

# Presidential Risk Propensity and Intervention in Interstate Conflicts

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What explains a state's decision to intervene in ongoing interstate conflicts? Intervention is a risky proposition, potentially incurring audience costs if the effort is unsuccessful or if casualties and other costs mount. Various domestic political factors and features of the international environment certainly shape the risks surrounding intervention, but recent work in political psychology suggests that individual leaders' risk-taking propensity, as measured by their locus of control (LOC), greatly influences their willingness to engage in potentially risky actions. In this paper, we examine the link between US presidents' risk propensity and the frequency with which they intervene internationally. Our analysis of the period 1946–2001 reveals that presidents with an internal LOC are generally more likely to intervene in ongoing conflicts. Moreover, such leaders are specifically more likely to engage in unilateral interventions and those geared toward harming the interests of interstate rivals, indicating a particular predilection toward risk-taking in their decision-making surrounding interventions.

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## Introduction

What explains a state's decision to intervene in an ongoing interstate conflict? As with other forms of involvement in international disputes, third-party intervention—particularly when it is unilateral, partisan (supporting one side), or involves substantial commitment of state resources—entails considerable risks. It is therefore not surprising that objective factors that alter decision-makers' risk

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calculations are the commonly cited drivers of states' involvement in international disputes. For example, a distribution of power capabilities that favors a state relative to potential adversaries reduces the risks of that state's involvement in interstate disputes. Similarly, domestic factors such as a political constituency that is militarily assertive, a growing economy, and unified government reduce the objective risks of involvement in international disputes. While this body of research has correctly identified important factors that shape the objective risks of certain policy options (i.e., the likelihood that specific costs will be borne when those policies are chosen), the notion of subjective risk assessments has received much less attention. If different political leaders, when faced with the same objective risks, perceive and respond differently to those risks, then our models' explanatory power will suffer to the degree that we focus solely on objective risk.

Research in political psychology indicates that leaders do indeed perceive risks differently given the same structural conditions. Specifically, locus of control (LOC) has been identified as a crucial determinant of leaders' attitudes toward risk (e.g., Vertzberger 1998; Keller and Foster 2012). Leaders with a relatively internal LOC believe that they can manipulate events and control escalation, and this confidence leads them to embrace policies that other leaders would view as too risky. In contrast, leaders with a relatively external LOC view outcomes as determined by larger forces beyond their control, a view that breeds caution in the face of risk. In this study, we apply these insights to the domain of intervention, hypothesizing that leaders with an internal locus of control will be more likely to engage in intervention generally and high-risk forms of intervention in particular. We test these expectations in the context of US foreign policy by examining the link between US presidents' LOC and the frequency with which they intervene internationally. Our analysis of the period 1946–2001 reveals that presidents with an internal LOC are generally more likely to intervene in ongoing conflicts. Moreover, such leaders are specifically more likely to engage in unilateral interventions and those geared toward harming the interests of interstate rivals, indicating a particular predilection toward risk-taking in their decision-making surrounding interventions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we review the system-level, dyadic, and state-level factors that influence the objective risks of intervention in interstate disputes. Second, we consider the role of subjective risk assessment and identify a key individual-level variable—locus of control—that shapes leaders' willingness to engage in risky foreign policy behavior. We develop hypotheses related to locus of control that allow us to examine the “value added” of subjective risk assessment when taking into account the objective risks of intervention. We then describe our methods and report our findings. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for the study of risk taking, intervention, and international conflict more broadly.

### **Third-Party Interventions in Conflictual Dyads: Systemic and Dyadic Influences**

A vast body of literature examines various types of third-party intervention in interstate disputes, ranging from neutral efforts (including mediation, arbitration, and good offices) to partisan intervention, which often involves more coercive efforts to support one side of the dispute to the detriment of the other. This literature has explored the causes, role, timing, and process of third-party mediation as a tool of conflict management (for example, Zartman and Touval 1985; Bercovitch 1996; Bercovitch and Diehl 1997; Greig 2001, 2005, to note a few). Mediation occurs when a third party calls for or attempts to aid disputants to resolve an underlying contentious issue. Such impartial or neutral interventions, however, are less common than partisan interventions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Corbetta and Dixon (2005) report 1,809 partisan interventions compared to 1,201 neutral intermediary interventions reported by Frazier and Dixon (2006) during the 1946–2001 period. Both datasets are discussed at length later in this manuscript.

As with the literature on neutral interventions, the work on partisan intervention is vast and well beyond our ability to adequately summarize here. This work includes balance of power/threat and related literatures (e.g., [Waltz 1979](#); [Walt 1985](#)), the alliance literature (e.g., [Siverson and King 1980](#); [Leeds, Long, and Mitchell 2000](#)), and the contagion and diffusion literatures (e.g., [Starr 2005](#)). In contrast to the mediation literature, in which diverse forms and techniques of neutral intervention have been widely explored, inquiries regarding partisan intervention have, until recently, focused on conflict joining as the predominant form of intervention, ignoring intervention techniques falling short of the militarized interstate dispute threshold ([Corbetta 2010, 2015](#)).

Of particular relevance for the present study, the literature on third-party intervention highlights a number of variables related to the dispute itself and the international context that shape the objective costs and likelihood of success for various types of intervention. Such variables include the severity or longevity of the dispute, great power status of the third party, geographical proximity, external support for the disputing parties, and trilateral relations between the third party and the two parties in conflict. The role of these factors is briefly reviewed here.

Because mediation-based interventions usually require the disputants to sit down at the negotiation table, neutral third parties most frequently participate in extended, high-severity disputes, which have already reached a mutually hurting stalemate, meaning disputants perceive mounting costs of continuing hostility yet little prospect of altering the status quo toward their desired outcome ([Zartman and Touval 1985](#); [Zartman 2001](#)). This joint realization renders disputants more amenable to accepting an intermediary's assistance. Intermediaries are also drawn to heightened-severity disputes, including those between enduring rivals, in which two states have repeatedly fought over the same contentious issue without durable settlement ([Bercovitch and Diehl 1997](#)). In these situations, intermediaries likely perceive a potential boost to reputation or status to be gained through facilitation of a successful settlement. Powerful third parties most frequently fill the intermediary role. Their heightened capabilities can be leveraged against disputants, further escalating the costs of continued hostility, while also permitting rewards such as foreign aid that can be used to incentivize settlement.

Decisions to intervene in contentious relations of other powers, whether to aid in resolving the dispute or to tip the scales in favor of one side, will be shaped by a series of strategic considerations involving the intervening power, its relation to the disputants, and the characteristics of the dispute itself. Triadic relations between a third party and a dispute dyad shape the role third parties assume when intervening in active disputes. [Corbetta and Grant \(2012\)](#) find that mediation and neutral interventions are most likely when a third party is "friends" with each of the disputing parties, while partisan intervention is more likely when a third party is friendly toward one disputant and hostile toward the other.

