

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kidnapping politics: The sorcerer's apprentice effect

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Abstract

Elected leaders often manipulate public emotions during kidnapping crises to advance political goals, yet they can also become trapped by the very 'captivity passions' they stoke. We call this the sorcerer's apprentice effect, after Goethe's tale, to capture a recurring pattern in democracies across time and cultures. Politicised captivity arises in contexts of interstate conflict or terrorism, where the seizure of individuals triggers a volatile mix of public emotion and political opportunism. Drawing on scholarship of emotion in international relations, we show how political entrepreneurs mobilise anger, fear, and contempt – amplified by media, civil society, and state institutions – to rally electoral support. These same emotions, however, can constrain leaders' future choices. Case studies reveal that efforts to exploit kidnappings for political gain often backfire: Adenauer (USSR) found lasting success, but Nixon (Vietnam), Reagan (Iran), Abe (North Korea), and Netanyahu (Gaza) illustrate how early wins can sow costly failures. Policy failure surely has many causes, but in our analysis, the broader the emotional repertoire leaders attempt to harness, the greater the risk of unintended and counterproductive outcomes.

Keywords: emotions and politics; hostage-taking; political captivity; political entrepreneurs; POWs

Introduction

Politicians often leverage the public's fascination with hostages and captives for political advantage, weaponising the drama of kidnapping incidents to criticise opponents, win elections, and pursue other political objectives. During the 1980 US presidential race, for example, Ronald Reagan's campaign exploited national outrage over the Iran hostage crisis to defeat Jimmy Carter. Yet leaders can also become trapped into making self-destructive policy decisions by pressures arising from the very emotions they have manipulated. Consider Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, whose commitment to prioritising the safe return of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea contributed to his meteoric rise within the Liberal Democratic Party during the early 2000s. Yet nationwide fury over the kidnappings, which Abe stoked to boost his own popularity, added pressure to Japanese diplomats to link the 'Six Party' North Korean denuclearisation negotiations with progress on the hostage issue – a position that limited Japan's influence in the talks and reduced the cohesion of external pressure on the DPRK's nuclear program.

We call this phenomenon – which we observe in democratic states over time and across cultures – the 'sorcerer's apprentice effect' (SAE). The origin of this concept is Goethe's classic poem about an ambitious young magician who loses control over the magical forces he summoned to mop the floors of his master's workshop and subsequently floods the space. The story is perhaps best known from its animated rendition in Disney's *Fantasia*, in which Mickey Mouse plays the over-eager spellcaster. It is, in essence, a cautionary tale warning just how easy it is for one to lose control over

social, political, or physical power out of hubris or miscalculation, and is therefore an apt allegory for the political dynamics engendered by captivity crises.

Despite the phenomenon's frequency, the dynamics associated with the SAE have not been examined systematically, perhaps due to the disproportionate attention paid by scholars of cross-border coercion to the motivations and tools of the coercer rather than the complex reactions of the coerced.¹ In our view, much research on captivity politics considers the politics of hostage-taking (especially the strategic motivations of the kidnappers) at the expense of understanding its social and political effects on the target state's leaders, citizens, and national policies.² Why do some policymakers succeed in leveraging emotions to accomplish political objectives, while others become entangled by them? What mechanisms enable policymakers to leverage kidnapping for political gain? And what, if anything, does this process reveal about how democracies process and respond to the traumatic, often lurid, spectacle of political kidnapping?

These questions – and the SAE more broadly – matter for several reasons. First, history has shown that in democratic societies, politicians who understand that captivity is a direct assault on the public's cherished belief that states exist to maintain order and protect their citizens are eager to capitalise on a kidnapping for their own benefit. Second, pursuing that advantage by whipping up – and/or surfing atop – national passions can lead to both consequential policy successes as well as notable, even if inadvertent, failures. Leaders who fail to react vigorously to the forced deprivation of their constituents' freedom, or who overreact to it, run an especially difficult gauntlet of social disapprobation and electoral punishment at home. Third, amid the rise of populism and the growing threat of disinformation abetted by social media, the world has seen a resurgence in politicised captivity, as exemplified by Hamas's seizure of more than 250 hostages during its 7 October 2023 attack on Israel. Understanding how captivity connects emotions to foreign policy is a more pressing challenge for students of international security than ever.

While aspects of the SAE may apply to autocracies, we focus on how competitive elections empower the public by making their sentiment about a kidnapping politically consequential. In exploring the SAE's dynamics and mechanisms, we argue that emotions help explain why some democratic leaders, whom we call 'sorcerers,' successfully exploit kidnapping crises while others – the less fortunate 'apprentices' – do not. In this context, 'success' often means that rising or incumbent leaders secure electoral victory, but it can also take the form of passing legislation or bolstering their preferred political narrative. Conversely, 'failure' occurs when political entrepreneurs or their successors, trapped inadvertently by the public sentiment they have stoked, are forced to make counterproductive policy decisions. A third outcome, 'failure to launch,' occurs when no ambitious politician comes forward to exploit a kidnapping situation for political gain.

We observe that after a prominent kidnapping incident, sorcerers and apprentices often try to harness and amplify some combination of anger, fear, and contempt – three powerful emotions that may politicise public opinion – in their favour. Yet those same emotions can trigger electoral backlash, limiting leaders' options and heightening the risk of policy derailment.

Specifically, we will explore how the number of *action tendencies*, that is, an agent's urge to satisfy a particular desire or confront a pressing problem triggered by a given emotion, multiplies when emotions are combined, and how these combinations of potential responses raise the likelihood of policy failure.³ Our analysis suggests that elected leaders are most likely to succeed in leveraging

¹E.g., Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 2008); Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Cornell University Press, 1996); and Kelly Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

²One notable exception is the literature on the psychological impact of captivity on victims and whether to negotiate with terrorists. For examples, see Ellen Giebels, Sigrid Noelanders, and Geert Vervaeke, 'The hostage experience: Implications for negotiation strategies', *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12 (2005), pp. 241–53; Patrick T. Brandt, Justin George, Todd Sandler, 'Why concessions should not be made to terrorist kidnappers', *European Journal of Political Economy*, 44 (2016), pp. 41–52.

³We derive this definition from Roger Petersen's *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotions in Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 24–34.

a kidnapping for political gain when they harness only anger – a necessary, although not always sufficient, tactic for public mobilisation. The potential for failure expands, however, when they overreach and attempt to exploit fear and contempt as well.

Our findings support the emerging view in international relations that analyses of high-risk state behaviour should account for how citizens' emotions arise and how those emotions shape cognition and behaviour.⁴ By unpacking these dynamics, we will demonstrate how elected leaders who weaponise captivity to fulfil short-term personal ambitions may do so at the cost of undermining long-term policy stability.

We begin by providing an overview of captivity politics in democratic states (and proto-democratic ones) to sketch the connection between public sentiment about kidnapping and its effects on foreign policy. Next, we offer a simple model, grounded in the existing literature on emotions in international relations, to explain how elected leaders are most likely to succeed in exploiting public emotions by politicising captivity – as well as when their attempts are likely to backfire. Finally, to demonstrate our model in action, we review several cases of sorcerers' successes and apprentices' failures. We conclude with the implications of our findings and recommendations for further, more rigorous tests of the SAE.

The intersection of captivity, democracy, and international relations

This section outlines the link between politicised captivity and foreign policy in democracies, showing how kidnappings can intensify identity politics by letting captors and captives assert moral superiority, rally solidarity, attract supporters, and claim rectitude – often by defining malevolent 'others' whose opposition helps consolidate and exploit public sentiment for political gain. Kidnapping is a strategic, coercive behaviour aimed at influencing a target's decision-making by promising a reward (the safe release of a hostage) for compliance, and threatening punishment (harm to or death of the hostage) for non-compliance. This bargaining tactic gives kidnappers leverage and agency over state policy-making and its leadership. Kidnapping is a prominent feature of Elisabeth Wood's 'repertoire of violence', which includes other coercive behaviours such as civilian targeting, forced displacement, involuntary recruitment, rape, and torture – terrorist acts that, as Wood notes, 'a group routinely engage[s] in as it makes claims on other political or social actors'.⁵ Stated simply, captivity is one of many forms of coercion where weaker actors may press stronger powers for systemic change.

But once politicised, captivity becomes just as, if not more, complex as other coercive behaviours. Compared with other acts of violence, it is an especially powerful trigger for emotional upheaval and socio-political mobilisation because families are *twice* victimised: first by the captors who have seized their loved ones and second by their own government, which failed to protect them. This process is aptly characterised by Mangus Ranstorp as 'a direct assault on commonly held principles and values of all citizens in liberal democracies, most notably the maintenance of order by a state to ensure that the lives of its citizens are secure against violence'.⁶ Accordingly, major

⁴For an early overview of the role of emotions in international politics, see Neta C. Crawford, 'The passion of world politics: Propositions on emotion and emotional relationships', *International Security*, 24:2 (2000), pp. 116–56. Her work is updated by Karl Gustafsson and Todd Hall, 'The politics of emotions in international relations: Who gets to feel what, whose emotions matter, and the "history problem" in Sino–Japanese relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:4 (2021), pp. 973–84. See also Roger Petersen and Sarah Zuckerman, 'Anger and violence in political science', in Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (eds), *The International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes* (Springer, 2010), pp. 561–82; Samuel Zilincik, 'The role of emotions in military strategy', *Texas National Security Review*, 5:2 (2022), pp. 12–26; Pierre Hassner, *La Revanche des Passions* (Fayard, 2015); and Jonathan Mercer, 'Human nature and the first image: Emotion in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 9:3 (2006), pp. 288–303.

