# Going Global: Assessing Presidential Foreign Travel

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**Abstract**

*Since President Roosevelt broke the Ironclad Custom—and especially following World War II—presidents have routinely traveled outside of the United States to visit other countries and meet foreign leaders. What explains the decision of presidents personally to go abroad? To examine this question, we collect and analyze a dataset of presidential international travel and public activities during the post-World War II period. We estimate the timing of presidential travel with a rich dataset on US foreign involvement, political agenda, and political incentives from 1950-2015. Our findings demonstrate that American political incentives are the strongest determinants of presidential foreign travel.*

Presidents increasingly travel to foreign countries where they meet foreign leaders, give speeches to foreign audiences, and visit American military bases. During the post-world wars era, the importance of foreign policy for American presidents and the interaction with the world has dramatically increased. In order to maintain US national security and the health of the economy in a post-modern global environment, presidents must cooperate, bargain with, and influence other executives around the world (Rose 1993; Smith 1997). To accomplish that, presidents need to conduct face-to-face diplomacy—travel and meet other world leaders, attend bilateral and multilateral meetings in the US and abroad, and influence citizens of other countries by giving media interviews or speeches to large audiences (Cohen 2016).

Several studies examine the extent of presidential travel abroad and the determinants of the timing and location of their trips, suggesting that there is some predictable pattern in presidential travel (Brace & Hinckley 1993; Doherty 2009; Lebovic & Saunders 2016; Smith 1997). Most of these studies, however, rely on indirect measures of presidential travel (activities rather than actual trips) and they lack a sufficient theoretical development of the domestic causes of presidential travel. Mainly, given that presidents are strategic political actors who manage their time and resources carefully and can rely on numerous political surrogates who serve the president and are committed to their message, why do they invest their time in such expensive and time-consuming activities? In this paper, we fill this void in the literature by offering and testing a theoretical model of the determinants of presidential foreign travel.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first review the change in presidential foreign travel—from the "Ironclad Custom" to the frequent trips to numerous countries that

characterize current presidents. Next, we review existing literature and propose a theoretical framework to examine presidential travel. We propose a model that combines international and domestic considerations. We then present our data—counts of presidential travel and public events—and our empirical analyses. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and limitations of our study.

## Breaking the Ironclad Custom

For more than 100 years, presidential travel outside of the US was prohibited by the "Ironclad Custom." Presidents were constrained by norms and expectations that were rooted in the nation's understanding of its role in the world as a beacon of liberty that is above the fray of entangling alliances and power politics that characterized European monarchies. The Republican government could remain small, decentralized, and unobtrusive only if it avoided taking part in the European power struggle. The president of the Republic was also expected to exhibit simplicity of manners—distinguished and admired but a fellow citizen nonetheless. Hence, a president should avoid the dignitaries and ceremonies of Monarchies around the world and should not be received by citizens of other countries as a Monarch (Ellis 2008).

In addition to these norms and expectations, technology during the early years of the Republic limited such travel. When George Washington was president, the passage across the Atlantic Ocean was dangerous and uncertain. Sailing ships could take anywhere from four to eight weeks to reach England. Hence, a trip to England would have kept the president away for several months; since there were no other forms of communication, the president would have been out of touch with the United States during his entire trip. Innovations during the 19$^{th}$ century reduced the travel time to England to a

week by steamship and allowed presidents to stay informed about events back home by telegraph (the transatlantic telegraph cable was completed in 1866 and at the beginning of the 20th century, wireless telegraph allowed people to communicate while at sea).

President Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Panama is the first trip of a president to a foreign country. Understanding the strong taboo against foreign travel, the administration released an itinerary that included only locations within the American-controlled "Canal Zone." No mention was made of the President's visit to Panama City, especially his meetings with the Panamanian president and their exchange of public greetings and speeches (Ellis 2008: 170-172). This trip and the trip of his successor, William Taft, to Juarez, Mexico were indeed firsts, but they were regarded as only minor departures from the custom.

President Woodrow Wilson, in his attempts to create the League of Nations, is the first president to have made an official trip to a foreign country (France). But following this visit—regarded at the time as a political mistake—his successors refrained from such trips and limited themselves to traveling close to the borders and only visiting Canada (Harding) and Cuba (Coolidge).

The proscription against foreign travel completely crumbled during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. In his first term, the change was small—traveling to Canada, Haiti, Colombia, and Panama. But, following his reelection in 1936 and especially after the outbreak of World War II, FDR traveled across the globe showing no sign that such travels are, or should be, limited. His successors, from Truman to Obama took nearly 300 trips abroad visiting over 100 foreign countries and spending over 1,500 days abroad.

