

The Logic of “Offstage” Signaling:
Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power-Protégé Relations

By
Roseanne W. McManus
and
Keren Yarhi-Milo

Word Count (excluding first four pages): 14,037

Acknowledgements

The order of the authors is alphabetical. Both authors contributed to all sections of the paper, and we assess our contributions to be equal. We thank Faisal Ahmed, David Carter, Wei-Chih Chen, David Edelstein, Raymond Hicks, Robert Jervis, Patrick Kearney, Raymond Kuo, Melissa Lee, Jack Levy, Julia Morse, Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Glenn Palmer, Saurabh Pant, Jon Pevehouse, Jacob Shapiro, Alex Weisiger, Austin Wright, and participants at the 2015 Peace Science Society meeting, the 2016 ISA convention, the 2016 International Forum on Peace Science in Shanghai, and the IR-CP research seminar at Rutgers University for feedback. We thank Hong Ding, Tyler Simko, and Audrye Wong for research assistance. Replication materials will be posted at <http://iojournal.org/data-archive/>.

Author Information

Roseanne W. McManus

Baruch College, City University of New York

Roseanne.McManus@baruch.cuny.edu

Keren Yarhi-Milo

Princeton University

kyarhi@princeton.edu

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of how major powers signal support for their protégés. We develop a theory that explains why major powers show support for some protégés using highly visible “frontstage” signals of support, while supporting other protégés through less visible, but nonetheless costly, “offstage” signals. From an international strategic perspective, it is puzzling that major powers do not always send the most visible signal possible, but we argue that this can be explained by considering the domestic environments in which the leaders of major powers and protégés operate. Focusing particularly on the United States as we develop our theory, we argue that the US will prefer to send offstage signals of support for more autocratic protégés for several reasons. First, sending frontstage signals of support for autocracies would expose US leaders to charges of hypocrisy. Second, frontstage signals of support for autocracies face an impediment to credibility because of the public backlash in the United States that overt support for dictators could generate. Third, many autocratic protégés would be reluctant to accept a frontstage signal of support from the US because it could undermine their regime stability. We test our theory in a dataset that records various support signals sent by the United States for other countries between 1950 and 2008, finding strong support for our expectations. We also find evidence of the causal mechanisms posited by our theory in a case study of relations between the US and the Shah’s Iran.

It is in the interest of major powers, such as the United States, to signal support for strategically important client states – or protégés – in order to deter harm against them and reassure the client’s leadership of continued support. But how can a major power signal its support credibly? Existing literature on major power-protégé relations has focused on the role of public signals, particularly formal alliances. Yet, in a number of important cases, the United States has avoided giving alliances or sending other highly public signals of support for protégés that are strategically important, instead opting to show its support through less visible military signals. For example, the Shah’s Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Singapore, Yugoslavia, and Franco’s Spain are all countries that have received high levels of US military aid and arms sales, signaling their international strategic value to the United States. However, none of these countries have been formal US allies, and the US has also avoided exchanging a large number of leadership visits with most of these countries.

These examples raise a largely unexplored question: why has the United States sent financially costly military signals of support for these countries, but largely avoided more visible signals? This behavior is puzzling from an international strategic perspective because more visible signals of support engage the sender’s reputation more directly, and are also more likely to be noticed by potential challengers. Thus, more visible signals might be expected to be more effective for deterring challengers and reassuring clients. Since these countries are important to the United States, why not signal this in the most effective way possible? What explains the decision of the US to send highly visible signals in some cases, but not in others?

To address this question, we begin by developing a new framework for classifying interstate signals of support. We consider two ideal types of signals: “Frontstage” signals are highly visible to the public domestically and abroad. These signals receive widespread press

coverage because they have public ceremonial aspects and/or are the subject of intra-government debate. Therefore, members of the public have the opportunity to become aware of frontstage signals and draw inferences from them about the relationship between the major power and protégé. In contrast, “offstage” signals, while not secret, lack features that generate high press coverage. Therefore, offstage signals are less likely to enter the public’s awareness and more likely to be observed only by the intended audience, which includes regime insiders within the client state and potential international challengers.

Based on this asymmetry in which audiences observe these two types of signals, we develop a theory that explains decision-makers’ signaling dilemmas and choices. We theorize that despite an international strategic preference for frontstage signals, domestic political constraints in the US as well as within the protégé country often lead the US to support *autocratic* protégés using offstage signals alone. In contrast, there are generally no domestic constraints on sending frontstage signals of support for democracies. We highlight three causal mechanisms – hypocrisy costs, credibility concerns, and autocratic regime stability concerns – that explain the relationship between the client’s regime type and the supply and demand for frontstage versus offstage signals from the United States. These mechanisms illustrate the dilemmas faced not only by US leaders, but also by autocratic recipients, in choosing between frontstage and offstage signals. Although our theory is focused on the United States, we conclude by discussing its applicability to signaling by other major powers.

We test our theory in a dataset that records various support signals sent by the United States for other countries between 1950 and 2008. We consider defense pacts and leadership visits to be frontstage signals because of the pomp and circumstance surrounding them, while we consider arms sales and military aid to be offstage signals. Our categorization of signals is

grounded in theory and supported by an analysis of press reporting frequency. Our statistical results strongly support our expectation that the United States is more likely to send solely offstage signals of support to autocracies than to democracies. We use robustness checks to further explore our causal mechanisms and rule out alternative explanations.

In addition, we include a case study of American leaders' deliberations and decisions regarding whether to support the Shah's Iran with frontstage or offstage signals. This is a hard test case for our theory in that the importance of Iran's geopolitical location and role in resisting communism during the Cold War might be expected to override concerns about Iran's regime type. Yet, consistent with our theory, we find that US policymakers were concerned about domestic backlash against frontstage signals within both the US and Iran, and these concerns led them to support the Shah primarily through offstage signals.

Our theory and findings make several important contributions. First, most studies on major power-protégé relations have focused on formal alliances. By considering other signals of support, such as leadership visits, military aid, and arms sales, we identify a puzzle that has received little recognition: sometimes major powers signal support for strategically important protégés in an "offstage," but still costly, manner.

Second, we use domestic politics to explain this deviation from the highly visible signals that we would expect to be most effective in deterring potential challengers and reassuring clients. This enables us to provide a compelling answer to the puzzle posed by Fearon regarding why countries make less than the strongest possible commitment in bargaining.¹ We show that factors emphasized by existing literature – such as a protégé's international strategic value, the Cold War, and risks of entrapment – cannot account for the pattern of choices between frontstage

¹ Fearon 1997, 83

versus offstage signaling that we observe. Instead, we show that it is the recipient's regime type, through its effect on domestic politics in both the patron and recipient states, that primarily explains this pattern. This leads to the further insight that frontstage signals of support by the United States for its autocratic clients can actually be counterproductive despite the greater commitment typically associated with such signals.

Third, we are also among the first to consider the recipient's role in signaling decisions. Whereas previous research has discussed how major powers fear entrapment, we highlight the fact that some weaker countries – specifically, autocracies with an anti-US opposition – may not even desire alliances or other public signals of support precisely because of their frontstage nature. For these autocratic protégés, receiving frontstage signals from the US might deter external threats but would enhance internal ones. Therefore, both supply-side constraints (on the US side) and demand (on the part of the protégé) influence US signaling decisions.

Finally, we highlight the important but under-explored role offstage signals play in patron-client diplomacy, extended deterrence, and reassurance. Specifically, we discuss how offstage signaling allows leaders to act strategically in order to accomplish two goals that are sometimes in tension with one another: establishing credible extended deterrence, while also avoiding backlash from domestic constituencies that might oppose the patron-client relationship. On the whole, we provide a more nuanced view on the interaction between international strategic imperatives and domestic political considerations than the current literature on major power-protégé alignment either permits or admits.

Literature Review: Alliances and Other Signals of Support

The method of reassuring protégés and deterring attacks against them that has received the most attention in previous research is alliances. A large literature exists on why alliances form. Realist theories suggest that alliances form to balance against threatening states² or to “bandwagon” with threatening states.³ Several scholars assert that regime type influences alliance formation. Some argue that countries with similar regimes are more likely to ally,⁴ whereas others argue that this relationship is spurious⁵ or a thing of the past.⁶

However, analyzing alliances alone does not accurately capture major powers’ signaling decisions. When a major power desires to signal support for a protégé, it has a wide menu of policy options available, including giving aid, selling arms, or providing symbolic support by sending its leader to visit the protégé or hosting the protégé’s leader. When a country can substitute among different foreign policy options, research that focuses on just one option is subject to bias.⁷ Accounting for alternate methods of signaling support is crucial to understanding why one signal is chosen over another.

In examining signals of support beyond alliances, we build on a small body of existing work on this topic. Like Morrow⁸ and Barnett and Levy,⁹ we consider alliances and arms as alternate foreign policy options, but we are focused on how a state uses these options to ensure a

² Walt 1985

³ Schweller 1994

⁴ Reiter and Lai 2000; Russett 1968

⁵ Gibler and Wolford 2006

⁶ Gartzke and Weisiger 2013

⁷ Most and Starr 1984; Morgan and Palmer 2000

⁸ Morrow 1993

⁹ Barnett and Levy 1991

protégé's security rather than its own security. Like Lake,¹⁰ our theory explores variation in relationships between patrons and clients. However, we seek to explain differences in the *publicity* of the asymmetric relationships, rather than the level of control or dependence. Recently, Milner and Tingley have also developed a theory that considers the role of domestic political considerations in choices among various US foreign and economic policies.¹¹ We build on their work by delving into the tradeoffs among security-related signals in particular, arguing that some are more domestically controversial than others because of higher publicity.

