

Dictators Cry Too: War and Public Support for Authoritarian Leaders

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Abstract

There is no scholarly consensus whether the public support for authoritarian leaders is more fragile or resilient in the aftermath of war. Using multilevel regression and synthetic post stratification (MrsP) to analyze the variation in public support for the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, this paper finds that war-torn municipalities were less likely to support the regime. Following retrospective theory of voting, the intensity and duration of bombing, proxied here as the number of attacks and days under the bombs, damaged the trust in the competence of the regime to rebuild the country and deterred voters from supporting Milosevic's coalition in a prospective election. Contrary to previous research on war and democratic leadership tenure, this paper finds no effect of casualties on the public support for the regime.

Word count:

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Do voters reward or punish war-time leaders? After a short war between Georgia and Russia in 2008, President Mikheil Saakashvili continued to rule the country for another five years. In Serbia, however, voters punished President Slobodan Milosevic at the ballot box in September 2000, only a year after his country underwent NATO bombing. Even though both countries incurred material devastation and human losses, their incumbents met different fates. Under what conditions does the outcome of war erode support for such incumbents? Do semi-authoritarian regimes like that of Milosevic ever lose public support in the aftermath of war? These questions are of immense relevance not just for those countries where free and fair elections put wartime leaders to probe, but more so for competitive authoritarian regimes where losing public support can have more sinister consequences for the incumbent.

The major perspectives are focused on the impact of casualties on democratic governments because elections are the key mechanism for leadership change. Yet, there is an inherent disagreement whether casualties erode leadership tenure over time. One segment of this research argues that the aggregate levels of public support for US presidents decline as the American death toll in war increases (Mueller 1973; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Gronke and Newman 2003; Eichenberg et al. 2006; Kriner and Shen 2007; Voeten and Brewer 2006; Gartner 2008; Gartner et al. 1997; Gartner and Segura 2000; Abramson et al. 2007; Karol and Miguel 2007), Others find that casualties do not necessarily erode incumbent support (Gelpi et al. 2007; Berinsky 2007; Althaus et al. 2012). What connects these two perspectives is the view that voters tend to be concerned about the outcome of war due to low tolerance for casualties (Colaresi 2004). The missing part is whether war weariness affects political systems without free and fair elections in a similar way. Several studies provide an inconclusive answer to this question (Debs and Goemans 2010; De Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Goemans 2000).

The lack of research on how war shapes public opinion in non-democratic contexts

means that both the scholarship and the policy community are unable to anticipate potential political changes in roughly one-third of the world's regimes where elections can lead to leadership turnover.¹ This paper takes a different turn in the study of the incumbent resilience in the postwar environment by examining how war destruction affects the support for the ruling party in a semi-authoritarian regime. Unlike previous studies that solely use casualties as a litmus test of public sensitivity to war, this paper employs the variation in the duration, intensity and human losses during the 78 days of NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 to examine its effect on the public support for the Milosevic regime. The casualties, duration and intensity of bombing were exogenous to the Serbian political arena, and largely driven by key military, communications and infrastructure targets, allowing for the analysis of the effects of war devastation and losses on the popular support.

This paper employs five nationwide polls conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade that were carried out in November 1999, March 2000, February 2000, August and September 2000 to test whether the retrospective theory of voting can work in a non-democratic context. As the retrospective theory argues that voters will link the leadership performance to their prospective support, I use a question on the competence of the Serbian leadership to rebuild the country after the war as well as the question on voting for parties or coalitions. This paper unpacks individual preferences via multilevel regression with synthetic post-stratification (MrsP) (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2017). Standard multilevel regression and post-stratification applies a multilevel model to individual surveys with information on demographic and geographic predictors (multilevel regression stage), and then weights the estimates of the model by the percentage of each demographic and geographic respondent type in the actual population of the observed unit (post-stratification stage).² The weighted predicted values for each Serbian municipality are then used

¹According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) Dataset (Coppedge et al. 2018), around 30% of the world's regimes are semi-authoritarian, i.e. they hold formal elections that are usually rigged

²For more information about the method see: Gelman and Little (1997); Park et al. (2004); Kstellec

as an outcome for testing voters preferences as the actual 2000 Serbian elections were rigged. MrsP relaxes the MrP's stringent approach by relying on marginal distributions in the population of subnational unit, turning a dearth of data into opportunity to assess categories that are not usually covered by national census (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2017).

The paper finds that the respondents from most vulnerable areas were less likely to support Milosevic in the postwar environment. The effect of residing in most affected municipalities decreased Milosevic's probability of winning by 0.5% for every day a municipality was bombed and by 0.4% for every attack. The paper finds no effect of human losses on the support for the regime.

War Costs and Incumbent Approval

Wars leave deep scars on a society long after they officially end (Ghobarah et al. 2003; Kriner and Shen 2007, 2014), but scholars disagree whether voters reward or sanction elected officials for their wartime performance. One of the particularly contentious issues is whether the public punishes politicians for the deaths of their compatriots. One junction of research analyzing the effects of war on public support for continuing the war finds that aggregate levels of public support for US presidents decline as the national American death toll rises (Mueller 1973; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Gronke and Newman 2003; Eichenberg et al. 2006; Kriner and Shen 2007; Voeten and Brewer 2006; Gartner 2008). Similar erosion of public support occurred in US counties with high level of proximate casualties during the Vietnam war (Gartner et al. 1997; Gartner and Segura 2000). Several studies identified this pattern in the 2004 US Presidential election where seating President George W. Bush won his re-election by a narrower margin owing to thousands of American casualties in the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Abramson et al. 2007; Karol and Miguel 2007). Mounting casualties also

et al. (2010); Lax and Phillips (2009a,b); Pacheco (2014); Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2014); Warshaw and Rodden (2012).

harm the electoral fortunes of US senators (Kriner and Shen 2007), and representatives (Grose and Oppenheimer 2007).

However, other studies show that proximate casualties may not necessarily translate into declining incumbent support. At the core of these studies is how voters receive and process information regarding casualties and whether they are attached to ruling elites and their discourse prior to the conflict. Gelpi et al. (2007) argue that voters tend to support the incumbent when they view the war as rightful (retrospective reasoning) and the war effort as successful at any point in time (prospective reasoning). Their findings indicate that US voters mostly relied on retrospective reasoning, i.e. whether war against Iraq is justified, when they voted in the 2004 presidential election. Pre-war attachment to the incumbent party and rhetorical framing can also beef up casualties tolerance. Berinsky (2007) shows that the framing of Iraq war as "Bush's war" made self-identified Republicans more likely to support the incumbent, while self-identified Democrats were less likely to follow suit. Norpoth and Sidman (2007) also show that the Iraq conflict helped President Bush in the 2004 presidential election by extending the rally effect. Finally, Althaus et al. (2012) find that although local losses have a stronger effect on incumbent approval than national losses, this effect is short-lived and weakest among those voters who regularly follow national or local news.

Review of these studies suggests that voters may or may not punish incumbents following a rise in national casualties. Similarly inconclusive are findings in research that examines local post-war costs on leadership turnover. On one hand, some studies show that communities experiencing more violence are most likely to alter their support for wartime leaders. In one such study, Driscoll and Maliniak (2016) conducted a survey in Georgia before the 2008 August war against Russia that shows a spike in popular support for the Georgian leadership and its actions. But in a postwar survey they find that those respondents who lived in close proximity to war-torn areas were more suspicious of the leadership

performance. More recently, [Kriner and Shen \(2017\)](#) have found that communities that lost friends, family and relatives in Afghanistan and Iraq favored Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential election because Trump denounced the wartime US Presidents for waging Iraq war.

Studies on semi-democratic regimes find that exposure to violence may not necessarily harm the government especially if the incumbent won the war or the alternative is viewed as warmongering. In the study of five postwar Croatian elections, [Glaudić and Vuković \(2016\)](#) find that voters who were more exposed to war in the 1990s strongly preferred the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), the right-wing party that had fought and won Croatia's independence in 1995. [Glaudić \(2017a\)](#) also shows that German communities that were more exposed to Allied bombing were more likely to vote for the Social-Democratic establishment for decades after the end of World War II, whereas German voters who experienced violence of World War I were more likely to reject the left and the right and support the Weimar governments ([Glaudić 2017b](#)).

