

How a prime minister's leadership style affects their parliament's role in security decisions



Parliaments sometimes get to influence security policy, but not always. [Juliet Kaarbo](#) draws on [Leadership Trait Analysis](#) to argue that prime ministerial leadership style is a critical factor in determining the role of parliaments in foreign affairs. She demonstrates the plausibility of this argument by comparing how Turkish and UK prime ministers' orientations towards parliament influenced key security policies.

The long-held view that parliaments are insignificant players in security policy is coming under considerable challenge by [recent research](#) demonstrating that parliaments can and have played a critical role in key security decisions. Parliaments, of course, are not always influential or even involved in security policy and contemporary scholarship identifies a number of factors that affect parliamentary influence, including the particular powers held by parliaments, intraparty divisions, and the context of the security mission. Missing from this laundry list is the prime minister, the most important political agent in parliamentary systems. In my [research](#), I explore how differences in PMs' leadership styles enhance or minimize parliamentary influence in security policy.

PMs' orientations to parliaments' role are important because parliamentary authority in security matters is often constitutionally and politically ambiguous. Even in the American system, in which the legislative role is constitutionally prescribed and further codified in the War Powers Resolution, presidents *sometimes* seek Congressional approval for troop deployment; at other times they do not.

The ambiguity of a legislative role in security is also present in many parliamentary systems and even when parliamentary approval is legally required, there is often disagreement about when and how parliamentary involvement is to be triggered. When there is no constitutional basis for such involvement, as in the UK tradition of the Royal Prerogative, there is considerable scope for PMs to decide if and when to involve parliament.

Parliamentary involvement in UK security policy may have become political convention, as [James Strong](#) and others have argued, but this convention is a product of successive decisions by PMs to allow the House of Commons to have a say. When parliaments are asked to (or themselves initiate) a debate and vote on a matter of foreign affairs, PMs also vary in the way they manage the parliamentary process. PMs, for example, may play a lead in disciplining their party, delegate discipline to others, or choose to remain above the political fray.

Prime ministers' orientations to parliaments are undoubtedly influenced by many factors, including their personal leadership style. PMs, for example, may differ in their overall involvement with parliament and they may differ in how they react to intraparty politics. They may also vary in the extent to which they engage in denial of opposition or wishful thinking that the vote will be in their favour. These differences are affected by basic personality traits.

I argue that the seven personality traits captured in [Margaret Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis](#) framework – belief in ability to control events; conceptual complexity; need for power; distrust of others; in-group bias; self-confidence; and task orientation – affect PMs' leadership styles and how they deal with parliament. Research has demonstrated that these seven traits systematically link to leaders' propensity to challenge or respect constraints, their openness to information and advice, the structure of their advisory systems, the quality of decision-making processes, and the policies leaders choose for their country or organization. From this research, I derive expectations about PM orientations toward parliamentary influence in security policies.

These involve three questions. First, which PMs are most likely to fight against parliamentary involvement? I argue that PMs who have a high need for power, and high levels of distrust, are likely to challenge or circumscribe any parliamentary role. Second, which PMs will actively engage in the management of the parliamentary process? Research suggests that PMs who have a strong belief in their ability to control events and high conceptual complexity will be more involved. Third, how effective are PMs in the management of that process? From work on leaders and policy mistakes, we would expect leaders who are low in complexity and high in self-confidence to blunder the process through mismanagement and underestimate the degree of opposition in parliament. This type of PM ineffectively opens the door for greater parliamentary influence.

Turkish politics provides one example of how different PM leadership styles influence PMs' orientations to parliaments and their role in foreign and security policy. In [my study with Çuhadar, Kesgin, and Özkeçeci-Taner](#), we argue that the surprise Turkish parliament vote in 2003 to decline the American request to use Turkey as a base for operations in the Iraq War was a result of the PM's bungling the management of the vote. In stark contrast was the Turkish parliament's approval of the deployment of troops in the 1991 Gulf War, which, we argue, came about from a very forceful leadership dictating its terms to parliament. The key differences in the personality traits for the leaders in these cases were their self-confidence and complexity.

Another example comes from the UK. In [my article with Daniel Kenealy](#), we note that in the highly unusual House of Commons defeat of David Cameron's preference to attack Syria in 2013, the PM was criticised for recalling Parliament in a haphazard manner, not doing enough to secure support from wavering backbenchers, being overconfident, and underestimating the opposition. Cameron's call for parliamentary support can be contrasted with Blair's reluctance to go to the House of Commons in the 2003 Iraq war; and Cameron's mismanagement of the process can be contrasted with Blair effectively turning the Iraq vote into a confidence motion and passionately delivering an impressive rhetorical case.

Can the differences between these two PMs' orientations toward parliament's role in security policy be captured by Leadership Trait Analysis? Blair's higher belief in his ability to control events and his higher need for power may explain his lower openness to parliamentary involvement and his higher level of active involvement. Cameron's comparatively higher complexity may explain his greater openness to parliamentary involvement and his higher self-confidence may explain his ineffective management.

The examples of Turkish and UK security policy demonstrate plausibility for my argument that PMs' orientations are part of the picture in parliamentary involvement in security affairs. If the role of parliaments in security policy is increasing in significance, and if the relationship between executives and legislatures [is being recalibrated](#) in modern parliamentary democracies, the executive, led by the PM, has considerable authority to interpret, manage, and even manipulate this relationship.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in [The British Journal of Politics and International Relations](#).

About the Author



[Juliet Kaarbo](#) is Professor in Politics & International Relations at the University of Edinburgh.

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