In addition, we take into account not only US domestic constraints, but the domestic constraints of US protégés. The protégé's perspective on signals of support has been neglected in the alliance literature, which implicitly assumes that a weaker protégé would be lucky to get a major power's alliance commitment and focuses instead on reasons that a major power would be reluctant to give it, such as fears of entrapment, entanglement, or governance costs.¹² In contrast, our theory suggests that certain protégés may wish to avoid alliances and other frontstage signals, but still desire support through other means.

Finally, our paper makes two broader contributions to the interstate signaling literature. First, while scholars have made the distinction between public and secret signals,¹³ we highlight a new category of signals that are non-secret, but at the same time not highly visible to public audiences. Second, our theory sheds light on a key puzzle raised by Fearon: Why do countries deviate from signaling the maximum possible amount of commitment, even if this undercuts the effectiveness of signals? We build on Fearon's brief speculation about the role of multiple

¹⁰ Lake 2009

¹¹ Milner and Tingley 2015

¹² Benson 2012; Kim 2011; Lake 2009; Snyder 1984

¹³ Kurizaki 2007

audiences¹⁴ and develop a comprehensive theory regarding when domestic constraints restrict the ability to send hand-tying frontstage signals.

Theory: Choosing Frontstage versus Offstage Signals

Major powers typically sit atop networks of protégés. It is in the interest of major powers for their client states to be secure because clients provide major powers with access to resources, basing rights, political or economic concessions, and greater international legitimacy.¹⁵ Because military conflict is costly, the most desirable way for a major power to ensure a protégé's security is through extended deterrence.¹⁶ Therefore, a major power signals support for its protégés in the hopes of deterring challenges against them and reassuring the protégés of its shared interest in their security. But how do major powers decide which type of signal to send? We argue that a crucially important factor in this decision is the level of publicity associated with different signals. While the visibility of a signal cannot be fully controlled by the sender, certain signals are designed in ways that make them more visible to public audiences than others. We consider two ideal types of support signals that a major power can send: “frontstage” signals and “offstage” signals.¹⁷

Frontstage signals of support are highly visible to public audiences, domestically and internationally.¹⁸ High visibility means that the signals receive widespread press coverage, so

¹⁴ Fearon 1997, 84

¹⁵ Lake 2009; Morrow 1991

¹⁶ Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014

¹⁷ This represents an expansion of Goffman's (1959) “frontstage” and “backstage” framework. For a discussion of secret, or “backstage,” signals see Carson (2016) and Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2017).

¹⁸ As long as the signal is highly visible to at least one public, domestic or foreign, we consider it to be frontstage.

that it is easier for attentive members of the public and opinion leaders to react to them. Two attributes can make signals highly visible: First, the signal is associated with public events that involve widespread media coverage, such as press conferences or ceremonies. Second, the signal is designed to provide an opportunity for intra-government debate, such as if it requires explicit legislative approval. Since the media often takes its cue from elected officials, intra-government debate will almost automatically lead to more media coverage of a signal. Although many members of the public may not actively follow foreign policy news, the visibility of frontstage signals through the media creates an opening for opinion leaders to rally the public, as explained below.

In contrast, offstage signals of support are associated with less publicity and therefore less awareness among the publics in the major power and client state. Offstage signals are *not* secret: Information on them is publicly available, and therefore highly interested parties – such as government officials and intelligence services of potential international challengers – will be able to monitor them. However, because offstage signals lack public ceremony or intra-government debate, they receive less automatic media coverage, creating a barrier to public awareness and the rallying of public opinion. This asymmetry in the awareness of offstage signals between government officials and the wider domestic audiences allows leaders to overcome the challenges associated with signaling their interests in the presence of multiple audiences.¹⁹

Both frontstage and offstage signals can be “costly” and credibly convey a major power’s interest in the security of a client. The public nature of frontstage signals makes them

¹⁹ Frontstage and offstage signals are ideal types, and there will likely be some variation in how much publicity individual signals receive in the real world. We consider the implications of this further below.

likely to generate hand-tying costs. Members of the public can infer from frontstage signals that the major power has an interest in the protégé, even if the major power makes no explicit commitment. This raises the prospect that the major power would face audience or reputational costs for abandoning the protégé and thus increases the likelihood that the major power would aid the protégé in time of need, by either intervening militarily or providing other assistance.

Offstage signals are less likely to generate hand-tying costs because they are less public.

Nonetheless, they can still function as informative signals because of their ex-ante costs in the form of resource transfers that government insiders, though not publics, can easily observe. If a major power incurs significant financial, opportunity, or human costs in order to support a protégé, this signals that the major power cares about the protégé's security. Since the cost of the signal helps to separate the behavior of a major power that cares about a protégé from one that does not, an offstage signal certainly conveys more support than sending no signal.

However, offstage signals have two significant disadvantages compared to their frontstage counterparts. First, because offstage signals are relatively less visible than frontstage, they have a higher probability of being overlooked by potential adversaries who might need to be deterred. Even though we expect these adversaries to pay closer attention than the public and therefore observe most offstage signals, they still face greater risk of being overlooked or misperceived than frontstage signals. Second, as discussed above, offstage signals are less likely than frontstage signals to create substantial hand-tying costs for the patron. Hand-tying costs have an advantage over sunk costs in conflict bargaining because they do not require up-front investment,²⁰ allowing countries to achieve more effective deterrence at a lower expected cost (because costs will only be paid if a bluff is called). Previous research has found that hand-tying

²⁰ Fearon 1997

alliance commitments are effective for deterrence²¹ and that sunk cost signals are less effective.²² This suggests that frontstage signals, all else equal, should be more effective for deterring adversaries as well as reassuring protégés.

Given these inherent benefits of frontstage signaling, why do patrons send offstage signals of support alone for some important protégés? We argue that in order to explain this apparently sub-optimal behavior, we need to look beyond the strategic international situation and consider the domestic systems of major powers and protégés. While international strategic considerations are important in determining which countries a major power supports, we argue that domestic considerations are more important in determining *how* a major power signals its support. Because the decision to send a signal of support requires agreement among the sender and recipient, our theory highlights the domestic constraints on *both* the major power and protégé regimes that can cause a deviation from frontstage signaling. We focus our analysis on signaling by the United States, the leading hegemon and a country with significant domestic constraints. In the conclusion, we discuss the generalizability of our theory to additional powers.

US Domestic Constraints

We begin by considering the US perspective. For the international strategic reasons discussed above, we expect the US to generally prefer sending frontstage signals of support for its clients. However, we theorize that when signaling support for *autocratic* protégés, the US will frequently prefer to send offstage signals instead. Regardless of how important certain autocratic protégés may be to US foreign policy, domestic constraints make it difficult for the US to send

²¹ Johnson and Leeds 2011

²² Furhmann and Sechser 2014; Krause 2004

frontstage signals of support for countries that do not share US democratic values. Specifically, we identify two related causal mechanisms that make US policymakers more reluctant to offer frontstage signals to support for autocracies than democracies: hypocrisy costs and credibility concerns.

The first mechanism is *hypocrisy costs*.²³ Hypocrisy costs consist of public disillusionment with US foreign policy when the US does not uphold the democratic values it preaches. Like audience costs, hypocrisy costs result from a contrast between words and deeds, but hypocrisy costs specifically relate to violations of commitments regarding values. Supporting the existence of hypocrisy costs, studies have found that the US public disapproves of leaders who say one thing and do another in a variety of different contexts.²⁴ There is also evidence that the US domestic audience cares about democratic values. Tomz and Weeks find that members of the US and UK publics are less likely to support attacking a country if it is a democracy because they view democracies as less threatening and morally superior.²⁵ In some US polls, respondents have ranked freedom and democracy as important foreign policy priorities, above stopping Communism during the Cold War or pursuing world leadership.²⁶ As shown in Figure 1, more than twice as many US respondents reported a favorable view of democracies than of non-democracies, across 465 polling questions about 42 different countries fielded between 1989 and 2013.²⁷

[Figure 1 here]

²³ Finnemore 2009; Greenhill 2010

²⁴ Chaudoin 2014; Levy et al. 2015

²⁵ Tomz and Weeks 2013

²⁶ *Los Angeles Times* 1991; *Time* 1983

²⁷ Gallup 2015

In order for hypocrisy costs to actually damage a president's political standing, the public must become aware of the hypocrisy and mobilize against it. The attentive portion of the public may automatically mobilize after learning about the hypocrisy through the media, but because many members of the public are inattentive, large-scale mobilization is unlikely to happen spontaneously. Nonetheless, research has shown that public opinion is heavily influenced by "opinion leaders," elites whom at least a portion of the public trusts to interpret events.²⁸ When the US supports authoritarian regimes, certain opinion leaders, such as human rights groups and opposition politicians, have the incentive to rally the public and use this as a political issue. Given the influence of elite framing on public opinion, particularly with regard to foreign policy issues,²⁹ these opinion leaders can mobilize the broader public by putting the issue of US support for autocracies on the public agenda and framing it as a betrayal of US values.

