

When do leader backgrounds matter? Evidence from the President's Daily Brief

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Abstract

A wave of recent scholarship shows that the backgrounds of political leaders shape their behavior once in office. This paper shifts the literature in a new direction by investigating the conditions under which foreign observers think a leader's background is relevant. We argue that pre-tenure biographical attributes are most informative to outsiders during leadership transitions—unique periods where the new ruler does not yet have a track record—because a leader's background provides clues about how that leader might govern. But as time passes, foreign observers quickly discount the leader's biography and instead evaluate the leader's observable behavior. We test our theory by creating a systematic daily measure of attention to foreign leader backgrounds derived from the President's Daily Brief, a novel data source of 4991 recently declassified reports from the Central Intelligence Agency to the American president.

Keywords

leader biography, leadership transitions, Central Intelligence Agency, President's Daily Brief

Introduction

Research on the personal backgrounds of political leaders has exploded recently. Among other things, this work implies that Donald Trump's business experience prompted his reluctance to pay for the defense of America's allies (Fuhrmann, 2020), Lee Teng-hui's education contributed

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to his support for democratization in Taiwan (Gift and Krcmaric, 2017), Lyndon Johnson's personal beliefs about the nature of threats drove US strategy in Vietnam (Saunders, 2011) and Kaiser Wilhelm II's military training influenced Germany's bellicose foreign policy before World War I (Horowitz et al., 2015). The unifying thread in this research agenda, sometimes called the "leader attribute school" (Horowitz and Fuhrmann, 2018) or the "personal biography approach," (Krcmaric et al., 2020) is the conviction that biographical attributes from before leaders take office systematically influence their behavior once in office.

Yet scholars have not yet fully explored the far-reaching implications of this research agenda's findings. If leader biography can predict political outcomes with some degree of confidence, then a leader's background is not just relevant for explaining the leader's behavior—it may also shape how others perceive the leader. We therefore flip the analytical lens typically used in the personal biography literature by asking: do foreign actors pay attention to leader backgrounds? And if so, when?

We argue that foreign observers focus on leader backgrounds to the extent that biographical information—as opposed to other sources of information—helps resolve uncertainty about how leaders will behave. Most often, biographical information is not crucial because outsiders can analyze a leader's track record in office, such as past foreign policy statements and decisions. However, in one unique context, leaders do not yet have a track record: leadership transitions. Since there are no words or deeds to analyze, we expect that foreign observers will scour the backgrounds of new leaders for clues about how they might govern. Biographical attributes offer useful (though imperfect) heuristics for evaluating leaders when there is little other information available. But as time passes, outsiders discount leader biography and instead evaluate leader behavior. In short, foreign observers treat the pre-tenure biographical attributes of leaders as a substitute for an observable track record in the low-information environments that leadership transitions produce. This is especially likely, we argue, when leaders have distinctive biographical features that deviate from the norm.

To test our argument, we exploit 4991 recently declassified daily reports from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to the American president between 1961 and 1977: the President's Daily Brief (PDB). The PDB is an ideal source to investigate when officials in one state believe that the biographical attributes of foreign leaders are relevant. To start, it provides daily-level data that allow for a granular investigation of how the CIA's reporting on foreign leader backgrounds fluctuates over time. Furthermore, the PDB's production process and emphasis on succinctness ensures that the CIA only devotes space to discussion of foreign leader backgrounds when they are deemed crucial for understanding a leader's behavior or preferences. Therefore, for the 416 non-American world leaders who entered office during the period for which the PDB is declassified, we code the specific days on which the PDB mentions any of the main biographical attributes that prior work on political leadership suggests are important (factors such as age, education, occupation, political and military experiences, and so forth).

We present three key findings. First, the PDB commonly discusses foreign leader backgrounds right before new rulers take office and during their earliest days in power. But as time goes on, attention to leader biography dissipates rapidly. Second, the PDB does *not* focus on foreign leader backgrounds when leaders already have established track records in office—even during high-profile foreign policy events such as international conflicts. Third, the PDB devotes the most coverage to the biographical attributes of "outlier" leaders who have backgrounds that deviate from what might be considered normal for heads of state. We also present several additional tests to rule out alternative explanations for these results.

To be sure, leadership turnover scholars have long argued that new leaders generate uncertainty. In these theories, prior beliefs about a new leader's toughness are essential for explaining whether adversaries probe that new leader with military threats.¹ But existing turnover scholarship does not explain why some new leaders are initially assessed as tough whereas others are initially assessed as weak. Therefore, existing work cannot explain why there are incentives to "probe for weakness" in some cases but in not others. We go one step further back in the causal chain to explain why a leader may be perceived as tough or weak upon first taking office. We argue that different pre-tenure biographical attributes cause foreign observers to start with different beliefs about how leaders will behave. If a new leader's biography suggests the leader is highly resolved, other states may refrain from probing that leader for weakness in the first place. On the flip side, a new leader whose biographical attributes suggest weakness might invite a flurry of military challenges from other states. Thus, a leader's personal biography can explain why that leader's strategic interactions with other states go down one pathway instead of another.

This insight is consistent with important historical crises. Consider, for example, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's decision to challenge newly elected American president John F. Kennedy over the status of Berlin at the 1961 Vienna Summit. Seen through the lens of the leader turnover approach,² the Soviets were unsure if Kennedy was resolved to continue Eisenhower's strong stance against communist aggression in Berlin, so they pursued a probing for weakness strategy to find out. But this is not the whole story. Rather than view Kennedy as a blank slate, the Soviet strategy was informed by Kennedy's personal biography. Indeed, there was a sense in Moscow that "this scion of a wealthy American family, who lacked serious legislative or executive experience, was a lightweight" (Fursenko and Naftali, 2010: 340). In other words, the Soviets may have tried to push Kennedy around precisely because Kennedy's personal biography suggested he might not push back. Our theory implies that if Kennedy had had a different background (or if Richard Nixon had won the 1960 presidential election), the Soviets might not have challenged so aggressively in Vienna.

More broadly, we take the literature on political leaders in two new directions. First, we invert the analytical framework used in most personal biography research: instead of examining the direct consequences of a leader's background on that leader's behavior, we shift the focus to how others perceive the leader's pre-tenure traits and experiences. In this way, we connect scholarship on leader backgrounds to the field of international security's longstanding interest in perceptions and misperceptions.³ Second, by highlighting the influence of leader biography on perceptions of foreign leaders, we answer Horowitz and Fuhrmann's recent call to "integrate work on leadership turnover and leader backgrounds" (Horowitz and Fuhrmann, 2018: 2081). Indeed, our paper illustrates how aspects of each school of thought can be united to yield new insights into the conditions under which a leader's identity matters in world politics.

Theoretical framework

A common intuition underpins the personal biography approach to political leadership: the backgrounds of leaders influence their behavior once in office.⁴ In this line of work, scholars unpack the black box of leaders by examining how individual-level biographical attributes such as military training, education, occupation, age, race/ethnicity, and gender, among others, shape a wide range of political outcomes.⁵ International conflict has received the most attention,⁶ but leader backgrounds have also been used to explain democratization (Gift and Krmaric, 2017), nuclear proliferation (Fuhrmann and Horowitz, 2015), defense spending (Fuhrmann, 2020; Koch and Fulton, 2011), access to international credit (Nelson, 2017), and economic growth (Besley et al., 2011).

A simple idea motivates our paper: if leader backgrounds are so important, then biographical attributes should not only shape the behavior of leaders themselves—they should also influence how others view those leaders.

The idea that a leader's background affects how others perceive the leader has been made most forcefully in research on voting in American politics.⁷ During elections, voters use politician backgrounds as heuristics—that is, informational shortcuts—as they evaluate candidates. Voters, of course, cannot know for certain how a politician will behave once in office, but they try to infer which candidates best suit their interests by examining easily observable facts about the candidates. Consequently, voters use biographical attributes such as gender (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993), race (Weaver, 2012), occupation and social class (Carnes and Sadin, 2015), education (Gift and Lastra-Anadón, 2018), and religion (Campbell et al., 2011), among others, to make educated guesses about how candidates will act once elected.