Major powers should be most likely to engage in both neutral and partisan intervention, as they are more likely to define their interests globally rather than by neighborhood, while also possessing the ability to project capabilities and influence outside their immediate region at lower relative cost ([Volgy et al. 2011](#)). Major powers are also most likely to be heavily embedded within both alliances and rivalries, both of which create strong preferences toward shaping external conflict to their allies' advantage or their enemies' detriment ([Corbetta and Dixon 2005](#)). Additional factors, including geographic proximity to a dispute, influence interventions, especially for less powerful countries ([Siverson and Starr 1991](#)). Intervention patterns appear heavily reliant on expectations regarding the delivery of external support—both to one's allies as well as enemies—which shapes a

potential intervening country's expectations of outcome and payoff (Smith 1996; Werner 2000).

### The Objective Risks of Intervention: State-Level Influences

At the state level, several political and economic variables shape the likely costs of intervention. Among the political factors in democratic states, the electoral calendar looms large. Failed interventions that occur early in a leader's tenure can erode political capital, raise questions about competence, and strengthen political opposition at a time when the government needs to build momentum with a series of "wins" on key policy goals. Similarly, costly interventions in close proximity to elections are likely to produce damaging electoral outcomes. Therefore, interventions that occur near the beginning of a leader's tenure in office or just prior to elections entail greater objective risks, and leaders should be less likely to pursue intervention during these periods (e.g., Gaubatz 1991).

Unified government reduces the risks of intervention by decreasing the likelihood of effective elite opposition to a leader's initiatives in the international realm (Wang 1996; Schultz 2001; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). In contrast, when the executive faces a legislature dominated by members of the opposition party, there are more avenues for opposing actors to block, dilute, or reverse the executive's initiatives. In these circumstances, the pursuit of foreign interventions that do not enjoy broad domestic support is likely to generate costs in the form of high-profile criticism and greater resistance to the leader's foreign (and perhaps even domestic) policy priorities.

Another key political variable concerns the ideology of the leader's core constituencies. A leader whose support base is relatively hawkish or internationalist will find it less politically costly to engage in assertive foreign policy behavior than a leader whose primary constituencies are dovish or isolationist. In the US context, militarized foreign policy is likely to be favored by the base constituencies of Republican presidents, while "constructive" international engagements, and especially those undertaken in concert with allies to assist democratic elements under duress in other states, are favored by the base constituencies of Democratic presidents (Eichenberg 1989; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Palmer, London, and Regan 2004).

Domestic economic factors also influence the objective costs of intervention overseas. On the one hand, leaders might be most likely to engage in intervention when the economy is performing well, as they seek to avoid "compounding" the electoral risks of a poor economy and a failed intervention. Alternatively, it might be the case that a flagging economy generates incentives for presidents to engage in international ventures, either as a diversion from their poor economic management or as an opportunity to demonstrate managerial competence in another policy domain (Ostrom and Job 1986; Foster 2008; Foster and Keller 2010). To account for these possibilities, we will include in our analysis two economic variables: GDP growth as a proxy for economic strength, and the monthly misery index (a measure of aggregate inflation and unemployment) as an indicator of domestic economic trouble.

### Locus of Control and Subjective Risk Assessments

While the objective risks inherent in a given situation provide important cues as to decision-makers' likely responses, a considerable body of work spanning the fields of psychology, management science, and political psychology indicates that individuals vary in their perceptions of, and responses to, objective risks. Since certain individuals, such as US presidents, exercise great influence over their states'

foreign policies, models of foreign policy behavior that do not take individual-level variables into account are likely to miss an important piece of the puzzle. As [Kowert and Hermann \(1997, 3–4\)](#) conclude:

That [individual differences in risk-taking propensity] have been ignored is unproblematic in a field such as economics which ordinarily concerns itself with the modal behavior of utility-maximizers in markets. But for students of international politics, no such oversight is permissible when the behavior of a single leader, shaping military or economic policy, often has dramatic consequences.

Perhaps the most important individual-level determinant of a leader's attitude toward risk is locus of control (LOC). LOC refers to one's beliefs about whether outcomes in one's life are determined by one's own efforts and skill (an internal locus) or by external forces, including luck, over which one has no control (an external locus) ([Rotter 1966](#); [Davis and Phares 1967](#)). These beliefs are crucial because a great deal of research has linked perceptions of controllability to risk-taking. Studies of risk-taking in the management world conclude that risk-takers don't perceive their decisions as inherently risky; rather, they are confident in their own ability to manage and modify risks, preventing negative outcomes (e.g., [Adler 1980](#); [Keyes 1985](#)). Such managers "make a sharp distinction between gambling (where the odds are exogenously determined and uncontrollable) and risk taking (where skill or information can reduce the uncertainty). The situations they face seem to them to involve risk taking, but not gambling . . . Thus, managers accept risks, in part, because they do not expect that they will have to bear them" ([March and Shapira 1987, 1410–11](#)).

Studies of risk-taking in the domain of foreign policy have likewise concluded that leaders' beliefs about their ability to control outcomes play a central role in shaping their attitudes toward risk. [Vertzberger \(1998, 69\)](#), in his study of military intervention and risk-taking, drives this point home:

Risk takers believe that escalation proceeds in identifiable and distinctive steps that can be monitored and hence prevented from getting out of control. Risk avoiders believe that escalation proceeds gradually in small steps that are not easily monitored; it can get out of hand and lead to a quagmire. Risk takers view the probability of adverse outcomes as low and limited. Risk is expected to stay within recognized and acceptable limits, the danger of losing domestic legitimacy is expected to be negligible, and, most important, belief in the controllability of escalation reduces anticipation of post-decisional dissonance. Hence the reluctance to make risky decisions decreases.

[Boettcher's \(2005\)](#) study of presidential risk behavior in foreign policy distinguishes between potential-motivated leaders (who are risk-seekers) and security-motivated leaders (who are risk-averse). Clearly one's LOC will shape one's preference for potential versus security: those who believe they can manipulate the environment will seek potential, while those who see outcomes as driven by external forces will prefer security. More recently, [Keller and Foster \(2012\)](#) found that US presidents who are risk-acceptant—as measured by LOC—are more likely to engage in diversionary strategies, which are inherently high risk. As with diversionary behavior, intervention in ongoing conflicts involves considerable political, economic, and security risks. Whether one perceives those risks as "deal-breakers" or as manageable uncertainties cannot be determined solely by objective situational factors; a complete explanation must take into account individual-level determinants of risk propensity.

Two empirically measurable leadership traits (see the methodology below) are closely related to one's beliefs about the controllability of outcomes. *Belief in ability to control events* ([Hermann 1999](#)) gauges a leader's general beliefs about whether outcomes in the political universe are determined by fate/chance or are subject to manipulation, while *self-confidence* ([Ziller et al. 1977](#); [Hermann 1999](#)) focuses

more narrowly on one's own perceived skills and experience in managing the environment. As shown in table 1, the coding of belief in ability to control events focuses on whether any entity with which a leader identifies is perceived as capable of shaping outcomes, whereas the coding for self-confidence focuses on the leader's personal sense of efficacy, authority, and influence. In sum, belief in ability to control events appears to be a broader philosophical disposition whereas self-confidence is a more personal, perhaps even visceral, sense of one's own efficacy and importance. These two characteristics need not be perfectly correlated—a leader might view events as relatively controllable (e.g., by their state's military forces or diplomatic instruments) but have a low opinion of their personal efficacy, or view events as heavily influenced by chance but have confidence in their own ability to buck this trend. Each characteristic therefore provides a somewhat different avenue by which a leader might perceive controllability and embrace risks—either because the environment is generally malleable or because the leader is particularly skilled at manipulating that environment.