What stems from these studies is that, following retrospective reasoning, voters seem to care deeply about the outcome of war both in democratic and semi-democratic contexts. [Colaresi \(2004\)](#) demonstrates that democratic regimes are most vulnerable to leadership turnover following a military defeat, although the gap with semi-authoritarian and dictatorial types narrows the longer the postwar tenure increases. [Debs and Goemans \(2010\)](#) suggests that war outcomes affect leader tenure but more acutely so in autocracies than democracies, while other studies show that military defeat threatens the political survival of all leaders irrespective of their tenure and regime type ([De Mesquita and Siverson 1995](#); [Goemans 2000](#)).

While death toll captures the public sensitivity to war, the consistent focus of existing studies on human losses to assess the political costs of wars might be insufficient for several reasons. First, the public may not necessarily blame the incumbent for casualties. In

fact, surveyed literature shows that incumbents can exploit the rally effect at least in the short term. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why casualties yield mixed findings in the literature. Second, even if death toll could harm the incumbent it is unclear whether the effect is driven solely by human losses or, if applicable, a wider destruction of economy, heritage and environment. Existing studies on war costs and incumbent approval generally lack this information. Finally, casualties might be disproportionately tied to a particular socio-economic background. In the US context, slain soldiers were more likely to originate from rural, poorer and less educated communities (Kriner and Shen 2017). In this case, incumbent approval may be driven by economic indicators rather than casualties.

This paper remedies these issues by using novel fine-grained data on NATO aerial bombing of Serbia with the information on the number of attacks, length and casualties by municipalities. Attack counts are more informative about conflict intensity because they indirectly account for both human and material losses. Essential for my study is that NATO bombing was driven by strategic logic—destroying military objects, factories, infrastructure and communications—which affected both more developed (Belgrade and Novi Sad) and less developed (Aleksinac, Leskovac) parts of Serbia. NATO bombing was not only randomly distributed across municipalities, it was also weakly correlated with demographic and socio-economic variables and not influenced by other forces that might have driven the support for the regime. In fact, this paper shows that the residents of bombed municipalities differ profoundly from those living in non-bombed municipalities, and I attribute the difference in support for Milosevic’s coalition to being bombed. This is an improvement over existing studies that so far use only casualties as a proxy for devastation. Using the intensity and length of bombing allows for a more robust test of the retrospective theory, which states that voters make decisions based on real-time hazards and how elected officials remedy their negative consequences (Fiorina 1978; Miller and Wattenberg 1985; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). These measures capture devastation that affected millions

of Serbians long after the war ended, and I argue that the failure of Milosevic's government to address these issues eroded his public standing on the eve of the 2000 election.

NATO Bombing of Serbia and The Support for Milosevic

After the Rambouillet talks on ending ethnic conflict in Kosovo between the representatives of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the delegation of Kosovo Albanians broke down, NATO launched punitive bombing against Serbia and Montenegro on March 24, 1999. NATO bombing lasted for 78 days and hit 108 out of 160 municipalities (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro). Figure 1 depicts the map of municipalities that NATO bombed from March 24 until June 10, 1999 when the intervention ended following the Kumanovo peace treaty between the NATO and Yugoslav Army. Novi Sad, a major city in Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina, was the most often bombed municipality with 44 days under 55 aerial strikes. The most often bombed place in Novi Sad was the state-owned oil refinery. Oil refineries were also hit in Pancevo, a town in Belgrade's vicinity, while NATO bombed airports, military bases and factories in Cacak, Kraljevo and Nis. Interestingly, only one Belgrade municipality entered the top 10 municipalities by the number of attacks and duration. Other municipalities from this list were towns with important infrastructure, airports, communications or industry across Serbia.

Crucial for this study is that the variation in bombing was not driven by political bias because most intense and often bombed municipalities had opposition rather than pro-Milosevic mayors. For instance, with a combined population of over 600,000, Novi Sad, Kraljevo, Nis, Palilula, and Valjevo were some of the most bombed places headed by the mayors from the democratic coalition Zajedno (Together). In contrast, roughly 150,000 people lived in pro-Milosevic municipalities of Kovin, Sombor, Stara Pazova and Pancevo. Among these, pro-opposition municipalities were on average bombed 26 days, while pro-Milosevic municipalities-19 days. Overall, opposition towns endured far more attacks and

days under bombs than those administered by mayors from Milosevic's coalition. In other words, NATO strikes were largely strategic and aimed at key military targets, transportation networks and communication lines though followed by both military and civilian casualties. According to the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), NATO bombs killed 754 individuals (454 civilians and 300 soldiers). Most casualties were in Kosovo (484), followed by Serbia proper (260) and Montenegro (10) ([Humanitarian Law Center 2012](#)).

NATO bombing also caused vast material destruction. According to a Yugoslav Army's report, NATO bombing damaged 907 and destroyed 119 civilian and military objects. Furthermore, a group of 17 independent Yugoslav economists found an estimated \$3.8 billion in direct damage excluding Kosovo.³ The report also found that Milosevic's government allocated \$191 million or roughly 5% to repair bridges, roads, military and industrial objects, mostly from Chinese loans. At this pace, the government would have needed more than two decades to repair the damage. The industrial production also went down by 21% compared to 1998, and by 40% compared to 1989, while salaries declined by 72% compared to 1999.⁴ and an estimated 230,000 people lost their job after the bombing.⁵

Such a bleak economic outlook damaged Milosevic's prospects of replenishing legitimacy through economic performance. After the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army from Kosovo, Milosevic's long-accumulated nationalist capital had also dried up. The regime's mounting repression of the civil society and opposition revealed how tense the situation had become. The government clamped down on already limited media freedom, carried out a major purge of academic staff, including many scholars of international repute, and closed down the Belgrade University. Milosevic also unleashed an unprecedented demonization campaign against Serbian opposition. Prior to 1999, Milosevic had relied on party loyalists to spread hate speech against his political opponents. But, after the end of the bombing Milosevic

³<https://freiserb.home.xs4all.nl/interviews/2000/e-dinkic09072000.html>

⁴https://www.vreme.com/arhiva_html/494/08.ASP

⁵<http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2000/05/02/srpski/P00042808.shtm>

became the medium of hate speech himself. He labeled opposition as a "group of paid weaklings and blackmailed speculators and thieves who exploit people's hardships and draw on financial resources from abroad to manipulate the feelings and needs of certain number of people" (Antonić 2001).

Since the end of the bombing, the opposition waged an increasingly desperate struggle to unseat the regime. Last time the opposition had been united was under Zajedno coalition when Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), Zoran Djindjic's Democratic Party (DS) and Vesna Pesic's Civil Alliance of Serbia (GSS) ran in the 1996 local elections. Although the coalition won several major cities, Milosevic rigged the elections inciting a months-long mass rallies that forced him to eventually concede defeat. In 1998, major opposition parties gathered once more under the Alliance for Change (SZP), but they soon split after SPO had opted out. Under Djindjic's guidance, SZP tried to wring concessions from the regime by organizing rallies in September 1999 but to no avail. In a joint declaration issued on 10 January 2000, 16 opposition movements and parties formed the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), and issued a demand for free and fair elections. In April 2000, more than 100,000 protesters took to the streets of central Belgrade while DOS reached out to the increasingly popular student-led grassroots movement Otpor (Resistance).

In a surprising move on July 24, Milosevic called early elections for the federal assembly and presidency to be held in two months, thus effectively cutting short his term that would have otherwise lasted until July 2001. Several studies explain Milosevic's move by his perception of the opposition as weak and disunited. Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom the findings from several public opinion polls conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences (IDN) in Belgrade reveal that Milosevic either underestimated the emerging opposition alliance or attempted to stop the decline of his coalition. An opinion poll from February 2000 revealed that 26% of decided respondents would vote for SZP, while 30% would support Milosevic's party (Institute of Social Sciences 2000). Another poll from March

shows even worse results for Milosevic: 35.4% of decided respondents chose the SZP while only 21.17% supported Milosevic's coalition (IDN 2000b). Finally, a joint May poll of the Center for Political Research and IDN showed that 27.9% of respondents supported the opposition block while 21.8% supported the pro-Milosevic coalition, and that 71 % were dissatisfied with the government.⁶

Eventually, DOS prepared a joint list for assembly elections and nominated Vojislav Kostunica—a leader of a small opposition party known for his personal integrity, nationalism and consistent opposition to Milosevic's non-democratic rule—as presidential candidate. On September 24, the election day, Kostunica won more than 50% of the vote despite the poll-rigging reports across the country. But Milosevic refused to concede defeat and the state electoral commission announced a runoff. DOS accused the regime of electoral fraud and launched a series of rallies and general strikes across the country. The protests started off in the major power mining and power corporation Kolubara, snowballed to a general strike that paralyzed the country, and ended in massive demonstration in Belgrade on 5 October 2000. After the protesters stormed into the Federal parliament, the police and military forces defected from Milosevic, and DOS and Kostunica took over the power.