Figure 1 illustrates the scale and scope of presidential travel from Truman to Obama (1945-2015). Each country a president has visited is colored. The yellow to red color scale reflects the number of presidential visits in a country over the entire period—a lighter (yellow) color stands for few visits (1-2) and a stronger (red) color stands for numerous visits (30 or more). Except for African countries, presidents have visited most countries in the world, returning to some countries numerous times—especially neighboring countries (Canada and Mexico), European allies (UK, France, Germany, and Italy), and major world and regional powers (Brazil, China, Egypt, Israel, Japan, and Russia).

[Figure 1 Here]

Not all presidents traveled at the same rate and each president shows significant variation in his travel schedule throughout his tenure. Figure 2 plots the number of trips of each president from Truman to Obama in each year in office (1945-2015). Except for Truman, every president traveled nearly every year in office. The number of trips was relatively modest from Truman to Reagan, averaging less than three trips each year. Starting from President George H.W. Bush, the number of trips dramatically increased to over six trips each year. This is consistent with the post-modern president thesis (Smith 1997): With the rapid increase of globalization since the end of the Cold War, presidents have found it more important to travel to foreign countries.

[Figure 2 Here]

Over time, presidents have also increased the number of countries they visit and the time spent abroad. Figure 3 illustrates this increase using a smoothed trend graph (hence, it does not reflect the extent of variation between years in office and between

presidents). As the figure illustrates, presidents have significantly increased the number of countries they visit and the days spent outside of the United States since the end of the Cold War. In the last decade, we see some decline in the number of countries visited and the days spent abroad, followed by a small uptick in recent years.

[Figure 3 Here]

What explains the variation in presidential travel across presidents and for each president? Are these actions randomly distributed or patterned across the term? What are the environmental, political, and global incentives that explain presidential foreign travel? In this paper, we address these questions using data on presidential travel and additional explanatory factors from Truman to Obama.

## Theoretical Framework

Presidents are strategic actors who carefully allocate their scarce resources. They need to travel abroad to engage in face-to-face diplomacy, but they must also be present and active in national politics. Some travels, such as summits of world leaders, are all but mandatory for presidents while other occasions, such as President Obama's trip to the Middle East and his public speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, are at the discretion of the president. What, then, explains their decision to travel?[1] We expect that the international and domestic environments will both provide demands and opportunities for travel. We therefore outline three main domains of influence: international involvement, policy agenda, and political considerations. We then examine the effect of these domains on presidential foreign travel, and compare it to domestic travel.

[1] In this study, we do not examine the effects of presidential foreign travel. See, for example, Brace & Hinckley (1993) and Cohen (2016).

**International Involvement**

As the head of state, presidents represent the United States on the global stage and are therefore affected by world affairs and the level of US involvement in them (Walt 2005; Martin 2005). In the era of the modern presidency, the president often finds himself playing the role of chief spokesman for the United States abroad where he meets, collaborates, and negotiates with other world leaders to promote exports, initiate bilateral projects, and sign treaties and contracts (Nitsch 2007). As Commander in Chief, the president is required to be visible, defend America's foreign interests, and marshal and direct resources of hard power to meet his foreign policy agenda. To accomplish these goals, presidents are expected to "go international" (Smith 1997).

This expectation has been amplified by advances in technology and increased involvement of the United States in the global community. Technological developments such as Air Force One, the advent of in-air refueling, as well as sophisticated and secured communication technologies afford presidents more opportunities to travel abroad while maintaining their involvement in national politics (Ellis 2008). The increased involvement of the United States in the global community requires presidents to conduct face-to-face diplomacy to ensure the cooperation of allies and to promote the president's economic and foreign policy agendas (Marra, Ostrom & Simon 1990; Rose 1988; Lebovic & Saunders 2016: 19).

Given the post-modern president's responsibilities of meeting, negotiating, and working with foreign leaders, we expect the president's travel schedule to change as American military and economic involvement in the world waxes and wanes. Specifically, we expect that when the United States is engaged in more military

operations abroad, presidents would emphasize their role as Commander-in-Chief by traveling around the world more often to build, strengthen, and reaffirm alliances. Similarly, when trade balance declines—the United States exports less than it imports—presidents should travel as a negotiator-in-chief to open new markets and improve existing ones (Nitsch 2007).

**Policy Agenda**

The extent to which a president participates in the international sphere is largely dependent upon which tools and strategies are granted or constrained by the domestic policy agenda (Kriner 2009; Lebovic & Saunders 2016). Presidents act based on the pressures of the political agenda that they face. To create a foreign policy and overall "national interest" amidst the various competing priorities, presidents must contend with the legislature, governmental institutions, interest groups, and public attention (Milner 1992: 772). To understand the impact of "the black box of domestic politics" (Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman 1992: 8) upon presidents' actions, we examine the policy agenda, congressional agenda, and public agenda. Each of these groups possess the powerful ability to raise awareness about various issues, thus shaping the political agenda and steering the policy-making process (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Cobb and Elder 1972; Edwards & Wood 1999; Light 1991; Wood & Peake 1998).