While this logic has become relatively common in some parts of political science, it has generally been missing in the study of international security.⁸ We expect international actors do something similar to voters in the electoral context. That is, they attempt to mitigate uncertainty about how leaders will behave by examining their backgrounds—but only under certain conditions. Just as voters are especially likely to pay attention to candidate biography during campaigns, foreign observers are most likely to focus on leader backgrounds in a specific context: leadership transitions.

Leadership transitions are a unique period because, as research on leader turnover and leader reputation shows, uncertainty about leaders is highest at the beginning of their tenures.⁹ When a new leader comes to power, uncertainty is prevalent because the ruler does not yet have a track record in office. This dynamic forces allies and adversaries alike to wonder about the policies the new leader will pursue. In the face of this uncertainty, other states might, for example, challenge new leaders to probe their toughness (Gelpi and Grieco, 2001; Wolford, 2007; Wu and Wolford, 2018). For their part, new leaders can try to signal their intentions, resolve, and policy preferences to foreign observers by taking costly actions once in office.¹⁰ Among other options, leaders may signal by making public statements (Lupton, 2020), joining international organizations (Hafner-Burton et al., 2015), standing firm when challenged (Dafoe and Caughey, 2016; Wolford, 2007; Wu and Wolford, 2018), and engaging in face-to-face diplomacy (Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Holmes, 2018; Joseph, 2021; Lebovic and Saunders, 2016).

Existing work on leader turnover, reputation, and signaling effectively calls attention to information that is revealed from *actions that take place in the period after new leaders take office*. But we argue that foreign observers exploit an additional source of information when assessing new leaders: *their biographical attributes from before entering office*.

The advantage of biographical attributes is that they are observable to outsiders before new leaders make any major decisions as head of state. In fact, biographical attributes are observable even before new leaders assume power.¹¹ We therefore expect that foreign actors will focus on leader backgrounds in the periods immediately surrounding leadership transitions since there are few, if any, alternative sources of information available at that time. In other words, to mitigate the information deficit that exists when a new leader enters office, outsiders have a compelling incentive to look to the leader's past—including personal traits and foundational experiences—when attempting to anticipate the leader's behavior.

The payoff of incorporating leader biography into theories of foreign policy signaling is substantial: leader biography offers an explanation for the initial assessments that outsiders have of new leaders. While existing work rightly emphasizes that new leaders' early interactions with their foreign counterparts set the stage for the rest of their tenures,¹² we go back one step further:

biographical attributes influence how others view new leaders in the first place. For example, Jimmy Carter was a relatively obscure political figure, especially in the eyes of foreign observers, before the 1976 election. Carter's quick rise surprised the Soviet Union, but the Soviet ambassador to the US viewed Carter's educational and military background as a clue about his policy priorities: "Deep down I hoped that Carter, with his military and technical background—he had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy and trained for the elite nuclear submarine service—could prove a more reliable and stable partner than his predecessor in the White House, especially in the talks on limiting nuclear weapons" (Dobrynin, 1995: 374). Although Carter's zeal for human rights complicated the relationship, the Soviets were right to anticipate that Carter would devote a great deal of energy to limiting nuclear weapons, particularly the SALT II agreement.

This discussion highlights the value of incorporating insights from the personal biography school and leader turnover school into a single theoretical framework. As the turnover school points out, new leaders constitute an important source of uncertainty in world politics because they are untested quantities when they first enter office. At the same time, however, new leaders are not blank slates. Each leader assumes office with a unique personal history. In this way, a new leader's background provides foreign actors with some useful information about the incoming ruler. If individual pre-tenure attributes really are correlated with how leaders act once in office—as the personal biography school suggests—then foreign observers can and should use that information in their assessments of new foreign leaders. Thus, information about a leader's personal biography takes on a heightened level of importance in the low-information environments that leadership transitions create.

Overall, our argument implies that information about a leader's pre-tenure biographical attributes and information about a leader's behavior in office can be substitutes. When a foreign leader has no observable track record, others will try to fill this informational void by scouring the leader's biography for clues that might predict future behavior. This discussion suggests our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Foreign observers will focus extensively on leader backgrounds in the periods immediately surrounding leadership transitions.

There nonetheless are limits to the insights that can be gleaned by examining a foreign leader's background. Biographical attributes cannot predict political outcomes with certainty—or sometimes even with confidence. One challenge is that a leader's psychological profile, ranging from risk preferences to narcissism to self-monitoring, also matters (Kertzer, 2016; Yarhi-Milo, 2018; Post, 2015). Even when a leader's biography suggests one thing, the leader's psychological makeup (which is harder to observe than biographical attributes) may push the leader to behave another way.¹³ Another challenge is that all leaders face some at least some domestic constraints, but it often is hard for outsiders to judge the extent of a leader's freedom of action. Even if leaders with certain backgrounds generally want to pursue certain policies, only some will be able to do so. Overall, the link between leader backgrounds and leader behavior in office is probabilistic, not deterministic. This makes it difficult to apply a general pattern about biographical attributes (e.g. older leaders tend to be more belligerent) to a specific case (e.g. would the elderly Raul Castro steer Cuba's foreign policy in a new direction?).

Given the inherent limitations of using leader biography to predict behavior, we expect that foreign observers will turn to other sources of information as they become available. In particular, as time goes on during a new leader's tenure, officials in other states should quickly discount the leader's background because an even more reliable indicator becomes available: the leader's track

record. If outsiders want to assess whether a ruler is likely to pursue a revisionist foreign policy, respect human rights, or create a favorable context for economic growth, they can directly analyze the leader's statements and behavior with regard to those outcomes. Armed with information about the ruler's track record—ranging from prior policy choices to conduct during face-to-face diplomatic meetings—there is less need to make an educated guess about how the leader's pre-tenure biographical attributes will inform current decision-making.

America's changing perceptions of Kim Jung Un illustrate this dynamic. Once it became clear that Kim would succeed his ailing father as North Korea's leader—and even before he assumed office—American analysts “began scouring [Kim's background] for clues” about how he might behave after taking power.¹⁴ Two biographical attributes were especially relevant to early American assessments of Kim: his young age and his foreign education. Kim's age convinced many observers that he would fail to consolidate power. Jung Pak, a former CIA officer, captured the prevailing wisdom by noting, “Surely, someone in his mid-20s with no leadership experience would be quickly overwhelmed and usurped by his elders ... not to mention that his youth was a critical demerit in a society that prizes the wisdom that comes with age and maturity” (Pak, 2015: xiii). Kim's education at a boarding school in Switzerland was relevant for a different reason: it hinted that he might be a political reformer. Indeed, many in Washington wondered “whether his time in Europe might have made him more prone to engagement with the West.”¹⁵

But shortly after Kim took office, American analysts discounted Kim's background and turned to his track record instead. In fact, Kim's behavior once in office suggested that initial assessments based on his biography were off the mark. He appeared firmly in control, showed little interest in reform, and conducted more nuclear tests and missile launches than his father and grandfather combined. Kim's emergent track record rapidly changed how Americans perceived him. Joseph DeTrani, a former intelligence officer, admitted that he was “initially guardedly optimistic” about Kim, but “with the launches and the test, he's reversed that.”¹⁶ Another former intelligence officer, Sue Mi Terry, acknowledged that “we were hopeful” when Kim first took office, but she and others soon altered their assessments since “[based on] what we've seen ... he is following in his father's footsteps.”¹⁷ Finally, a pair of reports from the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the body responsible for providing members of Congress with policy research, help illustrate our point. Just a few days into Kim's tenure in January 2012, CRS issued a report that speculated on how Kim's background—once again, his age and education—might shape his behavior. When CRS issued an update to the report in 2013, it deleted the section on Kim's background and instead discussed his track record, noting “escalated rhetoric,” “a number of provocative steps,” and the fact that Kim had “consolidated his authority as supreme leader.”¹⁸

Overall, this example demonstrates how outside observers start by using pre-tenure biographical attributes—the only information available during leadership transitions—to draw inferences about how a new foreign leader will likely behave. But as time passes, observers increasingly turn to the leader's track record in office to understand that leader and anticipate future behavior.¹⁹ To be clear, we do not argue that leader backgrounds are irrelevant in shaping leader behavior outside of transition periods. Our point is merely that outsiders are unlikely to focus on a foreign leader's biographical attributes when they can instead directly judge the things the leader has done and said while in office. This flip side of our theory's substitution logic implies a second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Outside of leadership transition periods, foreign observers will rarely focus on leader backgrounds.