Retrospective Theory and Public Support for Milosevic

Existing literature overwhelmingly focuses on why Milosevic lost the election than on how his support eroded over time even though the downfall preceded the 2000 electoral defeat (De Krnjivic-Miskovic 2001; Thompson and Kuntz 2004; Vladisavljević 2016; Dragović-Soso 2004). There is a tacit consensus that the bombing either had no effect on ousting Milosevic (Dragović-Soso 2004), or that it even buttressed his regime in the short run (Vladisavljević 2016). Even if the war had an effect on Milosevic's fall it is usually regarded as marginal and subject to other forces such as the popular discontent or successful opposition strategies (De Krnjivic-Miskovic 2001; Thompson and Kuntz 2004). Vladisavljević (2016, 10) argues

⁶<http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2000/05/02/srpski/P00042808.shtm>

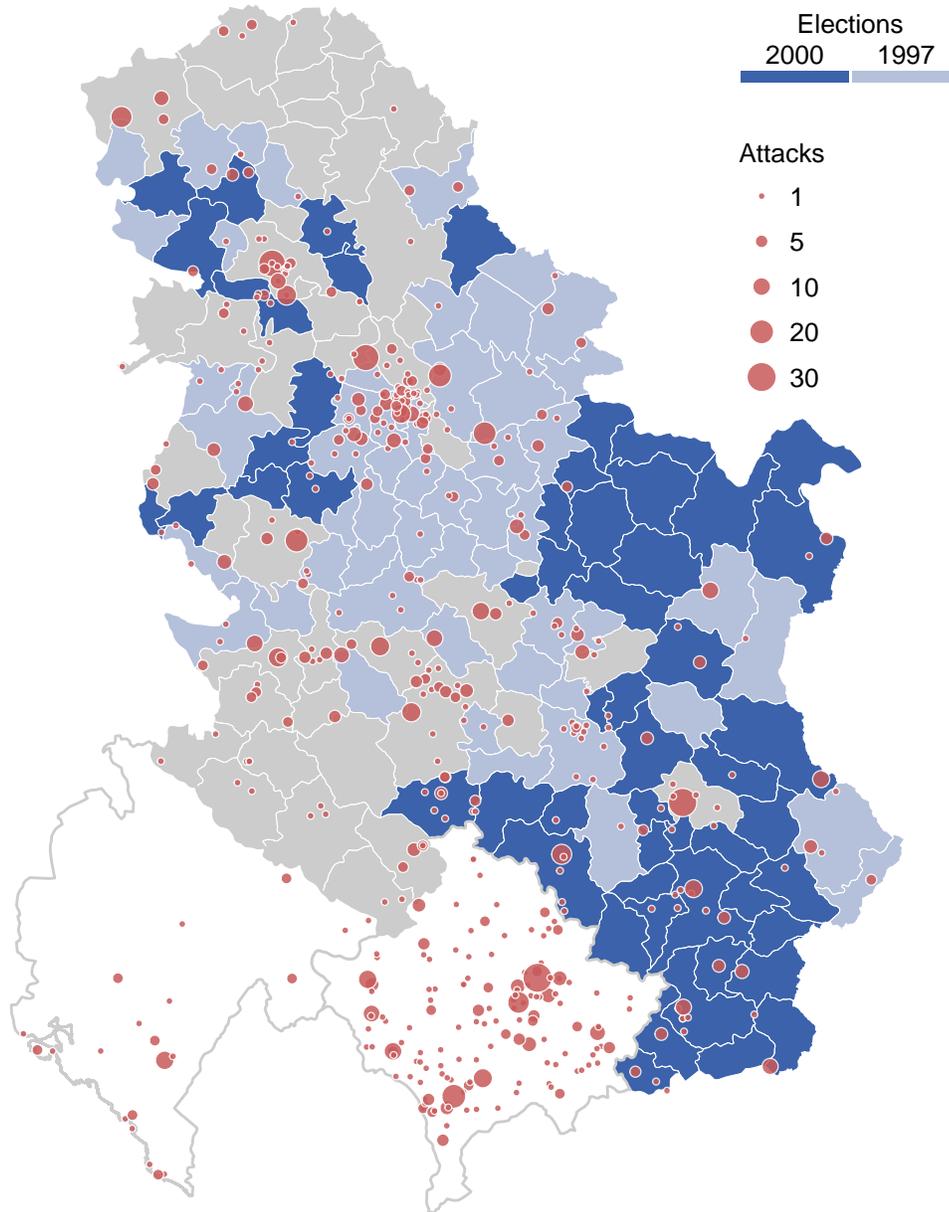
that the population offered marginal resistance to the regime after the bombing because it was recovering from the war. He argues that NATO intervention buttressed Milosevic's regime in the short run. [Dragović-Soso \(2004\)](#) claims that NATO bombing failed to oust Milosevic in a coup or usher in mass protests and that Milosevic's caused his own downfall by calling early elections. She argues that Serbia's economy was equally devastated under the international sanctions (1992-1995) but the population did not punish Milosevic in the elections.

This paper disagrees with common view that NATO bombing had no effect on Milosevic's public standing after 1999. Consider the 1997 Serbian parliamentary elections—last elections prior to the 1999 bombing: Milosevic triumphed in 105 out of 160 municipalities (See Figure 1). Three years later, Milosevic won in only 56 municipalities after losing almost a half of the previously held municipalities to Kostunica (See Figure 1). What had gone wrong? Nearly all of the municipalities that flipped experienced bombing. Compared to 1997, Milosevic lost entire Belgrade, several municipalities in Vojvodina, large swaps of Central and Western Serbia as well as some pockets in eastern Serbia. The only war-torn area that stayed loyal to the regime were parts of the country's east and south-east where Milosevic had won land-slide victories since his ascendance to power in the 1991 election.

However, I do not claim that bombing solely determined the regime turnover in 2000 because there were a few important causal forces like the US support for DOS ([Carothers 2001](#)), the creation of a broad coalition of opposition parties ([Howard and Roessler 2006](#)), and the popular mobilization against the electoral fraud ([Thompson and Kuntz 2004](#)). Furthermore, analyzing elections in competitive authoritarian countries akin to pre-2000 Serbia is problematic,⁷ not least because the elections under Milosevic were neither free nor fair ([Antonić et al. 1993](#); [Antonić 2001](#); [Goati 2001](#); [Pavlović 2001](#)). Rather, I argue

⁷There are various to describe authoritarian countries that hold regular elections such as "competitive authoritarianism", ([Levitsky and Way 2002](#)), "electoral authoritarianism" ([Schedler 2002](#)), as well as "semi-authoritarianism" ([Ottaway 2003](#)).

Figure 1: Municipalities that Voted for Milosevic's Party and Bombing Sites



that—contrary to previous studies of Milosevic's downfall—the focus should be on public support over time because the erosion of the regime commenced before the actual electoral defeat.

Using retrospective theory of voting, I argue that municipalities experiencing more war devastation were most likely to alter their support for the regime.⁸ Retrospective voting generally assumes that policies of state officials designed to deal with real events (e.g. inflation, natural disasters, wars) affect how individuals assess their performance. The theory argues that voters simultaneously observe events and policies enacted by the government. Next, they assess the competence of the government by attributing responsibility to these events to particular officials in power. Voters then translate their competence assessment into voting decisions, influencing the formation of the government or future policies.

Voters may punish poor performers in elections, seek leaders that would be most competent for the job or fall prey to their own cognitive and emotional bias. Usually, voters reward incumbents whose policies tackle the effects of hazards, and sanction those who fail to address public grievances. For example, previous research finds that voters reward incumbents for delivering relief payments after natural disasters (Healy and Malhotra 2009; Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011).

While the Milosevic regime probably offered side-payments to its close circle of loyalists, the overall government policies brought little relief to the population as a whole. Accordingly, more devastation from bombing should harm the overall economic well-being of the population (e.g. higher poverty rates, unemployment), and fuel public resentment. Indeed, as mentioned above, bombing obliterated wages and employment and made prices skyrocket across Serbia. Furthermore, the Milosevic regime restored only 5% of the country's infrastructure failing to remedy the effects of the bombing on the population. I, therefore, expect municipalities that were directly exposed to bombing to be associated with lower trust in the regime's competence to rebuild the country. This leads to a number of hypotheses:

⁸For a thorough review of the retrospective voting literature, please consult Healy and Malhotra (2013).

