Nevertheless, we conduct robustness checks by including these additional authoritarian regime types. In line with our main findings, the results indicate that personalist regimes tend to sustain the highest number of casualties in MIDs compared to all other autocracies (see Table S13).

As further sensitivity analyses, we employ Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s 2003 “winning coalition” variable as a direct measure for the size of an authoritarian leader’s support base. This measure is a composite index (on a 5-point scale that ranges from 0 to 1) based on a regime’s level of openness and competition vis-à-vis executive recruitment and the competitiveness of national participation.11 We also test our models with the ratio of the winning coalition size to the selectorate. Our inverse divide-the-dollar model predicts that the larger the ratio is, the higher the casualty sensitivity of an autocracy, resulting in fewer casualties sustained in a militarized dispute. The results (presented in Table S14) substantiate our expectations. Specifically, for a one-unit decrease in the winning coalition size of an autocracy, the number of casualties increases by about 39,233 (p < .001). So, as an authoritarian regime’s executive recruitment and participation become less open and less competitive (that is, as the winning coalition size gets smaller), such a regime will sustain higher casualties in a MID. The results further reveal that as the ratio of an autocracy’s winning coalition size to its selectorate size gets higher, the number of casualties suffered in a militarized dispute decreases by about 40,400 (p < .001). These findings are in line with our theoretical proposition that the distribution of public bads

| Table 3. Heckman’s Two-Stage Selection Model |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1: conflict initiation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-party regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military capabilities, Side A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military capabilities, Side B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side A’s proportion of dyadic capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional controls</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 2: number of casualties suffered</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-party regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (ln)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military personnel size (ln)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional controls</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald χ²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes. “Personalist regimes” is the reference category. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; †p < .10. Two-tailed tests. Table S4 reports the full tables including the coefficients and standard errors for the control variables).

10 Given the consistency of the results between the models with non-lagged and lagged independent variables, we decided to keep the original models for our main analyses to retain maximum degrees of freedom.

11 We incorporate this variable from the “Quality of Government Dataset” (Teorell, Samanni, Holmberg, and Rothstein 2011).
(here, casualties) becomes more difficult for a leader as
the winning coalition size becomes larger.

We also run our models using various alternative mea-
sures pertaining to the nature of the political system in
a regime. Specifically, we employ measures of repression
using the Physical Integrity Rights Index (Cingranelli and
Richards 1999), the number of veto players (Tsebelis
2002), political constraints (Henisz 2010), competitiveness,
contestation, and inclusiveness (Coppedge, Alvarez,
and Maldonado 2008). The results indicate that
decreases in repression and increases in the number
of veto players, political constraints, competitiveness, and
contestation all significantly decrease the number of casu-
alties sustained by authoritarian regimes in militarized
disputes. Moreover, when these measures are included in
the analytical models alongside our autocratic regime-
type measures, the results consistently show that personal-
ist regimes sustain a significantly higher number of casu-
alties in militarized disputes. These sensitivity analyses
help substantiate the robustness of our analytical findings
(see Tables S15 and S16).

For the final set of our robustness checks, we employ
alternative model specifications by including some addi-
tional control variables. For instance, we add a control
for constitution because some studies suggest that con-
script armies might suffer higher military casualties than
professional militaries (for example, Valentino et al.
2010; but see Vasquez 2005). We also control for peace
years. When states have been at peace with one another
for a long time, they may be more prone to end a dispute
before it becomes too costly. In particular, prior periods
of peace may have afforded such dyads more time to (i)
build institutions for better conflict management and (ii)
distance themselves from the recollections of any past
conflicts (see Hegre and Sambanis 2006). As Beck, Katz,
and Tucker (1998) suggest, controlling for peace years is
also useful to check for temporal dependence. We also
control for the adversary’s aims in a given dispute (that
is, issue at stake) because several scholars find that if
states are in a militarized dispute against adversaries who
seek to conquer their territory or change their govern-
ment or regime, they are likely to fight more fiercely and
suffer higher losses (Valentino et al. 2010). Because the
number of casualties may be dependent on whether one
side responds militarily to the other side’s threat to use
force or retaliates with a military action, we also control
for reciprocation (see Weeks 2008). We further control
for dispute outcome because a state may be willing to
incur a larger number of casualties for victory or the dis-
pute may result in a tie or defeat for the state such that
the state’s maximum casualty threshold may not have
been reached (see Goemans 2000). The results with these
additional controls do not differ from our main results
(see Table S17).

Conclusion

This study posed a novel question: Are some autocratic
governments more sensitive to casualties in armed con-
licts than others and, if so, why? Employing an inverse
divide-the-dollar game (vis-à-vis the distribution of public
“bads”), we argued that authoritarian leaders with smaller

 winning coalitions find it easier to distribute the costs of
militarized conflicts outside of those coalitions. This
diminishes their sensitivity to casualties. In line with our
theoretical expectations, we find that personalist regimes—
having the smallest winning coalitions—sustain the high-
est number of casualties in militarized disputes compared
to other authoritarian regimes, even after controlling for
potential selection effects.