We argue that it will be easier for opinion leaders to mobilize the public in the case of frontstage signals than in the case of offstage signals. Because offstage signals are more hidden from the domestic public, they can deprive opinion leaders of ammunition for politicizing signals of support and rallying the public to impose hypocrisy costs. Even though opinion leaders themselves may be aware of offstage signals, their ability to mobilize the public is dependent on media coverage, which they cannot fully control.³⁰ Therefore, it would be difficult for them to mobilize the public around an issue that is far outside the public awareness and that may not be

²⁸ Brody 1991; Katz and Lazarfeld 1955

²⁹ Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Kinder 1998, 172-173

³⁰ Baum and Potter 2015, 27-28

deemed “newsworthy” by the media.³¹ In contrast, rallying the public against support for authoritarians is easier in the case of frontstage signals because, as explained above and shown below, media coverage of frontstage signals has a natural tendency to be much higher. The fact that information about a frontstage signal is already available in the media and that the attentive public is already aware of it lowers the barriers for opinion leaders to influence the public and mobilize it to act.

Thus, through the influence of opposition politicians, interest groups, and other opinion leaders, hypocrisy costs due to frontstage signals of support for autocratic regimes can damage a president’s political standing. While this alone may not crucially harm a president’s reelection prospects, presidents have the incentive to avoid accusations of hypocrisy because these can undermine their credibility, their ability to push other policies, and their legacy. Therefore, we expect presidents to lean toward minimizing domestic political risks by relying on offstage signals of support for strategically important autocratic protégés rather than frontstage ones.

A second and related reason why the US might not send frontstage signals of support for autocracies is *international credibility* concerns. For signals of support to be effective, they need to be credible, meaning that international audiences must believe the US is indeed likely to aid the protégé in time of need. The transparency of democratic regimes can potentially be both a blessing and a curse for credible signaling. Schultz argues that if an opposition party supports a democratic leader’s threat, it will make the threat more credible; yet if the opposition opposes a threat, it is less likely to be believed.³² Similarly, McManus finds that high public approval for a

³¹ Opinion leaders can occasionally overcome this difficulty and rally the public against offstage signals. Our claim is thus a *relative* one: that mobilization of the public against a signal is less challenging and therefore more common when the signal is frontstage.

³² Schultz 1998

president can enhance the effectiveness of resolved statements, but insufficient approval can render statements ineffective.³³ This damage to credibility that can result from lack of public support suggests that the United States should avoid sending frontstage signals of support for protégés when frontstage signals are likely to result in significant public opposition.

Based on the logic outlined above, we expect domestic opposition to mobilize when the US visibly signals support for *dictators*. For example, when the US signaled support for Kuwait and an intention to intervene militarily after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, some US politicians, journalists, and members of the public objected because Kuwait was not a democracy.

Congressman Lee Hamilton stated, “I and many of my colleagues are hesitant about lining up with tribal monarchies and identifying our interests with them...That would put us in conflict with the worldwide trend toward democracy, as well as with our own democratic values”.³⁴

Although many factors influenced Saddam Hussein’s decision not to acquiesce to US demands to withdraw from Kuwait, such domestic discord was unhelpful for US credibility.³⁵

Of course, even in the case of offstage signaling, there could be doubt regarding whether the US public would support coming to an autocracy’s aid if it were in need. However, frontstage signals can worsen the credibility problem. Whereas the absence of a public reaction to offstage signals allows ambiguity regarding US public opinion toward a client state, frontstage signals have greater potential to generate public outcry and therefore make public opposition to aiding the client less ambiguous and more visible to potential foreign adversaries. Therefore, frontstage signals of support for autocratic protégés may not only be ineffective for deterrence or

³³ McManus 2017

³⁴ Friedman 1990

³⁵ Weisiger 2013, 164-165

reassurance, but also counter-productive by raising more doubts about US credibility. Taking into consideration both hypocrisy costs and credibility concerns, we expect that American decision-makers are more likely to send only offstage signals of support to autocratic client states than to democratic clients.

The Protégé's Domestic Constraints and the Demand for Offstage Signals

Thus far, our discussion has focused on the calculus of American policymakers regarding what signals of support to supply. Yet, the *demand* for signals by protégés constitutes another important part of the equation. We argue that autocratic protégés are more likely to seek solely offstage signals than democratic protégés. One reason is that autocrats might share the concerns discussed above about credibility. More importantly, while autocratic leaders benefit from external security guarantees (Barnett and Levy 1991), they may have their own domestic political reasons for keeping US support outside the public view, so that it cannot become a rallying point for the political opposition.

In many countries with pro-US authoritarian regimes, anti-Americanism exists among the population and political opposition. While anti-US sentiment is by no means exclusive to autocracies, the combination of a pro-US regime and an opposition movement that plays on widespread anti-American sentiments in the population is most common within autocracies, for the simple reason that a democracy could not remain a US protégé for long if the majority of the population opposed this. During the Cold War, pro-US autocrats in Central America and the Caribbean tended to face anti-US opposition movements, as evidenced by rebellions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua.³⁶ Today such domestic dynamics primarily exist in Arab

³⁶ Lake 2013

autocracies. The vast majority of citizens in countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates view the United States unfavorably.³⁷ Such anti-US sentiments have fueled Islamic opposition movements, such as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front³⁸ and threatened the stability of pro-US authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

In some cases, autocratic leaders actually join in the expression of anti-American sentiment, even if their policies are largely pro-US, in order to quell domestic opposition. Such a strategy attempts to legitimate the authoritarian regime by making it appear strong and independent of Western influences, and focusing negative attention on an external actor can also distract the public from domestic problems. Rubinstein and Smith argue that during the Cold War, many Third World governments relied on “instrumental anti-Americanism” in order to provide a scapegoat for domestic difficulties and enhance popular support.³⁹ Barnett also describes how many non-democratic Arab leaders have publicly portrayed themselves as anti-Western Arab nationalists, although privately they were “cynical manipulators,” willing to use any strategy to maintain their political power.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, in what Barnett calls the “sorcerer’s apprentice effect,” authoritarian regimes can become constrained by their own rhetoric, limiting the ability of authoritarians who have criticized the US to accept US signals of support.⁴¹

Thus, authoritarian rulers who follow pro-US policies but face strong anti-US sentiment in the population (which may partially result from their own regime legitimation strategies) are

³⁷ Telhami 2003

³⁸ Jamal 2012, 67-73

³⁹ Rubinstein and Smith 1988, 41

⁴⁰ Barnett 1998, 9

⁴¹ Barnett 1998, 107

caught in a dilemma. They seek US support against external threats, but cannot receive this support openly without inflaming public opinion and providing the opposition with an opening for criticizing the regime. Authoritarian leaders may calculate that moving US support offstage is the best strategy to remain in power. As Holleyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland argue, negative information is more dangerous to an authoritarian regime when it is widespread knowledge because it helps domestic actors coordinate to protest.⁴² As is the case in the US, opinion leadership by the opposition is likely to be necessary to rally the public in authoritarian regimes, but such rallying will be much easier when information about US signals of support is already accessible to the public because of the frontstage nature of the signal. For this reason, authoritarian regimes may prefer offstage signals, and the US is likely to share this preference in order to allow friendly regimes to remain stable and prevent the rise of anti-US opposition groups.

In sum, because of the risk that frontstage signals will provide a rallying point for the anti-American opposition groups that exist in many autocracies, we expect autocrats, on average, to be more reluctant than democrats to seek them. For example, in 1991 Saudi Arabia found itself constrained in its ability to seek a US defense pact, even though it faced a continued security threat after the Gulf War. More than 400 religious officials and political activists petitioned the Saudi king in 1991 to “avoid alliances that run counter to Islamic legitimacy.” Over the following years, public activists continued to call upon the regime to “avoid any kind of alliance or cooperation which serves imperialist goals.”⁴³ The presence of domestic opposition prevented Saudi Arabia from pursuing a formal defense pact with the United States and probably

⁴² Holleyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2016

⁴³ Gause 2003, 366

also explains why the Saudi king never visited the United States between 1985 and 2008.⁴⁴ However, this public sentiment did not stop the two countries from enjoying close military cooperation offstage.

Hypotheses

Based on the mutual preferences of the United States and its autocratic protégés, we derive the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: *The United States is more likely to send frontstage signals of support for more democratic countries than for more autocratic countries.*

Hypothesis 1b: *The United States is more likely to send solely offstage signals of support for more autocratic countries than for more democratic countries.*

Importantly, our hypotheses focus on comparing the relative likelihood of different signals between more and less democratic countries. They do not intend to imply that frontstage signals of support for autocracies are necessarily *uncommon*, but rather that they are *less* common than for democracies. Our theoretical starting point is that frontstage signals are, all else equal, more likely to be effective than offstage signals. It is therefore possible that the inherent general advantages of frontstage signaling will outweigh the previously discussed disadvantages of sending frontstage signals for autocratic protégés in some cases. Thus, our expectations are focused on the differences in signals sent for different regime types, not on the overall prevalence of different signals.