H1a: Municipalities that were bombed are likely to have lower trust in the regime's competence to rebuild the country than those that were not bombed.

H1b: As the duration of bombing increases, a municipality is likely to have a lower trust in the regime's competence to rebuild the country.

H1c: As the intensity of bombing increases, a municipality is likely to have a lower trust in the regime's competence to rebuild the country.

H1d: As the number of casualties increase, a municipality is likely to have a lower trust in the regime's competence to rebuild the country.

Mounting pessimism in the regime's capabilities should be followed by lower support for the ruling coalition. In the sanctioning mechanism, voters seek to reduce moral hazard on the part of the incumbent by voting for the opposition (Ferejohn 1986). Voters from municipalities exposed to bombing should have more incentives than voters from non-exposed municipalities to punish the Milosevic regime. By punishing poor performers, voters also signal their interest in selecting politicians who can potentially bring better results (Miquel and Snyder Jr 2006). In this sense, municipalities with more casualties should be then also less likely to favor the regime. Finally, higher intensity and longer exposure to bombing should tilt the public opinion against the incumbent. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Municipalities that were bombed are less likely to support the regime than those that were not bombed.

H2b: As the duration of bombing increases, a municipality is less likely to support the regime.

H2c: As the intensity of bombing increases, a municipality is less likely to support the regime.

H2d: As the number of casualties increases, a municipality is less likely to

support the regime.

Data and Methods

Public Opinion Polls

This paper uses five nationwide polls conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences after the bombing but before the 2000 federal elections. These polls were carried out in November 1999, March 2000, February 2000, August and September 2000 (), yielding 6182 responses from Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro) on political affinities.⁹ I then combined these polls into a single internally consistent mega-poll.

Outcome: Competence and Voting

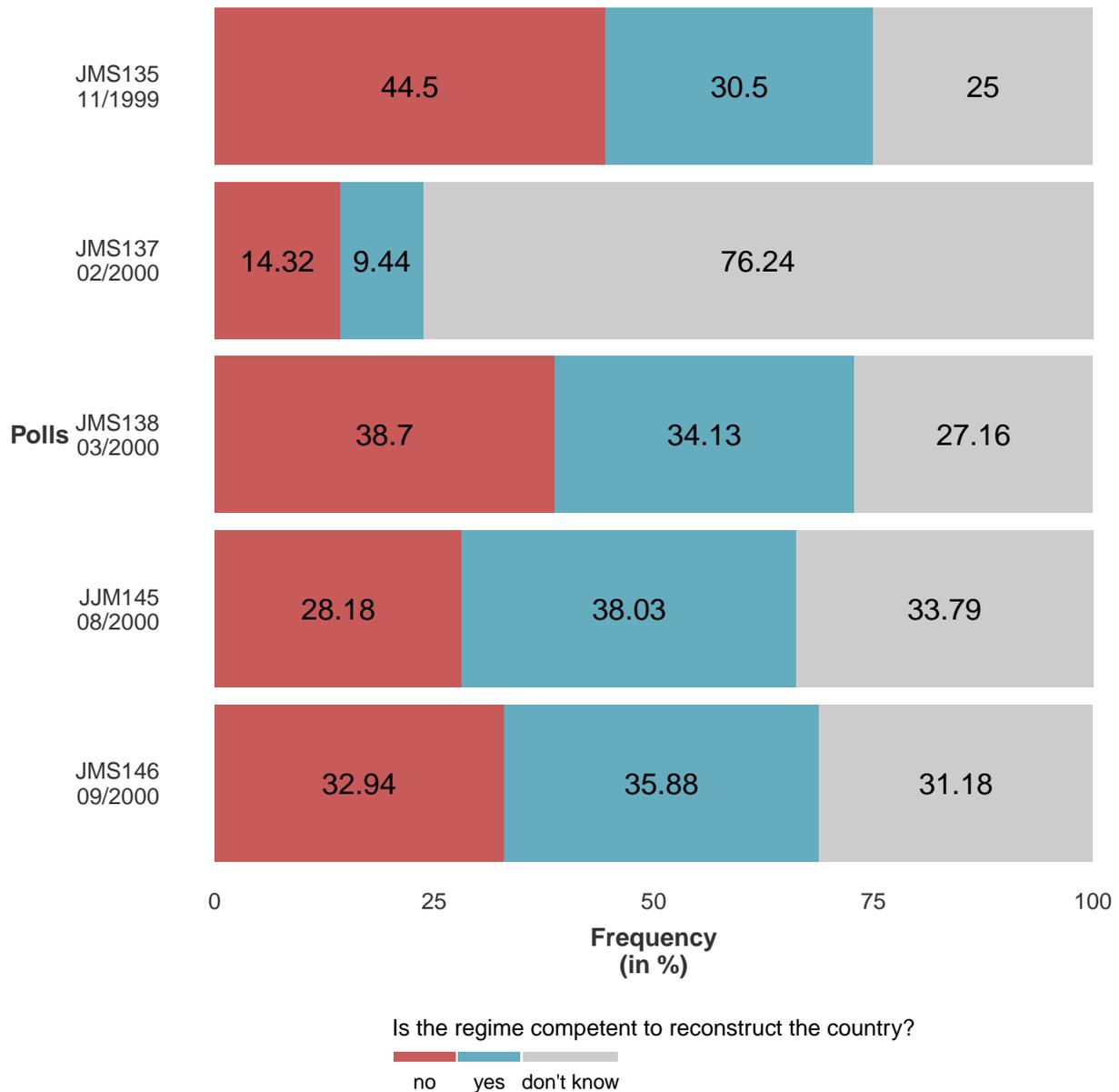
The competence of the regime to rebuild the country is measured using a question about how successful are political parties in rebuilding the country after the bombing. The question is roughly formulated as follows:

In your opinion, which party or a coalition could best solve the following problems in our society? Reconstruction of the country after NATO bombing.

The respondents could choose only one party. Following [Gelman and Hill \(2006\)](#) and [Lax and Phillips \(2009a\)](#), I convert the multinomial into binomial outcome. In cases where a response included one of the ruling parties (Socialist Party of Serbia [SPS], Yugoslav Left [YUL]) or the ruling coalition as a whole (in 1997 this comprised of SPS, YUL and the Serbian Radical Party [SRP]), I coded the variable as the confidence in the regime or 1. Any response in favor of the opposition parties (e.g. DP, SPO) or coalitions (e.g. SZP, DOS) as well as "Other" parties that shared no power at the federal or republic level was coded as 0. "Don't know/Not sure" responses were coded as missing values. Figure 2 shows the division among the respondents over the competence of the regime across the polls. There is an

