Accessing the Elites: Rebel Wartime Lobbying in the United States*

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Abstract

Rebel groups have inexpensive diplomacy tools (e.g., diasporas, media campaigns) in their arsenal, but some invest substantial financial resources in hiring professional lobbying firms in democratic countries. Why do rebels pursue this costly strategy? Focusing on lobbying in the United States, we highlight that lobbying offers direct access to decision-makers that low-cost diplomatic channels cannot provide. We argue that rebels turn to lobbying firms under two conditions: when escalating armed conflict creates urgent demand for signaling to foreign patrons preference alignment to secure rapid support, and when rebel service provision to civilians generates political legitimacy that lobbying can translate into foreign backing. Using original data on rebel lobbying derived from Foreign Agents Registration Act filings, we show that both conflict escalation and rebel service provision are associated with an increased likelihood of rebels hiring lobbying firms. Our findings highlight private lobbying as a distinct non-violent "technology of rebellion".

Keywords: Civil wars, rebel diplomacy, private lobbying

3,508 Words

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During wartime, rebel groups employ a range of low-cost diplomacy tools to garner support in democratic countries: mobilizing diasporas, running propaganda campaigns, and operating informal offices abroad (Huang 2016). These relatively inexpensive channels allow rebels to reach international audiences without incurring major financial burdens. Yet, some rebel groups choose to invest extraordinary sums in contracting professional lobbying firms. In 1986, the Angolan rebel group UNITA, for example, hired the Washington-based lobbying firm, Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly, for $600,000 to push for U.S. military aid (Ottoway and Tyler 1986).

Existing research shows that rebels pursue non-violent strategies to bolster their international reputation, including providing basic services to civilians (Heger and Jung 2017; Stewart 2018), launching social media campaigns (Jones and Mattiacci 2019; Bestvater and Loyle 2023), and even holding wartime elections (Arves et al. 2019; Cunningham et al. 2021). Diplomacy is often seen as part of this repertoire. What remains unclear is why some groups rely on low-cost diplomatic channels, while others devote scarce resources to private lobbying.

This study asks under what conditions rebels turn to such high-end form of diplomacy in foreign democratic countries. We focus specifically on the U.S., as the country has been one of the most frequent interveners in civil wars historically, making it a crucial target for rebel lobbying efforts. We argue that professional lobbying offers a distinct advantage: instead of relying on the uncertain prospect that elites will eventually respond to shifts in public sentiment, lobbying provides rebels with direct access to important decision-makers in key major powers.

We theorize that rebels will prioritize this direct access to the elites under two primary conditions. First, during escalating armed conflict, when survival is at stake, lobbying offers a channel to rapidly secure aid, sanctions, or diplomatic pressure with immediate implications for the battlefield. This is when such access is most immediately valuable. Second, when rebels have already invested in providing social services to civilians, lobbying helps rebels translate these efforts into political leverage that allows democratic policymakers to justify supporting them as backing legitimate actors and to mitigate potential public backlash. This is when the benefits of lobbying are most likely to materialize in the form of tangible support.

To test our claims, we collect original data on rebel groups' hiring of private lobbying firms in the U.S. between 1945 and 2012, which are drawn from filings under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), and combine them with existing data on rebel governance and conflict escalation. Our findings show that rebels are more likely to hire lobbyists when conflict escalates and when they engage in social service provision, all of which are consistent with our expectations about when direct elite access is most valuable and when the benefits of lobbying are most likely to materialize. Our placebo tests, sensitivity analyses, and selection-corrected models all help alleviate threats to inference from both selection bias and endogeneity.

Survival, Political Leverage, and Rebel Lobbying

What distinguishes lobbying from other diplomatic channels is that it not only allows the bypassing of the diffuse and uncertain process of shaping public sentiment, but also grants direct access to relevant decision-makers. Professional lobbying offers a distinct advantage even over institutionalized conventional diplomacy. Conventional diplomacy, such as dispatching rebel representatives and opening rebel offices abroad, also seeks meetings with policymakers (Huang 2016; Albert 2022; Huddleston and Hall 2023), but its ability to do so likely depends on ad hoc factors.