Our study sheds light on the variations authoritarian
leaders display in their sensitivity to casualties and con-
flict behavior. Returning to our example in the introduc-
tion, why was Saddam Hussein willing to incur more than
thirty times the casualties in the Gulf War than the Galti-
eri regime in the Falklands War? In part, Hussein faced a
smaller winning coalition than Galtieri, whose tenure
dependent on the support of the military elite of Argent-
tina. In accounting for variations in autocratic conflict
behavior, we should, of course, recognize the role of
other key factors. Most important among these is a lea-
der’s penchant for repression—especially in the form of
contraction of coordination goods. This factor proved
particularly pertinent in our illustrative cases.

For further examples of variations in autocratic casualty
sensitivity, one can look at border-related interstate con-
flicts between neighboring countries. Such conflicts gen-
erally take the form of high-stakes militarized disputes;
they are prone to costly clashes between the warring par-
ties (Mandel 1980; Vasquez 1995; Sweeney 2003). A
review of key border disputes involving different autocratic regime types suggests the existence of many real-
world examples that fall in line with our theoretical
model and empirical findings. For instance, the Algerian
military junta suffered less than 500 casualties in the Sand
War of 1963 between Algeria and Morocco. The Sino-
Indian War of 1962 was also not a very costly conflict for
China’s single-party regime, which suffered less than 750
casualties. That being said, Somalia, under the personalist
leadership of Mohamed Siad Barre, suffered more than
6,500 casualties in the Ethio-Somali War of 1977 over the
Ogaden region. Of course, besides these countries’ winning
coalition sizes, several other dynamics—such as rela-
tive capabilities, population, and dispute duration—also
likely contributed to such variations. Nevertheless, as our
temporal analyses demonstrate, even after controlling for
those other factors, autocratic regime type matters vis-
à-vis sensitivity to casualties.

Our study expands the scholarship on autocratic conflict
behavior and offers important policy implications. For
instance, while Lai and Slater (2006:118) suggest that in-
frastructural power is a stronger determinant of conflict
initiation than regime personalization, we argue that dif-
ferent dynamics may be at play once a conflict is under-
way and casualties start to accumulate. Indeed, while single-
party regimes may enjoy the security of tenure at home
due to high infrastructural power, the very factors that give
them such power may reduce their flexibility to engage in
high-casualty conflicts in part because their legitimacy is
generally due to being more inclusive than other autocra-
cies. As for military leaders, distributing the costs of casual-
ties outside their winning coalitions may become
extremely difficult, damaging their prospects for staying
in office. Accordingly, a key policy implication is that both
single-party and military regimes should be similarly cau-
tious about high-casualty conflicts regardless of their dif-
f erences in infrastructural power. By contrast, personalist
dictators function essentially without checks and balances
and can engage in highly erratic policymaking (Mattes
2010; but see Vasquez 2005) 13 We also control for peace

12 We adopt these measures from the “Quality of Government Dataset”
(Teorell et al. 2011).
13 We adopt the conscription measure from Toronto’s (2005) “Military
Recruitment Data Set.”
and Rodríguez 2014: 530). Given their small winning coalitions that do not pose a credible threat of removal (Weeks 2008, 2012) and a high penchant for repression through contraction of coordination goods (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010), personalist leaders enjoy full discretion over the extent of casualties they sustain in militarized disputes. In short, while Lai and Slater (2006:113–114) argue that regime personalization is secondary to infrastructural power for conflict initiation, our results indicate that personalization matters particularly once the conflict starts and casualties mount up.

That said, we should note that personalist leaders’ proclivity to sustain high numbers of casualties in MIDs can ultimately produce adverse domestic policy consequences affecting their post-conflict fate. Although it may be easier for personalist leaders to distribute the costs of war outside their small winning coalitions, excessive and recurrent costs that a conflict-prone personalist leader incurs on her country could eventually set the stage for a grassroots rebellion and help ripen the conditions for a mass revolution. One example is Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya. Despite employing exhaustive measures of repression to circumvent threats to his tenure, the frequent wars Gaddafi dragged Libya into (Weeks 2014:55) coupled with the extreme poverty he imposed on his people (while diverting the costs away from his winning coalition) largely contributed to his violent overthrow (Buera 2015).

Our results also closely relate to recent work on autocratic audience costs. As previously mentioned, Weeks (2008:59–60) suggests that certain types of authoritarian dispute initiators—including single-party and military regimes—possess a greater ability to generate audience costs and are less likely to face resistance from target states compared to regimes with a low ability to generate audience costs, such as personalist regimes. More specifically, for a dispute initiated by an autocracy with high audience costs, the target state may be hesitant to escalate the crisis because it may perceive the threat as more genuine. Such arguments on audience costs fall in line with our findings that personalist dispute initiators tend to sustain the highest number of casualties compared to single-party and military ones. If personalist regimes face higher rates of target reciprocation with a militarized action given their low audience costs, they may also face more casualties compared to other autocratic regime types.