Thus far, both of the empirical predictions derived from our theoretical framework involve over-time variation in when outsiders will (and will not) pay attention to foreign leader backgrounds. But our theory also makes a prediction about cross-case variation. In other words, it can tell us why the same biographical attribute—say, age—is considered notable for one leader but irrelevant for another. Recall that our argument is premised on the claim that officials in one state focus on a foreign leader’s background to the extent that this information helps resolve uncertainty about the leader’s possible behavior. If we are correct, then outside observers should devote the most attention to leaders whose biographical attributes make them outliers. By “outliers,” we mean leaders with backgrounds that deviate substantially from other individuals who might conceivably hold power in the state. A leader’s traits and experiences are less informative when they are in line with conventional assumptions about what a “normal” leader looks like (e.g. a middle-aged leader). But unusual or surprising biographical attributes are noteworthy—and possibly more informative—because they offer a clue about why the leader’s behavior could diverge from conventional expectations (e.g. an extremely young or old leader). This discussion yields our third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Foreign observers will focus more attention on leader backgrounds for “outlier” leaders than for “conventional” leaders.

Research design

The central challenge to testing our theory is measurement: the extent to which foreign actors focus on leader backgrounds is difficult to observe. This leaves two potential empirical strategies. The first is to use an indirect proxy for attention to leader biography and then estimate complex statistical models that try to minimize the shortcomings of the indirect measure. The second is to probe the historical record for a more direct measure of our dependent variable and then use a simple design to evaluate our hypotheses.

We can pursue the second option thanks to the recent declassification of the President’s Daily Brief (PDB).²⁰ The PDB is a written document that is hand-delivered from CIA headquarters at Langley to the White House every working day. It is arguably the most important intelligence product in the US. The PDB has consequently developed a certain mystique in policy circles, with many seeing it as the “newspaper with the smallest circulation in the world.”²¹ Intelligence managers measure their success based on the extent to which their team’s writing makes it into the PDB (Lowenthal, 2012). Even presidents and vice presidents extol the PDB’s importance: George H.W. Bush called it “a truly one-of-a-kind publication,” and Dick Cheney labeled it “the family jewels” of American intelligence (Priess, 2016, viii and 254).

In 2016, the CIA declassified all PDBs written between June 1961 and January 1977 (with some redactions remaining).²² This declassification period covers four different presidential administrations: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford. For the nearly 16 years for which the PDB is declassified, the CIA wrote a total of 4991 daily reports for the president (an average of 5.6 PDBs per week). As we explain below, the PDB offers an ideal testing ground for our theory because it allows us to measure what information the CIA believes the president should know *that day* to conduct American foreign policy.²³ Foreign leader backgrounds will be included (or excluded) when they are deemed important (or unimportant).

The rest of this section proceeds in two parts. First, we explain why the PDB is appropriate source material.²⁴ Second, we outline how we use the PDB documents to construct our measure of attention to the biographical attributes of foreign leaders.

The PDB as source material

The PDB has three unique features that make it excellent source material for measuring when the CIA focuses on foreign leader backgrounds. First, the PDB provides current intelligence to help the president understand *an extremely wide range of world events*. It is designed to report “accurate, timely, and objective information from classified and unclassified sources alike to help the president defend the homeland and protect US interests abroad” (Priess, 2016: xii). According to Richard Lehman, who designed the modern PDB format under Kennedy, the White House wanted “something that will have everything in it that is worth the President’s attention, everything that is worth his knowing.” The goal was “a single publication ... covering the whole ground” of intelligence related to American foreign policy (Kovar, 2000: 55). This wide remit is evident in the declassified documents, which cover the gamut of issues relevant to US foreign policy in the 1960s and 1970s, ranging from Cold War geopolitics to European integration to the domestic political churn of foreign countries.

Second, the PDB is *an extraordinarily succinct document*. Although the CIA has vast collection and analysis capabilities, the PDB is intentionally designed as a distillation of global developments. Presidents inevitably struggle with information overload, so the PDB simplifies the international landscape by highlighting “only what the president *needs* to know” (Priess, 2016: xii). Lehman recounts that Kennedy wanted a document concise enough to “fold and carry around in his breast pocket” so that he would not need “to fuss around with [lengthier intelligence reports]” (Kovar, 2000: 55). The PDB’s focus on succinctness endured during subsequent presidential administrations: nearly all PDB entries for a given topic range from a single sentence to a couple of paragraphs.²⁵

The fact that the PDB is both a brief document and an overview of everything the CIA believes that the president ought to know is, in the context of our paper, very important. The need for concision enforces judiciousness in what the authors of the PDB include in their analysis. Including extraneous information about a leader’s background comes with a high opportunity cost because it means that other potentially useful intelligence must be excluded. Hence, one strength of the PDB as a data source is that it is *not* primarily intended to provide biographical details about foreign leaders. Rather, the PDB authors must separate the most salient leader information from the trivia.

To be clear, the CIA maintained a separate “biographic register,” a database containing longer profiles of foreign leaders in addition to other political elites who could conceivably rise to the top.²⁶ These profiles remain classified, so it is impossible to include them in our analysis. But even if they were declassified, they would be far less useful to our study than the PDB. The biographic register collected *all* possible information about foreign leaders irrespective of its relevance for policymaking. In the words of one intelligence analyst, profiles in the biographic register were “data dumps” (Dyson and Duelfer, 2020: 775). This makes the biographic register inappropriate source material for our study because we want to know when the CIA does (and, equally important, does not) focus on leader backgrounds.²⁷ Nonetheless, the existence of the biographic register usefully addresses a potential selection effect. One might worry that variation in the PDB’s reporting on foreign leaders simply reflects whether or not the CIA possessed information about their biographical attributes. Given the availability of the massive biographic register, we are confident that this is not the case: PDB authors could have extracted information about foreign leader backgrounds from the register (among other sources) if they believed such information was relevant.²⁸

Third, the PDB’s design ensured that *a new document was written virtually every working day*. Since it was produced on a regular and pre-determined schedule, it offers granular, daily-level

observations that show whether or not US intelligence officials focused on foreign leader attributes at specific times. This is crucial because it allows us to construct a time-varying measure of fluctuations in the PDB's reporting on foreign leader backgrounds that can be matched to the timing of leadership transitions.²⁹

Overall, this discussion highlights how the PDB captures precisely what we want to measure: the conditions under which American intelligence officials think that the biographical attributes of foreign leaders are important relative to all the other types of information on which they might conceivably focus. Nonetheless, the Online Appendix considers some of the PDB's potential shortcomings as source material. We examine threats to validity stemming from biases in PDB reporting, redacted text, and the idiosyncratic aspects of each president's relationship with the CIA. While these concerns may apply to intelligence collection and analysis in general, we show that they are unlikely to influence our specific outcome of interest: the timing of PDB reporting on foreign leader backgrounds.³⁰

Using the PDB to measure attention to leader backgrounds

We constructed a leader-day dataset that records each time the PDB reports a biographical attribute about a foreign leader (as well as the specific attribute mentioned). To do so, we first tagged each PDB with its publication date. Then, for each of the 416 non-American leaders who took power between June 1961 and January 1977,³¹ we created a distinct corpus of PDBs. Each corpus starts 60 days before the leader enters office and continues for the duration of that leader's tenure. However, since human coding at the daily level for each attribute and every leader is time intensive, our main analysis focuses on a more specific time period.³² In line with our theoretical perspective, we code the PDB's discussion of biographical attributes during a "leader onset period" that starts 60 days before a leader takes power and lasts 120 days into the leader's tenure. Moreover, as we explain later, we also code the PDB's attention to leader backgrounds during two other periods to test the additional implications of our theory.