⁴⁴ Department of State 2015b

Classifying Signals

We now turn to identifying which US signals we view as frontstage or offstage. The signals considered here do not constitute an exhaustive list of signaling methods, but they are among the most common and important methods used by the United States. We focus on signals about which high-quality data are available. Thus, for example, we do not consider troop deployments because DoD deployment data do not distinguish between hostile, peacekeeping, and supportive deployments.⁴⁵ Our categorization of signals is based on the presence or absence of two attributes that affect visibility: public ceremony and intra-government debate.

Of course, because frontstage and offstage signals are ideal types, there is some variation in the amount of publicity received by different signals in the same category. A type of signal that typically receives little publicity may occasionally receive much higher publicity, and a signal that typically receives high publicity may occasionally avoid attention. However, such rare exceptions are unlikely to undermine our statistical analysis. We show below that the signals we categorize as frontstage do generally receive greater press coverage.

We identify two types of signals that we consider to be frontstage. The first is a defense pact. As a binding legal commitment, a defense pact creates the potential for substantial hand-tying costs in the form of public disapproval or reputational damage if the pact is violated. Thus, pacts reassure protégés and threaten potential challengers with the promise of intervention if the protégé is attacked. US defense pacts are frontstage signals because they are usually signed in formal ceremonies that garner substantial press attention and because they require Senate approval, leading to additional press coverage of the Senate debate.

⁴⁵ Defense Manpower 2014

A second frontstage signal of support is leadership visits. These visits can involve travel by the US president to a foreign country or travel by a foreign leader to the United States.⁴⁶ Although leadership visits are a less formal signal than defense pacts, they entail both sunk and hand-tying costs and can serve similar (though perhaps weaker) deterrence and reassurance functions. Aside from their monetary costs, they take time out of the president's busy schedule and require significant preparation by US officials, making them a "scarce resource."⁴⁷ Leadership visits also create hand-tying costs because – as frontstage signals characterized by public ceremony – they typically feature images of the US president smiling, praising, and shaking hands with a client state's leader. This suggests that the US president cares about the client, creating political and reputational costs for later abandoning the client. For example, after President Bush visited the nation of Georgia once and hosted three Georgian presidential visits between 2004 and 2008, he was criticized for not coming to Georgia's aid when Russia invaded.⁴⁸ It should be noted that leadership visits should only be considered signals of support when granted to a weaker country. Sufficiently powerful countries, such as Russia and China, have received US presidential visits even though the US does not seek to support them.

We further identify two offstage signals of support. The first is military aid. The US gives military aid to many countries, and the amount of yearly aid given to countries between 1950 and 2010 has ranged from around \$1,200 to nearly \$14 billion.⁴⁹ As explained in more detail below, our analysis only considers high levels of military aid to be signals of support. Giving a high

⁴⁶ We do not include visits by lower-ranking officials because these visits involve less ceremony and are sometimes intended to solve disputes rather than signal support.

⁴⁷ Lebovic and Saunders 2015, 1

⁴⁸ Kaplan 2008

⁴⁹ USAID 2015

level of military aid does not guarantee that the United States will assist a country if it is attacked. Nonetheless, as a costly signal, it indicates that the US has an interest in the country's security. Thus, in addition to improving a country's ability to defend itself, US military aid should raise expectations that the US will assist the country in some way if it is harmed. Military aid is unlikely to receive high publicity, both because it is not typically awarded in any prominent ceremony and because it is subject to relatively little legislative debate. Military aid is approved by Congress as part of large spending bills, and thus the amount of military aid given to any individual country is rarely the subject of much discussion.

Another offstage signal of support is arms sales. Like military aid, arms sales can be a costly investment in a country's success, and we similarly only consider high levels of arms sales to be signals of support. Many US arms sales are government-to-government, in which the US government negotiates with the arms vendor on behalf of the recipient country. There are also commercial arms sales, which are negotiated directly between a foreign government and US vendor, but the US government must approve both types of sales, meaning that no US arms are sold to countries that the US does not support. Similar to military aid, arms sales carry no guarantee of US assistance to a protégé, but could raise estimates of the probability of US intervention. Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper show how US arms sales to Taiwan and Israel have been intended by policymakers to serve both deterrence and reassurance functions.⁵⁰ Arms sales also receive little publicity. They require Congressional notification if their value is above \$14 million,⁵¹ the sales go through if Congress simply does nothing. Cases in which Congress

⁵⁰ Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper's 2016

⁵¹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2015

has challenged the executive branch on arms sales are rare.⁵² The typical absence of Congressional debate or public ceremony associated with arms sales means that they are usually completed with little public awareness.

To investigate whether our categorizations are generally accurate, we undertook systematic searches to see how often each type of signal is mentioned in the *New York Times*. If we can show that even people who read the *NYT* – a newspaper with comprehensive international coverage – hear less about offstage than frontstage signals, then we can probably assume that the same pattern holds for the broader public, which consumes less news. We searched the *NYT* for articles mentioning each type of signal between 1950 and 2008. We searched for defense pacts, military aid, and arms sales by year because data on these signals are recorded yearly.⁵³ For defense pacts, we identified all US pacts and drew a random sample of 250 pact-years for searching. For military aid, we identified the top 10 percent of military aid recipients in each year and drew a random sample of 250 military aid-years from this set for searching. For arms sales, we used the same procedure as for military aid. Focusing on the top 10 percent for military aid and arms sales creates a hard test for our expectation that these signals receive less coverage. Since leader visits are discrete events, instead of searching for them by year, we drew random samples of 250 presidential visits abroad and 250 foreign leader visits to the US from lists provided by the Department of State⁵⁴ and searched for articles mentioning them over a three-month period surrounding each visit. A more detailed explanation of our search procedures is available in the appendix.

⁵² Grimmet 2012, 5

⁵³ Gibler 2009; SIPRI 2014; USAID 2015

⁵⁴ Department of State 2015a; 2015b

As shown in Figure 2, the search results generally support our expectations. Defense pacts and US presidential travel abroad both receive significantly more press coverage than either military aid or arms sales. T-tests show that the differences in the number of articles covering pacts versus aid, pacts versus arms, presidential visits versus aid, and presidential visits versus arms are all significant at the 99.9 percent confidence level (Table A1). The only aspect of the findings that does not support our expectations is that foreign leader visits generally receive little *NYT* coverage. Despite this, we still consider foreign leader visits to be frontstage signals because they are likely to receive much more coverage abroad. For example, a search for articles mentioning German Chancellor Schroeder's 2005 visit to the United States yielded only 9 *NYT* results, but 35 results in *Der Spiegel*.

[Figure 2 here]

Research Design

We test our hypotheses about how regime type affects the decision to send frontstage versus offstage signals in a dataset that records signals of support given by the US to other countries by country-year. The dataset includes all countries with a population over 500,000 between 1950 and 2008,⁵⁵ except for the US itself and the competing major powers Russia and China. We assume that all other countries have some potential to receive US support signals, since US military power and interests span the world.⁵⁶ We seek to predict which, if any, types of signals the United States will send to broadcast its support for protégés.

We have two binary dependent variables, which are used in a bivariate probit model. The first dependent variable, *Frontstage*, records whether the United States sent a frontstage signal of

⁵⁵ Correlates of War 2011; Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972

⁵⁶ Less friendly countries are less likely to receive support, but our results are robust to dropping countries that had recent MID's with the US (Table A12).

support for each country in each year. As defined above, we consider frontstage signals of support to be defense pacts,⁵⁷ presidential visits abroad, and foreign leader visits to the United States.⁵⁸ Thus, if a country had a new or existing defense pact with the United States *or* was visited by the US president *or* sent its own leader to visit the United States in a given year, the variable Frontstage is coded as one. Of course, there are important differences between defense pacts and visits, and we explore the implications of these differences elsewhere (Tables A6 and A7). However, since we are primarily concerned with signal visibility, we group these two signals with high visibility together for our main analysis.

Our second dependent variable, *Offstage Alone*, records whether the United States sent an offstage signal of support without also sending a frontstage signal. As noted above, offstage signals of support include military aid and arms sales.⁵⁹ Again, despite the differences between these signals, we group them together for our main analysis because of their similarly low publicity. These signals are measured on a continuous scale, but we must create a binary dependent variable for our bivariate probit model. Although most countries receive at least some arms or aid from the US in most years, we want to focus on offstage signals that are costly enough to truly denote that a country is important to the US. Therefore, we code a country as having received an offstage signal of support only if it was among the top 10 percent of US arms or military aid recipients in a given year. We put the cutoff at the top 10 percent (in terms of total arms and aid given by the US) because this is the approximate point at which the level of aid and

⁵⁷ Gibler 2009, but Leeds' et al. (2002) alliance data produces similar results (Table A13).

⁵⁸ Department of State 2015a, 2015b. Our measure excludes visits only to the United Nations.

⁵⁹ USAID 2015; SIPRI 2014

arms given increases dramatically, as shown in Figures A1 and A2. However, the results are robust to varying the cutoff down to the top 50 percent or up to the top 5 percent (Table A12).