⁵Elisabeth Wood, 'Armed groups and sexual violence: When is wartime rape rare?', *Politics and Society*, 37:1 (2009), p. 133. See also Danielle Gilbert, 'The logic of kidnapping in civil war: Evidence from Colombia', *American Political Science Review*, 116:4 (2022), p. 2.

⁶Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon* (St. Martin's, 1997), p. 9.

kidnapping incidents can lead to an excessively zealous response that emerges, or is constructed, from national trauma, or what we call a 'captivity passion'.

Although historians and sociologists have traced the origins and emotional significance of captivity from the ancient world to the present, political scientists have only begun to theorise its strategic effects, especially in modern democratic systems – the politics most susceptible to captivity passions given their robust civil societies, electoral politics, and media freedoms.⁷ Perhaps one of the earliest and most obvious examples of the intersection between political captivity and modern domestic politics was the international slave trade. The introduction to this special issue notes how slavery – perhaps the most extensive and politically disruptive form of captivity – enriched many at the expense of millions of captured Africans.⁸ Slavery engendered social cleavages that distorted the equitable and democratic development of many countries in the western hemisphere and, in the case of the United States, served as a *casus belli* for its murderous civil war, the effects of which linger today.

Another early example of the connection between captivity and political mobilisation occurred in 1858, when a young Jewish boy, Edgardo Mortara, who had been secretly baptised by his nurse, was abducted by Bolognese police on the orders of Pope Pius IX, who insisted that Jews – even Edgardo's natural parents – could not legally raise a Christian child. Mortara's case became the subject of great controversy across Europe. It ultimately proved useful to leaders of the Italian *Risorgimento*, the movement to unify Italy beyond Church control, because popular antipathy to Mortara's abduction contributed to the fall of the Papal States.⁹

Half a century later, well after democracy had been consolidated in the United States, Theodore Roosevelt demonstrated how kidnapping could be used to engage the media, mobilise civil society, and shift diplomacy in the direction of a US president's choosing. In May 1904, after Ion Perdicaris, a Greek-American, and his stepson were kidnapped by a Moroccan tribal leader, the US Consul-General in Tangier cabled the White House requesting a man-o'-war be dispatched 'to enforce demands for their release'.¹⁰ Roosevelt, sensing a political opportunity at home and a chance to flex US muscle abroad, upped the ante. He sent *seven* warships across the Atlantic and had his representatives at the Republican Party convention in Chicago proclaim it was US policy either to get Perdicaris back alive or to assassinate his captor.¹¹ What Roosevelt and his allies did not reveal was that a ransom had been paid by the Sultan of Morocco and the crisis was already settled. The 'Perdicaris Affair' advanced Roosevelt's re-election and 'big stick' reputation.

Democratically elected politicians have weaponised captivity to advance policy agendas because the plight of identifiable victims provokes uniquely powerful emotions in domestic audiences. Thomas Schelling's 'identifiable victim effect' formalised the apocryphal quote often attributed to Stalin: 'An individual's death is a tragedy; a million deaths, a statistic'.¹² Following Schelling, many social scientists have examined how empathy and altruism are heightened when victims are vivid rather than statistical, their misfortunes certain rather than probabilistic, the harm *ex post* rather than *ex ante*, and when victims belong to the observer's reference group.¹³ Schelling's principle

⁷For examples of historical and sociological studies of kidnapping, see Joel Allen, *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Norman Antokol, *No One a Neutral: Political Hostage-Taking in the Modern World* (Alpha Publications, 1990).

⁸David Eltis, 'Africa, slavery, and the slave trade, mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries', in Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World: 1450–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 271–86.

⁹David Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (Vintage Books, 1997), p. 174.

¹⁰Jeffrey D. Simon, *The Terrorist Trap: America's Experience with Terrorism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 34–6; Harold E. Davis, 'The citizenship of Ion Perdicaris', *Journal of Modern History*, 14:4 (1941), pp. 517–26.

¹¹Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*, p. 36.

¹²Thomas C. Schelling, 'The life you save may be your own', in Samuel B. Chase (ed.), *Problems in Public Expenditure Analysis* (The Brookings Institute, 1968), pp. 127–75, and Thomas C. Schelling, *Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Errant Economist* (Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 113–46.

¹³Deborah A. Small and George Lowenstein, 'Helping a victim or helping the victim: Altruism and identifiability', *The Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 26:1 (2003), pp. 5–16; Daryl C. Cameron and Keith B. Payne, 'Escaping affect: How motivated

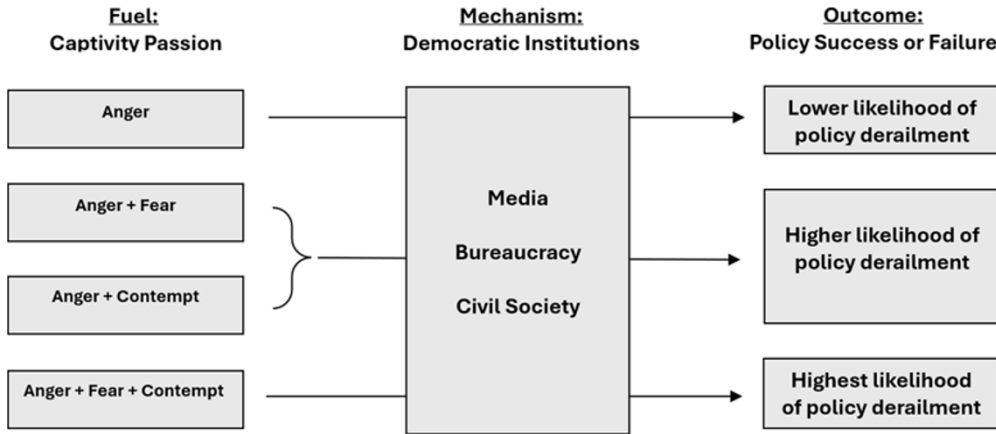


Figure 1. The Sorcerer's Apprentice Effect model.

applies here too, but its effects are amplified by the sense of urgency created by – and the political benefits derived from – the possibility of securing a captive's safe return.

Getting emotional: Fear, anger, contempt, and sorcery

When can elected politicians leverage 'captivity passions' to further their policy agendas? And when are they captured by them, leading to suboptimal, 'own goal' policy decisions? We suspect that policy entrepreneurs' success in harnessing captivity passions to advance their political agendas depends on not only who is kidnapped and by whom but also the specific emotions leaders seek to channel.

In the wake of a kidnapping, entrepreneurial politicians may try to deploy one or more of three powerful emotions to galvanise public opinion – *anger*, *fear*, and *contempt*. Sometimes these emotions already reside in public sentiment; fuelled by long-standing prejudices held by captors and victims, they await activation by a savvy agent. At other times, they may be sown and deployed through strategic oratory and symbolic actions. Regardless, such emotions elicit *action tendencies* from voters that could galvanise political support but also constrain leaders' future options. Anger, fear, and contempt are each powerful enough independently to destabilise public beliefs and behaviours. When combined, however, the number of action tendencies multiplies, thereby increasing the likelihood of policy failure. The interaction we observe among these three emotions provides a clear foundation for future inquiry. We illustrate this dynamic by combining the relevant emotions with the core institutions of democratic politics through which they are channelled in the probabilistic model represented by [Figure 1](#).

While fear, anger, and contempt are themselves powerful emotions, they first must be channelled through three core institutions of modern democratic nations – *the media*, *the bureaucracy*, and *civil society* – before policy entrepreneurs can generate sufficient support. Much like the emotions they amplify and convey, however, these three democratic institutions can themselves introduce additional stakeholders with competing interests that raise the potential for failure. Given the complexities of those channels, it is hardly surprising that policymakers risk becoming consumed by the very captivity passions they unleash when multiple emotions are involved.

emotions regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100:1 (2011), pp. 1–15; Paul Slovic, "If I look at the mass I will never act": Psychic numbing and genocide, *Judgement and Decision Making*, 2:2 (2007), pp. 79–95; Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov, "The "identified victim" effect: An identified group, or just a single individual?", *Journal of Behavioral Decisionmaking*, 18 (2005), pp. 157–67.

Based on this logic, three inputs are required to activate the SAE: (1) a captivity event with the potential to become politicised; (2) an entrepreneurial politician seeking political advantage (such as winning an election, passing legislation, or gaining diplomatic leverage) that could be aided by drawing on a captivity passion; and (3) a democratic society with a free media, robust civil society, and institutionalised bureaucracy through which public opinion can be manipulated.

Readers may rightly note that our model does not incorporate the agency of hostage-takers, who can choose to end the captivity drama by releasing the hostages or executing them, thereby derailing a savvy politician's plans. Indeed, this veto power is precisely what contributes to the uncertainty, drama, and urgency of the captivity spectacle itself. However, we also posit – perhaps cynically – that the hostage's fate is orthogonal to whether a policy entrepreneur succeeds or fails in weaponising a kidnapping to achieve political objectives. Our model does not seek to predict the likelihood of the captives' survival, but rather assess how and why politicians react to the victims' fates, whatever they may be. If anything, execution of a hostage can also provide an opportunistic leader licence for sweeping and aggressive policy action. In the dramatised world of the SAE, the leader's performance often matters more than the outcome of negotiations.