Based on the personal biography literature, we identified eight pre-tenure leader attributes the PDB might cover: age, education, political experience, military experience, gender, religion, race or ethnicity, and occupation or class.³³ Coding details for each biographical attribute, as well as an example from the PDB, are included in Table 1.³⁴ These examples help establish construct validity: the CIA reports on foreign leader backgrounds not simply for their own sake but instead because they offer insight into those leaders. For instance, Duvalier's age explains why he is ill-prepared to lead, Miki's overseas education suggests he might seek out new foreign relations in the region, Schmidt's prior experience as finance minister implies that he can overcome an economic crisis, and so forth.

In total, the PDB reports on leader backgrounds 348 times. Figure 1 shows how often each biographical attribute is mentioned. The prior political experiences of leaders receive the most attention. The fact that the PDB places such emphasis on political experiences validates the attention that scholars—particularly those working in the historical, qualitative tradition—have devoted to them. For example, an assessment of why US policy toward Iraq changed over time highlights the prior foreign policy experiences of the two Bush presidents: the elder had previously served as Ambassador to the UN, CIA Director, and Vice President; the younger had little experience when elected (Saunders, 2017). Perhaps surprisingly, political experience is often missing in quantitative personal biography research in international relations. This is likely to be due to the difficulty of cross-case measurement: what counts as relevant political experience is often specific to each country,³⁵ so quantitative analysis is more common in single-country studies.³⁶ However,

Table 1. Coding protocol.

Biographical attribute	Refers to ...	President's Daily Brief example
Age	Precise age, general youth or old age, or generational cohort	"[Jean-Claude Duvalier's] tenure is jeopardized by his youth; lack of preparation; and the probable development of factions involving people both within and outside the government. Personal ambition is almost certain to surface within the ranks of the supposedly faithful who are now freed of Papa Doc's restraining presence."
Education	Level of attainment, field of study, or location (university or country) of education	"[Takeo Miki] earned a degree from the University of Southern California in 1935. One of Miki's favorite themes is closer cooperation among the developed nations of the Pacific ..."
Political experience	Political office-holding experiences prior to becoming head of state	"Schmidt and Giscard, both former finance ministers, understand well the dimensions of economic imbalance within the EC and see the urgent need for corrective action."
Military experience	Training experiences, official positions, or participation in past conflicts (does not include generic use of rank or title)	"Major General Zia ur Rahman seized power in Bangladesh early this morning ... Zia is evidently highly popular among army troops; he played a leading role in Bangladesh's war of independence ..."
Religion	Religious affiliation or general degree of religiosity	"Sulayman Franjijah, a moderate Christian, was elected President yesterday by the Chamber of Deputies. During the final days of the campaign the new President ... was mentioned as a compromise candidate acceptable to both the Christians and Muslims."
Race or ethnicity	Racial or ethnic heritage	"Insofar as federal power exists at all, it is centered in the badly fragmented and undisciplined army, whose troops are mostly from the North. Colonel Gowon, army chief and head of the shattered federal government—himself a northerner—has at most only tenuous control over the military and security forces."
Occupation or class	Occupation or class background from before political career	"President Saragat has asked the respected economist and lawyer Emilio Colombo to try to form a center-left cabinet and end the most recent of Italy's political crises."

the fact that the PDB is littered with references to the political experiences of leaders suggests that all scholars—not just those working in the qualitative tradition—should take this variable seriously.³⁷ In the context of assessing foreign leaders, political experience may offer clues about (a) whether a leader will be able to consolidate power and (b) which issues a leader will prioritize (e.g. a former finance minister may emphasize economic issues over security issues).

We summarize our dataset's geographic coverage in Figure 2. The PDB reports at least one biographical attribute for the leaders of blue countries and does not report any biographical attributes

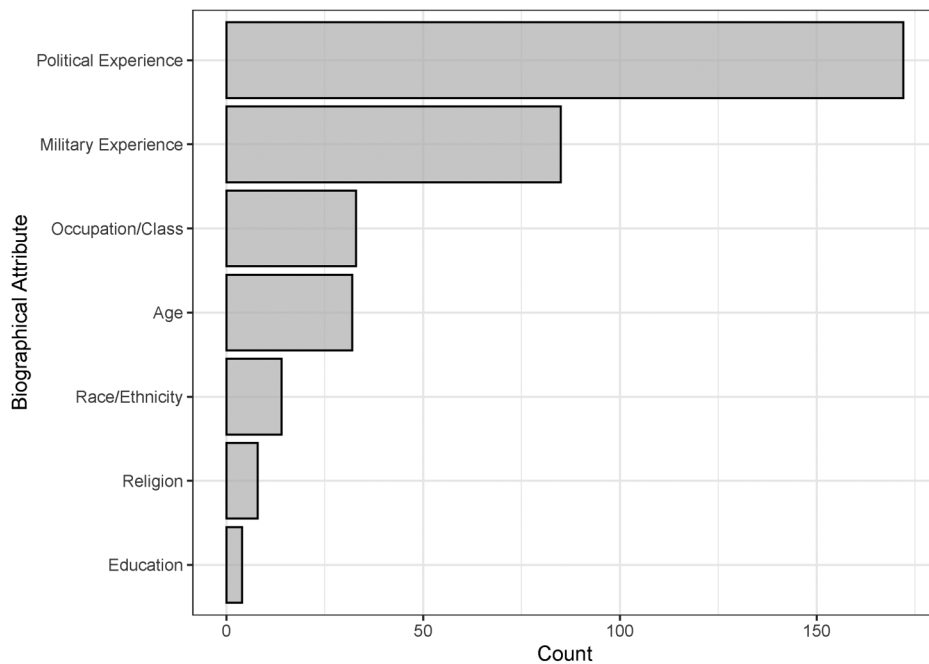


Figure 1. Summary of President's Daily Brief (PDB) reporting on leader backgrounds.

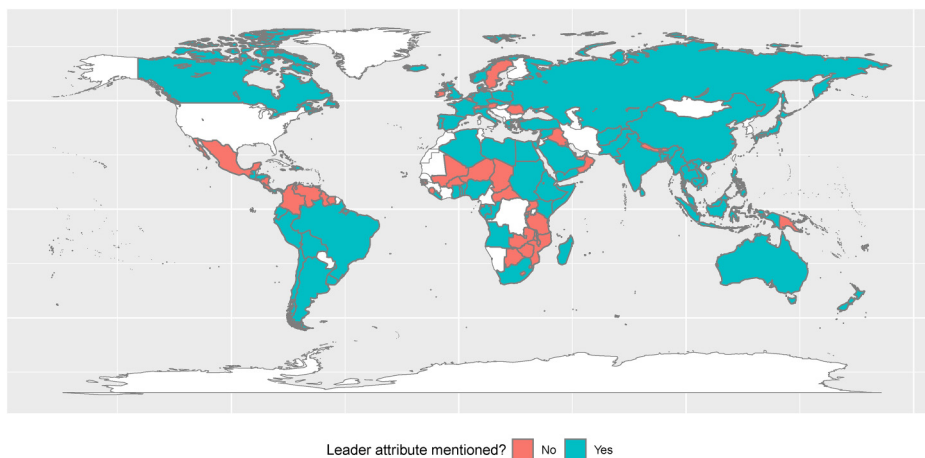


Figure 2. Geographic coverage of PDB reporting on leader backgrounds.

for the leaders of red countries. White countries are those that, by definition, are excluded from our analysis since they did not experience a leadership transition during the PDB's declassification period. The information summarized in the map speaks to generalizability: the PDB covers leader backgrounds in every world region. Moreover, the PDB discusses leader biography in both democracies and autocracies, rich states and poor states, NATO allies and Warsaw Pact

adversaries, etc. In short, our dataset offers enough global coverage to be confident that just a handful of states will not drive the results.

Empirical analysis

When does the PDB focus on leader backgrounds?