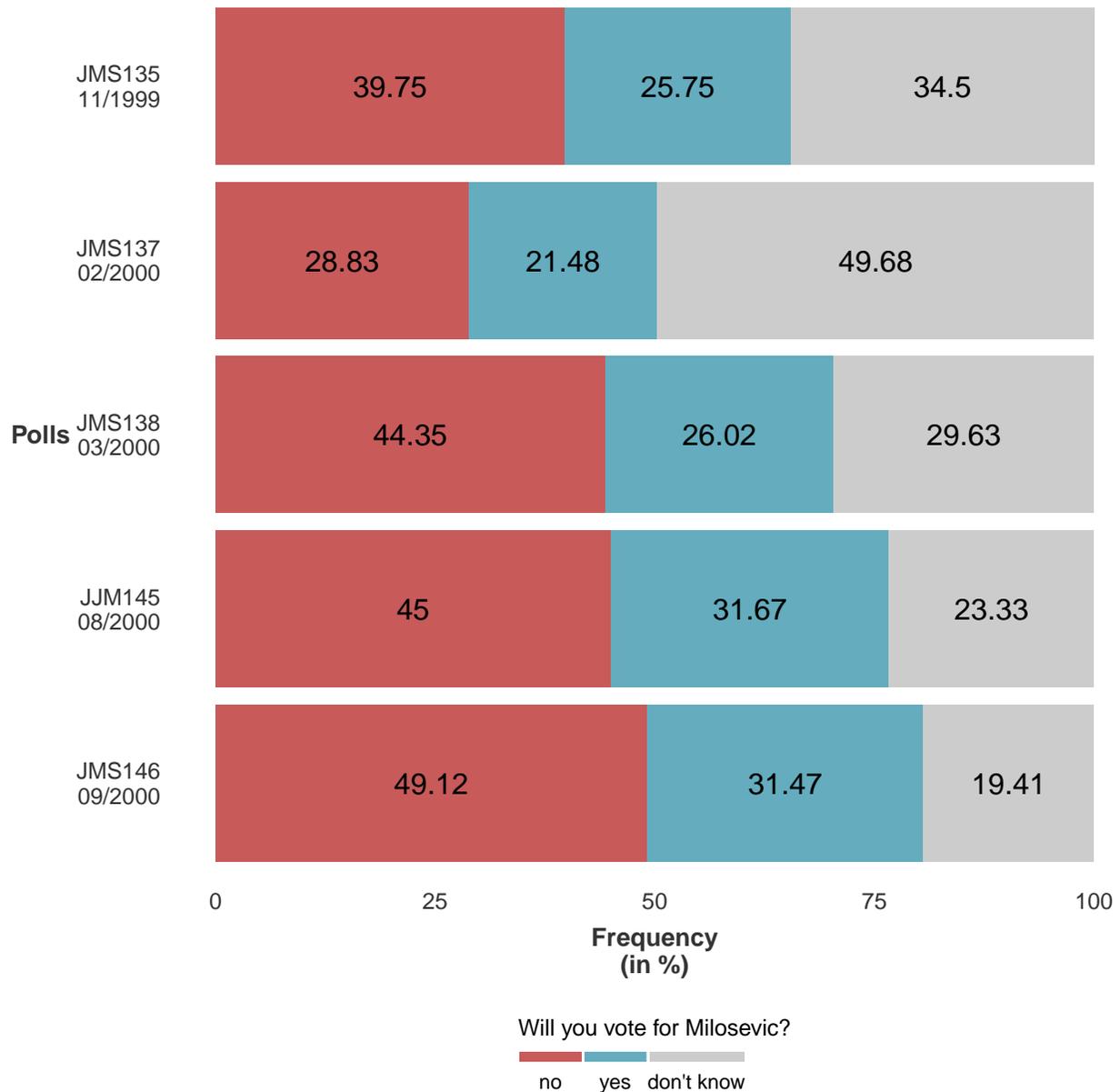
⁹The data collection of these polls was carried out in a uniform way by drawing respondents by lot and interviewing them using face-to-face approach.

Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Aggregated Responses on Regime’s Competency by Poll



overall distrust in the regime’s competence in the immediate months following the bombing that transformed into a greater trust as the Federal elections were approaching. Perhaps the election campaign reversed the negative trend as the regime used state-controlled media to issue propaganda to the population.

Figure 3: Frequency Distribution of Aggregated Voting Responses by Poll



Political preferences are covered by a survey question related to voting in the upcoming Federal assembly elections that is roughly formulated as follows¹⁰:

¹⁰The formulation of the question varies slightly by context. In the 1999 poll, there was no reference to the type of elections, while the 2000 surveys refer to the upcoming federal parliamentary elections. I believe that this variation is not problematic because voters are not necessarily capable of or interested in distinguishing among the different elections as much as they are concerned with partisanship. If question wording might

"If the elections for the Federal Parliament were held tomorrow, which party or a coalition would you vote for?"

This is a multiple choice question and reflects the political landscape of the time. Similar to the competence variable, I convert the multinomial into binomial outcome and code the vote for the ruling coalition or individual ruling parties as 1, and the vote for any opposition or "Other" party as 0. Responses such as "Would not vote", "Would vote but does not know for whom" or "Does not know" were coded as missing.¹¹

The distribution of voting preferences in Figure 3 indicates an increasing discontent with the incumbent over time. Already in November 1999, only five months after the bombing, the majority of the respondents were not ready to vote for Milosevic despite the robust state propaganda at the time. It appears that the negative effect of the bombing had consumed the remaining rally-around-the-flag effect. There is a clear and consistent gap between the opponents and proponents of the government across the polls with the share of the undecided respondents declining over time.

Demographic Variables

For each respondent, there is information on gender, urban/rural, one of five age categories (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and over 60), and one of five education categories (no education, elementary school, vocational education, high school and university graduate). Geographic features are represented by 12 geographic regions under which fall several municipalities; regions do not cut across the municipality boundaries (see Figure 6). For each region, I have information on average income, minority count and unemployment. Information on income and unemployment are obtained from the annual publications of the Serbian State Bureau of Statistics and vary by region and year, whereas figures for minority count originate from the 2002 census and vary by region. Income denotes average

alter the political preferences, I tackle this issue by including poll effects in the multilevel regression.

¹¹Although [Lax and Phillips \(2009a\)](#) turn such values into zeros, doing so in this context would distort the actual responses that could have been equally attributed to the pro-Milosevic camp and opposition.

salary in Serbian dinars and is measured by summing up the salary for municipalities of the region and dividing it by the number of municipalities. Identical approach is used to measure unemployment, which is the number of individuals not in employment per 1000 inhabitants of region. For minority count, I deduce the number of Serbs from the total number of inhabitants of a region.

Estimating Public Opinion

To analyze public opinion, I employ multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) that uses combined national survey data to simulate subnational opinion (See [Gelman and Hill 2006](#); [Park et al. 2004](#)).¹² MRP first estimates each individual's policy preferences as a function of his or her demographics and geographic location (multilevel regression stage), and then weights the estimates of the model by the percentage of each demographic and geographic respondent type in the actual population from the census (post-stratification stage). Responses are modeled as varying within subnational regions and within demographic groups such as age and education categories.

I begin by assessing the relationship between policy preference and individual- and group-level variables. I estimate a multilevel logit model where individual preference for Milosevic's coalition is modeled as a function of each individual's demographics and regional characteristics. Specifically, this equation includes age, education, interaction of age and education, interaction of age and gender, interaction of education and gender, interaction of age and urban/rural, poll, and region as random effects, while income, minority count and unemployment are treated as fixed effects (for individual i , with indexes a , e , g , p , r , u for age, education, gender, poll, region and urban, respectively). Then my model is

¹²Previous research finds that MRP produces more accurate and robust estimates in mid-sized samples, accounts for clustering issues, corrects for time fluctuations and estimates public opinion on the subnational level ([Lax and Phillips 2009a,b](#)).

$$Pr_{y_i=1} = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \alpha_{a[i]}^{age} + \alpha_{e[i]}^{education} + \alpha_{a[i],e[i]}^{age*education} + \alpha_{a[i],g[i]}^{age*gender} + \alpha_{e[i],g[i]}^{education*gender} + \alpha_{a[i],u[i]}^{age*urban} + \alpha_{p[i]}^{poll} + \alpha_{r[i]}^{region}),$$

Individual-level effects are modeled effects for individual respondents from the megapoll drawn from a Normal distribution with a mean of zero and some variance:

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha_j^{age} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{age}^2), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 5 \\ \alpha_k^{education} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{education}^2), \text{ for } k = 1, \dots, 5 \\ \alpha_{j,k}^{age*education} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{age*education}^2), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 5 \text{ and } k = 1, \dots, 5 \\ \alpha_{j,l}^{age*gender} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{age*gender}^2), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 5 \text{ and } l = 0, 1 \\ \alpha_{k,l}^{education*gender} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{education*gender}^2), \text{ for } k = 1, \dots, 5 \text{ and } l = 0, 1 \\ \alpha_{j,m}^{age*urban} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{age*urban}^2), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 5 \text{ and } m = 0, 1 \\ \alpha_n^{poll} &\sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_{poll}^2), \text{ for } n = 1, \dots, 5, \end{aligned}$$

The regional effects are modeled as a function of the region in which the respondent resides, and the region's average income, minority count and unemployment.

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha_r^{region} &\sim \text{Normal}(\sigma_{region}^2 \\ &+ \beta^{income} * income_r \\ &+ \beta^{minority} * minority_r \\ &+ \beta^{unemployed} * unemployed_r), \text{ for } r = 1, \dots, 12 \end{aligned}$$

I run the equation using a multilevel logistic regression model, estimated using the GLMER ("generalized linear mixed effects in R") function (Bates 2005).¹³

Post-stratification

The results of the logistic regression yield predicted probabilities of an individual supporting the Milosevic regime given his or her age, education, gender, urban origin and region. To estimate the proportion of each individual in the actual municipality population, I next compute weighted averages of these probabilities. In this case, information on actual population comes from the 2002 Serbian census. Most national census data usually break down the population by, for example, age and gender, while distributions for some of the key variables such as education, ethnic or religious affiliation are unavailable.¹⁴ The 2002 Serbian census is no exception because proportions are available for age, gender and urban origin but not for education.