In the remainder of this section, we outline our reasoning in greater depth, beginning with an explanation of these three emotions and their associated action tendencies. Next, we explore the institutional enablers – namely the media, the bureaucracy, and civil society – by which sorcerers and their apprentices might harness those emotions. Finally, we articulate how and why action tendencies associated with fear, anger, and contempt, especially when combined, can box leaders into pursuing suboptimal policy outcomes.

The fuel: Emotions and their action tendencies

In her discussion of emotions and international politics, Neta Crawford characterises emotions as 'inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings [that] may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioral states and changes'.¹⁴ Emotions are triggered by *cognitive antecedents*, or by perceptions of an external stimulus that give rise to a change in feelings which then manifests physically in *action tendencies* – learned or innate behaviours associated with different inner states. The range of emotions and action tendencies that bear upon political behaviour is vast. As Roger Petersen demonstrates, the feelings most relevant to violent conflict are the 'event-based' emotions of fear, anger, and resentment and the 'object-based' emotions of contempt and hatred.¹⁵

Of these five emotions, we posit that fear, anger, and contempt align more closely with the dynamics of political kidnapping than resentment or hatred. Resentment reflects a sense of subordination in a status hierarchy, which is unlikely since hostage-taking is typically a weapon of the weak. Targeted states are thus more likely to feel superior, rather than inferior, to their adversaries. Meanwhile, hatred is a visceral form of contempt that casts the target as *both* defective and dangerous – as beyond bargaining or reason, only elimination. Yet governments frequently negotiate with terrorists and other captors; hostage-taking entails coercive bargaining and requires dialogue. Given the prevalence of such bargaining even between bitter enemies, we suggest contempt is the more fitting object-based emotion in captivity politics.

In this context, the remaining emotions can be directed against captors, incumbent leaders, and even victims. Following Petersen, we connect the emotions, antecedents, and action tendencies to captivity (see Table 1).¹⁶

¹⁴Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 125. For more on emotions and international relations, see Jack Holland and Ty Solomon, 'Affect is what states make of it: Articulating everyday experiences of 9/11', *Critical Studies on Security*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 262–77; Simon Koschut (ed.), *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (Routledge, 2020); Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions'; and Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans*.

¹⁵Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans*, pp. 23–51.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

Table 1. Fear, anger, and contempt in a captivity passion.

Emotion	Object(s)	Cognitive antecedent	Observable signs	Action tendency	Effect on public
Fear	Captor	Perceived threat to personal security requiring immediate response	Rhetoric about elevated threat; introduction of public safety measures	'Fight or flight' to create distance from or neutralise threats (defensive)	Threat inflation; discounting unfavourable facts; embrace of a saviour figure
Anger	Captor Incumbent Leadership	Perceived injustice/unfairness of captors' behaviour or inability of authorities to help	Public discourse focusing on inequality and arbitrariness	Downgrade risk perceptions; increase prejudice; attribute blame; support retaliation (offensive)	Mass mobilisation; tribalism
Contempt	Captor	Perception of captors as inherently undignified or defective	Rhetoric expressing superiority over, or disgust for, captors' ethnic, racial, religious, or ideological attributes	Avoidance, shunning, scorn	Segregation; support for policies accentuating 'otherness'

Fear is a perceived threat to personal security that arouses the need to avert danger.¹⁷ The cognitive antecedent of fear is one's perceived lack of control over a situation that threatens physical harm. Fear produces two action tendencies: fight and flight. When afraid, individuals will attempt to gather additional information in order to ascertain the optimal response. Because that information is often curve-fitted to existing perceptions of danger, however, it can result in threat inflation, panic, dismissal of conflicting information, and a narrowing range of views – all of which can advantage a skilled policy entrepreneur.¹⁸ Observable signs that a leader is trying to stoke fear among the public in the aftermath of a kidnapping incident include rhetoric focused on uncertainty (especially when characterising captors' motivations) and advocacy for more rigorous public safety precautions.

Like fear, anger 'degrades reasoning' and stimulates scapegoating; it increases the tendency to overlook mitigating details and tends to 'perceive ambiguous behavior as hostile'.¹⁹ However, anger differs from fear in two ways. First, its cognitive antecedent is the perception of something unjust or unfair, rather than a potential threat to physical safety. Second, its action tendency is not 'fight or flight', which are 'defensive' reactions, but punishment – an 'offensive' one. Aggrieved citizens who believe that justice was neither pursued nor served in serious crimes are primed such that their anger may even influence judgments about unrelated acts of harm, potentially driving them to seek what they perceive as restorative justice against unrelated transgressors.²⁰

Notably, anger requires that the motives of transgressors be known – or at least firmly believed. It also heightens the desire for punishment against a specific actor, causes agents to downgrade risk,

¹⁷See Kim Witte, 'Fear control and danger control: A test of the extended parallel process model (EPPM)', *Communication Monographs*, 61:2 (1994), pp. 113–34.

¹⁸Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁹Julie H. Goldberg, Jennifer S. Lerner, and Philip E. Tetlock, 'Rage and reason: The psychology of the intuitive prosecutor', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 29 (June 1999), p. 782.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 781.

and increases prejudice and blame.²¹ It logically follows that these effects make anger an essential (but perhaps not always sufficient) component for mass mobilisation. Perhaps the surest indicator that a leader is stoking anger to generate a captivity passion is their rhetorical emphasis on justice, fairness, and retribution.

The final emotion pertinent to political kidnapping is contempt, the feeling that an individual or party is unworthy of respect, equitable treatment, or dignity. Its cognitive antecedent is the belief that a specific individual or party is inherently and irredeemably defective. The action tendency of contempt is avoidance; actors who feel contempt for a perceived inferior will typically shun, ignore, or otherwise isolate their targets.²²

We also posit that contempt can amplify the effects of fear or anger in a captivity context by essentialising captors and their injustices because individuals who feel threatened or wronged by those whom they deem inhuman tend to interpret the act as not just a violation of fairness but also a fundamental violation of the natural order. Accordingly, the desire to punish, defend, correct, and control may be exacerbated, potentially leading to especially volatile and often inhumane conduct. Signs that a policy entrepreneur is trying to stoke contempt in the wake of a political kidnapping include rhetoric aimed at amplifying public dislike or distrust of perceived 'others' and characterising a specific group as inherently inferior or cruel.

Skilled leaders in democratic societies across time and cultures – from Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon to Shinzō Abe and Konrad Adenauer *inter alia* – have displayed strong intuitions for how these emotions and their action tendencies can shape public opinion in the wake of a captivity event. Of all three emotions, anger is the perhaps most critical as it often results in the kind of public mobilisation that an elected leader can amplify to effect change in a democratic society. However, fear and contempt can also be useful tools for bolstering the status, authority, and popularity of political entrepreneurs. As per the core premise of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, fear's 'flight' response can inspire public acquiescence to authority because fearful masses seek their sovereign's protection.²³ Meanwhile, contempt may compound the effects of fear or anger, leading to a broader and more determined search for a saviour who will inflict punishment on 'others' (including political enemies at home) deemed responsible for a perceived wrong.

The mechanisms: Three democratic institutions

The presence of strong emotions alone is not sufficient for an elected or aspiring politician to exploit a captivity passion for personal gain. Those emotions must be amplified enough to shift public – and even elite – sentiment, often through at least one of democracy's core institutions: the media, civil society, and the bureaucracy. These democratic institutions become mechanisms that turn emotional fuel into policy fire in at least three ways: shifting national discourse, creating and sustaining stakeholder groups, and implementing government responses.

The media

By sharing hostage narratives and giving voice to the aggrieved, the media both fuel captivity passions and are influenced by them.²⁴ The media were famously characterised by Walter Lippmann as a platform for the independent transmission of news and as the moral foundation for free, fair, and democratic governance.²⁵ But intensified battles for control of the news narrative and competition for market share in a contemporary agora filled with disputed facts and disinformation have

²¹Roger Petersen and Sarah Zukerman, 'Anger, violence, and political science', in Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (eds), *International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes* (Springer, 2020), pp. 566–8.

²²Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans*, p. 43.

²³Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁴Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 'The management of visibility: Media coverage of kidnapping and captivity cases around the world', *Media, Culture & Society*, 35:7 (2013), p. 794.

²⁵Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1922).

undermined this more optimistic view of 'fair and balanced' media competition. Instead, media giants have formed increasingly open alliances with parties, factions, and individual politicians at the very moment when social media algorithms began directing public conversations towards mobile echo chambers. To be sure, social media are more unwieldy than broadcast media, but as we shall see, both can serve the principals in much the same ways.

