

# Global conflicts inflamed by election-seeking 'hawkish' politicians, study finds

January 14 2022

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Long-running conflicts, such as that between Israel and Palestine, are inflamed by the political process itself as politicians adopt tough 'hawkish' policies to get themselves re-elected, according to a new study.

Leaders propose tougher settlements than their citizens may like in order to signal their ability to manage potential conflict. The process also drives political 'doves' to adopt tougher policies than usual as they face the pressure of re-election.

When voters do not know either the ideology of a politician or their ability—for example, when a relatively new leader holds unknown views on how much conflict they would tolerate, the electoral process naturally favours those who are ideological hawks.

Publishing their findings in *PLOS One*, researchers from the UK and Australia point to examples across the [political spectrum](#) of both 'hawks' and 'doves' toughening their positions in the face of conflict.

In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu's hawkish policy bought him election victory, whilst India's incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi was hawkish with neighbouring Pakistan and secured re-election.

US President Barack Obama, faced with a lowered level of support among his electorate, gave a hawkish speech signalling his intention to be tough in fighting conflict—ironically when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize.

Co- author Siddhartha Bandyopadhyay, Professor of Economics at the University of Birmingham, commented: "Conflict between nations is common and often lasts for a long time. The Israel-Palestine conflict, for example has led to enormous costs to both sides and continues to persist.

"Our findings shed fresh light on the persistence of the Middle East conflict and the rise of ideological hawks in the U.S. following the 9/11 terror attacks.

"During times of conflict, hawkish policies carry the day. One only needs to look at the upper hand that hawks had in determining U.S. foreign policy, as well as the electoral success that more hawkish leaders have enjoyed recently to see that tough policies and politicians dominate in times of conflict."

Researchers modelled the conflict as a land dispute between two groups—one with an elected leader whose ability to manage a conflict post-settlement is unknown to voters. This leader may also have a hawkish or dovish ideology and experts examined scenarios where voters know that, as well as those where they do not.

Each proposed settlement by the leader leads to a probability of conflict, the tougher the settlement—that is to say, the fewer resources ceded by the leader to the other group, the higher the chance it will not be accepted by many in that group leading to conflict.

"We show that the [political process](#) contributes to leaders proposing tougher settlements than their citizens would like, so that they can signal their ability to manage the potential conflict. This holds across the ideological spectrum," said Professor Bandyopadhyay.

Mandar Oak, Associate Professor in Economics at the University of Adelaide, commented: "When voters know neither the ideology of the

politician nor their ability the [electoral process](#) naturally favours the election of those who are ideological hawks. We show that in such a scenario, the involvement of third parties, such as the UN, in negotiations can be mutually beneficial."

**More information:** Siddhartha Bandyopadhyay et al, A model of conflict and leadership: Is there a hawkish drift in politics?, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0261646](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261646)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Global conflicts inflamed by election-seeking 'hawkish' politicians, study finds (2022, January 14) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-global-conflicts-inflamed-election-seeking-hawkish.html>

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