WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT OUTCOMES ON DOMESTIC POLITICAL APPROVAL?

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Research Question

- Leaders face strong incentives when deciding whether to start or prolong wars.
- If victory reliably boosts approval and defeat reliably hurts it, this shapes democratic accountability and "gambling for resurrection."

Our angle:
- Focus on approval (short-run public support).
- Use a regression discontinuity design to approximate local causal effects from "closed" conflicts.

Research Question

- Main mechanism:
  - Victory signals competence, strength, and protection of national interests → higher approval.
  - Defeat signals incompetence, miscalculation, or wasted resources → lower approval.
- Moderating elements:
  - Legitimacy (UN condemnation of initiator).
  - Casualties (battle deaths and social salience of losses).
  - Economic performance (GDP growth, GDP per capita).
  - These factors shape how citizens interpret the outcome and how strongly they update their opinion of the incumbent.
  - We assume that these also have some impact on the conflict outcome.

Literature Review

- Conflict outcomes shape electoral results (Smith 1998).
- Wars are costly and seen as domestic political risks. Defeat increases the cost (Mesquita & Siverson 1995).

- Casualties:
  - Reduce public approval (Eichenberg et al. 2006).
- Wealth:
  - Influences conflict outcomes (Henderson & Bayer 2013).
  - More developed states perform better militarily (Beckley 2010).
- Legitimacy;
  - Legitimacy increases popular support for conflict (Chapman 2009).
- Disagreement in the literature on the effect of conflict outcomes on approval.
  - Public audiences are unable to make cost-benefit analysis of conflicts (Berinsky 2007)
  - Conflict only affects elections when opposition support is weak (Arena 2008).

Contributions

We contribute by: (1) focusing on short-run approval rather than elections; (2) using a conflict-level panel around the end of wars; (3) leveraging quasi-random close conflicts to approximate causality.

- Unit: Months
- Sample: interstate conflicts from year X–Y, with clear win/lose outcomes, from COW.
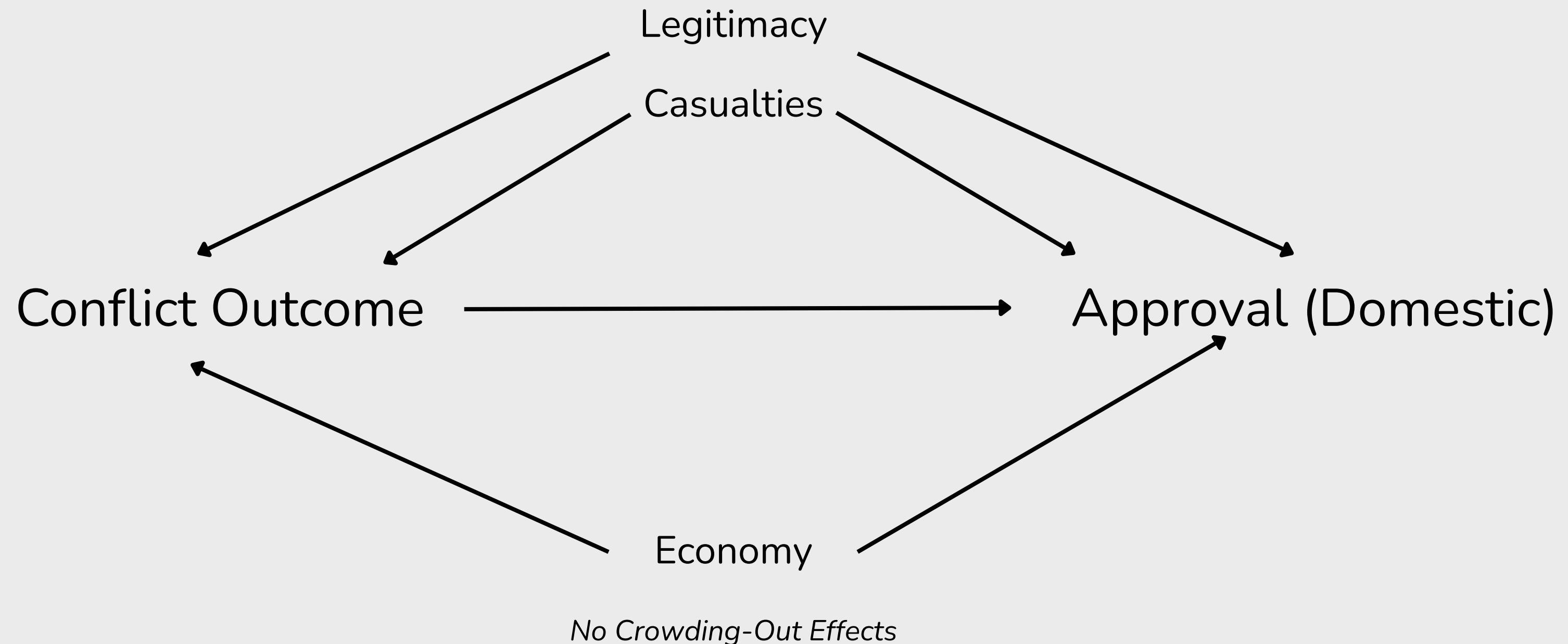
CIS slide showing:

- $t = -k \ldots -1$ (pre-outcome months),
- $t = 0$ (outcome month),
- $t = 1 \ldots +k$ (post-outcome).

Theoretical Estimand

What is the causal effect of conflict outcomes on domestic political approval?

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Legitimacy

Casualties

Conflict Outcome → Approval (Domestic)

Economy

No Crowding-Out Effects

Model

Approval_i: domestic approval level (or change in approval) measured around the conflict's end.

Model (sharp RD with covariates):

$$Approval_i = \alpha + \tau D_i + f(X_i - c) + \theta' Z_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:
- D_i = 1 if country i wins; 0 if it loses.
- X_i = running variable (time period around conflict outcome); c = 0.
- f($\cdot$): flexible function of distance from the outcome (local linear or local quadratic).
- Z_i: covariates (GDP growth, war-time spending, regime type, pre-war approval, etc.).
- τ is the RD treatment effect of victory on approval at the cutoff.

H1a: A positive interstate conflict outcome should be associated with an increase in domestic approval ratings.

H1b: A negative interstate conflict outcome should be associated with an decrease in domestic approval ratings.

H0: Interstate conflict outcomes aren't associated with a change in domestic approval ratings.

Data

Conflict & Outcomes (Primary):

- Correlates of War (COW) dataset:
  - Participants, start/end dates.
  - Conflict outcomes (win/lose/stalemate).
  - Casualties.

Legitimacy:

- UN resolutions in condemnation of the initiator.

Economic data:

- World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) or Penn World Tables:
  - GDP per capita, GDP growth.
  - Government consumption, military expenditure.

Approval data:

- Cross-national leader/government approval datasets.
- Country-specific polling sources (Gallup, Eurobarometer, national polls) when available.

Variables & Measurement

Dependent variable:
- Domestic political approval of the incumbent government/leader.
- Measured as:
  - Level: approval rating.