Media are both targets and instruments of political pressure and have become essential tools for every actor in a captivity drama – each seeking to be seen and heard. Most academic analyses focus on the captors who use the media to instil fear, polarise public opinion in target communities, gain publicity for their cause, provoke an overreaction, inform and misinform, secure the release of their own captured colleagues, attract new recruits, bolster their group's morale, gain insight into the target states' capabilities and strategies (as well as access its public and political class), gauge support, and in general appear larger than life.²⁶ But the press and social media provide a global stage for everyone's drama – that of the captors, the captives' advocates, and the victims themselves.²⁷ Mobilised groups in civil society and political entrepreneurs in the targeted states who champion their causes use the media as the battleground for attention. The media is the performative venue of choice for actors who understand 'the dramatic, mythic value of kidnapping and captivity stories.'²⁸

Civil society

Civic organisations provide another channel to politicise captivity and affect policy change. They can lobby for favourable political outcomes, impose reputational or operational costs on the state (e.g., by initiating protests, strikes, sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of 'foot-dragging' or non-compliance), and even rally international support for their cause. A robust civil society is typically idealised as a social good in liberal democracies. Civic groups are, after all, considered a check on the power of the state because they reside in Jürgen Habermas's 'public sphere', which mediates between society and state in the service of 'making possible democratic control'.²⁹ Social clubs, support groups, and community-based organisations are generally seen as pillars upholding liberal democracy because they enable citizens with common concerns to counterbalance centralised authority and goad officials to act.³⁰

Not everyone is convinced. Morris Fiorina criticised 'academics [who] have exalted civic engagement as the solution to social problems' while ignoring the 'dark side' of civic engagement, especially in the United States.³¹ Likewise, Sheri Berman and Omar Encarnación – the former with evidence from Weimar Germany and the latter with evidence from Spain and Brazil – each document how, absent robust state institutions, civil society groups can divide society and undermine democracy.³² Not all organisations formally unaffiliated with the state exist to check abuse of government authority. Trust of – and cooperation with – the state ebbs and flows, and history is littered with racist and xenophobic organisations, revolutionary militias, violent religious cults, criminal syndicates, and less visible actors with government connections within the 'covert world'.³³ These

²⁶For an earlier version of this list, see James M. Poland, *Understanding Terrorism: Groups, Strategies, and Responses* (Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 61.

²⁷Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*, p. 10.

²⁸Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 'The management of visibility', p. 793.

²⁹Jürgen Habermas, 'The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964)', *New German Critique*, 2 (Autumn 1974), pp. 49–50.

³⁰A key enabler of collective action is social capital. See Michael Woolcock, 'Civil society and social capital', in Michael Edwards (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 197–208.

³¹Morris P. Fiorina, 'Extreme voices: A dark side of civil engagement', in Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (eds), *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 403.

³²Sheri Berman, 'Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic', *World Politics*, 49:3 (April 1997), pp. 401–29; Omar G. Encarnación, 'Beyond civil society: Promoting democracy after September 11', *Orbis*, 47:4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 705–20.

³³Robert Cox, 'Civil society at the turn of the millennium: Prospects for an alternative world order', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (1999), pp. 13–15. See also Clifford Bob, 'Civil and uncivil society', in Michael Edwards (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* (Oxford University Press 2011), pp. 209–19.

groups are as likely to become energised by a high-profile kidnapping as more benign advocacy groups.

Feryaz Ocakli helps situate the connection between civil society groups and politicised captivity by pointing out that civil society organisations are treated ‘as arenas of civic participation rather than as political agents in their own right’.³⁴ He rejects the assumption advanced by many advocates of associationalism that the larger the civil society sphere, the better functioning the democracy.³⁵ Fiorina’s critique takes us the rest of the way. Speaking to the dynamics found in captivity politics where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are often salient organisational actors, he argues:

[Often] a few true believers [are] able to highjack the democratic process and impose unreasonable costs...on other actors as well as the larger community.³⁶

On his account, those who care most deeply about specific issues are also those who have the most extreme views about (or deepest emotional attachment to) them. Consequently, extremes are overrepresented in – and distort – democratic politics, not least of all in civic groups during an emotion-filled captivity crisis.

The bureaucracy

The bureaucracy is a third mechanism that skilled politicians use to guide captivity passions born of fear, anger, and/or contempt towards their preferred outcomes. Major foreign and security policy decisions cannot be implemented without support from implementing agencies. Winning buy-in from gatekeepers at every level of decision-making is especially important. Max Weber wrote more than a century ago that ‘if the bureaucratic apparatus ceases to do its work, or if its work is violently obstructed, chaos will erupt’.³⁷ Although Weberian bureaucracies are considered unemotional rational actors, democratic states with strong bureaucratic institutions have proven as susceptible to the emotional entreaties of affected families as to coercion by hostage-takers. The emotional intensity of politicised captivity often disrupts bureaucratic processes in ways reminiscent of the chaos Weber anticipated.

Ironically, politicised captivity often leads to the very thing it disrupts: an expansion of bureaucratic structures. The chair of the Iran hostage crisis team for President Jimmy Carter, for example, reported that the crisis ‘set in motion the bureaucratic machinery needed to manage [the crisis itself]’. He said it had been ‘kept well-lubricated and lightly mothballed’.³⁸ Yet Washington’s policy rarely withstood captivity passions with impromptu ‘lightly mothballed’ arrangements for long. Under pressure from the sharp increase in the captivity of US citizens abroad, particularly ISIS’s murders of captive American citizens in the 2000s – and from the importunings of their families and the politicians who supported them – successive White Houses were compelled to create ever more elaborate hostage-related bureaucracies.

In 2015, for example, the Obama administration created three new government offices: an inter-agency ‘Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell’, a ‘Hostage Response Group’, and an office of a ‘Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs’ housing a ‘Family Engagement Team’.³⁹ Then, when these proved insufficient, the Biden administration issued an executive order in 2022 declaring it would

³⁴ Feryaz Ocakli, ‘Political entrepreneurs, clientelism, and civil society: Supply-side politics in Turkey’, *Democratization*, 23:4 (2016), pp. 723–46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 725–6.

³⁶ Fiorina, ‘Extreme voices’, p. 402.

³⁷ Max Weber, ‘Bureaucracy’, in Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters (eds), *Weber’s Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 111.

³⁸ Harold Saunders, ‘Diplomacy and pressure, November 1979–May 1980’, in Warren Christopher et al. (eds), *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis* (Yale University Press, 1985), p. 60.

³⁹ Fact Sheet: U.S. Government Hostage Policy, Office of the White House Press Secretary (24 June 2015), available at {<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/24/fact-sheet-us-government-hostage-policy>}, accessed February 20, 2026.

expand policy tools to deter and disrupt hostage-taking and wrongful detentions.⁴⁰ This latter measure imposed financial and travel sanctions on those who, in Washington's view, unjustly hold US nationals, whether a terrorist network or a foreign government, and created a new travel advisory indicator to warn US citizens of the risk of wrongful detention by a foreign state. Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted that he and other administration officials had been in direct touch with hostage families, and that this measure was a response to their 'advocacy'. Under sustained pressure – and concerned about public disapprobation – the White House had come a long, emotionally draining distance from previous administrations' refusals to engage hostage-takers.

Explaining success and failure

Thus far, we have suggested that savvy politicians leverage three emotions – fear, anger, and contempt – to politicise captivity, sway public opinion, and push for policy change or electoral victory. We have also posited that the foundational institutions of liberal democracy – namely the media, civil society, and the bureaucracy – are the primary channels which enable policy entrepreneurs to mobilise followers and achieve political outcomes. One final question remains, however: why are some politicians masterful 'sorcerers' able to deftly harness a captivity passion for political gain while others evoke the 'sorcerer's apprentices' whose initiatives are consumed in the process of trying?

The answer, we believe, lies in the unpredictability of the volatile action tendencies associated with fear, anger, and contempt, especially when they are conducted through complex media, civil society, and bureaucratic institutions. Each of these emotions – especially anger – is powerful enough individually to generate public reactions that can limit or otherwise constrain the agency of actors who unleash them. With each emotion added to the mix, audience costs and other forms of public pressure multiply, thereby increasing the likelihood of policy failure.⁴¹ We investigate this claim in greater depth in the next section via case studies of both successful 'sorcerers' and unsuccessful 'apprentices'. Examples of each will show how emotional micro-foundations are critical for understanding why policy entrepreneurs sometimes harness captivity passions, while at other times they become ensnared by them.

Sorcerers vs. apprentices

Appreciating that our analysis is limited by space and data – and that we do not provide a rigorous test – we explore six cases to probe the plausibility of our model. We cover the full range of outcomes by including examples of one sustained success, four examples of short-term successes that contributed to subsequent policy failures, and one example of a 'failure to launch', a case in which no enterprising leader attempted to channel public sentiment for political gain amidst a captivity passion, despite available political support. In each case, we identify the key components of our model – the captivity crisis, the policy entrepreneur, and their objective – and illustrate how the agent's strategic use of anger, fear, and contempt in various combinations was linked to both anticipated and unintended outcomes (see Table 2).

Keen readers will notice the absence of cases in which a political entrepreneur draws solely upon fear or contempt. This absence is not accidental but reflects the data: we have yet to identify a historically significant case – whether between two states or involving a state and a foreign non-state actor – that can be reasonably coded as purely fear- or contempt-driven. We suspect this

⁴⁰Executive Order on Bolstering Efforts to Bring Hostages and Wrongfully Detained United States Nationals Home, Office of the White House Press Secretary (19 July 2022), available at: {<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/07/21/2022-15743/bolstering-efforts-to-bring-hostages-and-wrongfully-detained-united-states-nationals-home>}, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁴¹For more on the concept of audience costs, see James D. Fearon, 'Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes', *American Political Science Review*, 88:3 (1994), pp. 577–92.

Table 2. Selected Sorcerers and Sorcerers' Apprentices.