It is important to note the asymmetry between our two dependent variables. Our first dependent variable records cases in which frontstage signals are sent either alone or in conjunction with offstage signals, whereas our second dependent variable only records cases in which offstage signals are sent alone. This is due to our theory's focus on signal visibility. Frontstage signals garner a lot of publicity regardless of whether they are sent with or without offstage signals. In contrast, offstage signals can only avoid publicity if they are sent alone. Therefore, it is most appropriate for testing our theory to compare the decision to send frontstage signals *at all* with the decision to send offstage signals *alone*. (However, we observe substantively similar results if we treat frontstage signals alone and frontstage together with offstage signals as separate categories. Explaining the decision to send frontstage signals alone or together with offstage is beyond the scope of our theory, but in the Appendix we present evidence that this decision is driven by strategic factors.)

Figure 3 shows the percentages of country-years in our dataset that are coded as having received a frontstage signal, an offstage signal alone, or no signal of support at all. The distribution is broken down by regime type and between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. In both eras, democracies are more likely to receive frontstage signals than non-democracies. In contrast, non-democracies are more likely than democracies to receive either no signal or offstage signals only. Therefore, even before estimating a statistical model, we observe patterns in keeping with our expectations.

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3 also indicates that sending frontstage signals is considerably more common than sending offstage signals alone, in keeping with our argument that frontstage signaling has many advantages. Indeed, there are many countries that received a frontstage signal of support in almost every year in our dataset, including NATO and Rio Pact allies. Although offstage signals alone are less common, many of the countries that do commonly receive offstage signals only are of high strategic value to the United States, meaning that this type of signaling is important. The most frequent recipients of offstage signals alone are Thailand, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Spain (before joining NATO), Tunisia, South Vietnam, Iran (under the Shah), Indonesia, Bahrain, Singapore, Yugoslavia, Kuwait, Oman, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Our main independent variable is democracy. We employ the *Polity* score to measure democracy to ensure that our results are comparable to previous work.⁶⁰ We use the continuous Polity score rather than a dummy because we expect that the reasons to avoid frontstage signaling for autocracies will operate more strongly when a country is more autocratic. However, the results hold using a dummy measure (Table A8).

We also include control variables to account for countries' international strategic importance and warmth of relations with the United States. First, we include *US Rival MIDs*, the average number of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs)⁶¹ per year with a US rival in which a country was involved over the last five years.⁶² Second, we include *US Side MIDs*, the average number of MIDs per year in which a country was involved on the same side as the US over the

⁶⁰ Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2010. Specifically, we use the "POLITY2" variable, which fills in missing values. Countries experiencing foreign occupation are dropped.

⁶¹ Palmer et al. 2015

⁶² US rivals are defined as the seven countries that had by far the most MIDs with the United States in the time period covered by our dataset: the Soviet Union/Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, and Libya.

last five years. Third, we include *Other MID*s, the average number of MIDs per year outside the previous two categories in which a country was involved over the last five years. This variable controls for the risk of entrapment that might exist if the US signals support for a country that fights a lot of conflicts tangential to US interests.

Fourth, we include each country's *UN Voting Similarity* with the United States, measured using an S score.⁶³ Fifth, we control for *Russian Ally*, an indicator for countries with a Russian or Soviet defense pact.⁶⁴ Sixth, we control for a country's *Real GDP*,⁶⁵ since wealthier countries might be more important to the US. Seventh, we include measures of *US Exports* to each country and *US Imports* from each country⁶⁶ because US signaling decisions might be influenced by economic interests.⁶⁷ Seventh, we control for *Distance* from the United States.⁶⁸ Finally, we include a *Cold War* indicator and the *Year* of the observation to account for possible changes in US signaling preferences over time.⁶⁹ All of the independent variables except *Distance*, *Cold War*, and *Year* are lagged by one year.⁷⁰

We use a bivariate probit model to estimate seemingly unrelated regressions predicting each of our binary dependent variables. This model takes into account the expected correlation

⁶³ Gartzke 2006; Voeten and Merdzanovic 2009

⁶⁴ Gibler 2009

⁶⁵ Gleditsch 2002

⁶⁶ Barbieri and Keshk 2012; Gleditsch 2002

⁶⁷ Twenty-three observations are dropped because of missing values for trade, GDP, or UN voting. The results remain similar when the variables with missing values are omitted (Table A13).

⁶⁸ Bennett and Stam 2000

⁶⁹ We also split the sample into Cold War and post-Cold War eras and find similar effects in both eras (Table A14).

⁷⁰ The results are robust to longer lags (Table A14).

between the error terms of the two regression equations, which results from the fact that the signaling decisions are closely related. One alternate approach would be to use a multinomial logit or probit model, and these models produce substantively similar results (Tables A4 and A5). Another alternate approach would be to estimate a separate equation for each of the four individual signals that we consider. As shown in Appendix Tables A6 and A7, this approach also supports the same overarching conclusions.

Results

The main results are shown in Table 1. As predicted, the effect of the recipient's regime type varies dramatically between predicting frontstage signals and predicting offstage signals alone. For predicting frontstage signals, Polity has a positive and significant coefficient. Thus, consistent with H1a, more democratic countries are more likely to receive frontstage signals, compared to more autocratic countries. Furthermore, consistent with H1b, the Polity coefficient is negative and significant for predicting the probability of offstage signaling alone. This means the US is more likely to send only offstage signals of support to more autocratic countries compared to more democratic countries.

[Table 1 here]

Figure 4 shows the average predicted probabilities of the different signals, based on the model, and how they change with the signal recipient's Polity score. We see that the probability of receiving a frontstage signal of support increases greatly with the recipient's Polity score. In keeping with H1a, it goes from 32 percent to 57 percent as the recipient country moves from the lowest Polity score to the highest. The probability of receiving offstage signals only is generally lower than that of frontstage signals, but – in keeping with H1b – we find that it is significantly higher for more autocratic than for more democratic countries. The most autocratic countries,

such as Saudi Arabia or Oman, have a 9 percent probability of receiving offstage signals only, while the most democratic countries, such as Sweden or Costa Rica, have less than a 1 percent probability of receiving solely offstage signals. There is also a substantial portion of countries that receive no signal of support at all, and autocracies are more likely than democracies to fall into this category.

[Figure 4 here]

Finally, looking more closely at the control variables, Table 1 suggests that international strategic variables – such as US Side MIDs, Russian Ally, and UN Voting Similarity – are important for predicting the decision to send some signal of support versus none, but are not as useful for predicting the decision to send offstage only versus frontstage signals because their coefficients have similar signs and significances for predicting both types of signals. This indicates that the frontstage-offstage signaling decision is driven by the domestic constraints posited by our theory more so than by the international strategic concerns captured by these variables.⁷¹ Other than Polity, the only variable that is significant in different directions in the two equations is Distance. The results indicate that closer countries are more likely to receive frontstage signals, whereas farther away countries are more likely to receive offstage signals alone. This finding could reflect a variety of different strategic considerations, such as not wanting to give destabilizing arms transfers to closer countries, but is weaker than the finding for Polity. The final notable result from Table 1 is that the insignificance of the Other MIDs variable suggests that concerns about entrapment do not greatly affect US signaling decisions.

⁷¹ As further evidence that this decision is not driven by international strategic concerns, our results are robust to dropping NATO members, Rio Pact members, and other allies (Tables A9 and A14).

Robustness and Alternative Arguments

We perform robustness tests to address potential concerns about the results. We begin by confirming that our results are consistent when using alternate regime type measures, including the Unified Democracy Score,⁷² the Empowerment Rights Index,⁷³ and indicators for personalist and non-personalist autocracies⁷⁴ (Table A8). We also consider whether Muslim autocracies might be unique because of greater anti-US sentiment. To test this, we create separate indicator variables for autocracies with and without substantial Muslim populations.⁷⁵ We find that both types of autocracies are significantly more likely to receive offstage signals only and significantly less likely to receive frontstage signals in comparison to democracies, although the effect is slightly more significant for autocracies with a substantial Muslim population (Table A8).

Next, we probe alternative explanations for how the United States makes signaling decisions. Some alternate explanations – such as that the US hesitates to make binding commitments to more conflict-prone countries or that the US hesitates to give potentially destabilizing arms transfers to more proximate countries – have already been addressed with control variables in the main model. However, there are still other alternative explanations that are important to consider.

⁷² Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010

⁷³ Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014

⁷⁴ Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's 2014

⁷⁵ Autocracies are defined as countries with a Polity score less than 7. A substantial Muslim population is defined as more than 25 percent (Maoz 2013).

First, some may argue that the United States prefers to give legally-binding signals of support only to democracies, perhaps because they are more reliable allies.⁷⁶ Relatedly, some may speculate that it is Congressional rather than public opposition that primarily constrains the president's signaling ability, and that the US therefore favors sending signals that do not require explicit Congressional approval to non-democracies. Both of these alternate explanations can be tested by reclassifying presidential trips abroad and foreign leader visits (which make no legal commitment and have no requirement for legislative approval) as offstage signals, leaving defense pacts as the sole frontstage signal of support. If the alternate explanations above were correct, this change would be expected to strengthen the results, but in fact it weakens them (Table A9). This suggests that what is key is the visibility of frontstage signals compared to offstage, not which signals are more legally binding or require Congressional approval.