We start by testing the first hypothesis derived from our theory: attention to foreign leader backgrounds is a function of the uncertainty that leadership transitions create. Given that we have a daily measure of attention to the biographical attributes of foreign leaders in the PDB, simple histograms serve our purpose better than complex statistical models. Our basic empirical strategy is to plot the daily number of references to leader backgrounds in the PDB with respect to time.³⁸ A higher number of references to leader backgrounds suggests that the CIA places greater weight on the personal traits and formative life experiences of foreign leaders at that given time. If our argument is correct, the PDB's reporting of biographical attributes should be highest just before and after a leader takes power. But once a new leader starts making decisions in office, the CIA will stop using the leader's background as the basis of its analysis and will start using the leader's observable track record. Hence, we expect a sudden drop in the PDB's discussion of biographical attributes shortly after new leaders enter office.

We evaluate this prediction in Figure 3, which plots a histogram of references to foreign leader backgrounds during the leader onset period (i.e. the 60 days before a leader takes power through the leader's first 120 days in office) for all of the 416 leadership transitions in our sample. The x -axis

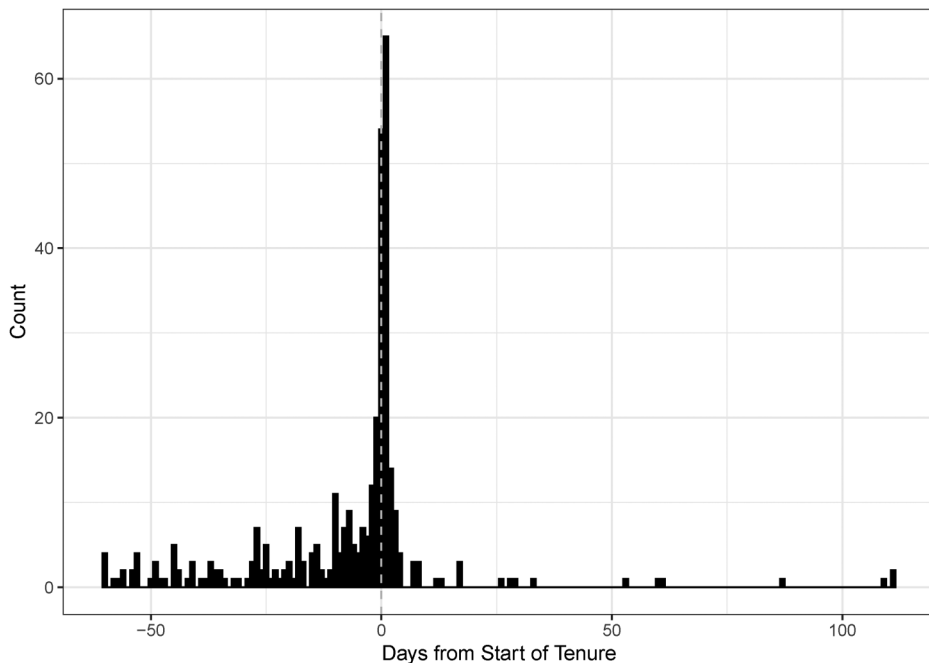


Figure 3. PDB reporting on leader backgrounds during transitions.

measures time. All transitions are centered on day 0, the day each leader assumes office (marked with a dashed line). The y-axis counts the number of biographical attributes mentioned in the PDB each day. For example, the bar above day 0 scores 54, indicating that the PDB mentions leader backgrounds 54 times on the day leaders initially enter office.

The results shown in Figure 3 support our theoretical expectations in three ways. First, the plot confirms that the PDB's reporting on foreign leader backgrounds peaks dramatically in the days just before and after leadership transitions. Second, the PDB refers to leader backgrounds relatively frequently in the weeks leading up to new leaders assuming office. In fact, the majority of reporting on biographical attributes (67%, or 234 of the 348 total references) take place before or on the day new leaders take office, a striking finding consistent with our prediction that leader backgrounds serve as a substitute for an observable track record in office. Third, as a ruler's time in office progresses, the PDB's attention to biographical attributes declines rapidly. In fact, after only about a week in power, a foreign leader's background receives little attention in the PDB. This suggests that the CIA quickly turns its focus to a new leader's words and deeds rather than reverting back to biographical facts to understand the leader.³⁹

The substitution logic of our theory suggested a second hypothesis: the PDB should rarely focus on foreign leader backgrounds outside of transition periods—even during high-profile foreign policy events—when leaders already have established track records in office. That is, the PDB is unlikely to refer back to a foreign leader's biographical attributes after that leader has accumulated a history of observable behaviors that can be evaluated directly. To test this prediction, we turn to a specific empirical context: the onset of international conflicts. If the PDB is going to focus on leader backgrounds at any point other than leadership transitions, the onset of an international conflict is it. Indeed, international conflict represents a difficult test of our theory because it is a time when leader biography is thought to be particularly important.⁴⁰

If biographical attributes are always relevant to how the CIA assesses foreign leaders, then there will be a burst of new reporting on leader backgrounds at the onset of a conflict. Such a finding would cast doubt on our proposed substitution mechanism. But if our argument is correct that the PDB only emphasizes leader backgrounds during leadership transitions—unique periods where there are no other sources of information that offer insight into the preferences, priorities, and possible behavior of foreign leaders—then there should *not* be a surge in biographical attribute reporting around conflicts.

To evaluate this second hypothesis, we code the PDB's attention to leader backgrounds for the period surrounding the onset of fatal militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) involving foreign leaders during the PDB's declassification period (Palmer et al., 2020). Our observation window for this test starts 60 days before the onset of the MID and ends 60 days after the MID's onset. We exclude MIDs that begin during the leader onset period to offer the cleanest test possible (this leaves 177 leaders who were involved in fatal MIDs).⁴¹ Panel (a) of Figure 4 plots the results, which support our theory. There is not a spike in references to foreign leader backgrounds surrounding fatal MIDs, and there is very little discussion of biographical attributes during the entire period. Panel (b) of Figure 4 confirms that this result is not an artifact of the PDB omitting discussion of leaders entirely. To the contrary, foreign leader names frequently appear in the PDB around international conflicts.⁴² The fact that reporting on leader biography is missing even at a time when leaders are discussed extensively is consistent with our mechanism's substitution logic: the CIA is unlikely to focus on a leader's pre-tenure attributes when it is possible to judge the leader's track record in office instead.

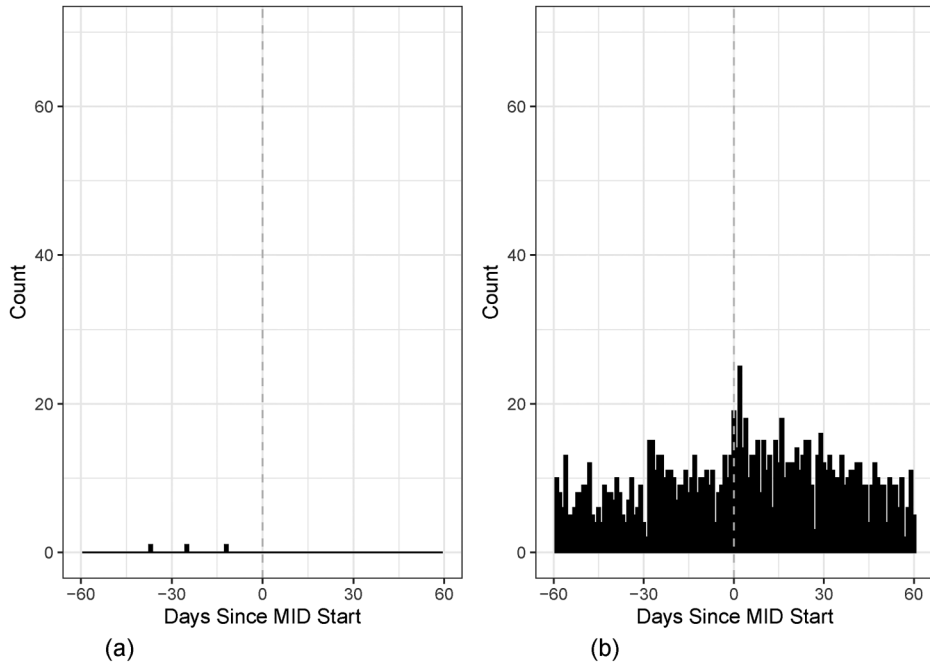


Figure 4. PDB reporting on leader backgrounds during militarized interstate disputes. (a) Leader Attribute Mentions. (b) Leader Name Mentions.