Case	Agent	Objective	Coding	Emotions
German WWII POWs (1955)	Konrad Adenauer	Re-election, national identity building	Sorcerer's success: Adenauer's personal ambitions fulfilled and national security enhanced	Anger
Vietnam POWs (1972)	Richard Nixon	Re-election	Apprentice's failure: Nixon re-elected, but empowered veto players who delayed post-war diplomatic normalisation for decades	Anger, contempt
Iran Hostage Crisis (1979)	Ronald Reagan	Electoral victory	Apprentice's failure: Reagan elected, but his administration was later undercut by a follow-on hostage crisis, the Iran-Contra affair	Anger, contempt
North Korean Abductees (2002)	Shinzō Abe	Rise to premiership	Apprentice's failure: Abe elected, but leadership of the Six Party Talks defaulted to China	Anger, fear, contempt
Gilad Shalit (2006)	Benjamin Netanyahu	Party formation and consolidation of conservative dominance	Apprentice's failure: Netanyahu elected, but Israel's massive exchange concession further compromised security	Anger, fear, contempt
'The Two Michaels' (2018)	Canadian Conservative Party leaders	Victory in parliamentary elections	Failure to launch: No agent stepped up to politicise the captivities	Anger

is because anger may be a necessary, though not always sufficient, condition for the social mobilisation that entrepreneurs need in order to achieve their preferred political outcomes. While the absence of such cases invites further inquiry into the role of individual emotions in shaping failure – a promising avenue for future research – it does not undermine our probative finding that entrepreneurs are more prone to failure when powerful emotions combine than when they do not.

Additionally, our cases demonstrate that there is no statute of limitations on these outcomes. They may unfold during the kidnapping crisis itself or emerge later through subsequent engagement with the responsible actors, so long as that interaction remains tied to the original incident and relevant to the policymaker's objectives. Put simply, our analysis privileges whether a given policy outcome can be traced to an entrepreneur's earlier effort to weaponise public emotions surrounding a kidnapping for political gain.

A sorcerer's success

Adenauer and the German POWs

Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, was a skilled 'sorcerer' who managed to govern as captivity passions boiled over, without allowing national emotions to undermine his domestic ambitions or diplomatic agenda. Throughout the 1950s, Adenauer faced two great challenges – reconstructing a German national identity free from the stain of Nazism

while governing a newly divided country and maintaining his political standing to remain in office. Adenauer was able to accomplish both objectives in part by harnessing public anger over the delayed repatriation of German POWs from Soviet custody.

At the end of World War II, more than three million German soldiers were imprisoned in Soviet camps, and by 1950, 100,000 POWs remained in captivity.⁴² After Stalin's death in 1953, the Kremlin released 12,000 German POWs – but only for resettlement in Moscow's then restive East German satellite. As late as 1955, nearly a decade after the end of the conflict, the West German government had acquired reliable information on only 9,000 of their unrepatriated soldiers, leaving the fate of tens of thousands still unknown. The West German public, particularly those on the anti-communist centre-right, believed their POWs were 'not war criminals, but victims of... a criminal Communist regime'.⁴³

Fuelled by anger and organised into civil society groups, they took to the streets in the early 1950s, declaring formal periods of 'national remembrance' that included mass public demonstrations and travelling exhibits designed to stir national emotions and force political leaders to take action to secure the POWs' release.⁴⁴ In October 1955, Adenauer found himself under intense media attention and 'mounting domestic pressure to act more forcefully to win the[ir] release'. Seizing the moment, he deftly framed 'the return of the ten thousand' (*die heimkehr der zehntausend*) as a moral obligation and arranged a mission to Moscow for 'humanitarian' purposes. In this way, the captivity crisis provided Adenauer political cover for two historic agreements with the Soviets – the release of the final captives that won him great acclaim at home and diplomatic relations with the USSR that did not destabilise the anti-communist western alliance.⁴⁵

Adenauer's Christian Democrats won an absolute majority in the Bundestag and he was rewarded with the chancellorship for another eight years, a period during which the nascent West German identity morphed into 'a powerful integrative myth' holding that the German people were, like the Jews of Europe, Hitler's victims. For some, Soviet-held German prisoners of wars (POW) embodied the war's total defeat and emasculation – but also German steadfastness and resilience that would pave its path to the future.⁴⁶ POW suffering was now depicted as collective penance for what later would be known widely as the Holocaust.⁴⁷ For many, the books finally could be closed on Nazi brutality.⁴⁸

It is notable that Adenauer avoided mixing public anger and anti-communist sentiment (both majority views at that time) with overly zealous or hateful rhetoric demonising East German or Soviet citizens. Had he stoked contempt, it would have complicated the POW release and foreclosed the chance for normalised relations with Moscow. Both, he judged, were acceptable to an agitated West German public, for whom diplomatic 'high politics' paled in comparison to the deeply personal urgency of reuniting long-suffering families.

Apprentices' initial successes seed policy failures

Nixon and the Vietnam POWs

Not all elected politicians who try to leverage a captivity crisis for political gain succeed for as long as Adenauer did. Some lose control of the powerful emotions they provoke, gaining

⁴²Frank P. Biess, 'The protracted war: Returning POWs and the making of East and West German citizens, 1945–1955' (PhD diss., Brown University, 2000), p. 2, reports that all POWs held by the Allies were returned to Germany by 1948; Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (University of California Press, 2001), pp. 39–40.

⁴³Moeller, *War Stories*, p. 39.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 21, 129, 133.

⁴⁶Biess, 'The protracted war', p. 109.

⁴⁷Jan Uelzmann, 'Symbolic homecoming of the hero-father: Realignment of national memory in the *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau* special feature on Konrad Adenauer's 1955 state visit to Moscow', *Colloquia Germanica*, 45:1 (2012), p. 42.

⁴⁸Moeller, *War Stories*, p. 44.

short-term wins that lead to avoidable and often unrelated policy failures – especially when they stir fear and contempt alongside anger.

One notable example in Cold War US politics was Richard Nixon's weaponisation of the Vietnam POW issue. Nixon wove a tapestry of anger and contempt during the early 1970s to curry political favour with voters ahead of his second election at the unanticipated cost of a decades-long delay in the renormalisation of relations with Vietnam. According to one analysis of tapes that were declassified in 2013: 'to win the [1972] election, [Nixon] needed the war to continue'.⁴⁹ Accordingly, his White House repeatedly declared Vietnam to be deceitful and cruel, and held press conferences featuring released US POWs to showcase their mistreatment and torture.⁵⁰ Doubling down on the declaration of contempt for the US enemy, Nixon's approach was to characterise the North Vietnamese as 'inhuman or even subhuman'.⁵¹ He also authorised an unsuccessful POW rescue mission as part of an 'eighteen-month campaign to arouse American public opinion...and revive sagging emotional support for the war'.⁵²

The comparison of Nixon to Adenauer is apt. Interstate disputes over the repatriation of POWs have always galvanised publics on the home front. Besides slavery, no form of captivity has claimed more victims, and it is no wonder that the POW experience – identified as it is with beatings, disease, and forced labour – became the universal symbol of suffering under captivity.⁵³ It is unsurprising, therefore, that emotional appeals from family members attracted widespread popular support despite the relatively modest numbers of US personnel who were captured or missing in Vietnam (about 2,500 in total).⁵⁴

Indeed, as if working from a script for Schelling's 'identifiable victim effect', millions of Americans wore bracelets distributed by civil society groups, each engraved with the name, rank, and loss date of a US serviceman missing or held captive in Southeast Asia in the 1970s.⁵⁵ Politically savvy relatives formed a 'League of Families' with the aid of prominent business leaders like H. Ross Perot and won access to the US foreign policy community, including an office for themselves in the White House with the blessing of candidate Nixon in 1972.

Seeking an advantage over Democrat George McGovern, Nixon backed civil society organisations that were advocating for the return of both the US POWs and the remains of comrades 'missing in action' (MIAs). Family members alleged Lyndon Johnson's administration had covered up the status of their family members, declaring that 'when a beloved son becomes missing in any war, parents like us become the living dead'. They tugged at American heart-strings by asking disconsolately, 'What could be worse than the emotional turmoil of "not knowing?"'⁵⁶

The advocates' deepfelt, but sometimes ignobly manipulative, efforts in the name of identifiable US soldiers generated broad public support and sustained their political influence. Overtones of bitterness and contempt for the POWs' Vietnamese captors were especially notable; much of the anger stemmed from the fact that Americans were being held captive by what was represented as

⁴⁹ Colin Schultz, 'Nixon prolonged Vietnam War for political gain – and Johnson knew about it, newly unclassified tapes suggest', *Smithsonian Magazine* (18 March 2013).

⁵⁰ Merle Pribbenow, 'Treatment of American POWs in North Vietnam', Wilson Center (14 February 2012).

⁵¹ Jon M. VanDyke, 'Nixon and the prisoners of war', *New York Review of Books* (7 January 1971).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Heather Jones, 'A missing paradigm? Military captivity and the prisoner of war, 1914–1918', *Immigration and Minorities*, 26:1/2 (2008), pp. 19–20.

⁵⁴ Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 2.

⁵⁵ John A. Siegfried, *Six Degrees of the Bracelet: Vietnam's Continuing Grip* (Xlibris 2011), p. xvi, available at: https://www.google.com/search?q=John+A.+Siegfried%2C+Six+Degrees+of+the+Bracelet%3A+Vietnam%E2%80%99s+Continuing+Grip&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS1192US1192&oq=John+A.+Siegfried%2C+Six+Degrees+of+the+Bracelet%3A+Vietnam%E2%80%99s+Continuing+Grip&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbwUyBggAEEUYOdIBCTUyMDlqMGoxNagCCLA CAfEfpU1Z5PQC84o&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁵⁶ Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs (ed.), *Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs* (United States Senate, 1993), p. 346; Author interview, former US Senate Select Committee staff member, Frances Zweig, 8 December 2012.

a cruel, ideological, and racially distinct 'other' that had just defeated their sons on the battlefield. Although Nixon handily won re-election and secured over 60 per cent of the popular vote, post-war reconciliation with Vietnam was delayed for decades, likely in no small part due to the emotional firestorm of the POW issue and the divisions within the family groups between pro- and anti-war factions.⁵⁷

Reagan and the Iran hostages

Perhaps the most remarkable example of US politicians exploiting captivity for political gain was the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–80, during which fifty-two US diplomats were held for 444 days in Tehran by revolutionary students with the support of Ayatollah Khomeini's government. The event tore through the American consciousness with hurricane force, shifting the axis of US foreign policy in unexpected ways for the better part of the next three decades, after presidential hopeful Ronald Reagan – recognising the potential of a mass abduction of US officials to channel public anger and contempt – used it to defeat Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election.