To mitigate this issue, I create adjusted synthetic joint distributions for education based on the marginal distributions using the multilevel regression with synthetic post-stratification (MrsP) technique developed by (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2017). MrsP uses existing available joint distributions in the census to simulate distributions of unavailable joint distributions by relying on survey information. In my case, the distribution of education in the survey data deviates from the distribution for each municipality in the Serbian census data. The proportions for the five categories of education in the survey are 16.3% (no education), 25.8% (elementary), 20.5% (vocational), 15.9% (high school), and 21.3% (university degree) and they deviate somewhat from the actual share of these educa-

¹³For data with hierarchical structure (e.g., individuals within states within regions), multilevel modeling is generally an improvement over classical regression. Rather than using "fixed" (or "unmodeled") effects, the model uses "random" (or "modeled") effects, at least for some predictors. The effects within a grouping of variables (say, state-level effects) are related to each other by their grouping structure and thus are partially pooled toward the group mean, with greater pooling when group-level variance is small and for less-populated groups. (Gelman and Hill 2006, 254–258).

¹⁴This has, for instance, led [Warshaw and Rodden \(2012\)](#) to omit age from their analysis of district-level surveys.

tion categories in the population of, for instance, Novi Sad (10%/ 19%/34.5%/17%/19%). MrsP adjusts the survey distribution of education to the known marginal distribution of every municipality by creating a correction factor for each of the education categories. Given that the survey disproportionately favors less educated respondents, I adjust survey distributions by a correction factor.¹⁵

Using the census data of the true joint distributions (for age, gender and urban) and the relative weights of the education distribution for each age, gender and urban, MrsP then extends each cell with the five education categories according to the relative shares of the corrected survey data information. For example, if there are 6% of women ages 18-29 from urban area of Novi Sad, I further disaggregate the age/gender/urban category using the adjusted relative shares for the five education categories. Therefore, adjusted distributions yield 0.07% of women ages 18-29 without education from urban areas; 0.5% of women ages 18-29 with primary school from urban areas; 2.7% of women ages 18-29 with vocational education from urban areas; 1.3% of women ages 18-29 with high school from urban areas; and 1.4% of women ages 18-29 with university degree from urban areas. Following that procedure, I compute the adjusted synthetic joint distributions for each age/gender/urban/education category in each municipality. Using adjusted joint distributions, I then compute predicted probabilities of pro-Milosevic support for each demographic-municipality type (θ_c) by weighting the prediction in each cell (c) by the actual population frequency of that cell (F_c). Let o be municipality index, then

$$y_o^{MrsP} = \frac{\sum_{c \in o} F_c \theta_c}{\sum_{c \in o} F_c}$$

As illustrated in Figure 5, resulting probabilities are compared to actual results of the 2000 election where each point represents a municipality. I also include information on

¹⁵Table 4 in the appendix summarizes actual and corrected proportions for education for each of the 160 municipalities.

whether a municipality was bombed or not. There is a correlation between the MrsP estimates and actual votes even though the elections were rigged. There is certainly more noise than desired and I attribute this noise to unreliable election results. Most outliers are municipalities that originate from the country's south and south-east that had been Milosevic's stronghold for decades. Some of these municipalities remained loyal to the regime despite being exposed to bombing.

MrsP Estimates and the Bombing of Municipalities

Support. The weighted probabilities yield municipality-level estimates that I use as an outcome in a linear model of bombing casualties and intensity.

Bombing. To assess the effect of bombing on support, I construct three variables. These are: *Bombed*, indicating whether a municipality was bombed or not; *Attacks*, measuring the number of strikes on targets that fall within the administrative boundaries of each municipality; *Days*, which shows the number of days during which a municipality was bombed; and *Deaths* that measures the number of both civilian and military casualties by municipality. The information on bombed municipalities, intensity and length comes from a dataset which I assembled using information from then pro-opposition Serbian daily ("Glas Javnosti"), two major Serbian weeklies ("NIN" and "Vreme"), reports from the Human Rights Watch, and the Database on casualties of the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) in Belgrade. I used The White Book of the Yugoslav Government sparingly due to its tendency to exaggerate strikes and casualties. NATO briefings were not used because they lack information on exact locations.

I coded cruise missile strikes and air raids if the source entailed information on the exact location of incident.¹⁶ For example, if the source reported an air raid on the Batajnica airport then I coded coordinates for the airport using Google Maps. If, however, the source identified a strike on a "wider area of Belgrade" or referred to a mountain range without

¹⁶The data do not include reconnaissance flights.

a reference to a particular object or unit then this attack was omitted. Fortunately, such occurrences were rare and I was able to pin down certain unreported locations using the HLC database of casualties.

For each of the identified strikes I report the date of incident as well as coordinates. To determine whether an attack falls within a municipality boundaries, I intersected each point coordinate with the municipality polygon using a GIS intersect function from package `sp` in R programming language (Pebesma and Bivand 2005; Team 2000). Next, I identify the number of strikes per municipality by summing up those points that the function attributed to particular municipalities. The average duration of bombing by municipality is 5.7 days, and the mean number of strikes by municipality is 6.5. Using information on location and date of strikes, I constructed `Days` by counting unique dates of strikes that fall within municipality boundaries.

Deaths is measured using the HLC database of NATO bombing victims, civilians and military alike. The database is built on an analysis of more than 6,000 documents: from the testimonies of family members of the deceased to court documents, foreign NGO/government reports, and forensic evidence, to secondary sources. By far, it is the most accurate and informative database on NATO casualties. According to the HLC database, NATO attacks killed a total of 754 people: 454 civilians and 300 members of the armed forces. There were 260 people casualties in Serbia proper (under the purview of this study); 10 in Montenegro; and 488 in Kosovo. In Serbia proper, most of the civilians were killed in Surdulica (29), Belgrade (16 journalists), Nis (19), Kursumlija (16), Aleksinac (15), and Grdelica (15). Overall, there were casualties in 43 out of 160 municipalities.

Controls. I consider several control variables that capture the socio-economic profile of the municipalities. Income is average gross annual salary in thousands of dinars for each municipality in 1998, and it comes from the annual publication of the Serbian State Bureau of Statistics. Age 20–34 shows the share of the youth in the total population as recorded

in the 2002 Census. Illiteracy shows the percentage of the population older than 15 that is unable to use written or printed content to function and develop in society. This measurement comes from the census. Finally, I use Win as the percentage of support for the Milosevic coalition in the 1997 elections to indicate prior political affinity.

Results and Discussion

The results of the OLS linear regression offer support for my argument in that exposure to bombing erodes the view of the Milosevic regime as competent to reconstruct the country as well as the probability of his re-election. I begin my analysis by discussing the results of the competence models (H1a–H1d) in Table 1. Model 1 shows that municipalities experiencing bombing are substantially different from municipalities that were not bombed. As envisaged in H1a, being exposed to bombing reduces the trust in the regime’s competence to rebuild the country. All else being equal, bombed municipalities were on average 3% less convinced that Milosevic’s regime is capable of reconstructing the country after the bombing (95% confidence interval is a 1–5-percentage-point decrease).