A placebo test

While the previous results are consistent with our argument, it is important to consider alternative explanations for our findings. One plausible alternative involves how the CIA presents information to the president. The basic premise is that the CIA thinks the president should know about foreign leader backgrounds, but the PDB only mentions them when leaders first come to power because biographical attributes are static. Given that they do not change over time, it would be redundant for PDB authors to repeat this information after the president already knows about the backgrounds of his foreign counterparts. This logic differs from our theory, which implies that the PDB does (and does not) report leader backgrounds for a precise reason: biographical attributes are used to form assessments of foreign leaders only when they do not yet have observable track records in office. It is difficult to discriminate between our argument and this alternative in the main test since both predict increased reporting on leader backgrounds when new foreign leaders enter office. However, we can discriminate between them by examining the PDB's coverage of foreign leader backgrounds *when there is a leadership transition in the US itself*.

Specifically, the alternative argument would expect a surge of reporting on foreign leader backgrounds when a new American president takes office if the new president has not received this information before. In contrast, our argument implies that a surge in reporting on foreign leader backgrounds should *not* occur because the CIA can analyze the observed behavior of foreign leaders (rather than rely on their biographical attributes) when preparing the PDB for the new American president.

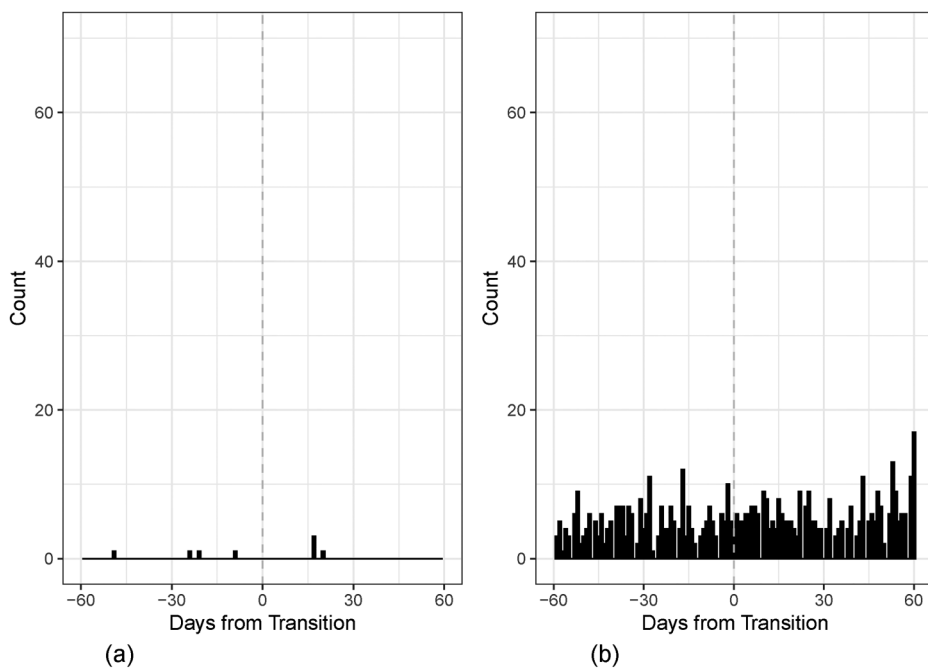


Figure 5. Kennedy–Johnson placebo test. (a) Leader Attribute Mentions. (b) Leader Name Mentions.

To parse our theory from this alternative, we treat Johnson’s unexpected assumption of the presidency after Kennedy’s assassination as a placebo test. We focus on the Kennedy–Johnson transition for three reasons. First, Johnson was notoriously uninformed on foreign policy issues before taking office. He therefore represents a “most likely case” for the alternative explanation because the CIA could not assume he knew anything about his foreign counterparts. Second, Johnson had zero access to the PDB during his time as vice president because Kennedy deliberately instructed the CIA not to share the documents with him.⁴³ Third, the timing of Johnson’s assumption of the presidency—a direct result of Kennedy’s assassination—was exogenous to the PDB. No relevant actor (the CIA, foreign actors, or Johnson himself) could possibly condition their behavior on Johnson’s start date.⁴⁴

Panel (a) of Figure 5 plots a histogram of references to foreign leader backgrounds in the PDB during the last 60 days of Kennedy’s administration and the first 60 days of Johnson’s. The results support our theory and undermine the alternative. The biographical attributes of foreign leaders are mentioned only sparingly across the entire period, and there is virtually no difference before and after Johnson becomes president. Moreover, this result is not a function of the PDB ignoring leaders in general. Panel (b) of Figure 5 shows that the names of foreign leaders consistently appear in the PDB during this period. The finding that the PDB commonly discusses leaders—but not their backgrounds—around this placebo intervention bolsters our theory’s claim that the CIA discounts biographical attributes when assessing foreign leaders with observable track records in office.

The salience of “outlier” leader backgrounds

A second alternative explanation for our main results makes an even stronger claim: foreign leader backgrounds might not matter at all. In this view, the CIA uses leader backgrounds as mere “filler” rather than as substantive content. Put differently, the CIA mentions biographical attributes during leadership transitions simply because there is little else to say about new leaders—not because those attributes are deemed relevant for policy outcomes.

In the research design section, we already explained that filler is unlikely to be due to the PDB’s extraordinary focus on succinctness: it was specifically designed to prevent the president from struggling with information overload by highlighting only what the CIA thought the president needed to know.⁴⁵ But we can also evaluate this possibility empirically. While it is hard to discriminate between our theory and the filler alternative when examining over-time variation (the previous tests), it is possible when examining cross-case variation. Indeed, cross-case variation is worth exploring because the same biographical attribute is sometimes deemed important for one leader but irrelevant for another. For instance, Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta’s ethnicity was mentioned in the PDB, but Greek leader Georgios Papandreou’s was not. Lebanese leader Sulayman Franjiyah’s religion was discussed, but Saudi Arabian leader King Faisal’s was not. Haitian leader Jean-Claude Duvalier’s age was included, but Canadian leader Pierre Trudeau’s was not. Why?

Our theory has a specific answer: leader backgrounds are referenced to the extent they are informative. We therefore expect the PDB’s cross-case variation in biographical attribute reporting to focus on outlier leaders (Hypothesis 3 in our theory section). Recall that by “outliers,” we are referring to leaders whose backgrounds deviate from other individuals who might conceivably hold power. To continue with the previous examples, our theory suggests there is little reason to devote scarce space in the PDB to discussing how Greece’s leader is ethnically Greek, Saudi Arabia’s king is Muslim, and Canada’s prime minister is middle-aged. None of these biographical attributes are surprising, so their informational value is limited. It is notable, however, when an ethnic Kikuyu takes power in Kenya, a Maronite Christian assumes office in Lebanon, or a teenager becomes head of state anywhere (in this case, Haiti). In contrast, the filler explanation would not expect the PDB to devote extra attention to outlier leaders. If references to foreign leader backgrounds really are nothing more than trivial filler, then their inclusion in the PDB should be arbitrary.

To evaluate our prediction about outlier leaders in a systematic manner, we turn to age (even though our logic should apply to other biographical attributes). The advantage of focusing on age is that it operates outside of any country-specific context. It therefore is possible to identify leaders who are outliers with respect to age by comparing each leader with all other world leaders in power at a given time. Moreover, leader age is a good variable to examine because it has received plenty of attention in both the PDB and the scholarly literature, especially as it pertains to conflict. Some find that older leaders are more conflict prone and argue this may be due to elderly leaders having shorter time horizons and a desire to secure a legacy (Horowitz et al., 2015). Using different methods, others find that younger leaders are more belligerent, possibly because of physiological differences such as higher testosterone levels.⁴⁶ Regardless of which side in this debate is correct, our point is that extreme values for leader age (i.e. very old or very young rulers) are especially pertinent, whereas leaders of average age are less notable. We therefore predict that the leader ages reported in the PDB will *not* match the true population of leader ages. Instead, we expect the PDB to focus its reporting on the outliers.

