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As Fareed Zakaria pronounced in a review essay published in *International Security* twenty-five years ago, “Innenpolitik is in.”1 Whereas International Relations (IR) scholarship was once defined by its focus on politics among nations rather than within them, much of the most interesting and influential work in IR in the past several decades has slipped the surly bonds of the unitary actor assumption to explore the interplay between different types of domestic actors in shaping international outcomes.

Elizabeth Saunders’s work exemplifies this movement. Her 2011 book, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, showed that American Presidents vary systematically in their beliefs about the origins of threats, and that this variation in causal beliefs shapes decisions about how military interventions should be conducted.2 In this sense, her work reflects growing interest in the way that individual leaders matter.3 Leaders, however, have domestic audiences of their own. Indeed, in one increasingly popular tradition in IR, the presence of domestic constituencies that are capable of monitoring and punishment is seen as enabling leaders to credibly signal in foreign policy crises despite incentives to bluff: by issuing threats in public, leaders

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effectively tie their own hands, due to the expectation that their domestic audience will punish them if they back down. 4

In “War and the Inner Circle,” Saunders raises the possibility that theories of audience costs are getting the audience wrong: leaders are concerned not about punishment from ordinary citizens, but from other elites. Her argument boils down to three main tenets. First, political elites systematically differ from the mass public in ways that make the former a more credible audience for foreign policy decisions: elites have different preferences than ordinary citizens about the use of force, a greater ability to impose direct costs on the leader, more information about foreign affairs, and are smaller in number, which makes them easier to accommodate. Second, because of elites’ abilities to hit presidents where it hurts – whether in the form of legislators obstructing the President’s domestic agenda, military advisors starting political imbroglios by running to the media, and so on – presidents conduct foreign policy by playing an “elite coalition game” (467), attempting to co-opt or buy off key political insiders in order to guarantee their support. Third, and relatedly, the mass public is relatively uninformed and disengaged from events on the world stage, and highly attentive to cues from trusted elites. As a result, as long as leaders successfully manage the flow of information and retain the support of key elites, no damaging elite cues will get out, such that leaders can shrink their relevant audience down to size and pursue foreign policy goals largely free from public constraint. After building this theory of intra-elite bargaining, Saunders then illustrates it with the case of President Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam, showing how Johnson’s escalation decisions were made while he was trying to minimize elite political costs, co-opting and recruiting key elites in order to prevent the conflict from spilling into the public spotlight.

The contribution of Saunders’s argument cannot be overstated. In sketching out a theory of intra-elite bargaining over decisions to use force, she pulls (and hauls) bureaucratic politics back into the IR spotlight, and in a more parsimonious and tractable manner than many of the discipline’s previous attempts. In pointing to the importance of the ‘inner circle,’ she tacitly encourages a field which is currently rediscovering the role of individual leaders to remember the broader decision-making context in which leaders operate. In pointing to the limitations of the mass public, she issues an explicit rebuke to the tendency of scholars of domestic politics in IR to adopt relatively heroic assumptions about public opinion.

Although her argument functions as a useful corrective by bringing political insiders into our theories of domestic politics and war, the fact that political elites play an important role in democratic foreign policy does not render the mass public entirely subservient. Elite cue theories posit a relatively restrictive, top-down model of public opinion about foreign policy, in which the public passively regurgitates cues provided by party elites. 5 Yet a range of empirical evidence suggests that public opinion may be harder to manage than

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elite-driven theories let on, whether in the form of Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump seemingly steamrolling his way to the 2016 Republican Presidential nomination despite the vocal opposition of party elites, or the tendency of Democrats in the mass public to be staunchly divided over wars that Democratic lawmakers uniformly support. After all, cues are most persuasive when they come from cue givers one trusts, and Americans’ trust in government is vertiginously low. Constructivists make similar arguments about mass public ‘common sense’ as an obstacle to elite hegemony. In an innovative study of the 1971 Bangladesh War, for example, Jarrod Hayes notes that President Richard Nixon and his then National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger’s attempts to construct India as a threat ultimately failed because the public saw India as a fellow democracy, and thus as inherently nonthreatening. More generally, the fact that elites and masses do espouse systematically different preferences about the use of force, as Saunders discusses, shows that the latter are not simply internalizing the dictates of the former; elite cues are a top-down heuristic through which the public can make sense of foreign policy issues, but personal values and general foreign policy orientations are a bottom-up heuristic, on which even citizens with relatively little information about politics can rely.

The article also raises interesting questions about indirect pathways through which public opinion can shape elite behavior, since political elites are strategic actors with domestic audiences of their own. Christopher Gelpi and Joseph Grieco, for example, show that elites are more likely to impose the political costs that Saunders describes when public disapproval of the President’s foreign policy agenda is high, implying that the political insiders who are sending cues to the public are also taking cues from them. The insider’s game, then, may be at least partially endogenous to public opinion.

Similarly, although Saunders's argument is primarily focused on the domestic half of the two-level game that leaders are playing, it is unclear whether foreign observers understand the insider’s game. This matters for two reasons. First, if foreign leaders are paying attention to the American public’s mood – as evinced by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s concern that “Other nations are more inclined to listen to proposals or objections from the President and me if they know that the American people are thoroughly behind us” –

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then public opinion ends up shaping foreign policy even if domestic leaders are otherwise insulated from the public’s whims. Saunders’s work thus raises interesting questions about the heuristics or cognitive schema that foreign leaders use to make sense of American domestic politics. Second, one of the major critiques of audience-cost models has been the assumption of intersubjective agreement spanning higher-order beliefs among both domestic and foreign audiences: domestic leaders must believe that their domestic audiences will punish them, which foreign leaders must also believe from afar, which domestic leaders must believe that foreign leaders believe, and so on. Since the machinations of the inner circle are less likely to be accurately perceived by foreign observers, the inclusion of the elite-coalition game further stretches the plausibility of traditional crisis-bargaining models; audience-cost theory might not just be getting the audience wrong, but the theory wrong as well.

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