Some of the literature on the individual-level determinants of risk-taking seems to emphasize self-confidence as a precursor to general attitudes toward controllability. For example, Vertzberger (1998, 68) notes that “The more confidence that decisionmakers have in their skills, expertise, and experience, the surer they will be of their ability to fix initial errors, and the more tempted they will be to take risks. Some might even come to see risk taking as a welcome challenge to their skill in handling difficult situations and using them to their advantage.” Furthermore, Vertzberger suggests that “decisionmakers’ perception of self-efficacy will lead them to perceive risky situations as controllable and as affording opportunities, not threats” (1998, 68). Research on strategic risk-taking among managers has also identified self-confidence as a predictor of risk-taking (Schaninger 1976; Baird and Thomas 1985). However, much of the literature on the individual-level determinants of risk-taking treats self-confidence and belief in ability to control events as overlapping and interchangeable concepts. Because we can identify somewhat different mechanisms by which each characteristic shapes perceptions of controllability and risk-taking, we use both concepts in this study and we treat them as joint contributors to one's overall LOC. We expect that leaders who score higher on both characteristics—and therefore perceive themselves as influential actors in a generally malleable universe—will be the most likely to take risks, whereas those who doubt both their own efficacy and the general malleability of events will be least likely to take risks.

A decision maker's LOC is apparent in both the choices they make as well as how they communicate those choices to others. For example, Presidents Kennedy and Reagan each possessed strongly internal loci of control, but whereas Kennedy's LOC was influenced by average *belief in ability to control events* coupled with heightened *self-confidence*, Reagan's displayed both elevated *belief in ability to control events* and *self-confidence*. In fact, President Reagan's *belief in ability to control events* was the highest observed of any US president since World War II, while his *self-confidence* was second only to Kennedy's. President Reagan was also a journalist, who routinely recorded his personal reflections on the day's events. These *Reagan Diaries* provide a first-person, personal account of the president's thought process and reflections on significant foreign policy events throughout his presidency, including several international interventions in response to the attempted expansion of Libyan territorial waters into the Gulf of Sidra in 1980–81 and during the 1982 Lebanese Civil War.

For example, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Qaddafi repeatedly asserted that the Gulf of Sidra was a closed body of water internal to Libya. When Reagan took office, US opposition to Libya's claim intensified. In June 1980, Reagan reflected in his diary: “I approved naval maneuvers in Mediterranean waters that Qaddafi of Libya has declared are his territorial waters. I'm not being foolhardy but he's a madman. He has been harassing our planes out over international waters & it's

**Table 1.** Leadership style characteristics and coding procedures—locus of control (from Keller and Foster 2012, 589)

Characteristic	Coding procedures	Sample language
<b>Self-confidence (SC)</b>	Focus on use of personal pronouns in spontaneous remarks; coded as high self-confidence, pronoun use reflects belief that the president instigates activities, should be viewed as an authority figure, or is the recipient of positive responses from others  $\text{Score} = \frac{\text{per president average of } \left( \frac{\text{personal pronoun use that meets criteria}}{\text{total personal pronoun use}} \right)}$	High SC: <i>I am going to. That is my plan of action. If it were up to me. Let me explain what we mean. You flatter me with your praise.</i>
<b>Belief in ability to control events (BACE)</b>	Focus on verbs or action words in spontaneous remarks indicating that president or group with whom president identifies takes responsibility for planning or initiating actions  $\text{Score} = \frac{\text{per president average of } \left( \frac{\text{verbs that meet criteria}}{\text{total verbs/referring to actions}} \right)}$	High BACE: <i>We're getting rid of a rather expensive administration overhead. I took charge of passing the strictest air-pollution laws in the United States.</i>
<b>Locus of control scale: (SC + BACE)/2</b>		

time to show the other nations there Egypt, Morocco, et al that there is different management here,” (Reagan 2007, 22). Reagan would maintain the hard line on Qaddafi, authorizing eight interventions targeting Libya during his presidency. Apparent in his thought process was awareness of his locus of control: Reagan believed that Qaddafi and other leaders would respond differently to him than to his predecessor and was eager to draw attention to the changes in leadership incumbent to his presidency. In contrast, neither presidents Carter nor Bush—both of whom possessed external loci of control—would authorize any interventions against Libya.

Reagan’s role in de-escalating phases of the 1982 Lebanese Civil War demonstrates how his internal LOC informed his approach to conflict management. On August 12, 1982, Reagan writes in his journal:

Met with the news the Israelis delivered the most devastating bomb & artillery attack on W. Beirut lasting 14 hours. Habib cabled—desperate—has basic agreement from all parties but can’t arrange details of P.L.O. withdrawal because of the barrage.

King Fahd [Saudi Arabia] called begging me to do something. I told him I was calling P.M. Begin immediately. And I did—I was angry—I told him it had to stop or our entire future relationship was endangered. I used the word holocaust deliberately & said the symbol of his war was becoming a picture of a 7-month-old baby with its arms blown off. He told me he had ordered the bombing stopped—I asked about the artillery fire. He claimed the P.L.O. had started that & Israeli forces had taken casualties. End of call. Twenty mins. later he called to tell me he’d ordered an end to the barrage and plead for our continued friendship. (Reagan 2007, 97–98)

The assertiveness of Reagan’s intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, in which his *self-confidence* and *belief in ability to control events* are clearly on display, presents a stark contrast to President Bush’s handling of the taking of American hostages by the Islamic Jihad in Lebanon in 1990. President Bush possessed an external locus of control, characterized by moderate *belief in ability to control events* but comparatively low *self-confidence*. In unscripted discussions with members of the press, President Bush repeatedly expressed his frustration with his lack of control over the trajectory of the hostage situation. In responding to a question regarding the Islamic Jihad’s decision to postpone the release of American hostages due to the United States’ reluctance to engage in high level talks, President Bush replied, “We’ve been disappointed before—hopes raised only to have them dashed by excessive speculation. I would add that we are not talking to the hostage holders . . . But beyond that, I can’t think of anything I could say that would contribute to the release of the hostages,” (Bush 1990a). A few weeks later, when asked how the actions of the United States had contributed to the release of hostages, President Bush replied, “I can’t say that our actions facilitated the release of [the hostages]. I hope that the affirmation and reaffirmation of our policy might have contributed to it, but there was no behind-the-scenes negotiations that will come out that show that we pulled this off. I wish I could—I was going to say, I wish I could say that was true, but it would have to be true within these confines I’ve spelled out here earlier on,” (Bush 1990b). Regarding the potential for more hostages to be released, Bush continued, “But you can rest assured that I have asked for that answer: Will this lead inevitably to the release of others? But I can’t say that I’ve gotten any feeling that this process is destined to go forward in a short period of time. I wish it was different. I so wish it were different,” (Bush 1990b).