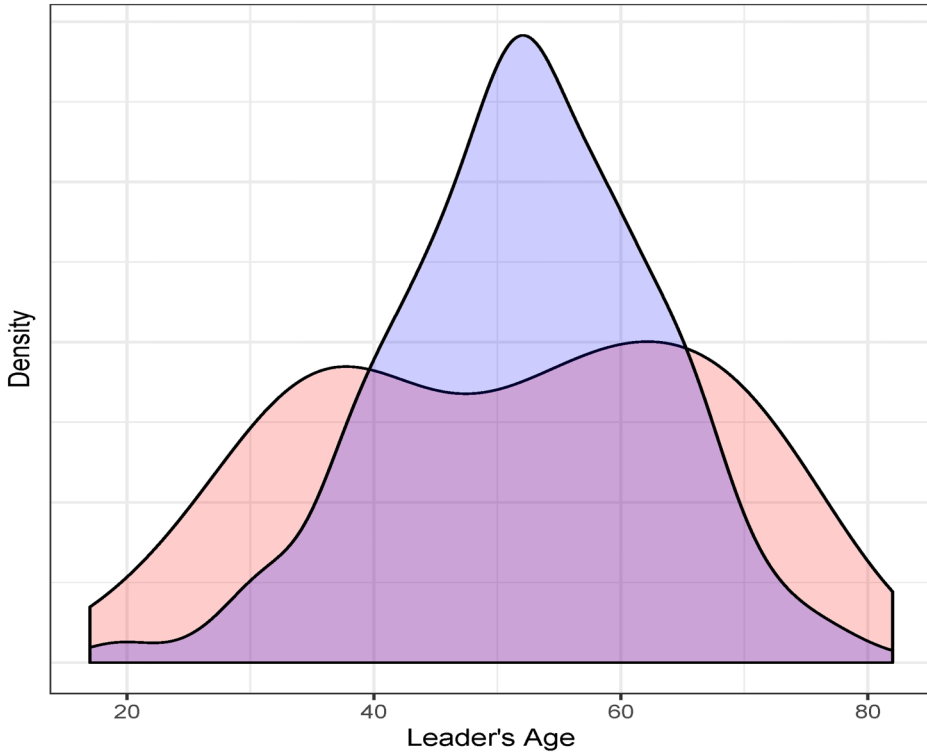


Figure 6. All leader ages vs. leader ages discussed in the PDB.

Figure 6 plots the density of leader age from two different populations.⁴⁷ The blue plot shows the distribution of age for all leaders who took power between 1961 and 1977, the period during which the PDB is declassified. Not surprisingly, the distribution for the full population of leaders is approximately normal, and the modal leader is middle-aged upon entering office (specifically, 52). The red plot shows the distribution of age for only the leaders whose age was reported in the PDB. Clearly, this is not a random draw of the underlying population (the blue plot). Relative to the ages of the underlying population, the PDB unambiguously reports less on leaders near the mode and more on leaders at the extremes. Overall, Figure 6 demonstrates that cross-case variation in the PDB's reporting on leader backgrounds is consistent with our theory's information-based logic and inconsistent with the alternative that leader biography is haphazardly included in the PDB as filler.

Conclusion

This article develops a new theory to explain why a leader's personal biography plays an especially prominent role in the low-information environments that leadership transitions create. In particular, when a leader does not yet have a track record in office, biographical attributes offer foreign observers clues about how the leader might behave. We exploit recently declassified CIA documents, the PDB, to test our argument. Our analysis offers three main pieces of evidence in support of the

theory. First, the PDB regularly reports on leader backgrounds just before and after new rulers take office, but attention to biographical attributes quickly dissipates following leadership transitions. Second, when leaders already have established track records in office, the PDB rarely focuses on their backgrounds—even during high-profile foreign policy events such as international conflicts. Third, in line with our claim that leader backgrounds are referenced to the extent they are informative, the PDB devotes the most coverage to “outlier” leaders who have biographical attributes that deviate from conventional expectations about the backgrounds of heads of state.

Our findings suggest several avenues for future research. To start, why do foreign observers place greater weight on some biographical attributes than on others? For example, Figure 1 indicates that political experience receives far more attention in the PDB than, say, education or religion. Why? Existing personal biography research has compellingly identified a long list of leader attributes that “matter,” but we know far less about why outside observers might deem one more notable than another.

Another avenue for additional research involves over-time variation in how intelligence analysts and national security officials form assessments of foreign leaders. Our findings imply that different indicators are more or less relevant at different times. Leader backgrounds are especially important in the periods surrounding leadership transitions, but other indicators—such as a leader’s policy choices or a country’s military hardware—appear to matter more at other points. This should prompt future work to consider over-time variation in more depth rather than assume that the relevance of a particular indicator or source of information is always constant.

Future work should also investigate the extent to which our argument generalizes outside of the US. On the one hand, we expect our theory’s substitution mechanism to generalize widely. The idea that one actor might turn to biographical information when attempting to assess the likely behavior of another actor without an observable track record is not unique to the CIA or American foreign policy more broadly. In everyday life, people use biographical information to make judgments about others in low-information environments. For instance, a hiring manager will likely scour the biographical information in a job applicant’s resume for clues about the quality of the applicant. But after the applicant is hired and starts working, the manager is likely to focus less on the applicant’s personal background and more on their on-the-job track record. Hence, our theory’s basic mechanism has wide applicability and operates outside of any country-specific context. It therefore is reasonable to expect that many intelligence agencies outside the US do something similar to the CIA, at least on an intuitive level.

On the other hand, even though we expect our mechanism to generalize widely, the specifics of intelligence reporting (and thus the relevant documents) will vary from one country to the next. This suggests that even if other intelligence organizations adopt the basic substitution logic identified in our theory, it could look quite different in practice. Moreover, relative to intelligence organizations in some other states, CIA analysts—and the PDB staff in particular—may engage in unusually high-quality intelligence reporting owing to the CIA’s vast resources, comprehensive training, and deeply institutionalized rules and procedures. The CIA also has a culture of “getting it right” over political pandering (Robarge, 2005), a dynamic that is often missing in autocracies. Hence, we expect that the generalizability of our theory should be greater in contexts where national intelligence agencies are highly professionalized.

Our study also raises policy implications. Given that intelligence on a foreign leader’s background can provide officials with policy-relevant information at the crucial moment of uncertainty surrounding transitions of power, our paper highlights the potential value of profiling foreign leaders and elites.⁴⁸ Of course, at-a-distance profiling is extremely difficult. As former CIA Director George Tenet put it, “Intelligence is always much better at counting heads than divining

what is going on inside them. That is, we are very good at gauging the size and location of militaries and weaponry. But for obvious reasons, we can never be as good at figuring out what leaders will do with them” (Haines and Leggett, 2007). We agree that American intelligence analysts cannot get inside the heads of foreign leaders. But they do not necessarily need to psychoanalyze foreign leaders to acquire valuable information about them. If the personal biography school is correct that observable pre-tenure attributes are correlated with how leaders act in office, then policymakers can and should use that information to anticipate new leaders’ behavior—and, in turn, adjust their own behavior—to achieve better foreign policy outcomes.