Professional lobbyists, by contrast, enter democratic policy arenas with pre-existing relationships, expertise, and reputational capital that enable more efficient advocacy. Their embeddedness in policymaking networks can allow rebels to present demands directly to actors who shape sanctions policy, foreign aid, and diplomatic interventions. This capacity for expedited elite access, therefore, differentiates lobbying from other diplomatic options in terms of benefits and costs. Then, the question becomes: under what conditions rebels deem this costly strategy particularly necessary and worthwhile?

We argue that the first condition arises during periods of escalating armed conflict. Escalation heightens both the rebel-side urgency for rapid external support and the foreign state-side willingness to aid credible, competent partners. Intensifying battlefield violence threatens rebel survival, particularly given the asymmetric nature of civil wars and opposing states' typically superior military capacity. As the risk of defeat increases, so does rebels' need for swift assistance from external states. Whereas public diplomacy might shift attitudes over months or even years, lobbying offers a quicker route to material intervention. For rebels facing existential danger due to battlefield pressures, such speed should make lobbying quite attractive.

Moreover, higher-stakes forms of aid, such as combat support, or coercive diplomatic pressure on the incumbent government, can shift battlefield dynamics in favor of rebels. Existing research shows that low-cost and high-cost external state support can follow distinct logics and trajectories (Huang and Sullivan 2021). Lobbying also likely increases the probability of securing precisely these higher-stakes forms of support because it places rebels' appeals before the officials who control such policy instruments. During conflict escalation, when casualties pile up, rebels should especially value high-stakes support more, and lobbying can offer a direct route to obtaining it.

At the same time, intensified battlefield violence can heighten the "fog of war," potentially increasing foreign governments' uncertainty about rebel capacity and intentions. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) demonstrate that external patrons tend to support groups that are competent enough and have similar preferences. Lobbying provides an effective channel for rebels to communicate both attributes. As professional lobbyists can rapidly convey information to key officials, rebels can signal their organizational sophistication and willingness to align with donor priorities. This should help reduce information asymmetry for external states. By offering an immediate and targeted mechanism for signaling reliability, lobbying can lessen foreign policymakers' uncertainty, making it an attractive option for rebels during periods of conflict escalation.

H1. Rebel groups experiencing conflict escalation are more likely to hire professional lobbying firms, all else equal.

Another condition under which rebels find lobbying particularly beneficial is when they have previously invested in social service provision (e.g., education or healthcare services) for civilian populations. Service provision demonstrates that rebels are engaged with community needs, rather than operating as mere predators, helping them cultivate an image of political legitimacy that is often visible to external audiences (Mampilly 2011). This carries important political implications for foreign democratic governments, which can face domestic scrutiny over aiding armed groups and must justify such foreign policy decisions to their domestic constituents. A record of service provision can recast rebels as representatives of local interests, offering external sponsors a moral rationale and helping them deflect criticism about potential consequences of supporting armed groups, including escalation and civilian harm (Sawyer et al. 2017). Framing the sponsor-rebel relationship as rooted in humanitarian concerns can lower both the legal and reputational costs that might otherwise discourage external backing (Salehyan et al. 2014).

In other words, service provision creates a foundation for political leverage: it gives rebels a governing record that democratic governments can invoke when justifying support. Lobbying becomes valuable in this context because it enables rebels to convert their governance efforts into political leverage abroad. Through direct access to policymakers, lobbyists can help rebels frame their service provision as evidence of legitimacy and community representation, providing democratic governments with concrete narratives to defend their support for rebels abroad. As such, rebels that provide social services have more to gain from the targeted, elite-oriented access lobbying provides, making them more likely to invest in this high-end form of diplomacy.

Hypothesis 2. Rebel groups providing social services to civilians are more likely to hire professional lobbying firms, all else equal.

Data and Research Design

We estimate a series of logistic regression models using original data on rebel lobbying via private firms in the United States. Our unit of analysis is the rebel group-government dyad-year; we analyze 230 groups engaged in 103 civil conflicts worldwide between 1945-2012[1].

Our original data on rebel lobbying via private firms draws on the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Under FARA, American firms or individuals representing foreign principals, including foreign governments and rebel groups, before government agencies must register annually with the Department of Justice (DOJ). The DOJ is then legally required to submit an annual report to Congress, which is subsequently made

[1]Following Kreutz (2010) and (Albert 2022), the sample includes all groups responsible for at least 25 battle-related deaths in civil wars that cumulatively resulted in a minimum of 1,000 deaths.

publicly available. We examined public FARA records to identify which rebel groups hired lobbying firms and when they did so[2]. A dichotomous variable, *rebel lobbying* is coded 1 if the rebel group hired a lobbying firm in the U.S. in a given year[3].