In discussing the policy agenda, we refer to the extent to which the political system is focused and can focus on foreign events. A key factor in this focus is the state of the economy, which consumes much of the public attention. When the economy is in decline, the entire political system is focused on it. During this time, the president is expected to focus on the economy and avoid foreign endeavors.

Furthermore, presidents can use foreign travel as a way to divert attention from domestic issues. According to the now-rich work on diversionary theory, presidents can (and do?) divert public and elite attention from domestic issues to foreign policy by deploying troops in order to improve their public standing and electoral fortunes (Brace & Hinckley 1993; DeReuen 1995, 2000; Hess & Orphanides 1995; James & Rioux 1998; Mintz 2004).[2] But presidents are mindful of the cost of using force and the temporal gain it may generate and are therefore careful in using force to divert attention. Presidents prefer to have high levels of support and strong electoral margins before engaging in extensive foreign policy activity (Ostrom & Job 1986; Potter 2013). They may, therefore, opt for more peaceful means of diverting attention. Andrade and colleagues (1996, 2003) demonstrate that presidents can divert attention from domestic issues and focus the public agenda on foreign policy by "going public" on foreign affairs. Similarly, Wood (2012) finds that presidents often engage in rhetorical threat war with other countries—or "saber rattling"—as a way to focus attention on foreign affairs, to affect electoral outcomes, and bolster domestic support. Following the same reasoning, presidents can divert attention by traveling abroad, meeting with world leaders, and delivering speeches to foreign audiences. We therefore expect that presidents will respond to public concern about domestic issues—most significantly, the economy—by focusing on foreign issues and traveling abroad.

Finally, while the president has broad powers to conduct foreign policy, Congress's role in creating the policy agenda can greatly influence where a president devotes his time and energy (Howell & Pevehouse 2007). Presidents are attuned to the

[2] The connection between domestic problems and foreign actions also affects other countries. Fordham (2005) demonstrates that countries which are likely targets of diversionary use of force by the United States behave more cooperatively when the American economy is performing poorly.

congressional agenda (Cavari 2017). We therefore expect that when Congress is concerned about foreign policy, presidents will travel abroad more.

**Political Considerations**

Through their actions, presidents affect and are affected by the political environment. In his historical piece on international agreements and domestic politics, Robert Putnam recognized that a president would "give primacy to his domestic calculus" when formulating a foreign policy (1988: 457). Thus, we expect the political environment created by public opinion, relations with Congress, and the president's time in office to affect presidential travel.

General public opinion toward the president can often motivate the president to focus on foreign affairs. Beginning with Mueller's (1970) discourse on the "rally-round-the-flag" effect, conventional wisdom has coalesced around the idea that "presidential actions in the foreign arena enhance the public standing of the president" (Marra, Ostrom, & Simon 1990: 592). While the immediate response in approval is "transitory"–often as short as 30 days (Marra, Ostrom, & Simon 1990)–traveling abroad offers the president a chance to improve his political currency in the form of public opinion polls (Mackuen 1983). Thus, for a narrowly elected president or one that teeters on razor-thin approval margins, international diplomacy is an opportunity to climb in the polls, no matter how small the gain may be (Potter 2013). The president's ability to manipulate or manage public support through foreign policy incentivizes and should logically lead to an increase in presidential actions abroad (Marra, Ostrom, & Simon 1990; Geer 1996; Canes-Wrone 2009). Indeed, early work has shown that presidential foreign travel is inversely related to approval (Brace & Hinckley 1993), reflecting the president's belief

that emphasizing certain issues and being seen as a national leader on the international stage can positively influence public perceptions (Druckman & Jacobs 2009).

Another dominant impact on presidential activities is his relationship with Congress. Following Aaron Wildavsky's (1966) famous assertion that presidents are more successful in their foreign policy agenda than in their domestic one, we expect that when presidents face an oppositional Congress, they will turn to the policy area they can influence—foreign policy. This, however, is strongly affected by the political, partisan balance within Congress. When the parties are polarized on policy, the president often sees an opportunity to create consensus, build unity, and call for "politics to stop at the water's edge" by personally engaging in diplomacy abroad (Smith 1997: 222). Though these diplomatic missions are announced in relation to foreign policy objectives, they are closely related to support for the president's agenda at home (Brace & Hinckley 1993). Viewing presidential travel through the lens of game theory, the president, as a rational actor, may conduct a cost-benefit analysis and see a window to maximize his expected utility by engaging abroad (Kriner 2009; Lebovic & Saunders 2016). Still, divided governments and high party polarization introduce excessive burdens on government function (Binder 2003). We therefore expect that presidents will travel more during divided governments, yet they will find it more difficult to travel when they face a polarized Congress controlled by the opposition party.

