

# HAWKS, DOVES, AND PEACE: AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

Short Title: Hawks, Doves, and Peace

Keywords: rapprochement, hawks, doves, domestic politics, conflict resolution, foreign policy, experiments, public opinion

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· Previous versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, March 16-19, 2016 and the Peace Science Society, South Bend, Indiana, October 20-22, 2016. For helpful feedback we thank workshop participants at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Texas, and Yale University, as well as Stephen Chaudoin, Jeff Colgan, David Edelstein, Josh Kertzer, Michael Masterson, Aila Matanock, Jon Pevehouse, Alison Post, Jonathan Renshon, Elizabeth Saunders, Michael Tomz, Elizabeth Vonnahme, and Ariel Zellman.

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**Abstract:** An old adage holds that “only Nixon could go to China,” i.e. that hawkish leaders face fewer domestic barriers than doves when it comes to pursuing reconciliation with foreign enemies. However, empirical evidence for this proposition is mixed. In this paper, we clarify competing theories, elucidate their implications for public opinion, and describe the results of a series of survey experiments designed to evaluate whether and why there is a hawk’s advantage. We find that hawks are indeed better positioned domestically to initiate rapprochement than doves. We also find support for two key causal mechanisms: voters are more confident in rapprochement when it is pursued by a hawk, and more likely to view hawks who initiate conciliation as moderates. Further, the hawk’s advantage persists whether conciliatory efforts end in success or failure. Our microfoundational evidence thus suggests a pronounced domestic advantage for hawks who deliver the olive branch.

**Replication Materials:** The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science Dataverse* within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YWZBUJ>

Word Count: 9,453

## I. Introduction

One of the more interesting and counterintuitive insights in political science and economics is the idea that substantial policy reversals are often accomplished by unlikely leaders. When it comes to foreign policy, scholars have suggested that “only Nixon could go to China”: because Nixon was widely perceived to be a foreign policy hawk, domestic audiences regarded his efforts to reconcile with China more favorably than they would have viewed the same policies by a dove. Similarly, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, a hawk, successfully negotiated the 1978 Camp David Accords; by contrast, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, a dove, was removed from office after his efforts to forge peace with the Palestinians at the 2000 Camp David Summit.

The thesis that hawks possess a domestic political advantage at initiating rapprochement has inspired a robust literature. Scholars have researched the specific mechanisms that could make voters respond more favorably to peace initiatives by hawks than by doves (Cowen and Sutter 1998; Cuckierman and Tommasi 1998; Nincic 1988; Russett 1990; Schultz 2005); developed counterarguments for why hawks should not have a public opinion advantage (Clare 2014; Fehrs 2014); and tested these ideas empirically (Chiozza and Choi 2003; Clare 2014; Colaresi 2004; Fehrs 2014; Schultz 2003; Sigelman and Sigelman 1986; Trager and Vavreck 2011). However, findings are mixed; we currently lack compelling evidence for whether hawks indeed have a domestic political advantage at making peace, and we do not know why and when this advantage may exist.

Yet, the question of whether hawks are in a better position to achieve peace is important from a policy-making perspective. If domestic audiences are indeed more likely to support hawkish leaders who attempt peace, then the election of a hawk might signal greater room for

reconciliation between enemies than otherwise thought. Similarly, if hawks have greater domestic backing for reaching out to an enemy, then third parties with a stake in bringing about an end to a rivalry may consider intensifying their efforts when hawks are in power.

In order to shed light on whether and why hawks possess a domestic advantage at pursuing reconciliation with a distrusted adversary, we adopt an experimental approach. We clarify existing theoretical arguments, highlighting the fact that the idea of a “hawk’s advantage” explicitly builds on expectations about how the mass public responds to leaders’ policy choices. We then develop innovative experimental tests designed to evaluate the hawk’s advantage at the level of public opinion. Our experiments reveal not only whether hawks are better positioned domestically to pursue peace, but also what mechanisms drive voters’ evaluations of peace efforts, and how voters respond both before and after they have learned whether rapprochement was a success or failure.

We find strong microfoundational evidence that hawks are advantaged at cooperation with international adversaries: hawks who initiate rapprochement receive significantly more support than doves. The hawk’s advantage stems both from the public’s greater confidence in a policy of rapprochement when it is pursued by a hawk, and the perception that hawks who pursue conciliation have more moderate policy preferences. Not only are hawks advantaged in the immediate aftermath of the conciliatory act, but this edge persists after the public learns about the outcome of the rapprochement effort. Our experiments also show that, whether the international rival responds by rejecting or reciprocating the conciliatory gesture, domestic audiences respond much more favorably when hawks extend the olive branch.