Second, we test whether US signaling decisions are driven by the fact that some dictators face more threats and thus seek more arms. While the main model already controls for external threats, it is possible that dictators are more likely to face internal threats and more willing to use force against domestic opponents. Thus, military aid and arms sales may directly aid the regime security of dictators. To rule this out as an alternative explanation, we control for which dictators the face greatest domestic insecurity by including an indicator for civil war⁷⁷ and an indicator for a history of irregular regime transitions⁷⁸ in our regression. Neither of these

⁷⁶ Gaubatz 1996

⁷⁷ Sarkees and Wayman 2010

⁷⁸ Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009

variables significantly affects the probability of offstage signals, and the result for democracy holds, suggesting no support for this alternate explanation (Table A9).⁷⁹

Furthermore, we consider the possibility that certain signals by the US may endogenously affect a country's regime type – that is, the US influence indicated by the signals may encourage countries to democratize.⁸⁰ Regressing Polity on lagged indicator variables for all of the individual support signals as well as the lagged value of Polity itself, we find that leader visits, military aid, and arms sales do not affect regime type, but having a defense pact is a significant predictor of a higher Polity score. To rule out the possibility that our results are driven by the endogenous relationship between defense pacts and democracy, we re-estimate our model dropping all countries that have US defense pacts. Polity remains a negative and significant predictor of the decision to send offstage signals only and a positive and significant predictor of the decision to send frontstage signals (Table A9).

Another concern is that defense pacts are difficult to revoke, and other signals of support may be prolonged or repeated due to bureaucratic inertia. We therefore estimate a model that includes a cubic polynomial of the time since the last change in the type of signal sent. We also estimate a separate model that includes lagged versions of both dependent variables on the right-hand side of each equation. Again, our results remain robust (Table A10). Finally, we add fixed effects. We do not use country fixed effects because these would restrict us to examining only the impact of regime change within countries, but we are crucially interested in how differences across countries affect US signaling decisions. However, we estimate a model with fixed effects

⁷⁹ As further evidence that the results are not driven by military necessity, they are robust to dropping countries in which the US had major military involvement (Table A14).

⁸⁰ McDonald 2015

for region and another model with fixed effects for the identity of the US president. Our results remain robust in both (Table A10).

Further Evidence of Mechanisms

In addition to ruling out alternative causal mechanisms, we seek to provide additional evidence of the mechanisms posited by our theory. We begin by examining the impact of time on US signaling strategies. We believe that the causal mechanisms in our theory have operated throughout the post-World War II era, but we expect that the importance of the mechanisms related to US domestic backlash has increased over time due to exogenous events that increased presidential vulnerability to criticism about foreign policy and human rights. These events include the Vietnam War, which ended the “Cold War consensus” that fighting communism was more important than human rights;⁸¹ the Watergate scandal, which increased distrust of the president and criticism of the president in the media;⁸² Jimmy Carter’s rhetorical emphasis on human rights,⁸³ which set the tone for future presidents; and the rise of cable news and the internet. These events produced an environment in which the president became more vulnerable to criticism for making frontstage signals of support for non-democratic protégés.⁸⁴

Since most of these events occurred in the 1970’s or early 1980’s, we should expect our causal mechanisms to operate even more strongly after that time. To test if this is the case, we create a series of dummy variables to divide our sample into different time periods. For every

⁸¹ Hook and Spanier 2013, 95-99

⁸² Rosati and Scott 2011, 77-80

⁸³ Hook and Spanier 2013, 111-112

⁸⁴ Scrutiny of US arms sales also increased in this era, but the 1976 Arms Export Control Act preserved the ability of the president to make arms sales quietly, except when Congress forced a debate.

year, we create a dummy variable equal to one for all observations after that year, and we interact each dummy individually with the Polity score. We find that the dummies for 1975 and 1983 have the most significant interactions, each significant at the 94.6 percent confidence level (Table A11). This suggests that the president's concern about the regime type of frontstage signal recipients increased significantly in the mid-1970's through early 1980's, as we would predict based on our causal mechanisms. The marginal effect of Polity as a predictor of frontstage signals is more than 60 percent larger in the post-1983 era than before, a statistically significant difference.⁸⁵

As another way to test our causal mechanisms, we analyze the impact of the strength of US political opposition on US signaling. Given the ability of opposition opinion leaders to rally the public, our theory implies that presidents should be more reluctant to send frontstage signals of support for autocratic regimes when they face a stronger opposition party.⁸⁶ To test this, we interact Polity with the percentage of Congressional seats held by the party in opposition to the president.⁸⁷ The interaction between Polity and opposition seats in Congress is positive and highly significant for predicting frontstage signals (Table A11). The marginal effect of Polity on the probability of a frontstage signal increases by 85 percent – a statistically significant change – as the percentage of opposition seats moves from its minimum to its maximum. This indicates that when there is more opposition in Congress, presidents take more consideration of a

⁸⁵ For predicting offstage signals alone, the 2001 dummy has the most significant interaction with Polity, probably due to the War on Terror.

⁸⁶ Howell and Pevehouse 2007

⁸⁷ US House 2014; US Senate 2014

country's regime when deciding whether to issue a frontstage signal of support.⁸⁸ It might be suspected that this finding is partially attributable to the ability of opposition in Congress to veto defense pacts, but the interaction remains significant after dropping countries with defense pacts, leaving visits as the sole frontstage signal (Table A11). This suggests that presidential signaling decisions are influenced by the concerns about public backlash that underlie our causal mechanisms.⁸⁹

Dilemmas of Reassurance: US-Iran Relations under the Shah

Finally, to provide even more direct insight into the causes of US signaling decisions, we use primary source documents and secondary literature to process-trace the considerations that influenced US decisions regarding how to signal support for the Shah's Iran, a strategically important protégé. We find that in deciding whether to offer Iran frontstage or offstage signals of support, US policymakers took into account concerns posited by our theory, including the Shah's need to maintain domestic legitimacy, their own potential hypocrisy costs, and the blow to US deterrent credibility that could result from domestic backlash against a frontstage signal. We do

⁸⁸ Interestingly, in such situations, the increase in the probability of frontstage signals of support for democracies is greater than the decrease in the probability of frontstage signals for autocracies. This might be because publicly supporting democracies can increase a president's domestic approval, which is useful when faced with strong opposition.

⁸⁹ There is no significant interaction with Polity for predicting offstage signals alone. This may be because Congress has some limited ability to block offstage signals and/or because the probability of sending offstage signals alone is already smaller than the probability of frontstage.

not claim that these were the only considerations at play, but the documents suggest they were central in the deliberations.⁹⁰

From the start of the Cold War, the US considered Iran to be an important country because of its “resources, strategic location, and vulnerability to [Soviet] armed attack” and feared that if “Iran should come under Soviet domination, the independence of all other countries of the Middle East would be threatened.”⁹¹ In 1953, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles developed the idea of encouraging Iran and other Middle Eastern countries to form an anti-Soviet alliance.⁹² Iran joined the “Baghdad Pact” along with Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, and Great Britain in 1955. Because the United States had been a proponent of the Pact, Iran and other members expected the US to join as well. Policymakers in the US Department of Defense advocated for the US to join the Pact, arguing that failure to join would undermine the credibility of US deterrence.⁹³ However, the US did not join due to objections from the State Department, which argued that the US should signal its support for the Baghdad Pact members through security assistance and informal involvement rather than formal membership.⁹⁴

Two of the reasons given for not joining the Pact illustrate the causal mechanisms in our theory. The first was that domestic publics in the Pact members might object to a visible display of Western support and involvement, which would undermine their authoritarian or semi-

⁹⁰ The US was also concerned with the reactions of the Soviet Union, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to a defense pact (Campbell 1960, 60).

⁹¹ FRUS 1989, doc. 6

⁹² Campbell 1960, 49

⁹³ FRUS 1991, doc. 153

⁹⁴ FRUS 1991, docs. 60, 197, and 241. In 1958, the US did quietly sign a separate pledge to aid Iran in the event of an attack, but it was vaguely worded and not a formal treaty (Bill 1988, 119).

authoritarian regimes. A 1956 State Department document notes that “some elements” in Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan viewed the Baghdad Pact as a “vehicle for the extension of UK influence and control in the Middle East.”⁹⁵ The State Department expected that US membership might add to the problematic impression that the Pact was being imposed by the West.⁹⁶ Secretary of State Dulles acknowledged most local people in the Middle East would not support a defense pact with the US.⁹⁷ Thus, perceived domestic constraints on Iran’s Shah and other autocratic protégés caused the United States to avoid sending a frontstage signal of support by joining the Baghdad Pact.

A second reason that the US did not join the Baghdad Pact is related to the credibility concerns that can arise from frontstage signals to non-democracies. The State Department feared that an attempt by the US to join the Pact could lead to public controversy and Senate rejection of the treaty, which would undermine the Pact. In a policy meeting, Secretary of State Dulles stated that asking Congress to consider the Baghdad Pact would create a “major explosion.” Dulles went on to opine, “Therefore, to propose joining the Pact and then to have it rejected by the Senate would be a death-blow to the Pact and would have much more serious and detrimental effect [sic] on the Pact at the present time than our not joining.”⁹⁸ Dulles later asked Baghdad Pact ambassadors rhetorically if they would still want the US to join if he could not guarantee Senate passage of the treaty, apparently silencing their requests for the US to join.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ *FRUS* 1991, doc.160

⁹⁶ Ruane 2005, 186

⁹⁷ Campbell 1960, 49

⁹⁸ *FRUS* 1991, doc. 115

⁹⁹ *FRUS* 1991, doc. 163

At this point, US government fears about domestic and Congressional objections to the Baghdad Pact were based much more on concerns raised by the pro-Israeli lobby than on concerns about the Pact members' regime types.¹⁰⁰ The anti-Communist consensus was strong in the 1950's, and any non-Communist country was viewed as part of the "free" world. From the 1960's onward, however, this consensus began to weaken and more criticism of Iran arose within the US.