Finally, the political calendar also affects presidential activities. First, during an election year, incumbent presidents are likely to avoid foreign travel and focus on their reelection bids (Brace & Hinckley 1993; Doherty 2009). Second, research indicates that presidents travel abroad more in their second term (Lebovic & Saunders 2016),

specifically in their final year in office (Brace & Hinckley 1993). Whether attempting to divert attention from "lame duck" struggles or seeking to take a victory lap and build a legacy in light of their newfound freedom from reelection obligations, presidents will likely increase their foreign travel late in their presidency.

Beyond travel, we examine how different presidents utilize their ability to make public appeals in Washington, on tour and, our main interest, in foreign countries. Here, we are interested in the comparison between domestic and foreign events. We expect that presidential foreign events will be different than the other two types of activities—events in Washington and during domestic travel.

## Data and Method

We use two sources to measure presidential travel: Foreign trips of presidents from the Office of the Historian,[3] and presidential public activities (speeches) divided by location—foreign, domestic tour or in Washington—from the Public Papers of the President.[4] We aggregate both measures of travel to six-month, semiannual periods (January-June, July-December). Semiannual aggregation allows us to account for variation yet avoid excessive noise due to presidents' calendars. Because of data availability of some of our independent variables, our data are from 1950 to 2015. During this period, there are 132 data-points, in which presidents traveled in 104 (79%). On average, presidents took 2.1 trips (sd=1.61) to 4.8 countries (sd=4.24), and spent 11.7 days abroad (sd=10.36) in a six-month period. In terms of activities, presidents held 6.56 speeches abroad (sd=6.01), compared to 60.67 in Washington (sd=20.96) and 29.14 on

[3] Available online at https://history.state.gov/
[4] Available online at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/

domestic tours (sd=17.02). In our analyses below, we account for possible difference between the first and second half of each year.

We estimate two sets of models. First, we focus on foreign travel—how many trips a president takes and to how many countries in each half-year period. As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, these measures of travel best demonstrate the level of foreign travel of presidents and provide ample variation for empirical analyses. Because of the nature of the dependent variable—count of trips and of countries—we use Poisson estimators.

Second, we examine public events in all three locations—in Washington, on tour in the US, and traveling abroad. Given the exclusivity of the three types of events—a president cannot be abroad and give a domestic speech while he is in Washington—we model these public activities simultaneously using a Seemingly Unrelated Regression model. Because the dependent variables are counts, we use Poisson estimators.

Based on our hypotheses detailed above, both sets of models include the following explanatory variables:

US International Involvement. We include two variables of international involvement. First, to measure the use, commitment, and visibility of American hard power in the world, we use the number of US troops deployed or stationed abroad per year (*Troops*). From 1950-2003, the data are from a Heritage Foundation study; from 2003-2015, the data are from the Defense Manpower Data Center. Second, to measure the balance of economic relations, we use the annual balance of trade accounts (*Trade Balance*)—that is, the difference between import and export markets as a percentage of the current GDP. Data are from the Federal Reserve. To allow for causal testing, we use

the difference between trade levels in t-1 and in t. We do not lag the level of troops, because presidents are expected to react to current levels of troops.

Policy Agenda. To gauge the salience of foreign affairs on the political agenda, we include measures of the public, congressional, and policy agendas. First, as a strong measure of policy focus, we include the change in seasonally adjusted aggregated unemployment numbers from the Federal Reserve Economic Data (*Unemployment*). Second, for public perspectives on the importance of domestic affairs, we use Gallup's monthly Most Important Problem survey, which asks individuals to choose what they feel is the most important problem facing the United States. Relying on coding by the Policy Agendas Project, we aggregate all economy-related responses to generate a measure of economic interest (*MIP Economy*). Finally, we include a covariate of congressional attention to foreign policy, using the sum of bills introduced in Congress that are coded by the Policy Agendas Project as bills concerning foreign affairs (*Bills Foreign*). Bills and MIP are lagged to allow for causal testing.