Moving on to the effects of the duration and intensity of bombing on public trust, I find support for both H1b and H1c. As shown in Model 2 and Model 3, respectively, a longer exposure to bombing and higher number of air strikes have a negative impact on government approval. Model 2 shows that for each day of air strikes, affected municipalities were 0.9% less likely to perceive Milosevic’s regime as competent (95% confidence interval is a 0.3–1-percentage-point decrease). Since the mean number of days under the bombing for war-torn municipalities is 5.7, it implies that an average duration sunk Milosevic’s competence in the eyes of the public by approximately 5%. Air strikes demonstrate an identical negative effect on public trust. In accordance with H1d, I find that casualties also have a detrimental impact on public trust. For every additional casualty, municipalities were 0.8% less likely to trust the regime (95% confidence interval is a 0.1–1-percentage-point

Table 1: Competence of the Milosevic Regime

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Bombed	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.01)			
Days (ln)		-0.009 (-0.01, -0.003)		
Attacks (ln)			-0.009 (-0.01, -0.003)	
Deaths (ln)				-0.008 (-0.01, -0.0001)
Income (1000s)	-0.35 (-0.41, -0.30)	-0.36 (-0.41, -0.30)	-0.36 (-0.41, -0.30)	-0.35 (-0.40, -0.29)
Age 20-34 (ln)	-1.07 (-1.58, -0.55)	-1.02 (-1.56, -0.48)	-1.01 (-0.41, -0.30)	-1.23 (-1.74, -0.72)
Illiteracy	0.24 (-0.14, 0.63)	0.23 (-0.15, 0.63)	0.24 (-0.14, 0.63)	0.39 (-0.04, 0.79)
Win	0.01 (-0.000006, 0.02)	0.009 (-0.003, 0.02)	0.009 (-0.004, 0.02)	0.01 (-0.001, 0.02)
Observations	160	160	160	160
R ²	0.70	0.69	0.69	0.69
Adjusted R ²	0.69	0.68	0.69	0.68
Residual Std. Error (df = 154)	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.003
F Statistic (df = 5; 154)	73.06	71.66	71.82	68.7

Note: OLS linear regression estimates with 95% confidence intervals in the brackets.

decrease). These findings paint a picture of first step in the retrospective voting theory—one in which the public shows resentment of the government for failing to address grievances in the wake of war.

In the second step, the public ventures beyond resentment to punish the regime and select an alternative at the ballot box. The voting models are presented in Table 2. The first column (Model 5) shows that bombed municipalities are profoundly different from non-bombed municipalities; bombed municipalities are less likely to support the regime and this is in line with H2a. The estimated effect of bombed municipalities is a 3-percentage-point decrease in the pro-Milosevic vote share. Model 6 displays the effect of duration on voting for Milosevic. The negative relationship between duration and voting for the regime is congruent with H2b. For every day of bombing vote share for the establishment is 0.6% lower. Similarly, mounting strikes are associated with lower support, as envisaged in H2c. For every air strike that a municipality had endured there is a 0.6-percentage-point decrease in pro-Milosevic voting (Model 7). Finally, I find no support for H3d as the coefficient estimate for casualties is in expected direction but confidence intervals cast a doubt on its practical significance for understanding voting patterns. This finding goes against some of the previous research on the war and tenure of democratic leaders.

There are at least three potential explanations why casualties have no effect on voting. First, the public may blame the aggressor rather than the incumbent if they fall under the influence of the rally effect. Second, human losses may not have a long-term impact like the wider destruction of economy, heritage and environment. War damage tends to inhibit a country's economy long after wars officially end. Finally, casualties might be disproportionately tied to a particular socio-economic background. In the US context, slain soldiers were more likely to originate from rural, poorer and less educated communities (Kriner and Shen 2017). In this case, incumbent approval may be driven by economic indicators rather than casualties.

Table 2: Voting for Milosevic's coalition

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Bombed	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.009)			
Days (ln)		-0.006 (-0.01, 0.002)		
Attacks (ln)			-0.006 (-0.01, -0.00003)	
Deaths (ln)				-0.002 (-0.01, 0.005)
Income (1000s)	0.19 (0.14, 0.25)	0.19 (0.13, 0.24)	0.19 (0.14, 0.25)	0.20 (0.14, 0.25)
Age 20-34 (ln)	-2.00 (-2.52, -1.49)	-2.01 (-2.55, -1.48)	-2.02 (-2.56, -1.49)	-2.20 (-2.71, -1.69)
Illiteracy	0.14 (-0.24, 0.52)	0.15 (-0.23, 0.54)	0.15 (-0.23, 0.55)	0.23 (-0.16, 0.63)
Win	0.02 (0.01, 0.04)	0.02 (0.01, 0.04)	0.02 (0.01, 0.04)	0.02 (0.01, 0.04)
Observations	160	160	160	160
R ²	0.54	0.53	0.53	0.52
Adjusted R ²	0.53	0.51	0.51	0.50
Residual Std. Error (df = 154)	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.003
F Statistic (df = 5; 154)	37.03	35.33	35.22	33.72

Note: OLS linear regression estimates with 95% confidence intervals in the brackets.

These results suggest that average bombing duration and intensity decrease the probability of voting for wartime leadership by 0.6 percentage points for every day or strike. Given that the average duration is 5.7 days and average intensity 6.5 attacks, the estimated effect is a decrease of around 3.4 to 4 percentage points in the pro-Milosevic vote-share in bombed municipalities. The turnout in the 2000 federal presidential elections was 4,694,063 for Serbia, which means that, all else being equal, the pro-Milosevic coalition lost more than 200,000 votes (or around 4%) to the opposition in Serbian municipalities. According to the official results that include Montenegro, the opposition candidate for the Federal President, Vojislav Kostunica, won 2.4 million votes or 50.24% while Milosevic secured 1.8 million votes or 37.15%. Had it not been for the effect of bombing, Milosevic might have secured a runoff as Kostunica would have lacked at least 200,000 votes to claim victory in the first round.

In sum, the empirical evidence demonstrates that bombing harms the approval of incumbent's policy in localities that were exposed to more intense strikes. Respondents from such municipalities are also reluctant to vote for the incumbent in upcoming elections. Therefore, I conclude that war negatively affects the public support for semi-authoritarian regimes even when controlling for important socio-economic and political features.

Robustness Tests

Figure 1 shows that NATO overwhelmingly bombed major cities such as Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Nis because they are Serbia's industrial, political and military hubs. Using Table 1 and 2, I re-specify the models by excluding Belgrade's nine core municipalities,¹⁷ as well as the municipalities of Nis and Novi Sad to test whether the results substantially change. This reduces the number of localities to 149. The re-specified models yield similar results to

¹⁷These municipalities are Vracar, Stari Grad, Cukarica, Zvezdara, Palilula, Rakovica, Vozdovac, Novi Beograd, and Savski Venac.

my previous findings.¹⁸ The duration and intensity preserve their direction and effect on both the approval and voting preferences. The only difference is that casualties lose their practical significance when it comes to modeling voting preferences.

Since nine out of eleven of the excluded municipalities were in opposition hands prior to the bombing, it is also worth exploring whether the effect of bombing on public attitude is moderated by pre-war voting. The practical significance of the interaction term would mean that an effect of bombing on public approval is different in municipalities that voted for Milosevic in 1997 than in those that voted against his coalition. In other words, it would suggest that bombing has no independent effect on public opinion from previous voting as this paper argues.

I re-specify the models in Table 1 and 2 by including an interaction term between previous voting (*Win*), and each of the bombing variables. Then I run these models using the full sample. The results demonstrate no practical significance of the interaction term in any of the specified models even though the coefficient estimates are in the expected negative direction. These findings demonstrate that bombing has an effect on public opinion regardless of past political preferences.

Conclusion

This article investigates whether the consequences of war make public opinion turn against non-democratic regimes by modeling the MrsP predicted support for the regime of Slobodan Milosevic after the 1999 NATO bombing as a function of duration, intensity and casualties. The bombing of Serbia provides a good opportunity to examine the public's tolerance for paying the costs of war in non-democratic setting. Some of my findings challenge the conventional wisdom on public opinion and foreign policy, but support other findings in studies on war and democratic tenure. The results indicate that the duration and intensity

¹⁸The results are stored in Table 3 and 4 in the Appendix

of bombing tilted Serbia's post-war public opinion toward the opposition side. As predicted by the retrospective theory of voting, more devastated municipalities demonstrated lower confidence in the regime's competence to rebuild the country as well as lower interest in supporting the Milosevic coalition in prospective elections. Perhaps most surprising, and against previous studies, casualties appear as a relatively unimportant driver of public support in the Serbian case. These findings bode ill for expectations that severe human losses can harm the survival of warmongers in the post-war period.

The picture that emerges from this analysis is one of war bringing political changes even to authoritarian regimes with competitive elections. When war hits home it destroys economic foundations of society, sowing a resentment among the population. High unemployment, miserable wages and mounting prices lead to crumbling confidence in the regime's competence to ever bring better life. While the regime offers payments and perks to its inner circle the population is offered little relief. As the regime turns to repression to preserve unity amid the failure to address grievances, the alienated public is deterred from supporting the incumbent. As a result, the public is more open to punishing the regime and selecting an alternative that can deliver better future.