### Hypotheses

Third-party intervention in international disputes presents a variety of objective risks. Failed interventions can damage a state’s credibility on the world stage, undermine a government’s domestic political approval, and—particularly if the intervention is unilateral or militarized—can produce substantial costs in blood and



treasure. As discussed previously, these risks can be mitigated or exacerbated by the distribution of capabilities, political structures, and domestic economic conditions. But even under the most favorable of circumstances, foreign intervention is fraught with potential costs. Therefore, we would expect that leaders' attitudes toward risk would play a crucial role in determining whether or not they pursue intervention in interstate disputes.

Leaders who are lower in self-confidence and belief in their ability to control events (a relatively external LOC) will approach the prospect of intervention with great caution. In calculating the costs and benefits of intervention, they will perceive many aspects of the situation as beyond their ability to control: the responses of the disputing parties; the reactions of domestic critics; the potential setbacks that may gain traction in the media; the length of time that diplomatic, economic, or military resources will need to be committed to the intervention; and the eventual scope of the commitment. Such leaders are unlikely to intervene in foreign interstate disputes unless the objective risks are quite low or they see no alternatives to action. Unilateral intervention will be particularly unlikely since the lack of allies to share the burden focuses the potential costs on the leader and his or her state. In the event such a leader views intervention as necessary, they will likely devote resources to building a coalition that can provide political cover and share the burden in terms of military and economic resources. Furthermore, intervention that is likely to provoke a longstanding adversary will also be particularly unattractive for such leaders given the possibility of uncontrollable escalation. The perceived risks of intervention will be magnified when confronting a rival, as such opponents will tend to view intervention in zero-sum terms and respond in kind to forceful efforts to harm their interests. Even if the objective risks of intervention are low, such leaders' external LOC will amplify these risks and produce a proclivity to reduce their commitments or withdraw altogether at the first sign of significant trouble.

In contrast, leaders who are higher in self-confidence and belief in ability to control events (a relatively internal LOC) will view foreign interstate disputes as yet another policy arena in which they can produce desired outcomes through skill and determination. They will reason that if things begin to go badly—either in the theater abroad or in the realm of domestic politics—they will have ample warning and sufficient opportunity to right the ship through their own clever maneuvers. They may not even contemplate the prospect that the intervention will end in failure; if they do consider this possibility, they will likely conclude that they will be able to extricate their state and themselves, politically, from the disaster without suffering heavy costs. Unlike their external LOC counterparts, leaders who are confident in their ability to shape outcomes will not recoil from the prospect of unilateral interventions, since allies are not necessary in order to control the course of events. They will not devote the same kind of attention and resources to coalition-building as would leaders whose risk aversion makes multilateralism an important "safety blanket" and risk dampener. Similarly, such leaders will not shy away from interventions that are likely to provoke rivals, since escalation can be monitored, controlled, and reversed before events spiral out of control. In fact, unilateral and rival-targeting interventions may be viewed by such leaders as opportunities for the state to demonstrate its power and to deal its adversaries a serious setback.

These expectations are formally stated below. Note that Hypothesis 1 deals with intervention in general, while Hypotheses 2 and 3 focus on more specific types of intervention that present special risks and are therefore worth examining, given our emphasis on leaders' risk propensity.

**Hypothesis 1:** *Leaders with an internal LOC (as indicated by strong beliefs in their ability to control events and high self-confidence) will be more likely to intervene in interstate disputes than leaders with an external LOC.*

**Hypothesis 2:** *Leaders with an internal LOC will be more likely to pursue unilateral intervention in interstate disputes than leaders with an external LOC.*

**Hypothesis 2:** *Leaders with an internal LOC will be more likely to pursue intervention in interstate disputes in order to harm rivals than leaders with an external LOC.*

### Research Design

We test these expectations for American leaders using a monadic, monthly dataset of American-led interventions in external dyads during the period 1946–2001. The month is the appropriate time unit for several reasons. First, because we focus on interventions undertaken by American presidents, aggregating to a larger temporal unit such as the year would not produce a dataset sufficiently large for robust empirical analysis. Moreover, aggregation to the annual level would inflate noise in the data, making patterns difficult to detect. For example, while there is at least one conflict management attempt in each year, 63% (422 of 672) of months under observation experience no new intervention. Likewise, annual aggregations create extreme outliers in active years while masking variability during less active periods of intervention. In 1951, President Truman initiated forty-three conflict management attempts, almost doubling the next highest year (twenty-two interventions in 1961). Nearly 25% (ten of forty-three) of those interventions took place during the month of February, followed by April (eight interventions), and October (seven interventions). Although those three months do display the highest levels of intervention attempts observed in these data, three months during the same year experience no new intervention attempts (March, May, and August). Third, monthly aggregates more accurately highlight the extent to which interventions vary with active MIDs, which might indicate a heightened opportunity for conflict management. Finally, monthly periods more accurately reflect the dates of presidential successions, especially extraordinary successions resulting from the assassination of Kennedy and the resignation of Nixon.

We operationalize several dependent variables capturing different aspects of conflict management interventions, both partisan and neutral, coded from the Corbetta and Dixon (2005) and Frazier and Dixon (2006) datasets. Both datasets cover the same time period (1946–2001) and implement the same coding procedures, providing a comprehensive set of third-party interventions in external dyads separated by the partisanship of the intervening party. The Frazier and Dixon dataset captures neutral forms of intervention, including mediation, but also includes a range of other conflict management techniques, ranging from requests or appeals made to the conflicting parties, through election monitoring, verification of disarmament agreements, and peacekeeping, provided that the intervening third party does not overtly side with one disputant over the other. These data are complemented by the Corbetta and Dixon project, which captures the same range of military and nonmilitary conflict management techniques, with the added stipulation that the third party's intention is to tip the trajectory of the conflict toward an outcome favoring one of the disputants.

Both datasets include unilateral and multilateral interventions, representing both coalitions of states as well as interventions from intergovernmental organizations. In the event of a multilateral intervention, the “lead third party” is identified as the state that initiated the intervention, made the most meaningful contribution to the intervention, or chaired a multilateral committee or commission overseeing the intervention attempt. Drawing from these data, we construct our most general dependent variable, which captures the monthly count of newly initiated interventions in external dyads—both neutral and partisan—in which the United States was recorded to be the principal governmental actor. We observe 448 separate American interventions occurring in 250 (of 672) months under investigation.

Patterns of intervention initiation over 1946–2001 period are presented (annually) in figure 1a.