Reagan's team played upon the mixture of anger at the White House for allowing the incident to happen and contempt for the hostages' Muslim captors. The media played a particularly powerful role in galvanising the public by focusing on the predicament of individual hostages and their families and, in the words of one scholar, transformed problems that 'call for rational responses into personal dramas and tragedies which demand compassionate reactions'.⁵⁸ Fanning the rage of the American public, ABC News in 1979 ran a daily broadcast dedicated to covering the Iran hostage crisis under the headline 'America Held Hostage'.⁵⁹

Despite the many demands of his re-election campaign, President Carter never left the Oval Office.⁶⁰ He directed his energy towards the families, adopting a 'Rose Garden strategy' and delivering updates from the White House's back yard. Carter's passivity proved no match for the dynamic Reagan, whose campaign relentlessly whipped up public sentiment and hammered the Carter administration for its failures. At the same time, however, Reagan's deputies also liaised secretly with Iranian officials. Gary Sick, then the top White House official responsible for Iran, describes how Carter's strategy for dealing with the hostages was undermined months before the 1980 presidential election when Reagan's campaign director, Robert Casey, struck an agreement with Tehran. The quid-pro-quo was secret but straightforward: if the Ayatollah held the hostages until after the election, then the Reagan administration would arrange for Israel to provide Iran with weapons.

In Sick's view, the move was 'nothing less than a political coup'.⁶¹ Republican operatives, he says, 'trifled with...[the emotions of hostages' families], playing them skilfully, but cynically, for the party's own tactical advantages'.⁶² Reagan was so eager to harness public sentiments galvanised by the Iran hostage crisis into an electoral victory in the short-term that he undercut long-term interests by keeping American captives in Tehran for months longer and transferred arms to an adversary. Sick suggests this agreement was 'the first act in a drama that was ultimately to conclude with the Iran-Contra Affair', the secret sale of US weapons to Iran in exchange for help in releasing American hostages in Lebanon, with the profits illegally diverted to fund the Contra

⁵⁷Select Committee, *Report of the Select Committee*, p. 301; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, pp. 79, 158–9, 282–3, *inter alia*.

⁵⁸Brigitte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the World Trade Center Bombing* (Columbia University Press, 1994) pp. 125–6.

⁵⁹Emphasis added. Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media*, p. 56, reports that the hostages in Tehran remained the top broadcast story for the full fourteen months of the crisis. See also John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them* (The Free Press, 2006), and Rose McDermott, 'Prospect theory in international relations: The Iranian hostage rescue mission', *Political Psychology*, 13:2 (1992), pp. 237–63.

⁶⁰Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*, p. 129.

⁶¹Gary Sick, *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan* (Random House 1991), p. xvii.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 29. This was confirmed decades later by one of Casey's operatives in Peter Baker, 'A four decade secret: One man's story of sabotaging Carter's re-election', *New York Times* (18 March 2023).

rebels in Nicaragua.⁶³ The Reagan administration would pay a huge reputational cost when the Iran-Contra affair eventually came to light in August 1985; its Defense Secretary, an Assistant Secretary of State, and several other high-level officials, including the National Security Advisor (who attempted suicide), were all indicted.

Abe and the North Korean abductees

Politicians who fail to control the captivity passions they have unleashed are not confined to the United States, of course. One example is Japan's late former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, who rose through the ranks of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party in the early 2000s by channelling national trauma over North Korea's silent seizures of Japanese citizens – only to find that furor over the abductee issue would preoccupy negotiators during the Six Party Talks on North Korean denuclearisation. It was striking that the hostage issue could lead the Reagan administration to trade arms illegally with Tehran, but even more noteworthy that talks on an existential issue such as preventing nuclear war could be distracted by public opinion about the fate of a handful of individuals abducted over two decades before their absence was even publicly disclosed. This was the collateral result of Japanese politicians – including Abe – attempting to leverage contempt as well as anger when channelling public outrage over a kidnapping incident for their own political purposes.

In October 2002, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il acknowledged obliquely to Japanese Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi that his agents had been snatching Japanese youths from seaside towns for years in the 1970s–1980s in an effort to strengthen Pyongyang's espionage programmes.⁶⁴ The fury of the Japanese populace was immediate. Movies, anime, and manga that demonised the North Korean regime made the abductees *causes célèbres*, and the 'abduction issue' dominated national discourse. Kim admitted that his government had kidnapped thirteen innocent Japanese youths, but Japan's National Police Agency claimed a much higher number. And civic groups – some dedicated to the overthrow of North Korea – claimed an order of magnitude more.⁶⁵ The objective of these groups and the politicians who supported them was not only to marshal anger at the injustice of the kidnapping and the government's perceived passivity in negotiating for the hostage's release, but also to trigger fear and contempt. As these organisations pointed out, the abductees had been taken not only at random – making anyone a potential target – but also by a people whom many Japanese had long denigrated as culturally inferior.

The two most prominent civil society groups – the Rescue Association, a combined support group and political action committee, and the Family Association – had been set up in March 1997 by professional activists with the collaboration of family members who suspected correctly, albeit on the basis of scant evidence, that their loved ones had been abducted. After Kim's admission in 2002, these groups grew their paid staff and came to operate nearly one hundred branches across Japan from which they used the welfare of the abductees and their families to build a national megaphone for their cause. Armed by support from family members who had complained for years about officials' 'arrogance' and 'callousness', they gave senior posts in the Rescue Association to conservative politicians who succeeded in using the highly emotional 'abductee issue' to tilt national policy towards North Korea in their preferred direction.

The politically astute Abe – then Koizumi's deputy chief cabinet secretary – immediately recognised the abduction issue as a 'political asset' and declared it would become his 'life's work' – work

⁶³ Sick, *October Surprise*, 12.

⁶⁴ Celeste L. Arrington, 'Linking abduction activism to North Korean human rights advocacy in Japan and abroad', in Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb (eds), *North Korean Human Rights Activists and Networks* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 85–108; Richard J. Samuels, 'Kidnapping politics in East Asia', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 10:3 (September–December, 2010), pp. 363–96.

⁶⁵ Eric Johnston, *The North Korean Abduction Issue and Its Effect on Japanese Domestic Politics*, Japan Policy Research Institute Working Paper No. 101 (2004); Gavan McCormack and Haruki Wada, 'Forever stepping back: The strange record of 15 years of negotiation between Japan and North Korea', in John Feffer (ed.), *The Future of US–Korean Relations: The Imbalance of Power* (Routledge, 2006). For the families' own story, see Kitachōsen ni Ratchi Sareta Kazoku ni yoru Renrakukai (ed.), *Kazoku* [The Families] (Kobunsha, 2003). See also the article by Todd Hall and P. Anh Nguyen in this issue.

that on one account would include 'foment[ing] anti-North Korean sentiment across Japan'.⁶⁶ Abe assumed chairmanship of the Rescue Association and stimulated enough public agitation over the abductee issue to enable him to engineer an unlikely electoral victory in November 2003 for his Liberal Democratic Party.

Abe had considerable help from the Japanese media, which, having previously supported efforts of other politicians to normalise relations with Pyongyang, reversed itself and frothed into high dudgeon; it became impossible to question openly the motives of the abductees' families and other advocates, some of whom had electoral ambitions and others anti-communist ones. This meant that other, arguably more important issues, such as denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, paled before this emotionally potent cause of all national causes. One Diet member said that it would be 'political suicide' even to suggest that proliferation of nuclear weapons ought to be of equal or greater concern than the release of the abductees. And according to one senior broadcasting executive, any criticism of how the issue was evolving was 'like stepping on a religious icon'.⁶⁷

Accordingly, while the Japanese public was being lathered into a collective rage, Japanese politicians whose sights were set earlier on North Korean mineral resources – and therefore were willing to ignore early news of the abductions – suddenly ceased advocating for normalised relations with Pyongyang. The government elevated the return of all abductees as a condition for participation in the multilateral Six Party Talks on denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, a position that other participants – China, South Korea, Russia, and the United States – viewed as a distraction from the more important issue of nuclear proliferation.⁶⁸ The irony, of course, was that even though the Japanese government had launched the diplomatic initiative, Japan 'marginalised' itself by succumbing to national sentiment.⁶⁹ The Six Party Talks proceeded under mostly Chinese leadership without settling Japan's primary concern, and soon collapsed.

Netanyahu and the abduction of Gilad Shalit

A final, powerful illustration of how elected politicians can lose control over captivity passions is related to what before 7 October 2023 was the most politicised kidnapping in the history of the Israel–Hamas conflict – the abduction of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006. In the wake of Shalit's kidnapping, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mixed a powerful cocktail of anger, fear, and contempt to elevate his own political status and sell an invasion of Gaza to the Israeli public. However, Netanyahu would later find that the captivity passion he attempted to harness put enormous pressure on him to secure Shalit's safe release in exchange for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners – including Yahya Sinwar, the chief architect of Hamas's murderous October 7 attack and hostage grab seventeen years later. The arrangement also undercut Netanyahu's popularity by prompting a vigorous backlash from families whose loved ones had been murdered by some of those who were released and, as in Sinwar's case, would murder and kidnap again.