We proceed with three main independent variables. *Rebel social service provision* is a binary variable indicating whether the group provided education or healthcare services to civilians. It is obtained from Albert's (2022) Rebel QSI dataset and coded 1 if the group provided either service in a given year. To capture conflict escalation, we use two measures. *Battle-related fatalities*, aggregated using the UCDP's Georeferenced Event Dataset, reflects the most reliable estimate of battle-related deaths. We use a log transformed version of this. *Active armed conflict*, derived from the Rebel QSI, is a dichotomous indicator coded 1 if fighting between a rebel group and the government resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths[4] in a given year.

We control for a variety of group- and conflict-level characteristics that have been previously associated with rebel diplomacy. The main group-level controls include an ordinal measure of *rebel mobilization capacity* (Non-state Actor Data; Cunningham et al. 2009), whether the group engaged in less-costlier, more *conventional forms of diplomacy*[5] in a given year (Rebel QSI Dataset; Albert 2022), pursued *separatist goals* (Rebel QSI), and *taxed civilians* in conflict zones (Rebel QSI). Additional group-level controls we include in fully extended model specifications are whether the group enjoyed *foreign state support* in a given year (Non-state Actor Data), maintained a *political wing* (Non-state Actor Data), pursued *leftist goals*, and *controlled territory* (Rebel QSI). Conflict-level controls include whether the conflict took place during the *Cold War* and *conflict duration*.

To account for potential variation in the U.S. government's baseline receptivity to rebel lobbying, we control for the incumbent *president's party*, the incumbent's *popular vote share* in the preceding presidential election, whether the year was a *U.S. election year*, and whether the government opposing the rebel group was a *U.S. ally*, as coded in the ATOP dataset v5.1 (Leeds et al. 2002).

Results

We evaluate our two hypotheses using logistic regression models. The results in Table 1 offer support for both of them.

With respect to H2, for which the evidence is the strongest, service provision is positively associated with lobbying across all specifications. In the models with the most extensive sets of controls (Models 3 and 6), the estimated odds ratios for service provision are 2.97 and 3.23, respectively, and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Service-

[2]We focused on whether a group lobbied, rather than the specific lobbying activities, as prior research highlights that such details are often inconsistent and "quite noisy" (Mattiacci and Jones 2020, 873–874).

[3]34 of groups in our sample (15 percent) engaged in lobbying via private firms at least once during their existence.

[4]This threshold follows the conventional cutoff point in the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset.

[5]Rebel conventional diplomacy captures whether a given group sent representatives abroad to meet with foreign government officials or politicians or operated offices abroad.

Table 1. Logit Models of Rebel Lobbying via Private Firms in the U.S., 1945-2012

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Social service provision	1.366**	1.076**	1.090**	1.356**	1.161**	1.173**
	(0.583)	(0.549)	(0.545)	(0.562)	(0.511)	(0.508)
Battle-related deaths (log)	0.160**	0.163*	0.163*			
	(0.071)	(0.091)	(0.091)			
Active armed conflict dummy				0.803*	1.114**	1.138***
				(0.433)	(0.450)	(0.430)
Group-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Conflict-level controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Additional group-level controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
US-level controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Target country-level controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	3,166	2,935	2,935	3,077	2,852	2,852