We also isolate certain types of intervention that we associate with varying levels of risk. Specifically, we look to whether leaders approach unilateral interventions differently than multilateral interventions (figure 1b), the propensity to intervene through IGOs (figure 1c), and strategic partisan interventions either to assist an alliance partner or to harm a rival (figure 1d). The Corbetta/Dixon (2005) data on partisan interventions further identifies the disputant targeted by the intervening party. Using the Alliance Treaty Obligation and Provisions dataset (Leeds et al. 2002), we identify fifty-six instances in which the United States initiated a partisan intervention on the side of a defensive alliance partner. Similarly, we identify 117 interventions that directly targeted a rival, reliant on the Rivalry 5.1 dataset (Klein, Goertz, and Diehl 2006).

As each of these dependent variables take the form of event counts, are characterized by over-dispersion, and evince no discernable serial autocorrelation in ACF plots, we utilize negative binomial models with no temporal controls and robust standard errors for our statistical analyses (Long 1997).

The primary explanatory variable is each president's (from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton) *locus of control* (LOC), which is an average of the leadership attributes self-confidence (SC) and belief in ability to control events (BACE). These measures are developed using the leadership trait analysis (LTA) (Hermann 1987), which employs content analysis of rhetorical patterns. Scores reflect the percentage of the time that presidents, when utilizing certain verbal constructs, use language indicative of an underlying psychological disposition; higher scores indicate a more internal locus of control. Table 1 details the coding scheme.

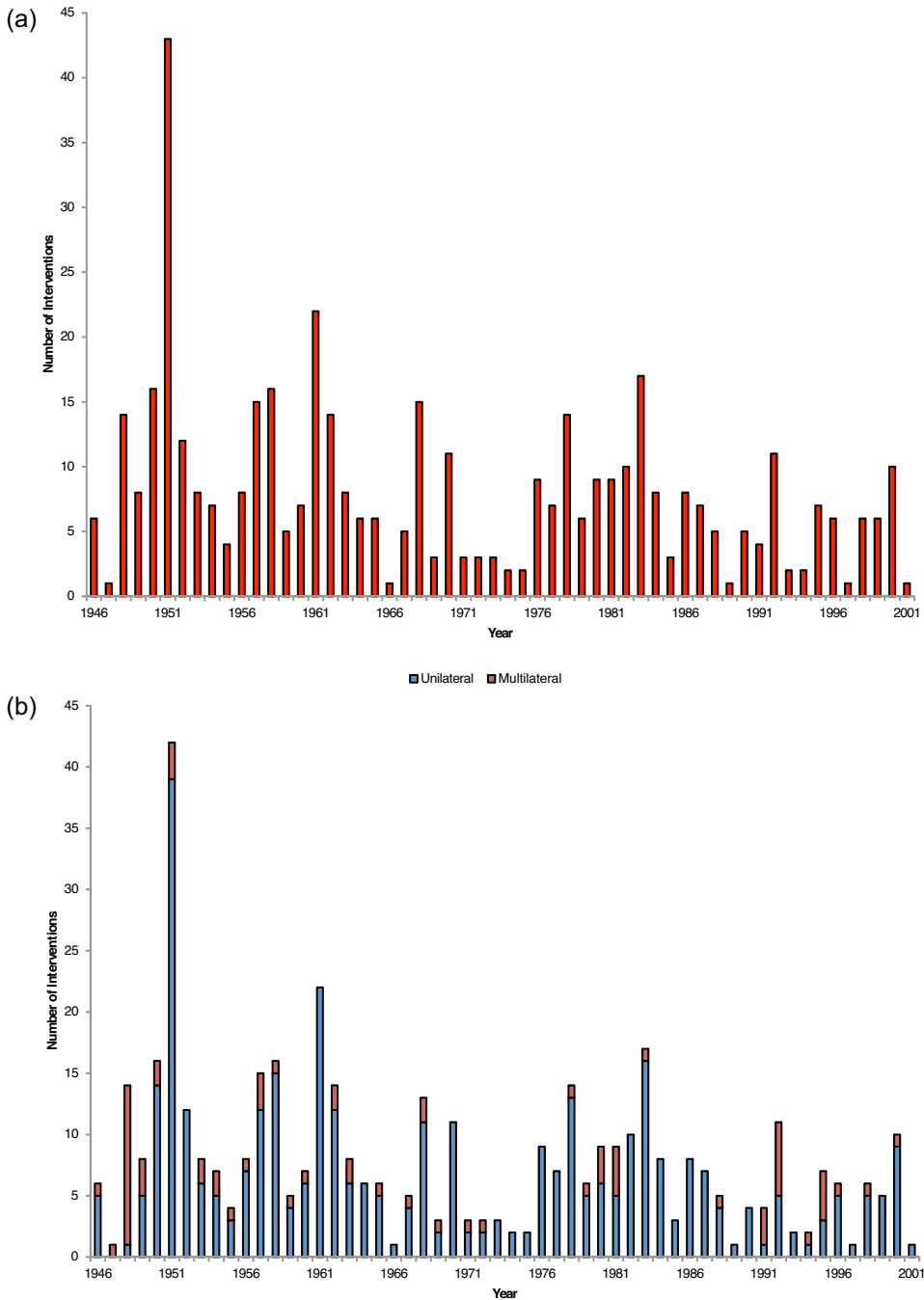
To minimize the impact of external influences (such as speechwriters) on leaders' use of language, we code spontaneous, not scripted, remarks. Our coding procedure exactly duplicates that of Keller and Foster (2012, 589–90), allowing us to arrive at “per-president” LOC scores:

For each president we randomly selected, from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, four press conferences per year and coded all responses of 100 words or greater. We doubled the sample to eight press conferences per year—when available—for presidents whose terms lasted four years or less. This technique yielded at least 20 press conferences for each president, with most presidents having 30 or more. This produced far more than the minimum number of coding units (fifty 100-word responses) required by the Hermann system (1987, 1999) to develop a leadership profile. The automated version of the LTA system, developed by Social Science Automation in consultation with Hermann, was used for this project ([www.socialscienceautomation.com](http://www.socialscienceautomation.com)). The LTA's “at-a-distance” assessment scheme has been employed successfully by numerous studies of political psychology and foreign policy (e.g., Hermann 1999; Keller 2005; Shannon and Keller 2007), and several of these have ascertained both its internal consistency across coders (Hermann 1980, 1987) and its validity vis-à-vis other leadership psychology assessment measures (Hermann 1984, 1988).

The “per-presidency”<sup>2</sup> LOC scores of each president, including the component variables SC and BACE, are presented graphically in figure 2.

We also include a series of control variables capturing multiple dimensions of both the domestic and international environments that might shape leaders' decisions to intervene, largely mirroring Keller and Foster's (2012) analysis of presidential leadership styles and the use of force. We include three variables to account

<sup>2</sup>There exists a debate in the political psychology literature regarding the use of annual versus tenure-averaged measurement of trait scores (Dyson 2007; Foster and Keller 2010). We opt for the latter for one primary reason: the aggregated average of scores allows us to generally identify a president as being of an overall psychological type, whose traits estimates are derived from the “body” of his rhetoric and are not subject to fluctuations in rhetoric across time and in response to situational factors.