From the moment of Shalit's abduction, Netanyahu and his allies knew that Hamas had unwittingly handed conservatives a powerful platform to advance their political cause. Shalit, a nineteen-year-old corporal in the IDF, was snatched by Hamas fighters who had tunnelled into

⁶⁶'Political asset' is from Chaewon Chung, 'Shinzō Abe, key advocate for resolution of abduction issue, dead at 67', *NK News* (8 July 2022). 'Life's work' and 'anti-North Korean sentiment' were reported by Thisanka Siripala, 'Abe Shinzō and the North Korean abduction issue', *The Diplomat* (28 September 2022).

⁶⁷ Author interview, Tokyo, January 2009.

⁶⁸See International Crisis Group (ed.), 'Japan and North Korea: Bones of contention', *Asia Report*, 100 (2005, pp. 9–12); Hong Nack Kim and Jack L. Hammersmith, *North Korean Review*, 4:1 (Spring 2008), pp. 74–90; and Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, 'Projecting economic power: Japan's diplomacy towards North Korea', *Clingendael Diplomacy Papers No. 21*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, The Hague (2009).

⁶⁹Pamela Kennedy, 'Odd one out: The problem with Japan's focus on the abduction issue', *Stimson Center* (10 October 2017), available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2017/odd-one-out-problem-japans-focus-abduction-issue/>, accessed February 20, 2026.

southern Israel. Known merely as ‘Gilad’ in order to establish his familiarity among a sympathetic public, Shalit was characterised not as a POW but rather as a civilian in uniform who was abducted by terrorists. Further contributing to this portrayal, the underground tunnels, which were as likely to be used for smuggling food and weapons *into* a blockaded Gaza as for smuggling fighters *out*, were officially labelled ‘tunnels for kidnapping soldiers.’⁷⁰ Such an image seemed designed to reinforce the public’s belief that any of their children could be the next victim of a Hamas abduction and that Palestinian militants deserved no mercy for employing such underhanded tactics against innocent young Israelis.

As this narrative congealed, the public’s impatience with the government’s initial reluctance ‘to cross a red line’ and negotiate for Shalit’s release led to the rapid proliferation of ‘Free Gilad’ civic organisations, intensified pressure on the Israeli Cabinet, and deepened splits within the Israeli body politic.⁷¹ These groups used nearly every tool leveraged by civil society organisations in democratic societies to impose costs upon the Netanyahu government for perceived inaction, including protests, sit-ins, eliciting sympathy from international supporters, and other forms of narrative building and foot-dragging. Hundreds of thousands of signatures were collected on petitions and hundreds of demonstrations were held to demand that the government make a deal for Shalit’s release. Volunteers joined Shalit’s father and manned a protest tent pitched outside Netanyahu’s residence in Jerusalem. One activist insisted ‘it all started from a feeling of anger...the government was not doing its job.’⁷²

At first, the civil society groups did not prevail. The government’s narrative, framed in the double yoke of Shalit’s captivity and Hamas’s rocket attacks on civilian populations in southern Israel, generated public support for an Israeli assault on Gaza – ‘Operation Cast Lead’ – in December 2008 through January 2009. Intense fighting left more than 1,000 Gazans dead and stimulated broad international condemnation of Israel. Netanyahu was rewarded, becoming prime minister for a second time in November 2009.

Two years later, however, Netanyahu found himself in a bind. Now the ‘Free Gilad’ groups whose anger he had tried to redirect ramped up the pressure for a prisoner swap to secure Shalit’s release. In October 2011, Netanyahu released more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners – including some convicted for murder and for terrorist attacks – in exchange for a single young conscript. Israelis who supported this pointed to the account in Genesis 14 of Abraham’s organising a posse of more than 300 men to rescue his nephew, Lot, from foreign kings. This story was cited frequently as the biblical justification for why the redemption of captives ‘*pidyon shevuyim*’ became the highest form of *mitzvah* – a good deed done in accordance with Jewish religious belief.⁷³

But families of those murdered by some of the released prisoners were incensed – particularly by the release of Sinwar.⁷⁴ In the words of one journalist, Netanyahu’s submission was made possible because ‘Israel [was] obsessed with Gilad Shalit in a way that no other nation in history has been obsessed with a prisoner of war.’⁷⁵ Having conceded to the pressure, the Israeli government pushed back, arguing that the Free Gilad campaign had undercut negotiations for his release by raising the

⁷⁰Term used at Israeli Defense Force briefing, Tel Aviv, June 2009.

⁷¹Examples of old activist blogs and websites include: ‘Free Gilad Shalit’, available at: {<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129065640/http://giladshalit.blogspot.com/>}, accessed February 20, 2026.; and ‘Gilad Shalit’, available at: {https://web.archive.org/web/20110208133105/http://www.habanim.org/en/index_en.html}, accessed February 20, 2026. For a list of affiliated groups, see ‘Give Israel Your United Support’, available at: {<https://web.archive.org/web/20130120034218/http://www.giyus.org/partners.html>}, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁷²Coby Ben-Simhon, ‘Lost cause’, *Haaretz* (23 April 2009).

⁷³‘*Pidyon shevuyim*’ was a constant refrain during author interviews in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem regarding Gilad Shalit in July 2010. In the Middle Ages, the biblically inspired concern was so central that whole Jewish communities went bankrupt attempting to collect funds to ransom captive relatives. See Ethan Bronner, ‘Captive helps close the distance between Israelis’, *New York Times* (1 December 2009).

⁷⁴Daniel Estrin, ‘The shadowy Hamas leader behind the war against Israel’, *NPR* (3 December 2023).

⁷⁵Ari Shavit is quoted in R. P. Wright, *Kidnap for Ransom: Resolving the Unthinkable* (CRC Press, 2009), p. 2.

costs of prisoner exchange. One spokesman declared public safety was threatened: '[T]he price of the deal rose to insane heights.'⁷⁶ The captivity passion initially created by Netanyahu and his allies prompted one prominent journalist to reflect on how 'Israeli society's inability to tolerate even a single soldier held in captivity result[ed] in popular movements that ha[d] a tremendous impact on strategic decisions made by the government.'⁷⁷

Failure to launch

Finally, there are abduction cases in which a captivity passion never comes to a boil – perhaps because the political class is unimaginative, the timing inopportune, more pressing domestic issues take precedence, or the families of the victims refuse to cooperate. China's detention of Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in response to Canada's imprisonment of Huawei CEO Meng Wanzhou at the behest of the United States in December 2018 was such a case. Notably, no Canadian politician, from either the incumbent government or the political opposition, made a serious effort to exploit the situation for political gain.

Three years after their imprisonment, both Meng and the 'two Michaels' became *causes célèbres* in their respective countries, and their paired detentions stimulated nationalist posturing.⁷⁸ In Canada, their seizure triggered pushback against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's China policy and seemed to strengthen the hand of Conservative leader Erin O'Toole, inducing Trudeau to call for a snap election in August 2021. However, in the lead-up to the election, O'Toole and his parliamentary allies never sought to mobilise public support for the two Michaels or encourage their families to take a more vocal role. Ultimately, Trudeau prevailed in the election, and the Canadian public responded to the release of the two Michaels – four days after Trudeau's electoral victory – less with triumphalism than relief.⁷⁹

In contrast, China's response to the abduction of Meng was far more emotional and politicised than Canada's response to the retaliatory seizure of the two Michaels. Posts related to Meng's return topped the list of Sina Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms, and were read more than 100 million times on the day she returned to a state welcome amidst an enormous crowd of Chinese well-wishers at Shenzhen Baoan Airport. Thirty million netizens viewed her arrival on live stream, and office towers were lit up in celebration.⁸⁰

Puzzlingly, the lead-up to the Meng–Michaels prisoner swap had many of the ingredients required for a Canadian SAE to kick-in – namely a lengthy captivity crisis that captured the national news cycle and a robust democratic society replete with strong civil institutions, a free media, and a skilled bureaucracy. However, it was missing one essential ingredient – a policy entrepreneur with a political objective that could be advanced by mobilisation of an emotional public. We cannot be certain why O'Toole and his Conservatives did not push the issue further, or why Trudeau did not use it.

⁷⁶Uri Tuval, 'Bringing Gilad home: A look at the Shalit family's struggle', *Haaretz* (26 June 2009).

⁷⁷Ronen Bergman, 'Gilad Shalit and the rising price of an Israeli life', *New York Times Magazine* (9 November 2011). See also Walter Reich, 'Saving Shalit, encouraging terror', *New York Times* (18 October 2011).

⁷⁸Danielle Gilbert and Gaëlle Rivard Piché, 'Caught between giants: Hostage diplomacy and negotiation strategy for middle powers', *Texas National Security Review*, 5:1 (2021/2022), pp. 11–32, captures this dynamic well, available at <https://tnsr.org/2021/11/caught-between-giants-hostage-diplomacy-and-negotiation-strategy-for-middle-powers/>, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁷⁹Justin Massie, Stéphanie Chouinard, and Louis-Benoit Lafontaine, 'Foreign Policy and the 44th general election in Canada', Network for Strategic Analysis (17 September 2021), available at <https://ras-nsa.ca/foreign-policy-and-the-44th-general-election-in-canada/>, accessed February 20, 2026; Andy Blatchford, 'Top Trudeau rival O'Toole would push for Canada to join U.S., UK, and Australia Security Alliance', *Politico* (16 September 2021), available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/16/trudeau-otoole-canada-security-alliance-512217>, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁸⁰Chen Qingqing, Shen Weiduo, and Cao Siqi, 'Major progress for China's diplomas as US heeds call from Chinese request list to release Meng Wanzhou', *Global Times* (25 September 2021).