While low audience costs may lead to personalist regimes facing higher dispute reciprocation, our findings suggest that reciprocating states should be cautious about the lower sensitivity of personalist regimes to casualties. If a personalist threat against a target state indeed proves to be genuine despite low audience costs and a militarized dispute breaks out, the target state may find itself bogged down in a high-severity conflict. Therein, the willingness of personalist leaders to sustain high casualties may also affect the number of casualties the target state suffers. This possibility should be alarming especially for democracies given their tendency to avoid militarized disputes with high human costs. As such, a major policy implication is that along with the audience cost abilities of an autocratic adversary, target states should also consider an autocratic regime’s casualty sensitivity in deciding whether to reciprocate with military action.

Our research also provides a possible avenue for addressing another puzzle concerning foreign policy decision making: If democracies are more likely to win the wars they fight, then why do nondemocracies target democracies more frequently? It may be because autocracies are cognizant that democracies would rather negotiate a settlement than facing the risks of a high-casualty conflict. Therefore, personalist leaders may target democracies more frequently knowing that they may be able to pry some goods from democratic leaders attempting to avoid costly conflicts. Future research should test this proposition.

While this study focused primarily on the sensitivity of authoritarian regimes to military casualties in interstate disputes, further studies may similarly explore the sensitivity of autocracies to civilian casualties (suffered both on the home front and by opponents). Although some works systematically investigate the issue of civilian casualties, such studies generally look at the intrastate level. For example, examining genocides and politiescides for the period 1955–2001, Aydin and Gates (2008:90–91) find that fewer constraints on the executive power of authoritarian rulers lead to higher targeting of civilians. Such findings signal that the sensitivity of autocracies to civilian casualties may vary in MIDs as well. However, no research we know of has quantitatively investigated civilian casualty sensitivity of different authoritarian regime types at the interstate dispute level.

The scarcity of comprehensive and reliable systematic data on civilian casualties in international conflicts remains one key reason for this gap in our knowledge of civilian casualty sensitivity (see Manrique-Vallier, Price, and Gohdes 2013). As Seybolt, Aronson, and Fischhoff (2013:3) point out, counting civilian casualties is an elusive task wherein “researchers must not only overcome the practical problems of tallying the dead and injured during wars and rebellions but also circumvent rival parties’ attempts to distort these numbers.” Despite significant progress in gathering data on civilian casualty counts for interstate wars (for example, Valentino et al. 2010) and for intrastate armed conflicts (see PRIO’s “Battle Deaths Data”), accurate time-series-cross-sectional data at the interstate dispute level remain lacking. Consequently, many studies focus on a single country (primarily, the United States) or specific military intervention cases in exploring the issue of civilian casualties (for example, Kahl 2007; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009). Once data become available, future research may further differentiate interstate disputes based on the relative levels of military and civilian casualties (that is, high–high, high–low, low–high, and low–low) and investigate how the regime would respond depending on the country’s winning coalition–selectorate structure and civil–military relations.

In short, studying the sensitivity of autocracies to casualties holds great potential for significantly advancing our understanding of the conflict behavior and processes involving such regimes, with real-world implications for civilians and the leaders who govern over them in deciding matters of war and peace. Further scholarly efforts in this line of research are particularly crucial if, as the democratic peace theory suggests, the remaining conflicts in the world are likely to include at least one nondemocratic state.

References

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table S1. Descriptive Statistics.
Table S2. Sensitivity Analyses with the Minimum and Maximum MID Casualty Values.
Table S3. Replicating the Analyses with Casualty Rate and Casualty Per Capita Measures.
Table S4. Heckman Two-Stage Selection Models—Full Table with All Covariates.
Table S5. Variance Inflation Factors.
Table S6. Sensitivity Analyses with Lagged Measures.
Table S7. The Number of Casualties Sustained in Militarized Interstate Disputes—Lai and Slater’s Typology.
Table S8. Replicating the Analyses with Alternative Casualty Codings—Lai and Slater’s Typology.
Table S9. Replicating the Analyses with Casualty Rate and Casualty Per Capita Measures—Lai and Slater’s Typology.
Table S10. Heckman Two-Stage Selection Models—Lai and Slater’s Typology.
Table S11. Sensitivity Analyses with Lagged Measures—Lai and Slater’s Typology.
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Table S13. Sensitivity Analyses with Hybrid Regimes and Monarchies.
Table S14. Sensitivity Analyses with Authoritarian Regimes’ (1) Winning Coalition Size and (2) Ratio of the Winning Coalition Size to the Selectorate.
Table S15. Sensitivity Analyses with Authoritarian Regimes’ (1) Repression, (2) Number of Veto Players, and (3) Political Constraints.
Table S16. Sensitivity Analyses with Authoritarian Regimes’ (1) Competitiveness, (2) Contestation, and (3) Inclusiveness.
Table S17. Sensitivity Analyses with Additional Controls.
Table S18. Sensitivity Analyses with Panel Corrected Standard Errors (PSCES).