**Figure 1.** (a) Frequency of US interventions, 1946–2001: all interventions. (b) Frequency of unilateral and multilateral US interventions, 1946–2001. (c) Frequency of US interventions undertaken to “help allies” and to “harm rivals,” 1946–2001. (d) Frequency of interventions undertaken in conjunction with intergovernmental organizations, 1946–2001.

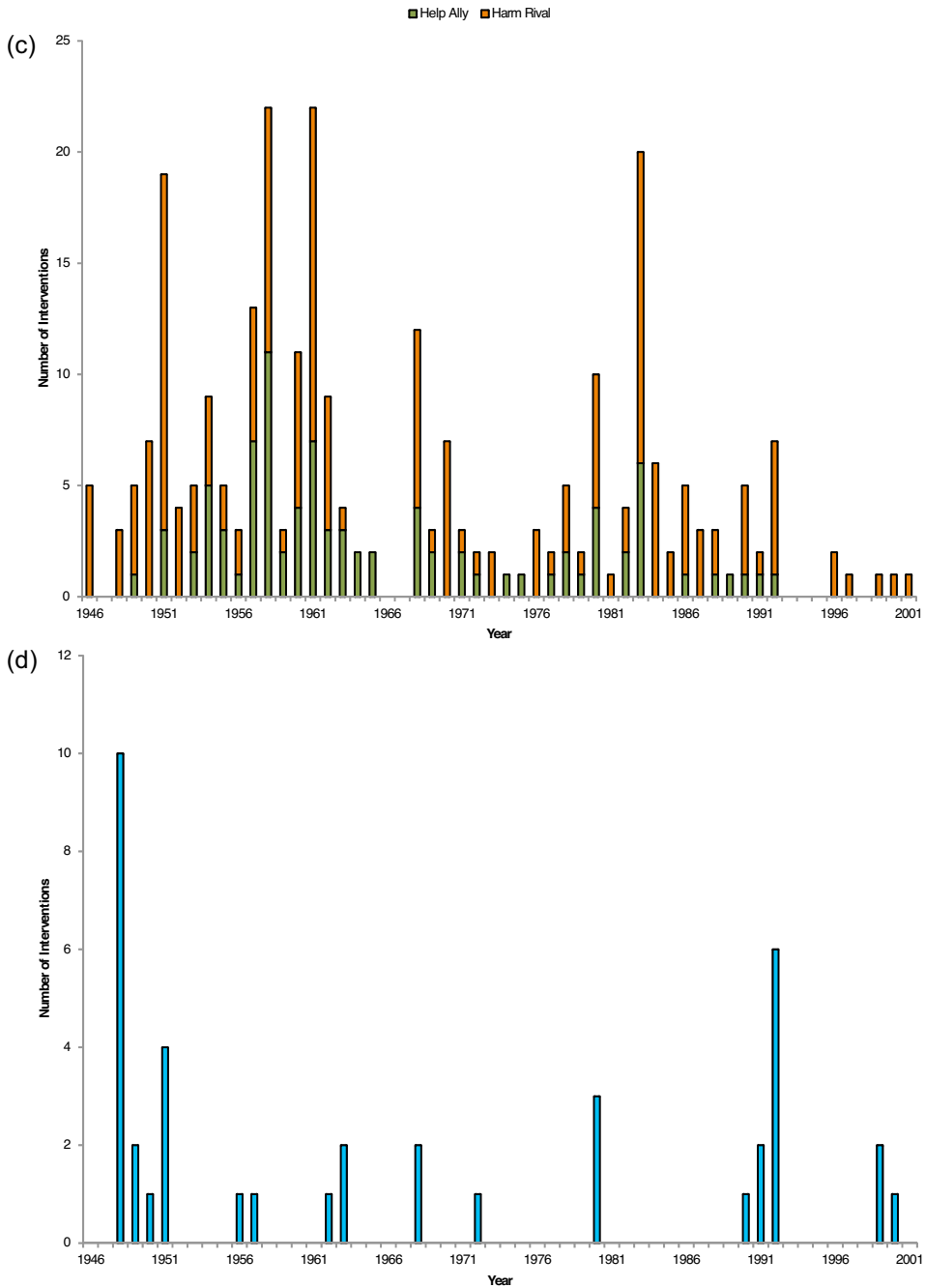
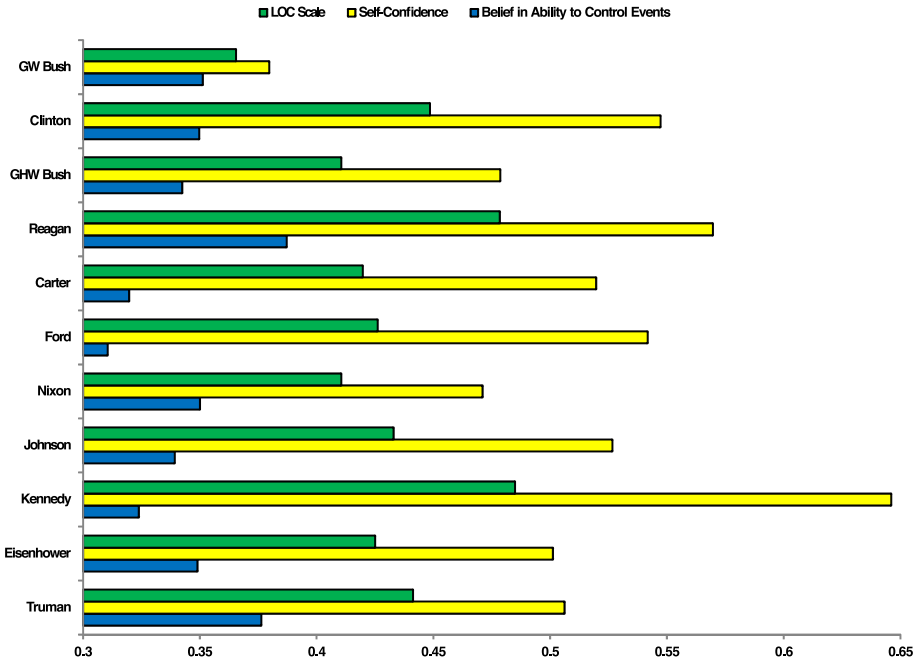


Figure 1. Continued

for US opportunity to intervene in the international system. First, we include the annual CINC score from the Correlates of War's National Material Capabilities dataset, which captures the share of global capabilities possessed by the United States, as an approximation of American power (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). Two additional variables capture opportunity for American intervention between foreign countries. The presence of a militarized interstate dispute between two countries



**Figure 2.** Spontaneous self-confidence, BACE, and locus of control scores for American Presidents, 1946–2001.

provides a clear indicator of contentious relations possibly warranting external intervention. Although both the Corbetta/Dixon data on partisan interventions and the Frazier/Dixon data on neutral interventions dataset capture preconflict and postconflict interventions, an active MID signals an immediate need for conflict management techniques, both serving to draw the attention of third parties and also making intervention easier to justify domestically. To account for this heightened opportunity for intervention, we include a monthly count of active MIDs in the system not involving the United States, as reported by version 4.1 of the Correlates of War Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset (Palmer et al. 2015). Finally, we include the current size of the international system, as measured by the number of states in the system, as a proxy for system complexity and contentious issues falling short of MIDs.