Key treatment & running variable:
- Treatment (D): Conflict Outcomes
- Running Variable: Time around the conflict
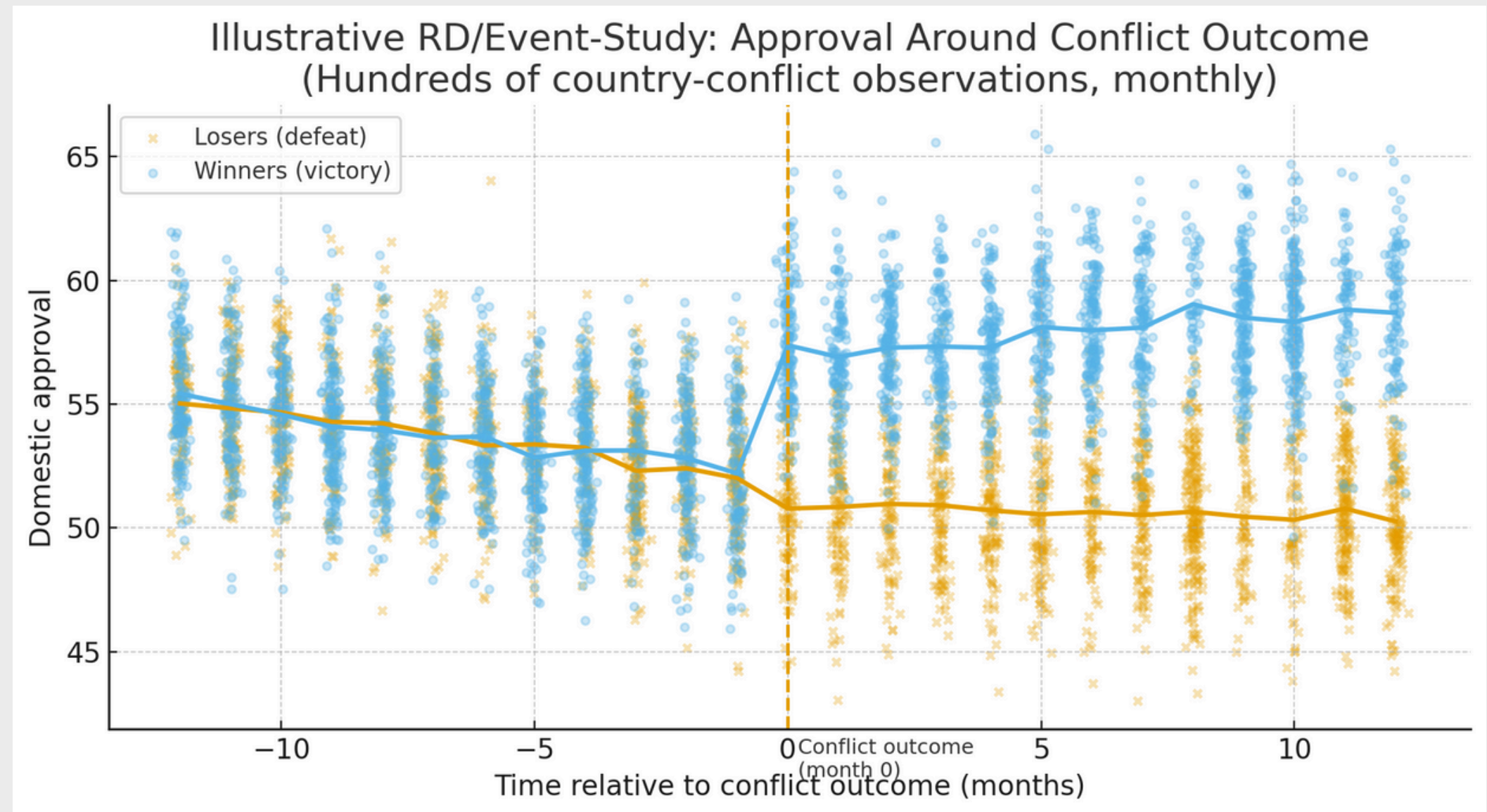
Conflict characteristics:
- Casualties: battle deaths (total, or per capita or log-transformed).
- Legitimacy: UN condemnation of initiator.

Controls:
- GDP growth, GDP per capita.
- Military expenditure (% of GDP), overall government consumption.
- Regime type (democracy/autocracy), opposition strength.
- Pre-conflict approval (legitimacy).

- We focus on closed interstate conflicts with clear outcomes, where pre-conflict conditions make victory vs defeat nearly random.

- Time is measured in months around the conflict outcome/termination (month 0).

- Before month 0, winners and losers show a similar downward trend in approval.

- At month 0, approval for winners jumps up, while approval for losers drops or stays flat.

- Assuming approval would have continued smoothly over time in the absence of the outcome, this discontinuity at month 0 is interpreted as the causal effect of winning (vs losing) on domestic political approval.

Illustrative RD/Event-Study: Approval Around Conflict Outcome (Hundreds of country-conflict observations, monthly)

Limitations

Local nature of RD:
- Estimates apply to closed conflicts (near X=0), not to all wars.

Measurement challenges:
- Approval data are uneven across countries and time.

Identification concerns:
- Possible unobserved factors that also change at the cutoff.
- Some conflicts may not fit the "closed war" logic well.

External validity:
- Effects may differ by region, regime type, era (Cold War vs post–Cold War).

Internal validity:
- Endogeneity problems.

Thank you for your attention!

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