Despite the fact that the Shah expressed a sense of insecurity and doubts about the US commitment to Iran,¹⁰¹ the US sent few frontstage signals of support for Iran in the 1960's and 1970's. In 1970, the US government briefly considered promoting a new regional alliance in the Middle East, but quickly rejected the idea as "impractical."¹⁰² Presidential visits were also minimized. The US president visited Iran only twice between 1960 and 1979, no more than he visited strategically unimportant countries such as Uruguay and Costa Rica.¹⁰³ Instead, most US signals of support for Iran were provided offstage. Between 1963 and 1969, Iran was consistently among the top 10 recipients of US military aid,¹⁰⁴ and in every year between 1968 and 1978, Iran was among the top five US arms recipients.¹⁰⁵

Domestic constraints in both the US and Iran posed barriers to frontstage signals of support during the 1960's and 1970's. Public criticism of Iran within the US began to increase under Kennedy, as Iranian students studying in the US raised awareness of human rights

¹⁰⁰ *FRUS* 1991, doc.111

¹⁰¹ Johns 2007, 74, 80

¹⁰² *FRUS* 2006, doc. 91

¹⁰³ Department of State 2015a

¹⁰⁴ USAID 2015

¹⁰⁵ SIPRI 2014

violations in Iran.¹⁰⁶ Criticism intensified in the 1970's. In 1975, Amnesty International said Iran had the worst human rights record in the world.¹⁰⁷ In 1976, a Congressional subcommittee held hearings on Iranian human rights.¹⁰⁸ When President Carter hosted a visit of the Shah to the White House in 1977, protests were held nearby and turned violent. Demonstrating the existence of hypocrisy costs, a *New York Times* editorial noted how “awkward” it was for a “President committed to advancing the cause of human rights worldwide” to give “a full honors welcome to a ruler as close to an absolute monarch as exists these days.”¹⁰⁹ Given the backlash, this relatively rare frontstage signal may actually have been counterproductive in convincing observers of US support for Iran.

At the same time, the Shah faced domestic constraints on cooperating with the US. In 1964, there were protests in Iran over immunity privileges given to US military personnel under a new status-of-forces agreement, which Islamic fundamentalist leader Ayatollah Khomeini called a “document of enslavement.”¹¹⁰ As of 1965, the US Ambassador to Iran argued that it would help the Shah's domestic political standing to let the Shah show more public independence from the US on the public stage.¹¹¹ The Shah increasingly played to the anti-American climate domestically, declaring that “Iran cannot surrender its destiny to whims of

¹⁰⁶ Shannon 2015, 670

¹⁰⁷ Faroughy 1975

¹⁰⁸ Bill 1988, 211

¹⁰⁹ *New York Times* 1977

¹¹⁰ Johns 2007, 71

¹¹¹ Johns 2007, 75

foreigners even if they are very close friends”¹¹² and permitting criticism of US foreign policy in the Iranian press.¹¹³

In sum, the domestic climates in both Iran and the United States made it difficult for the US to signal support for Iran on the frontstage in the 1960’s and 1970’s, despite the fact that Iran continued to be viewed as strategically important. Thus, the US opted to signal support for Iran primarily offstage. We therefore find evidence for the causal mechanisms highlighted in our theory: US policymakers sent primarily offstage instead of frontstage signals of support for Iran because of a desire to preserve the Shah’s regime security, credibility concerns, and eventually concerns about hypocrisy costs.

Conclusion

Why does the US show support for some regimes that are strategically important to US foreign policy using offstage signals alone, while it chooses to support others with frontstage signals? This puzzle intensifies when we consider that highly visible signals of support should, all else equal, be more effective in deterring potential challengers and reassuring client states. The answer, we argue, is that leaders think strategically about domestic political factors in choosing not only whether, but also *how*, to signal their foreign policy interests. In this paper, we develop and test a theory that highlights how domestic political factors shape the preferences of both US leaders and their autocratic protégés so that both may prefer for US support to be signaled in an offstage manner. We find strong statistical support for our theoretical expectations

¹¹² Johns 2007, 77

¹¹³ Bill 1988, 178

and also find evidence in support of our causal mechanisms in the case of US signaling toward the Shah of Iran.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of considering a fuller menu of options available when explaining foreign policy choices. We also highlight the importance of considering factors that influence both the supply (on the part of the major power) and demand (on the part of the protégé) for signals of support. These innovations enable us to more closely approximate how leaders actually think about the tradeoff between different foreign policy tools in order to explain otherwise puzzling behavior. One practical implication of this is that it is potentially misleading to rely on information about only highly visible signals such as defense pacts when making inferences about the importance of autocratic protégés to the US.

Our paper suggests several directions for future research. First, it lays important groundwork for testing which types of signals of support are most effective in deterring potential challengers or reassuring protégés, since analyzing this without accounting for how signaling decisions are made could lead to bias. Second, it would be possible to expand the frontstage/offstage framework to other foreign policy realms, such as economic relations or counter-terrorism, and probe whether regime type continues to have an important effect. Our work might provide insight into another type of signaling – secret signals of support – which are more difficult to observe than offstage signals.¹¹⁴ Domestic considerations are likely to have a similar effect on US covert signaling.

Third, scholars could test whether the signaling dynamics we report are also relevant to other democratic major powers, such as Britain and France, which face similar domestic constraints. We should keep in mind that, as second-tier powers that conduct their foreign policies in the shadow of the US, these countries may feel less compelled to support non-

¹¹⁴ See Carson (2016) and Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2017) for more on secret signaling.

democracies for strategic reasons, which could decrease their reliance on offstage signaling. Our theory, we suspect, is less applicable to explaining the signaling decisions of Russia or China because as non-democracies, they have little to fear from hypocrisy costs. Therefore, additional research is necessary to determine the extent to which autocratic patrons deviate from frontstage signaling and why.

Our theory and findings also have important policy implications. Some of the most strategically important protégés of the United States are non-democracies. An argument could be made that those regimes – such as Jordan or Saudi Arabia – would be more capable of deterring challengers or would feel more reassured if the US supported them more visibly. However, our paper cautions against such an approach: Taking these relationships onto the frontstage, we argue, could carry domestic political costs for leaders in the US and/or the client states. This could adversely affect the credibility of these frontstage signals and the political stability of the protégé regimes. Thus, our paper suggests that transparency in the realm of international security is not always an asset for signaling.

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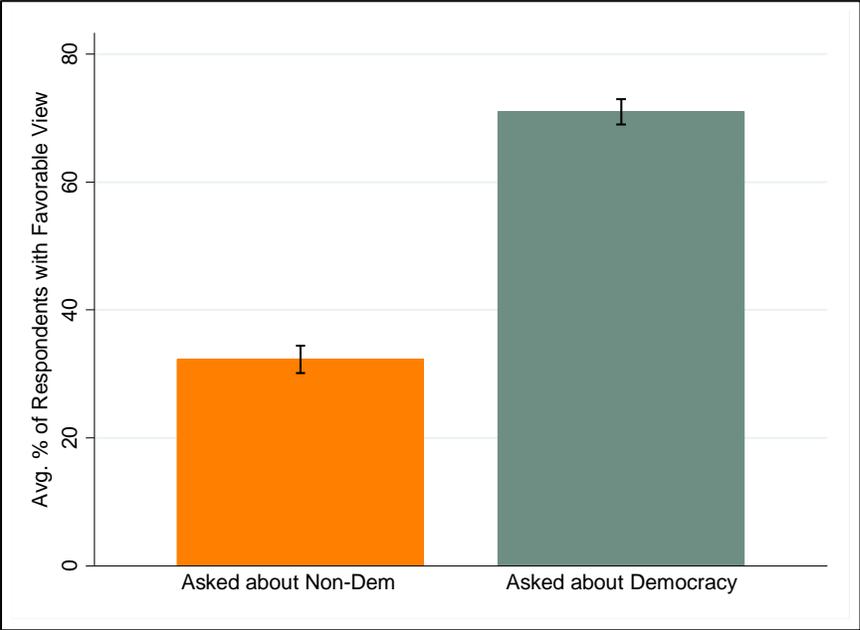
Table 1: Main Model

	Equation 1: Predicting Frontstage	Equation 2: Predicting Offstage Alone
Polity	0.042 ^{***} (0.009)	-0.062 ^{***} (0.014)
US Rival MIDs	0.256 (0.214)	0.362 [*] (0.198)
US Side MIDs	1.435 ^{***} (0.371)	0.586 [*] (0.304)
Other MIDs	-0.008 (0.076)	0.036 (0.091)
UN Voting Similarity	0.932 ^{***} (0.160)	0.703 ^{***} (0.236)
Russian Ally	-0.794 ^{***} (0.159)	-0.468 ^{**} (0.200)
Real GDP	1.137 ^{**} (0.565)	-0.008 (0.225)
US Exports	0.095 ^{**} (0.043)	0.002 (0.015)
US Imports	-0.038 [*] (0.021)	-0.000 (0.013)
Distance	-0.024 ^{***} (0.004)	0.012 [*] (0.006)
Cold War	0.255 ^{***} (0.086)	-0.022 (0.181)
Year	0.012 ^{***} (0.004)	0.016 ^{**} (0.008)

Note: This is a bivariate probit model with N=7,187. All variables except *Distance*, *Cold War*, and *Year* are **lagged by one year**. The standard errors are clustered by recipient country.