Our six domestic-level variables seek to control for the degree to which institutional and situational factors might shape the likelihood that presidents undertake potentially risky international ventures like interventions. First, we control for key features of the electoral calendar by including both a measure of the number of *months in office* for each president as well as a variable coded 1 in the three months (September, October, and November) leading up to and including *presidential elections*, and 0 otherwise. Second, we include the dichotomous variable *unified government*, coded 1 if the legislature and executive branch are occupied by members of the same party and 0 if they are not. Third, to account for the potential influence of constituents' ideology, we include a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a *Democratic president* is in office and 0 if the president is a Republican. Finally, we seek to control for the potential influence of the state of the economy on intervention behavior by including two variables: the monthly *misery index*, a measure of aggregate inflation and unemployment (<http://www.miseryindex.us/rawdata.aspx>), and *GDP growth*, the quarterly change in the US gross domestic product (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GDP>).

### Empirical Results

The results of our various analyses are presented in table 2. As can be seen, the coefficient for Locus of Control is positively and statistically significantly related to the initiation of all interventions, as well as to those types of interventions (unilateral<sup>3</sup> and to harm rivals) that we have hypothesized are particularly associated with increased risk.<sup>4</sup> As expected, LOC is negatively related to the initiation of multilateral interventions, under the auspices of IGO efforts, or to “help allies,” though these relationships are not statistically significant. In terms of control variables, there are several relationships of note. First, in three of the models—indeed, in precisely those three in which LOC is positively and significantly predictive of the volume of intervention—the coefficients for the *Presidential Election* variable are negative and significant. Likewise, the coefficients for months in office are positive and significant in the “unilateral” and “harm rivals” models but negative and significant in the “multilateral” model. In addition to confirming the general logic of risk avoidance, these findings suggest the potential for some important, theoretically reasonable interactions with LOC. Second, and interestingly, both the misery index and GDP growth are consistently positive predictors of the volume of intervention. This seemingly provides evidence for both the risk aversion and diversionary logics: while presidents are apt to intervene more frequently when the national volume of economic productivity is growing, they seem also to become more intervention-oriented when arguably more “politically dangerous” economic problems (i.e., those most likely to impact the daily lives of their constituents) arise.<sup>5</sup>

To more fully illustrate the nature of the relationship between LOC and intervention, we conduct marginal effects analyses, employing the modified bootstrapping technique outlined by Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006). These analyses are presented in figure 3; for presentation purposes, and since all marginal effects are statistically significant (at the 0.10 level) for all levels of LOC in each of the analyses, figure 3 tracks only predicted counts. Included above the X axis in figure 3 is, for purposes of comparison, the rough placement of each president’s LOC score.

As is evident, the predicted volume of all types of interventions increases, steadily but also only slightly in terms of overall magnitude, as LOC scores rise (i.e., become more internal). Of particular interest, perhaps, only a small proportion of the interventions undertaken by presidents with an external LOC (e.g., George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush, and Richard Nixon) are intended to harm the international standing of rivals. This changes dramatically as LOC “becomes” more internal. Indeed, for presidents with the highest LOC scores (Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy), the expected volume of “harm rival” interventions is more than four times higher than for presidents with the lowest LOC scores. Overall, figure 3 provides solid, if relatively modest, support for the hypotheses developed here.

We also conduct a series of robustness checks to our analyses. First, in regards to the choice of model, while perhaps marginally preferable in analyzing some of the dependent variables (especially the IGO interventions, where the frequency of positive dependent variable outcomes is lowest), the use of zero-inflated negative binomial does not alter the findings of any model in any significant way. Second, regarding additional potential control variables, neither potential increases in

<sup>3</sup> Referring again to the distributions illustrated in figure 1b, the similarities between the findings of the “all intervention” and “unilateral intervention” models are unsurprising, given the fact that about 86% of all US interventions are unilateral. But it is still noteworthy, and commensurate with our logic regarding risk, that presidential LOC is not a significant predictor of the volume of multilateral interventions.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, pertinent to the discussion in footnote 1, that annual measures of LOC are positively associated with all, unilateral, and harm rivals models, though these coefficients barely fail to reach broadly accepted levels of statistical significance ( $p \approx 0.20$ ).

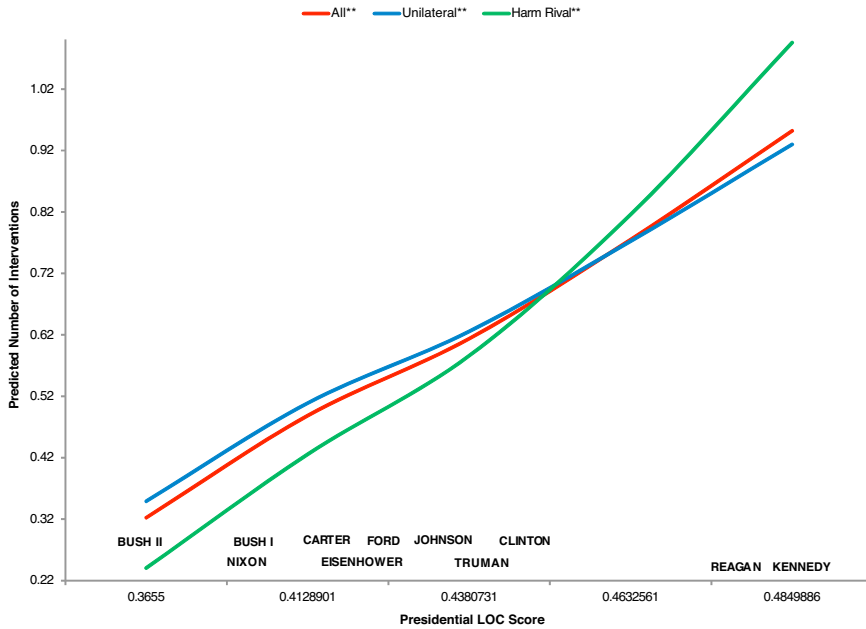
<sup>5</sup> The findings regarding misery, growth, and LOC hold irrespective of whichever combination of those three variables is included in the analysis.