Political Environment. For the political environment model, we include a number of variables to describe the domestic political environment. First, we account for presidential approval using Gallup's presidential approval ratings (*Approval*). Second, we use dummy variables to indicate whether a year is an election year (*Election*) or in the seventh and eighth year of a presidency (*Lame*). Because of the difference between the last two years in office, we coded the first year after the final midterm election as 1 and the president's final year in office as 2.[5] We also control for the relationship between the president and Congress by including an indicator for divided government (one or both

[5] We code only the second half of 1968 as lame duck. President Johnson announced that he will not run for reelection only in March 1968. Until then he was an incumbent running for reelection and was viewed and acted as such.

chambers not controlled by the party of the president). To account for the level of party polarization, we use DW-Nominate's measure of difference in party means in the Senate (*Polarization Senate*). We also include an interaction between the two (*Divided X Polarization*)—accounting for situations of a polarized Congress controlled by the opposition party. Approval is lagged one observation to allow for causal testing (with the exception of administration change where we use the current ratings); all others represent a current state of the political system.

To account for the differences between presidents and the effect of time on the challenges and opportunities each president faces, we cluster the standard errors by Congress. To account for possible differences between the first and second half of each year, we include an indicator for the second half.

## Results

The standardized coefficients of the two travel models are summarized in Table 1. Column 1 summarizes our model using count of trips as the outcome variable. Column 2 summarizes the model of number of countries visited. The two models demonstrate very similar results. Number of troops offers no significant prediction value for travel. Yet, trade balance fits our expectations—presidents travel less to foreign countries when the balance of trade is improving—that is, when US exports grow in comparison to imports.

[Table 1 Here]

Of the three measures of the policy agenda—unemployment, public concern, and congressional attention—unemployment and public concern have significant effects on both measures of presidential travel. When unemployment is high—indicating a struggling economy and strong domestic concerns—the president avoids foreign trips.

Yet, when the public shows a concern with economic issues, presidents increase the number of countries they visit. Congressional agenda has no effect on presidential foreign travel.

The most informative covariance and indicators, however, are those which measure the political environment. Presidents are attuned to the political calendar and their standing vis-à-vis Congress. Presidents travel less during election years and travel more during their final years in office. They feel more comfortable traveling (number of trips) when they enjoy public approval. Finally, presidents also travel more when Congress is divided and when party polarization is high; yet, when presidents face a polarized Congress controlled by the opposition party (interaction term), they avoid foreign travel.

Table 2 summarizes the standardized coefficients of the events model (public speeches). The third column, events abroad, offers another indication of the effect of the different factors on foreign travel—presidents are tuned into the policy agenda (unemployment), political environment (divided government and polarization), and their time in office.

[Table 2 Here]

Yet, our interest in this model is to compare the extent of public events in the three different settings—in Washington, on a domestic tour, and abroad. Differences are as expected. Presidents deliver more speeches on domestic tour during election years, yet speak more often in Washington and abroad in their final years in office. During periods of divided government, presidents prefer to speak outside of Washington or in foreign countries. Polarization incites more public activity in all three forms, yet most

significantly abroad. Similar to the results in the travel model, presidents speak less on tour—both domestic and foreign—when they are facing a polarized Congress controlled by the opposition party. The size of the effect is significantly larger for foreign events.

## Discussion

In modern times, presidents are expected to travel abroad to engage in face-to-face diplomacy, but they must also be present and active in national politics. To balance these pressures and others, presidents need to be strategic actors and allocate their scarce resources carefully. Our empirical evidence aims to test how presidents weigh these pressures. The models and results reveal that presidents respond to foreign and domestic policy pressures as well as political considerations.

Presidents respond to the international environment and the US's involvement in it. Presidents are active players in promoting American business abroad. This supports theoretical arguments that international coordination is needed to boost exports (Nitsch 2007). While presidential travel does not correlate with the level of troop deployment, we find a strong negative correlation between trips and change in trade balance. This directly contradicts the literature which argues that, as more troops are spread around the world, the president would need to visit them in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief (Smith 1997; Marra, Ostrom, & Simon 1990). However, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that large numbers of troops being stationed abroad (in South Korea or Germany during the Cold War, for example) is often treated as such a normal situation that it doesn't demand special presidential attention; for instance, Presidents Carter and Reagan only visited troops abroad once each (in Germany and Korea, respectively) during a time when huge numbers of military members were permanently stationed abroad. Once the

Cold War ended, permanent overseas posts were significantly downsized and the US was involved in more, smaller expeditionary conflicts. This seems to have resulted in troops abroad being seen as a novelty in the public consciousness and as an opportunity for presidents to fulfill their role as Commanders-in-Chief in a conflict environment; indeed, President Clinton visited expeditionary troops deployed to Honduras, Macedonia, and Bosnia (twice) while President Bush met with troops in Yugoslavia and, numerous times, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our public events model demonstrates that when a large number of American soldiers are deployed around the world, presidents avoid speechmaking and retract to governing functions. Consistent with the travel models, presidents demonstrate a negative correlation between trade balance and public speeches. When the trade balance declines, presidents engage in more public events abroad, an effect significantly larger than that of domestic tours.