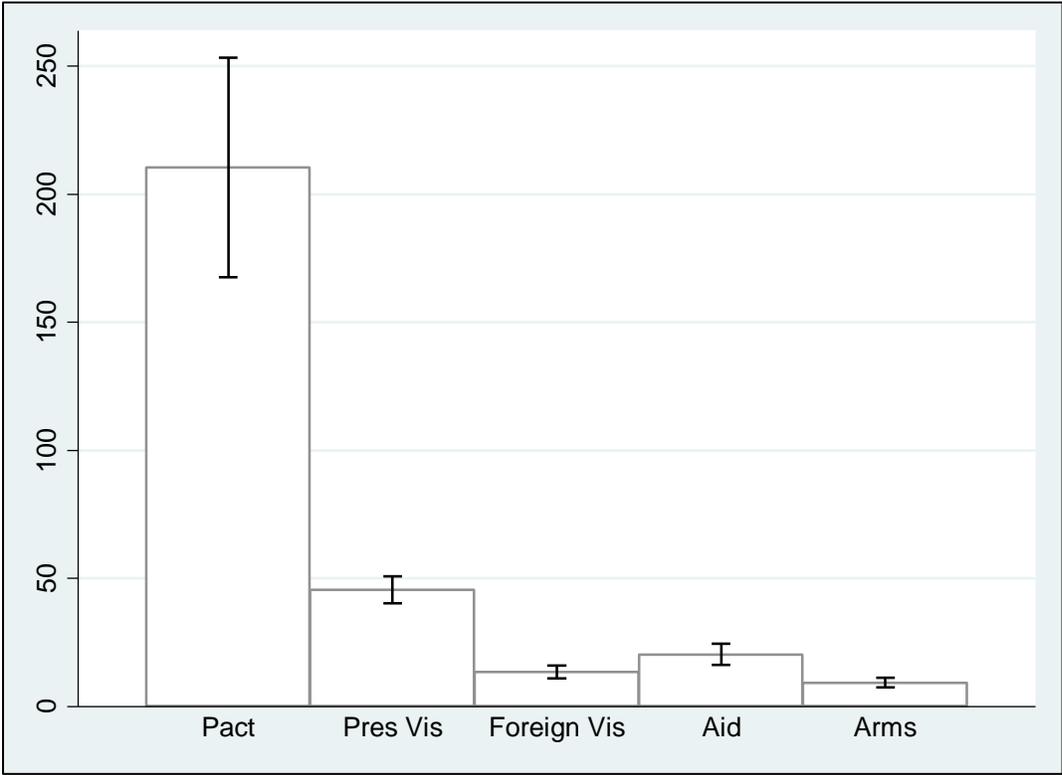
* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Figure 1: US Respondents' Views of Democratic and Non-Democratic Countries



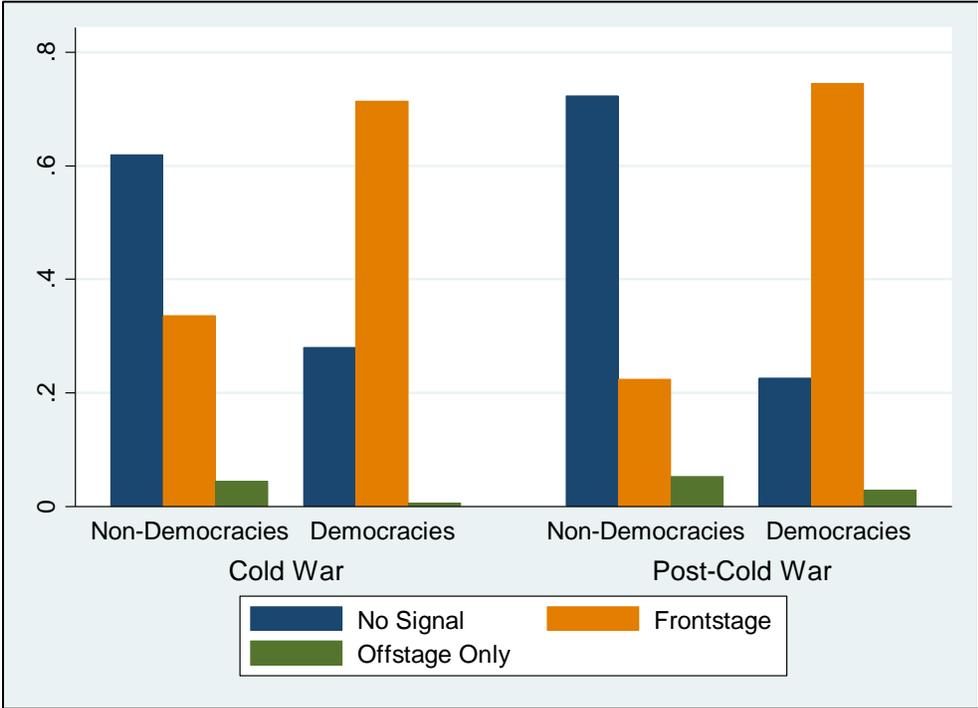
Note: The lines denote 95 percent confidence bounds.

Figure 2: *New York Times* Search Results



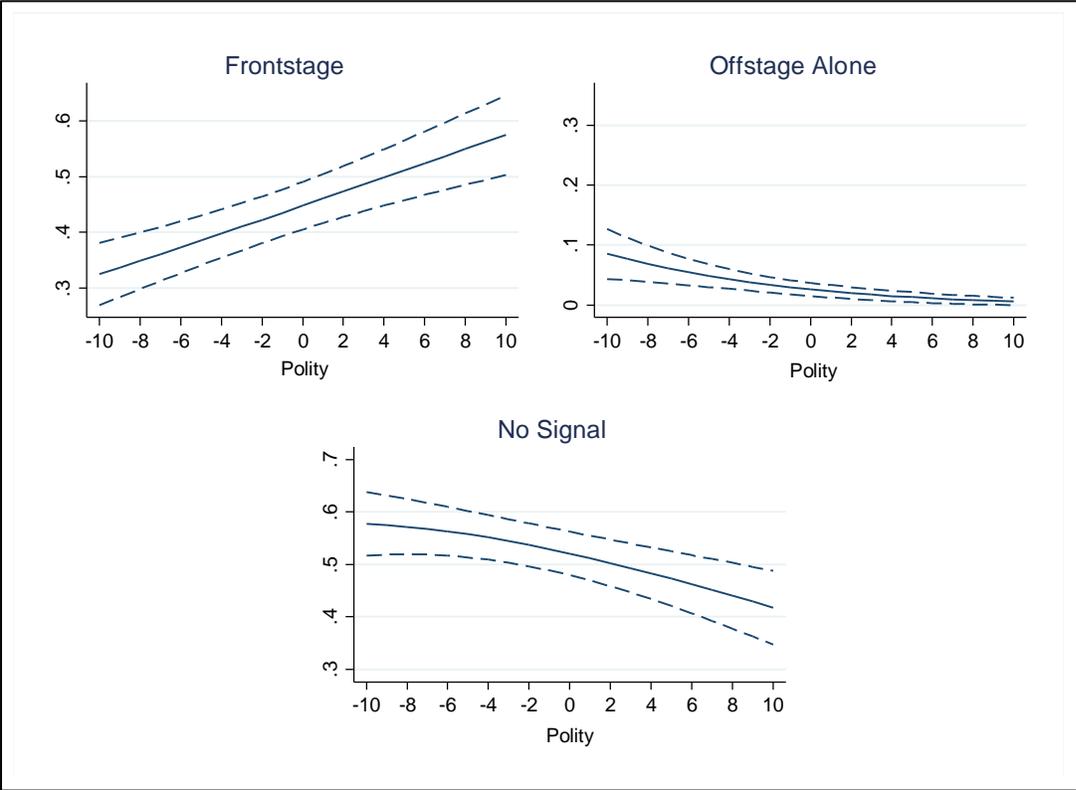
Note: The bars show the average number of *NYT* search results, per visit or per year. The lines show 95 percent confidence bounds.

Figure 3: Dependent Variable Distribution



Note: The bars show the percentage of country-years receiving each type of signal by regime type and era. We consider countries with a Polity score above 6 to be democracies.

Figure 4: Impact of Polity on Predicted Probabilities



Note: The solid lines show average predicted probabilities, which are calculated by taking the predicted probabilities for every observation and averaging them. The dotted lines are 95 percent confidence bounds.