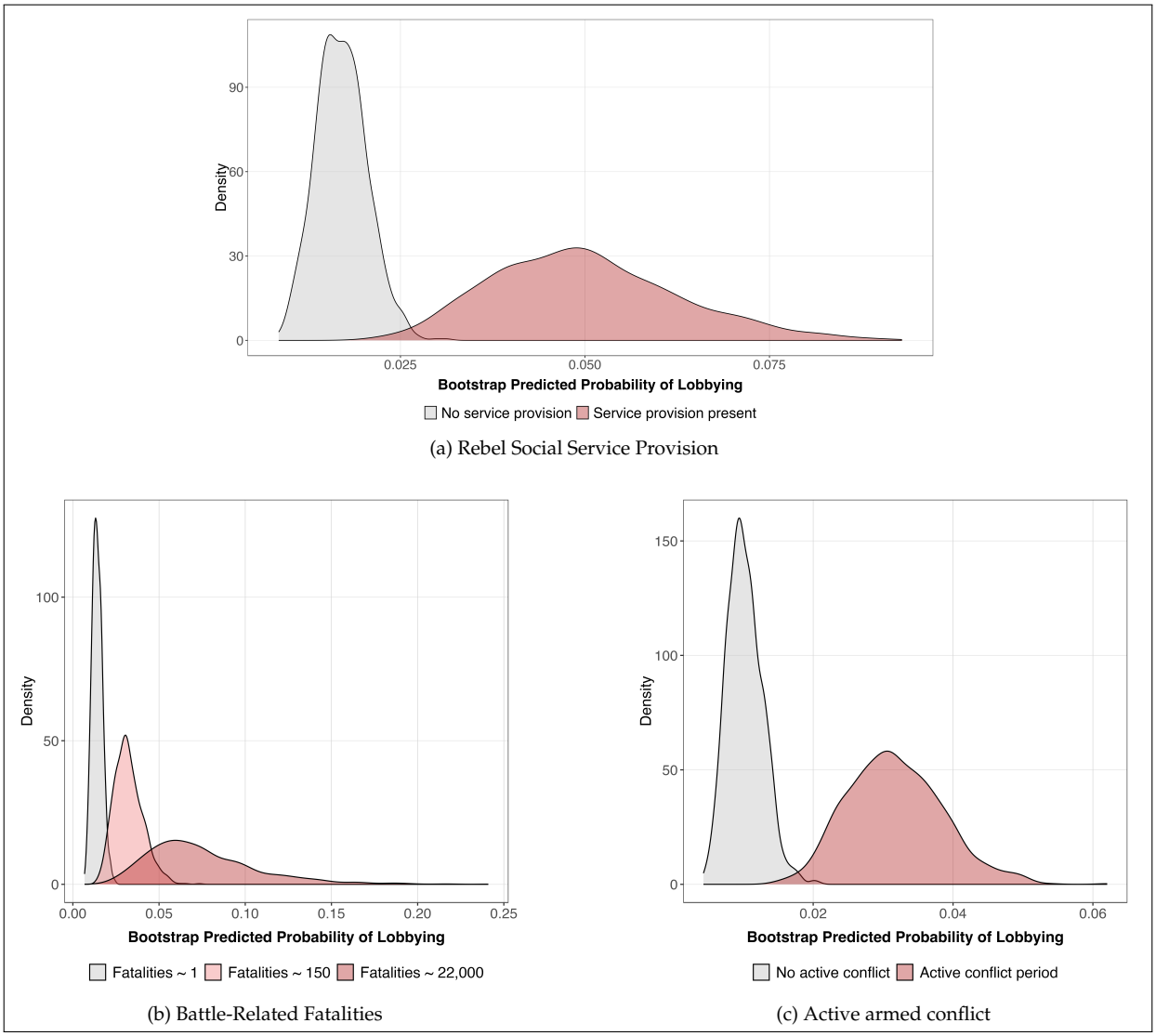
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. *Robust standard errors clustered on group. Control variable estimates are presented in Appendix 2.*

providing rebels are thus more than three times as likely to hire a lobbying firm as otherwise similar groups. In Figure 1a, the distribution of bootstrap-predicted probabilities of lobbying is markedly higher for service-providing rebels (point average of 5 percent) than for non-providers (point average of 1.7 percent).

Turning to H1, we evaluate the effect of escalation using two measures: battle-related fatalities and a binary active conflict indicator. The results for fatalities show a consistently positive relationship across Models 1 to 3. Although these estimates do not consistently meet conventional significance thresholds, Figure 1b shows a substantive pattern: increases in fatalities from minimal levels to the upper range of the sample (22,000 battle-related fatalities) correspond to sizable increases in the predicted probability of lobbying, from a point average of 1.4 percent to 7.5 percent.

The second escalation measure, the active armed conflict dummy, yields results that are substantively large and statistically significant in the fully controlled models (Models 5 and 6). In Model 6, for instance, the odds ratio for active conflict is 3.12, indicating that rebels engaged in an active conflict episode are more than three times as likely to hire a lobbying firm as groups outside of active conflict periods. Figure 1c further demonstrates that predicted lobbying probabilities are considerably higher during active conflict compared to non-conflict years.