The policy agenda has a strong effect on presidential foreign travel. Presidents understand that domestic problems come first—if the economy is in shambles, they cannot travel around the globe and speak to foreign audiences. Public and congressional agendas have a more limited effect. Public concern with the economy weakly correlates with travel to more countries, hence offering some support to the diversionary theory. This can be seen anecdotally in President Obama's travel schedule: during his first year in office—at the height of the Great Recession—Obama set a record for presidential inaugural year travel. Presidents do not hold more public events when the public is concerned about the economy.

Yet, our main contribution is in the effect of the political considerations. Presidents are mindful of the opportunities and limitations of the political environment and utilize them when deciding whether to travel and conduct public events. They feel safer traveling when they enjoy public approval. Presidents tend to speak more domestically than abroad during election years and are most engaged in foreign travel in their final years in office. Most significant, however, is their response to the political balance in Congress. Consistent with the intuition of the two presidencies thesis, presidents travel around the globe and deliver public speeches to foreign audiences when they face a divided government or when Congress is polarized. In other words, when Washington, DC becomes too gridlocked to work, the president travels abroad in order to jumpstart the debate at home or to accomplish his foreign policy goals that he cannot push through Congress. President Clinton is a prime example of this. His first two years in office, he only took four and six trips abroad, respectively. His second term in office saw then-record highs of polarization in the Senate; he responded by taking seven (twice), 10, and a presidential-record 11 trips abroad. The impossible governing condition of a polarized divided government constrains the opportunities of presidents who then stay in Washington and limit their public appearances.

These findings are not without limitations. First, the dearth of data may limit the understanding of causality and the broad applicability of our study. While our independent variable datasets are rich, we were simply constrained by the low *n* of presidential activities. This is partly due to the low number of annual trips presidents take as well as the relative novelty of international presidential activities. This lack of data points has also impacted the existing body of research. With minimal empirical analyses

available and theories based primarily on case studies of one or two presidents, there is very little consensus in the literature on how presidential travel may occur.

Another limitation that frustrated our studies is the lack of some sort of "chaos index," or a metric that can indicate whether the international arena was calm or frenzied, whether due to a stock market meltdown, tsunami, or a wave of popular revolutions. We attempted to measure this uncertainty in our first model by accounting for economic and conflictual instability in the world. Our efforts were hampered by the lack of academic or practitioner consensus on which metrics best measure global economic health as well as a lack of indicators for social stability in the world. Creating a more sound chaos index is outside the scope of this project, but such a variable could go a long way to clarifying the relationship between the president's international travels and the global environment. As more data becomes available, other trends and relationships may become more obvious that could provide more fertile ground for further research.

The main focus of this paper is to determine what factors might propel a president to leave the country; as such, our models seek to identify those factors. Further research should be conducted to find out *why* certain factors have the impacts they do. For instance, why do international conflicts and public opinion affect the president's policy focus but not his travel schedule? Why wouldn't the president's international activities be matched with his policy goals? Also, why does the lame duck period impact presidential travel? Is it because he is taking a victory lap and attempting to build a foreign policy legacy or is it because his political capital has evaporated and he is eager to leave Washington, DC?

