

William G. Howell, and Jon C. Pevehouse, *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers*

David Brulé

Volume 29, Spring 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs29br10>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brulé, D. (2009). Review of [William G. Howell, and Jon C. Pevehouse, *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers*]. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 29, 0–0.

already failed the vulnerable populations with whom it is concerned. Furthermore, this book is a highly accessible treatment of a very complex and oftentimes perplexing topic and, if nothing else, helps the reader make sense of it with an eye toward addressing the structural causes of human suffering, rather than dealing with human suffering after it has manifested itself. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in human rights and humanitarian affairs — both the specialist and non-specialist alike — and would consider it appropriate for classroom use in both graduate and advanced undergraduate university courses.

Eric A. Heinze is an Assistant Professor in the School of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Howell, William G., and Jon C. Pevehouse. *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

The conventional wisdom concerning domestic politics and the US presidential use of force abroad is that presidents are largely autonomous in such decisions. William Howell and Jon Pevehouse offer a convincing array of evidence that appears to shatter this image of a largely unconstrained president. They seek to address whether Congress influences presidential decisions to use force and, if so, how.

The authors make extensive use of research on presidential-congressional relations to inform the ways that Congress may constrain the presidential use of force. They contend that Congress is capable of imposing costs on the president in pursuit of military operations abroad. For example, Congress may work to dismantle the president's venture by refusing to appropriate funds or require burdensome obligations as a condition for funding. Congressional criticism of the president's venture may undermine the credibility of the president's resolve, emboldening foreign adversaries to resist US action and increasing the likelihood of a costly war. Congressional criticism may also serve as the catalyst for turning public opinion against a military operation. Because the president's partisan or ideological foes in Congress have political incentives to thwart presidential initiatives, Congress can be expected to impose such costs primarily when large and cohesive majorities oppose the president.

Looking to the data, the argument withstands a variety of tests. Employing large data sets covering the post-war period, Howell and Pevehouse present fairly persuasive statistical evidence. They show that US uses of force are more frequent when the president enjoys partisan support in Congress. They find that the probability of deployments among opportunities to use force increases with the president's partisan support in Congress. The authors also provide in-depth examinations of six cases, identifying when and how Congress influences presidential decisions over military operations. Finally, the authors carefully examine the role of congressional criticism of presidential proposals to use force. These analyses suggest that the media provides an outlet for congressional opposition and that such opposition shapes public support for military operations, which, in turn, influences presidential decision to use force.

While this book is clearly state-of-the-art, it insufficiently addresses a glaring possibility. Howell and Pevehouse thoroughly examine the strategic relationship between the president and Congress but fail to seriously consider the strategic relationship between the US and potential targets of presidential action. A strategic process may be responsible for the findings the authors attribute to shared partisanship. In spite of the excellent examples the authors provide, partisan debates tend to focus on social and economic issues. Such a focus suggests that divided government may forestall the president's pursuit of his domestic agenda but not necessarily his foreign policy agenda. Thus, presidents facing partisan opposition may have no other choice than to focus on foreign policy in order to produce a record of policy success. If presidential threats are regarded as highly credible when Congress is expected to oppose the president's domestic policy agenda, potential targets of the US should avoid behavior that may lead to the US use of force. Such a process should produce findings that indicate fewer uses of force when the president faces higher levels of congressional opposition.

The authors miss an opportunity to evaluate this possible strategic account. In chapter 4, Howell and Pevehouse examine opportunities to use force as the unit of analysis but fail to examine the influence of congressional support on the frequency of opportunities. Their effort to assess strategic interaction is limited to Heckman analyses in which the first-stage equation analyzes the probability that a state is involved in an opportunity on any given *day* between 1945 and 2000. The choice of units in the first-stage equation may bias the test against

the strategic interaction argument. But because the authors offer no comparative analyses using different units of analysis, the reader cannot discern whether such a bias exists. Moreover, the authors reject the use of James Meernik's data on opportunities to use force but fail to offer an empirical comparison of the two data sets, missing an occasion to demonstrate robustness.

The authors also miss the chance to determine whether partisan opposition can be equated with foreign policy opposition. As research by Dennis Foster and Kenneth Schultz suggests, partisan opponents in the legislature may have incentives to support the president because of the popularity of the venture or the general disdain for the target. This suggests case-by-case data on legislative support for the president's venture.

These concerns notwithstanding, *While Dangers Gather* is an important book that will be useful to students of conflict involving democracies.

David Brulé is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Tennessee.