Placebo Tests. First, we assess whether our argument inadvertently explains overall rebel diplomacy, rather than behavior specific to high-cost private lobbying. If the two key predictors (i.e., conflict escalation and service provision) also shaped variation in less costly, conventional diplomacy, the mechanism would not be uniquely tied to high-cost lobbying. To investigate this possibility, we re-estimate the main models with conventional diplomacy as the outcome. Across specifications, both predictors are null (see Appendix 3). Second, we check whether the positive association we observe simply reflects



(a) Rebel Social Service Provision

(b) Battle-Related Fatalities

(c) Active armed conflict

Figure 1. Distribution of Bootstrap Predicted Prob. of Rebel Lobbying via Private Firms

Note. Predicted probabilities are obtained from 1,000 bootstrap replications in which the model is re-estimated on resampled data, and each density curve represents the distribution of average predicted probabilities across the bootstrap samples. Panels (a) and (b) are generated from Model 3 in Table 1; Panel (c) from Model 6. All control variables are held at their sample means or medians.

broader rebel organizational capacity, rather than the political leverage logic we advance. We replace service provision with rebel policing, a governance activity that also signals capacity, but is far less likely to generate political capital with democratic governments, as it often functions as a mechanism of resource extraction (Mampilly 2011, 203), rather than safeguarding civilian well-being. If our results were driven by capacity, policing should display a similar positive association with lobbying. However, policing is a null negative predictor (see Appendix 4).

Sensitivity Analysis for Omitted Variable Bias. We conduct sensitivity/bounding analyses to assess how strong an omitted confounder would need to be to eliminate our estimated effects (Oster 2019). Specifically, these ask how powerful an unobserved factor would have to be to reduce the effects of conflict escalation and service provision on lobbying to zero. Following Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), we implement a linear probability model and use rebel taxation, which is a very large substantive predictor in our baseline models, as the benchmark covariate to estimate how much of the residual variance in conflict escalation and service provision an omitted confounder would need to account for, relative to taxation, to render the findings sensitive to omitted variable bias. Nullifying the estimated effects would require a confounder two times stronger than taxation for service provision and a confounder more than three times stronger than taxation for conflict escalation (see Appendix 5).

Selection-Corrected Two-Stage Analysis. We estimate a first-stage probit predicting selection into being "at risk" of engaging in diplomacy (i.e., having engaged in conventional diplomacy), compute the inverse Mills ratio, and then estimate a second-stage binary model of private lobbying in the United States with the IMR included. For identification, we include the presence of a legal political wing in Stage 1, because it predicts conventional diplomacy (Huang 2016), but exclude it from Stage 2. The second-stage results show that service-providing groups, as well as those experiencing conflict escalation, remain significantly more likely to engage in high-cost private lobbying after correcting for selection, but only at the 90% confidence level (Appendix 6).

Legal Eligibility to Lobby in the U.S. A clear limitation of our analyses is in that not all rebel groups are legally permitted to hire professional lobbyists in the U.S. Given that groups designated as terrorists cannot contract with American firms, the FARA data capture only those legally eligible to lobby. For the purpose of addressing this selection issue, we estimate a Heckman model in which the first stage predicts legal eligibility based on terrorist designations and the second stage models lobbying among eligible groups. The results show that our findings hold (see Appendix 7); once legal eligibility is corrected for, rebels experiencing conflict escalation and those providing social services remain significantly more likely to hire lobbying firms.

Conclusion

This study makes several contributions. First, we join a growing body of work highlighting the state-like qualities of governing rebels. Just as states sustain diplomatic efforts during military crises, rebels devote resources to diplomacy during conflict escalation.

Second, we introduce lobbying as a distinct form of rebel diplomacy. Although recent scholarship emphasizes rebels' use of highly visible channels like social media (Jones and Mattiacci 2019; Bestvater and Loyle 2023), we demonstrate that rebels also invest in lobbying that largely unfold out of public view and underscore that these less visible strategies warrant attention. We also contribute to work conceptualizing diplomacy as part of the "technologies of rebellion" (Huang 2016). While prior research examines how rebels select violent tactics or calibrate violence with non-violence (Arves et al. 2019), we show that rebels also choose among different non-violent technologies (e.g., low-cost vs. high-cost diplomacy). This raises questions about how foreign policymakers and publics respond to such tools and whether emerging digital activism substitutes for elite-focused diplomacy.

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