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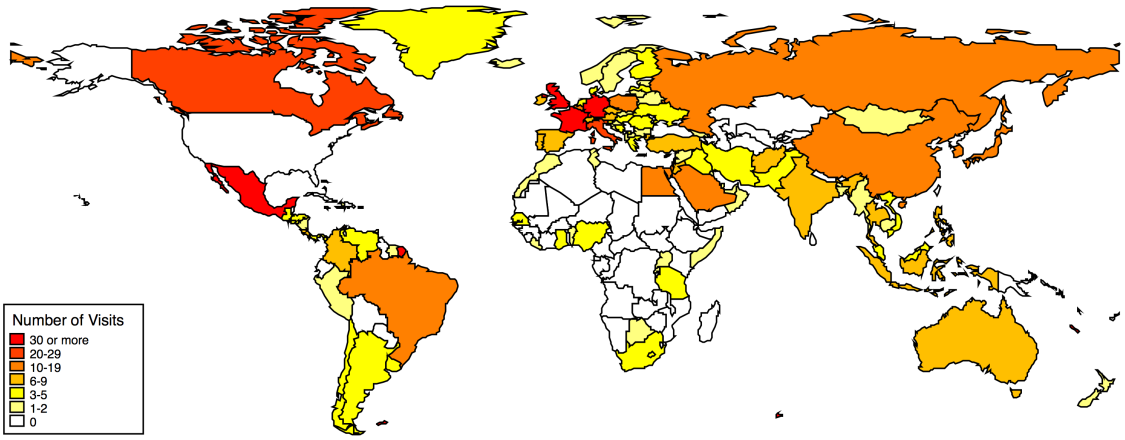
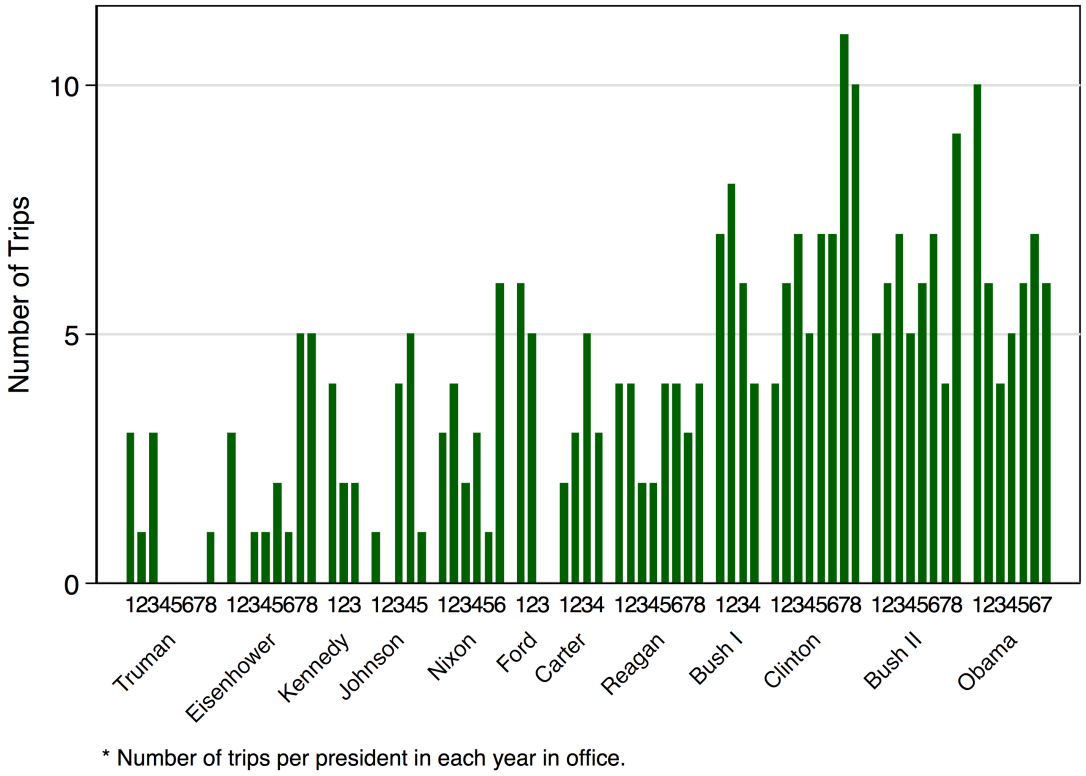
**Figure 1: Scale and Scope of Presidential Trips Abroad, Truman to Obama, 1945-2015**