There are a few lessons here for conflict management. First, unilateral military interventions may weaken autocrats, but human losses will not. The international community should attempt to dissuade major powers from intervening unilaterally wherever possible. Second, embattled authoritarian leaders may be more vulnerable to external pressure in the aftermath of war than previously thought. Using this moment of weakness to push for the respect of human rights and rule of law may result in benefits for the society but also boost opposition forces. Finally, foreign governments should not lump all the non-democratic regimes together. It appears that competitive authoritarian regimes face sensitive public similar to democracies. Engaging the public through dialogue than coercion may pay dividends in the future. If the public ever escapes the sway of the rally effect, it will make

the belicose behavior of at least some authoritarian regimes politically untenable.

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Figure 4: Boundaries of Geographic Regions Used in Analysis (in red)

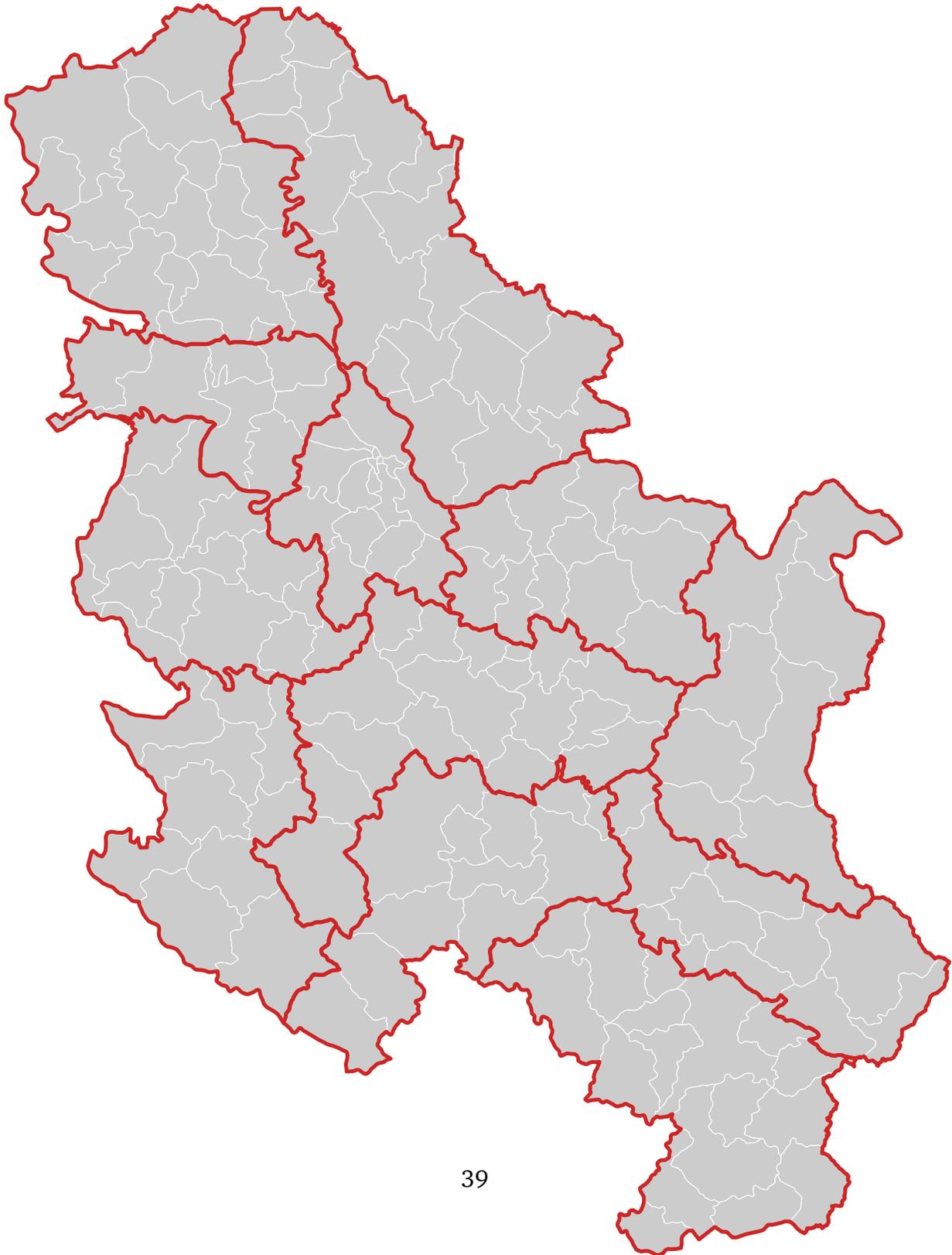


Figure 5: Weighted MrsP Probabilities of Voting for the Government and Actual Share of Votes for the Regime in the 2000 Federal Elections by Municipality

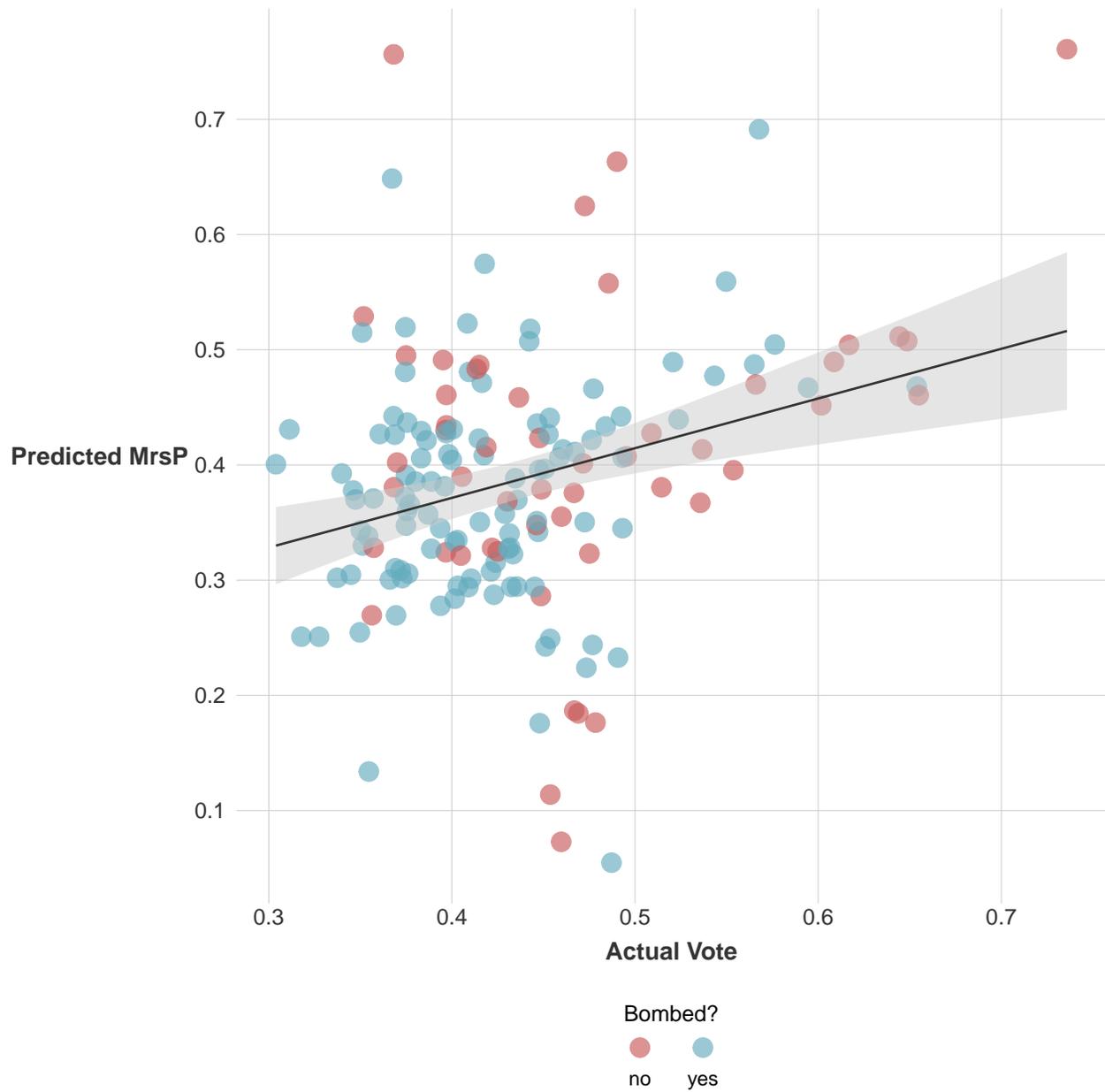


Figure 6: Number of Days Under Bombing By Municipality