Our uncertainty notwithstanding, the ‘two Michaels’ case demonstrates two important features of politicised kidnappings, both scope conditions of our inquiry: first, that there can be no SAE without an agent. Aspiring sorcerers must accept the risks of escalation by engaging with the public on captivity issues; they must ‘pay to play’. Second, it reminds us that authoritarian leaders, operating with control of their press and bureaucracies – and without interference from Tocquevillian civil society groups – can be at least as skilled as democratic ones in manipulating public emotion in the service of their preferred foreign policy. At the very least, although the nature of audience costs in autocratic regimes differs from those in democracies, there is room to broaden the utility of our model as our research proceeds.⁸¹

Conclusion

We are taught that ‘clever politicians do not take the political world as they find it.’⁸² This is a particularly apt characterisation of elected leadership during captivity crises where incumbents are vulnerable to criticism that they have failed in their central responsibility to protect citizens. These incumbents, moreover, are particularly exposed when insurgent politicians spin vivid, anxiety-inducing captivity narratives that stimulate public anger, fear, and contempt to secure a captive’s release and then stake compelling claims to governing in the interest of national security. Indeed, the efficacy of insurgents’ performances may propel them as much (or further) towards their objectives than successful negotiations, rescues, or punishment – options beyond their current reach, but well within the grasp of incumbents whose failures are laid bare before the public. On the other hand, we have also seen how politicians who manipulate political captivity to mobilise discontent may – much like Goethe’s (and Disney’s) sorcerer’s apprentice – fail to secure the release of captives and/or lose control of the emotion-fuelled passions they help unleash. To the extent that they frame their ambitions in nationalistic rhetoric marinated in contempt, they may strengthen their angry or fearful domestic base, but at the cost of undermining the viability of their current or future foreign and security policies.⁸³

We chose cases from different times and places – and in which different combinations of emotions were generated – in order to probe the broad utility of our model. In so doing, it became clear that the SAE is not everywhere in play. Some captivity dramas run their course without ever becoming fully politicised – as in the 2021 ‘two Michaels case’ in Canada – while in others, like the Japanese ‘abductee issue’, a sorcerer’s apprentice stimulated public emotions that marginalised Japanese influence in consequential regional security affairs. This was a reprise of how President Nixon decades earlier cultivated leaders of the POW–MIA movement to secure his electoral base, but lost control of them after the family groups split over his Vietnam War policy. Likewise, the political allies of Gilad Shalit who pressed the Israeli government to free more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners to secure his freedom triggered a vigorous backlash from families whose loved ones had been murdered by some of those released, one of whom became the architect of Hamas’s October 7 attack.

At the time of this writing, more than two years after that attack, this century’s most dramatic captivity drama to date ended when a non-Israeli political entrepreneur, US President Donald Trump, intervened with international support to compel Israel and Hamas to make a hostage/prisoner swap. Hamas released all twenty living hostages and began to return the remains of twenty-eight more. And, in a maudlin replay of the Shalit resolution, these few survivors and

⁸¹ See also Susan D. Hyde and Elizabeth N. Saunders, ‘Recapturing regime type in international relations: Leaders, institutions, and agency space’, *International Organization*, 74:2 (2020), pp. 363–95.

⁸² Kenneth A. Schepsle, ‘Losers in politics (and how they sometimes become winners): William Riker’s heresthetic’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 1:2 (2003), p. 309, summarises this insight of Riker’s monograph *The Art of Political Manipulation*. Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli’s Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Cornell University Press, 2003), explores leaders’ use of *bricolage* for much the same purpose.

⁸³ Catherine E. DeVries, Sara B. Hobolt, and Stefanie Walter, ‘Politicizing international cooperation: The mass public, political entrepreneurs, and political opportunity structures’, *International Organization*, 72:2 (Spring 2021), p. 309.

their deceased colleagues were exchanged for 1,900 Palestinian prisoners, 250 of whom were serving life sentences for murder.

Until the Trump intervention, we wondered why the appropriate coding for this case seemed to be ‘failure to launch’. Some limited SAE dynamics were, after all, in play. Family groups organised vigorous protests with broad popular support. There was also deep resentment of a standing authorisation for IDF field commanders to order fire upon enemies holding Israeli soldiers even at the cost of the soldiers’ lives – the so-called ‘Hannibal Directive’.⁸⁴ On October 7, this ‘friendly fire’ took the lives of Israeli civilians for the first time, triggering IDF veterans to highlight the Hannibal Directive and demand a ceasefire in Gaza.⁸⁵

But strikingly, no Israeli politician – including Cabinet ministers who urged Prime Minister Netanyahu to pursue hostage release as a priority – took the risk of weaponising public sentiment for political gain. Meanwhile, members of the Israeli public demanding the captives’ safe return did not wait for a domestic sorcerer to fuel its rage at Netanyahu and the rest of his Cabinet for keeping a full hostage release beyond reach. Instead, they mobilised themselves. During years of continuous demonstrations, Israelis demanded a deal for the return of loved ones, yet their fury – including a general strike after Israel stiff-armed ceasefire talks and Hamas murdered six hostages – had no prominent national leader. Observing that no Israeli politician or senior security official, many of whom openly opposed government policy, stood to unite the well-organised hostage families, one Likud minister concluded that Netanyahu ‘fears [his far-right cabinet ministers] more than he fears the families of the hostages’.⁸⁶ Apparently, the prime minister valued US support even more than he feared either domestic group.

The case is all the more puzzling given how the division of Israel’s electorate over the hostage issue crystallises the SAE. Michal Uziyahu, chair of the Eshkol Regional Council, site of multiple October 7 attacks, evocatively framed Israel’s dilemma when she asked how best to imagine ‘victory’ over Hamas. Is it, she wondered, an ‘image of a hostage hugging his family or the image of a building we bombed?’⁸⁷ In the absence of a ‘sorcerer’ capable of uniting public sentiment behind the former vision, Israel’s leadership was free to choose the latter. The prime minister steadfastly resisted families’ and veterans’ demands to get the hostages back, a stark contrast to the case of Gilad Shalit two decades earlier, when the pressure to redeem even one Israeli hostage was irresistible and widely justified by biblical scripture.

Ultimately, it was Trump, an agent from abroad, who changed the calculus by stretching the constraints on Israeli political action and was subsequently bathed in adulation by an emotionally drained Israeli public. Should the peace agreement stand, he could be coded as a ‘sorcerer’ who benefited from – but did not ignite – Israeli emotions. Should it come undone as a consequence of Trump’s intercession, his role will be coded as an ‘apprentice’. But for now, *Time Magazine*’s cover headline on former prime minister Ehud Barak’s assessment captured the Israeli public’s sentiment perfectly: Trump was ‘the leader Israel needed’.⁸⁸

We acknowledge, and want to understand better, the variable effects of captivity passions on foreign and security policy. In doing so, we hope to move beyond conceptual probing in limited cases and to specify SAE dynamics more fully. At this juncture, we are confident about the relevance of the SAE and five aspects of the understudied relationship connecting captivity, emotions,

⁸⁴ Amy Teibel, ‘Gaza is tiny and watched closely by Israel. But rescuing hostages there would be a daunting task’, Associated Press (11 October 2023), available at: <https://www.abc27.com/international/ap-gaza-is-tiny-and-watched-closely-by-israel-but-rescuing-hostages-there-would-be-a-daunting-task/>, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁸⁵ Breaking the Silence, ed., ‘Testimonies’, available at: <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies?as1=Hannibal&is=1&sw=1&ci>, accessed February 20, 2026.

⁸⁶ Michael Hauser Tov, ‘Senior Likud minister: Netanyahu will only push for Gaza deal “when streets are burning”’, *Haaretz* (1 September 2024); Yossi Melman, ‘To protest Netanyahu’s cruelty, should Israel’s security chiefs resign?’, *Haaretz* (1 September 2024); and the equally blunt headline from the left in Amos Harel, ‘Israeli hostages die so Netanyahu can keep his coalition alive’, *Haaretz* (1 September 2024).

⁸⁷ Eden Solomon, ‘Is the image of victory a hostage hugging his family, or a building we bombed?’, *Haaretz* (21 April 2025).

⁸⁸ ‘The leader Israel needed’, *Time Magazine* (10 October 2025).

and national policy. First, there are two abductees in most captivity narratives – the corporeal ones and, metaphorically, the bodies politic. The former provides a lens to explore the latter, that is, the successful kidnapping of national politics and diplomacy enabled by manipulation of national emotions. Second, we understand that the manipulation of public emotions during captivity crises in the service of national policy is best understood as a feature, not a bug, of democratic governance.

Third, we observe that during captivity crises, captors and ambitious leaders *both* may use three domestic political institutions – *civil society*, *the media*, and the *bureaucracy* – to stir and channel public emotions, consolidate power, and stimulate state action that affect international security. Fourth, in so doing, leaders may fortify their electoral bases but make constructive national policy more difficult to sustain. Finally, we believe that making sense of why ‘sorcerers’ succeed, ‘apprentices’ struggle, and some actors ‘fail to launch’ deepens our understanding of how emotional and politicised captivities can reshape the course of foreign affairs and international security.

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