

Brief primer: Scharpf (2020)

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Governments sometimes send their soldiers to be trained by foreign powers; often big ones with clear geopolitical agendas. In Scharpf's case, this foreign power is the United States. This kind of training doesn't just make soldiers more capable. It also makes them less controllable. Historically, foreign-trained officers have been involved in coups, repression, and all sorts of behavior that governments should fear. So the puzzle is simple: why would governments knowingly take that risk?

Scharpf's answer is that governments are not making a single decision; they make two distinct decisions, and each is driven by a different logic.

The first decision is whether to send soldiers abroad at all. This is not really about military effectiveness. It's about politics—specifically, international politics. During the Cold War, Latin American governments operated in a world where aligning with the United States mattered a lot. But alignment is cheap talk unless you can make it credible. Sending soldiers to a US military academy is one way of doing that. It's costly, because those soldiers may come back with loyalties and ideas that don't fully align with the government at home. And precisely because it is costly, it sends a strong signal: “we are tied to you, and we're not planning to switch sides anytime soon.” So participation in foreign training is best understood as a commitment device in international relations.

Once a government has crossed that threshold – once it has decided to participate – the second decision kicks in: how much training should we demand? This is where the story shifts from diplomacy to domestic survival. More training means more skilled soldiers, which can be extremely useful if the government is facing serious threats—especially insurgencies. But more training also means more officers who are potentially capable of organizing against the regime. So governments are walking a tightrope. They don't just maximize training. They increase it only when they really need it—when there is a concrete threat and when foreign training offers skills they cannot easily produce at home. In the Latin American context, that means counterinsurgency: dealing with guerrilla movements that domestic militaries were often poorly equipped to handle.

The argument is two-fold: governments use foreign training both to signal loyalty abroad and to manage threats at home. These are separate decisions, driven by different incentives.

To test this, Scharpf looks at a very specific and well-chosen case: the US School of the Americas, which trained tens of thousands of Latin American soldiers between 1946 and 2004. This institution is perfect for the question because it combines high – access to advanced military training – with very visible risks. Many of its graduates later participated in coups or repression. If governments are still using this kind of training, they must have a reason.

Scharpf collects data on more than 60,000 individual training records and aggregates them to a data set at the country-year level. The key outcome is how many training courses did a country's military personnel attend in a given year? Some countries never send anyone. Others send a few people occasionally. And some ramp up participation at certain points in time. So you get a dataset with a lot of zeros and a lot of variation among the non-zero cases.

Now here's where his design becomes clever. Instead of treating all observations the same, Scharpf takes his theory seriously and builds the theorized data generating process into the model. If governments make two

decisions: whether to participate, and how much to participate. As a result, he uses a zero-inflated negative binomial model. One part of the model asks: what explains whether a country sends anyone at all? This is the participation decision, the diplomatic stage. The other part asks: given that a country participates, what explains how many training courses it uses? That's the intensity decision—the military stage. In other words, the model mirrors the theory: first entry, then volume.

The variables also map neatly onto these two stages. To explain participation, Scharpf looks at how closely a country's foreign policy aligns with that of the United States—for example, how similarly they vote in the UN. The idea is that countries that are politically aligned with the US have more incentive to signal that alignment through training. To explain the amount of training, he looks at domestic threats—especially guerrilla attacks. The idea is that governments will only ramp up training when they face threats that foreign training is actually useful for addressing.

The results line up with the argument. Countries that are more aligned with the United States are more likely to send troops to the School of the Americas in the first place. That supports the idea that training is used as a diplomatic signal. But once you look at how much training countries demand, alignment no longer matters. Instead, what matters is whether the country is facing guerrilla threats. When insurgent activity increases, governments significantly increase their use of foreign training. Other forms of unrest—like strikes or demonstrations—don't have the same effect. So governments are not just reacting to instability in general; they are responding specifically to threats that foreign training can help address.

Put differently, governments are behaving in a very targeted way. They use foreign training to lock in international relationships, and they expand it only when they need specific military capabilities. They are not blindly accepting whatever training is offered. They are using it strategically.

The takeaway is not just about military training. It's about how political actors make decisions under competing pressures. Governments are balancing international credibility against domestic risk, and they are doing so in a way that is conditional and selective. Methodologically, the paper is a nice illustration of how you can let your theory guide your model choice. The distinction between “whether something happens at all” and “how much of it happens” is not just statistical. It reflects two different political processes.

In short: Governments don't just decide whether to cooperate; they decide how deeply to commit, and those are two different political choices