**Table 2.** Leadership locus of control and the volume of US interventions, 1946–2001: negative binomial analyses (monthly)

Variable	All	Unilateral	Multilateral	With IGO	“Help ally”	“Harm rival”
Democratic president	0.207 (1.14)	0.088 (0.44)	0.560 (1.34)	<b>1.444** (2.79)</b>	<b>-0.888* (-2.21)</b>	<b>-0.536* (-1.86)</b>
Presidential election	<b>-0.646* (-1.79)</b>	<b>-0.924** (-2.32)</b>	0.245 (0.39)	1.022 (1.62)	-0.483 (-0.87)	<b>-2.582** (-2.59)</b>
Unified government	-0.155 (-0.81)	0.075 (0.35)	<b>-0.747* (-1.83)</b>	-0.543 (-1.09)	<b>0.916* (2.14)</b>	0.320 (1.12)
CINC score	<b>7.679* (2.15)</b>	3.653 (0.91)	<b>23.549** (2.90)</b>	<b>23.799** (2.47)</b>	<b>-23.254** (-2.35)</b>	1.573 (0.29)
Ongoing MID	0.014 (0.87)	<b>0.031* (1.82)</b>	-0.046 (-1.14)	<b>-0.150** (-2.51)</b>	0.055 (1.45)	-0.009 (-0.40)
Number of states in system	-0.001 (-0.18)	-0.007 (-1.07)	<b>0.022* (1.79)</b>	<b>0.026* (1.85)</b>	<b>-0.054** (-3.41)</b>	-0.012 (-1.30)
Months in office	0.003 (0.97)	<b>0.005* (1.92)</b>	<b>-0.010* (-1.65)</b>	0.001 (0.01)	-0.002 (-0.28)	<b>0.010** (2.46)</b>
GDP growth (quarterly)	<b>13.058** (2.40)</b>	<b>15.114** (2.33)</b>	2.010 (0.16)	2.483 (0.16)	7.654 (0.54)	<b>17.37** (1.99)</b>
Misery index (monthly)	<b>0.066** (3.41)</b>	<b>0.060** (2.70)</b>	<b>0.094* (1.65)</b>	0.105 (1.44)	0.018 (0.36)	<b>0.070** (2.41)</b>
<b>Locus of control scale</b>	<b>8.327** (3.16)</b>	<b>9.256** (3.17)</b>	0.902 (0.12)	-9.616 (-0.73)	0.914 (0.13)	<b>12.990** (.307)</b>
Constant	<b>-6.580** (-3.36)</b>	<b>-6.008** (-2.69)</b>	<b>-10.148* (-2.13)</b>	-6.990 (-1.06)	8.092 (1.56)	<b>-6.912* (-2.31)</b>
Wald $\chi^2$	<b>61.78**</b>	<b>56.45**</b>	<b>33.57**</b>	<b>43.07**</b>	<b>42.11**</b>	<b>66.88**</b>
$\alpha$	<b>0.992**</b>	<b>1.245**</b>	<b>3.232**</b>	<b>10.790**</b>	<b>4.704**</b>	<b>2.022**</b>

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01 (one-tailed tests). Z-Scores in parentheses. N for all models is 648.





\*\*Associated marginal effects significant at 0.05 level.

**Figure 3.** Leadership locus of control and the volume of US interventions, 1946–2001: predicted probabilities.

American war weariness (as measured by US involvement in ongoing wars) nor a potentially curvilinear effect of presidential tenure (measured by the quadratic term of the number of months in office) are significant or impact the core findings.<sup>6</sup> Third, substituting standardized versions of presidential trait scores (see Keller 2005) returns results that are substantively identical to those associated with the raw scores, indicating that the findings are not artifacts of measurement choice.

Finally, despite a well-established theoretical rationale for their joint importance, analyses of the separate components of LOC scale reveal that, in this sample at least, high self-confidence is a more consistent predictor of increased intervention than is a greater belief in one's own ability to control events. Running each of the component variables separately in the same model, SC is positive and significant, while BACE is not statistically related to dependent variables. Predicted probability analyses reveal a slightly more complex relationship. Unequivocally, the highest rate of intervention per month predicted by the model (1.22) is produced when both SC and BACE are at their maximum observed values. This rate is 78% greater than when both measures are at their minimum; however, it is only 10% greater than when SC is at its maximum and BACE at its minimum, and this latter marginal change is not statistically significant. As such, while the statistical combination of the two variables indicates a particularly strong inclination to intervene for presidents who are high in both self-confidence and BACE, the former is having a stronger effect. Nevertheless, since self-confidence and BACE provide distinct theoretical mechanisms by which leaders' risk-acceptance may be amplified—confidence in one's personal efficacy in shaping outcomes and belief in the overall malleability of events—we believe future studies should continue to evaluate their separate and combined effects on risk-taking.

<sup>6</sup> Cross-correlations of all explanatory variables reveal only one potentially problematic instance of collinearity—between military capabilities (CINC) and the number of states in the system (0.92). Alternative models dropping either or both of the measures produce results that are the same in substance as those reported in table 2.

## Discussion

Conventional models of state conflict behavior take into account important systemic, dyadic, and domestic factors that influence the likely costs and benefits of involvement in international disputes. Scholars of foreign policy analysis have argued that decision-makers serve as the “filter” between these objective conditions and policy behavior (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962; Hudson 2005). Leaders must perceive and respond to environmental conditions if they are to shape policy. As a result, leaders’ beliefs, perceptions, and decision-making styles play a crucial role in determining how objective factors will be interpreted and incorporated into the policymaking process. Consistent with this view, the findings reported here suggest that leaders’ subjective risk assessments play an important role in shaping how the objective costs of intervention are weighed and interpreted. Specifically, after controlling for systemic “opportunity” for intervention and a range of domestic political and economic influences, US presidents’ risk-taking propensity has a statistically significant and substantively important effect on the likelihood of US intervention in ongoing interstate disputes. Consistent with our hypotheses, the influence of LOC on intervention behavior is particularly pronounced in the context of the more high-risk forms of intervention: unilateral intervention and intervention that targets a rival.

There are many potential avenues for future research, and some of the most interesting of these involve more detailed specification of risk. Several of our interstate- and domestic-level control variables were included on the basis of the logic that the riskiness of intervention shapes presidents’ proclivity to actually intervene, and the findings regarding GDP growth and election periods bear this out. Most obviously, as our theory portrays LOC as a “dampener” of risk recognition (or, rather, an indicator of increased risk acceptance), future work would do well to focus on the interactions of the individual- and domestic/international-level measures. Interestingly, our first foray into this endeavor has produced mixed results. Multiplicative interactions of LOC with misery and GDP growth, for example, produce no statistically significant results, indicating no mediating influence of LOC on either diversionary or economically risk-averse intervention behavior. The interaction of LOC with the number of months in office, however, is negative and significant, indicating that presidents with an internal locus of control are more likely to undertake interventions earlier in their presidencies. This might suggest, broadly, a very important “first-image” caveat to our understanding of the impact of elections on potentially dangerous international engagements.

This study indicates that “bringing leaders back in” to the study of intervention is a fruitful enterprise, both theoretically and empirically. By explicitly considering both the objective variables that shape the riskiness of intervention and the subjective attitudes toward risk held by key leaders, we can gain a deeper understanding of when and why particular states pursue specific types of intervention in ongoing disputes. As scholars of foreign policy analysis have noted, ultimately it is human decision makers who must perceive and respond to the risks and opportunities present in the domestic and international environment. Understanding the psychology of risk-taking is therefore essential to grasping the dynamics of foreign intervention and other potentially costly endeavors in the realm of world politics.

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