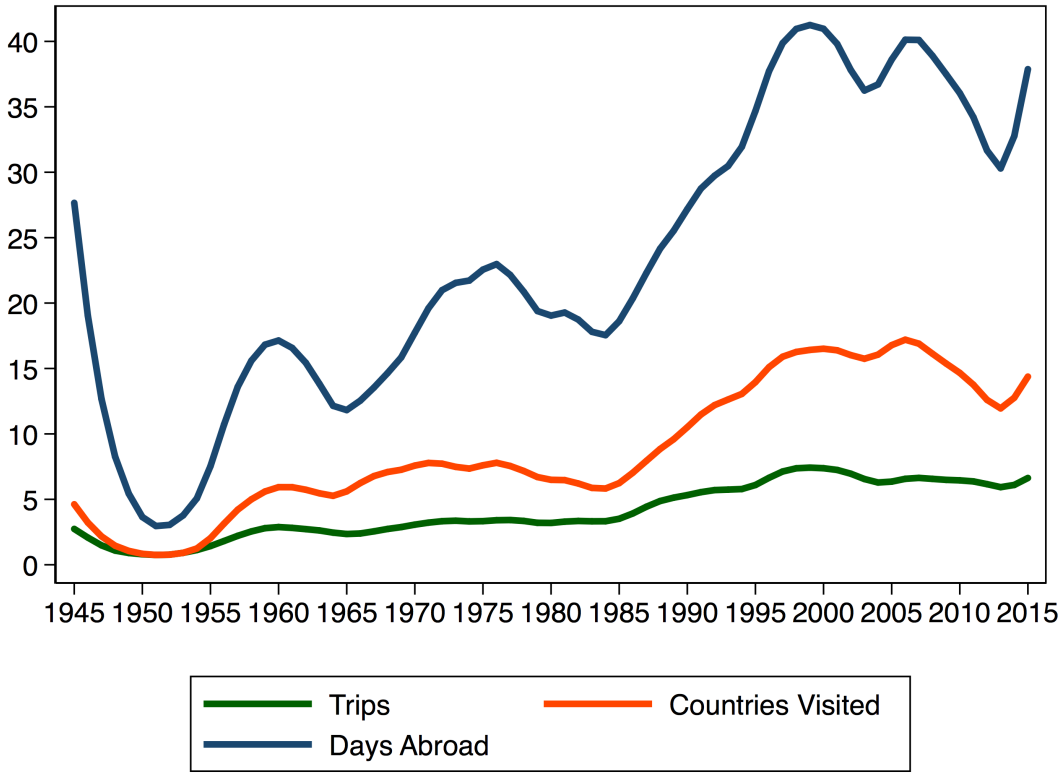

Note: Data are from the Office of the Historian.

**Figure 2: Number of Trips Abroad: Truman to Obama, 1945-2015**




Note: Data are from the Office of the Historian.

**Figure 3: Trends in Presidential Travel, 1945-2015**




Note: Data are from the Office of the Historian (number of trips, countries visited, and days abroad). All series are aggregated to annual sums.

**Table 1: Assessing Determinants of Presidential Foreign Travel**

| | (1)<br>Travel - Trips | (2)<br>Travel - Countries |
|---|---|---|
| Troops | -0.064 | -0.020 |
| | (0.0264) | (0.0436) |
| Trade Balance (difference, t, t-1) | -0.053*** | -0.021* |
| | (37.43) | (62.74) |
| Unemployment (t-1) | -0.186** | -0.095*** |
| | (0.0663) | (0.0668) |
| Public Agenda (Economy, t-1) | 0.145 | 0.060* |
| | (0.00699) | (0.00623) |
| Congressional Agenda (Bills, Foreign, t-1) | -0.034 | -0.005 |
| | (0.00654) | (0.00866) |
| Election year | -0.071* | -0.042* |
| | (0.130) | (0.170) |
| Lame Duck (final 2 years) | 0.125*** | 0.053** |
| | (0.0859) | (0.130) |
| Presidential Approval (t-1) | 0.091* | 0.022 |
| | (0.00428) | (0.00461) |
| Divided Government | 0.460*** | 0.190** |
| | (0.429) | (0.581) |
| Polarization (Senate) | 0.439*** | 0.186*** |
| | (0.578) | (0.844) |
| Divided X Polarization | -0.468*** | -0.198*** |
| | (0.559) | (0.759) |
| Second half of the year | -0.014 | -0.018 |
| | (0.126) | (0.140) |
| *N* | 129 | 129 |

Poisson Count models.
Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

**Table 2: Assessing Presidential Public Activities in DC, on Tour and in Foreign Countries**

| | (1) Events - DC | (2) Events - Tour | (3) Events - Foreign |
|---|---|---|---|
| Troops | -0.005*** | -0.018*** | -0.038*** |
| | (0.00682) | (0.0105) | (0.0220) |
| Trade Balance (difference, t, t-1) | 0.001 | -0.006*** | -0.013** |
| | (14.90) | (27.23) | (45.32) |
| Unemployment (t-1) | 0.001 | 0.002 | -0.053*** |
| | (0.0136) | (0.0209) | (0.0457) |
| Public Agenda (Economy, t-1) | -0.001 | -0.006** | 0.025 |
| | (0.00125) | (0.00195) | (0.00421) |
| Congressional Agenda (Bills, Foreign, t-1) | -0.001 | -0.002* | -0.008 |
| | (0.00200) | (0.00264) | (0.00674) |
| Election year | -0.001 | 0.010*** | -0.022** |
| | (0.0305) | (0.0395) | (0.102) |
| Lame Duck (final 2 years) | 0.003*** | -0.003* | 0.027*** |
| | (0.0240) | (0.0327) | (0.0712) |
| Presidential Approval (t-1) | -0.000 | -0.002 | 0.013 |
| | (0.000978) | (0.00145) | (0.00316) |
| Divided Government | -0.007** | 0.022*** | 0.171*** |
| | (0.100) | (0.160) | (0.369) |
| Polarization (Senate) | 0.008*** | 0.016*** | 0.119*** |
| | (0.149) | (0.230) | (0.541) |
| Divided X Polarization | 0.002 | -0.026*** | -0.169*** |
| | (0.153) | (0.241) | (0.535) |
| Second half of the year | -0.005*** | 0.010*** | -0.016** |
| | (0.0233) | (0.0339) | (0.0712) |
| *N* | 129 | | |

Seemingly Unrelated Regressions. Poisson Count models.
Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$