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Supplemental material

All data, replication materials, and instructions regarding analytical materials upon which published claims rely are available online through the SAGE CMPS website: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/07388942231196109>

Notes

1. See, e.g. Wolford (2007).
2. Many leader turnover scholars, such as Wolford (2007) and Lupton (2020), reference this case.
3. See, for example, Jervis (1976).
4. To be clear, the personal biography approach is interested in leaders’ pre-tenure experiences and characteristics—not experiences acquired on the job during their time as head of state. Other leadership research highlights how leaders’ desire to remain in power or to avoid post-tenure punishment shapes their behavior. See, e.g. Chiozza and Goemans (2011), Croco (2011), Downs and Locke (1994), Goemans (2000), Krmaric (2018, 2020), Krmaric and Escriba-Folch (2023) and Prorok (2016).
5. This research agenda may suffer from a “file drawer” problem since most published studies report statistically significant results. For an important exception, see Carnes and Lupu (2016).
6. See, e.g. Colgan (2013), Dube and Harish (2020), Feaver and Gelpi (2002), Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018), Horowitz et al. (2015) and Saunders (2011).
7. There is also an interesting parallel in international political economy research on how international institutions assess the creditworthiness of leaders. See Nelson (2017).
8. In an exception, Byun and Carson (2023) examine foreign leader age and perceptions of leader senility. There also is related work on how elites with different backgrounds view threats (rather than how others view leader backgrounds). For example, Yarhi-Milo et al. (2018) use a survey experiment on members of the Israeli Knesset to study how elites interpret costly signals.
9. On leader turnover and the related issue of leader reputation, see Colaresi (2004), Dafoe and Caughey (2016), Gelpi and Grieco (2001), Lupton (2020), McManus (2020), Renshon et al. (2018), Wolford (2007), Wu and Wolford (2018) and Yarhi-Milo (2018).
10. See, e.g. Fearon (1994).

11. Our argument dovetails with Yarhi-Milo (2013). Consistent with Yarhi-Milo's argument, we expect that intelligence organizations will often pay attention to observable and/or quantifiable factors. But instead of Yarhi-Milo's focus on military hardware, an observable indicator based on choices leaders make once in office, we shift the focus to leader backgrounds.
12. See, e.g. Wolford (2007) and Lupton (2020).
13. For a creative approach to measuring leader psychology, particularly reputational concerns, see Dafoe and Caughey (2016).
14. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Offers Many Faces, Many Threats," *Washington Post*, 13 April 2013.
15. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Offers Many Faces, Many Threats," *Washington Post*, 13 April 2013.
16. "Secret U.S.–North Korea Diplomatic Trips Reported," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2103.
17. "Sue Mi Terry: North Korea Is a 'Mystery' Under Kim Jong-un," *PBS Frontline*, 14 January 2014.
18. "North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation," *CRS Reports*, 13 September 2013. See also the report of the same title dated January 17, 2012. Both available at <https://www.everycrsreport.com/>.
19. One interesting implication of our argument is that the type of information that intelligence organizations prioritize when assessing potential adversaries can vary over time. This stands in contrast to most existing work that debates which type of information is most important to the assessments of intelligence organizations in a general sense. See, for example, the debate described in Yarhi-Milo (2013).
20. Some presidents want a CIA briefer on hand to give an oral briefing and answer questions, others simply request delivery of the PDB document.
21. "Breaking with Tradition, Trump Skips President's Written Intelligence Report and Relies on Oral Briefings," *Washington Post*, 9 February 2018.
22. The PDB was called the President's Intelligence Checklist from its creation in June 1961 until December 1964. We analyze both iterations of the document but use "PDB" for convenience.
23. To be clear, the PDB allows us to capture what information intelligence officials believe is important, not what the president or other policymakers believe. Assessing the beliefs of policymakers would require an entirely different research design and a different set of documents. Moreover, intelligence organizations and political leaders may focus on different pieces of information when assessing the intentions of their adversaries. See Yarhi-Milo (2013).
24. See also Goldfien and Joseph (2023).
25. Some might be concerned that the CIA fills up the PDB with trivial information when there is nothing important to tell the president. This concern has little merit. For instance, Robert Gates, a leading figure in several presidential administrations, wrote PDBs early in his CIA career. He recalled his first PDB: "The cigar-chomping editor handed back my first [draft], and it looked like a bloody chicken had walked across it. That's where I learned to be succinct" (Priess, 2016: 55).
26. Before 1961, the CIA coauthored the biographic register with the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau. For background, see <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84-00951R000100010004-8.pdf>.
27. For a similar reason, we intentionally do not focus on the highly detailed biographical and psychological profiles of foreign leaders that the CIA sometimes prepared in advance of the president's face-to-face meetings with his foreign counterparts.
28. At one point, the CIA office responsible for leadership profiles was producing more than twice as many reports as all of the CIA's regional offices combined. See Dyson and Duelfer (2020: 773).
29. For this reason, the PDB represents better source material than long-term assessments such as the National Intelligence Estimates, which typically take many months to produce.
30. Moreover, some of the empirical tests will assuage concerns about potential threats to validity.
31. We identify leadership transitions with the Archigos dataset (Goemans et al., 2009).
32. A coarser coding over each leader's entire tenure confirms that attributes are rarely discussed outside this window.
33. We also found several references to leaders' worldviews (i.e. their general ideological beliefs or political orientations). Worldview is not included in our study because—unlike the other attributes—it is not a

- biographical fact that outsiders can always observe easily. Nonetheless, the references to worldview validate studies that take leader beliefs seriously (e.g. Saunders, 2011).
34. We omit gender from the table because there are no explicit references to it in the PDB. This is probably because leader names are accompanied by gendered pronouns that make the leader's gender obvious.
 35. Others define "experience" differently. Potter (2007) argues that presidents become less likely to engage in international conflicts as their terms progress because they acquire experience on the job. To be clear, our focus is the leader's prior political experiences, not experience acquired during the leader's tenure.
 36. In the US context, some have linked the prior political experiences of presidents to how experts rate the "greatness" of those presidents in surveys (e.g. Balz, 2010; Simon and Uscinski, 2012).
 37. One promising development is the Leader Experience and Attribute Description (LEAD) dataset assembled by Horowitz et al. (2015), which codes the number of years of prior political experience that world leaders had before taking power. While this measure may not perfectly capture the nuances that qualitative work tends to highlight, it is arguably the best possible indicator for making cross-leader comparisons.
 38. To be clear, our theory does not make predictions on which specific attributes the CIA will discuss during transitions, so we focus on when and how often the PDB covers any leader attribute.
 39. We confirmed that the PDB still discusses foreign leaders frequently in the weeks after transitions occur. This should mitigate concerns that the decline in the discussion of leader biographical attributes might merely be a function of a decline in the discussion of leaders generally. See the Online Appendix for a comparison of how often leader biography is discussed relative to leader names during the full leader onset period.
 40. See, e.g. Colgan (2013), Dube and Harish (2020), Feaver and Gelpi (2002), Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018), Horowitz et al. (2015), Krmaric et al. (2020) and Saunders (2011).
 41. Including these MIDs does not substantively alter our findings.
 42. Specifically, (b) counts the number of "mention-days" for foreign leaders' names. For example, if a leader's name is mentioned six times on a certain day, we code a one. If the leader's name was not mentioned at all, we code a zero. Plotting the total number of times that leader names are mentioned produces a very similar pattern (although the values on the y-axis are larger).
 43. This was largely due to the personal animosity between them (Priess, 2016: 38–39). In contrast, Ford had access to the PDB before assuming the presidency. We do not include Ford and Nixon in this placebo test since they do not offer a clean research design comparable with Johnson's assumption of the presidency.
 44. On the Kennedy–Johnson transition as a source of analytical leverage, see also Dafoe and Caughey (2016) and Saunders (2011).
 45. Moreover, in interviews conducted for this paper, intelligence officials explicitly rejected the premise of the filler argument. As one member of the American intelligence community who wished to remain anonymous put it: "There are seven layers of editorial review before a paragraph gets added to the document. At each layer a manager will ask: is this piece of information necessary to include in the PDB? If it is not, they remove it and send it back to the author."
 46. Bertoli et al. (2019). For another take on leader age that focuses less on objective age and more on perceptions of senility, see Byun and Carson (2023).
 47. We use the Archigos dataset (Goemans et al., 2009) to measure leader age.
 48. Our theory also calls attention to abrupt leadership transitions that bring to power previously obscure individuals. Irregular turnovers are always tense. But our theory suggests they may be especially difficult if outside observers did not anticipate the new ruler (e.g. an unknown junior military officer leads a coup). In cases like this, it is possible that the intelligence agencies of some countries might lack even basic biographical facts to help them assess the foreign leader.

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