## II. The Theoretical Basis of the Hawk's Advantage

At its most basic, the “hawk’s advantage”- thesis suggests that voters react more favorably when hawkish leaders attempt to reconcile with an international rival, compared to dovish leaders who pursue the same policies (Cowen and Sutter 1998; Cuckierman and Tommasi 1998; Nincic 1988; Schultz 2005). As we explain in detail below, there are two possible reasons that hawks might have a domestic advantage when they risk peace. The first is that voters are more confident in the merits of conciliatory policies advanced by hawks than the same policies put forth by doves. The second is that voters infer that doves who pursue peace are extreme pacifists, but assume that hawks who extend the olive branch have moderate foreign policy preferences. Regardless of the mechanism, the “hawk’s advantage”-thesis suggests that a reputation for hawkish foreign policy preferences provides leaders with a domestic edge when it comes to reconciling with a distrusted enemy.

Some scholars, however, have reached the opposite conclusion. Indeed, one reason that the idea of a hawk’s advantage has garnered attention is that it runs counter to well-established arguments that there are benefits to behaving in line with past commitments, and costs to changing policy stances. Scholars have found that leaders who deviate from previously held issue positions are often penalized by voters (Tomz and Van Houweling 2012), and that leaders who back down from military threats incur significant domestic audience costs (e.g. Levy, McKoy, Poast, and Wallace 2015; Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011). Just as leaders might be penalized for backing down from explicit threats or promises, leaders’ decisions to pursue policies that do not fit their overall reputation (or “type” as perceived by domestic audiences) could elicit disapproval from voters. Indeed, some scholars argue that doves, not hawks, have domestic advantages when it comes to making peace. As Chiozza and Choi (2003) point out,

when voters evaluate a leader's decision to settle an international dispute, they might reward consistency and penalize out-of-character behavior. This suggests that domestic audiences look *less* favorably on attempts by hawks to bring about rapprochement than similar attempts by doves.

This discussion thus suggests two competing hypotheses about the relationship between leader type, the initiation of rapprochement, and public opinion:

*H1 ("hawk's advantage"): Hawks will face a lower penalty/greater reward than doves for pursuing a conciliatory policy toward a distrusted adversary.<sup>1</sup>*

*H2 ("dove's advantage"): Hawks will face a greater penalty/lower reward than doves for pursuing a conciliatory policy toward a distrusted adversary.*

### **Causal Mechanisms**

It is also important to understand *why* voters might react differently to hawks and doves who pursue reconciliation. Scholars have proposed two different rationales that advantage hawks.

Policy Credibility. Cuckierman and Tommasi (1998) and Cowen and Sutter (1998) suggest that voters are warmer toward rapprochement efforts by hawks because they perceive hawks' peaceful efforts to be in the country's national interest. Since hawks are not naturally predisposed to cooperation with an adversary, the public infers that a cooperating hawk chose an appropriate approach. By contrast, voters doubt the wisdom of doves' conciliatory moves: when

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<sup>1</sup> We are agnostic about whether rapprochement typically results in approval or disapproval; it likely depends on the context.

doves pursues rapprochement, voters have trouble discerning whether rapprochement is indeed a prudent policy or whether doves are blindly following their own preferences for cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

These ideas lead to the following hypothesis:

*H3 (“policy credibility”): Voters are more likely to believe that a conciliatory policy is wise when it is carried out by a hawkish rather than by a dovish leader.*

Moderation. Schultz (2005) builds on Nincic (1988) to develop an alternative mechanism. The rationale is that voters, especially those close to the center of the political spectrum, are wary of leaders with extreme preferences about military confrontation and international cooperation (Russett 1990). These voter preferences create incentives for leaders to demonstrate that they are middle-of-the-road: hawks have an incentive to prove their moderation by pursuing reconciliation with an adversary, while doves are disincentivized to seek peace. A dove who cooperates with the enemy risks being seen as an extremist—a pacifist—and the median voter will recoil. By contrast, a hawk who pursues reconciliation reveals himself to be a moderate rather than a warmonger and, as a result, will curry favor with the median voter. This leads to the following hypothesis:

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<sup>2</sup> This logic resembles more general arguments about the value of surprising information; the public could be more likely to update beliefs if information comes from an unlikely source (e.g. Baum and Groeling 2010; Saunders n.d., though see Gelpi 2010). However, that literature typically addresses how partisanship, not a reputation for hawkishness/dovishness, affects perceptions.

*H4 (“moderation”): Voters who observe a hawkish leader carrying out a conciliatory policy are more likely to conclude that the leader is moderate than voters who observe a dovish leader carrying out the same policy.*

The two mechanisms build on different logics of what is being evaluated. As Schultz (2005) points out, the credibility mechanism stipulates that there is uncertainty about the optimal policy, while the moderation mechanism assumes that voters are uncertain about the leader’s preferences or type.<sup>3</sup> Under the credibility mechanism, voters rely on leader type to evaluate the policy, and, under the moderation mechanism, voters use the policy to assess the leader’s preferences. Which mechanism is at work is consequential: if pursuing cooperation with an adversary makes hawks appear moderate, and thus can lead to electoral rewards, then they might initiate rapprochement more frequently and in a larger range of circumstances than if their primary advantage is simply that the reconciliation policy they pursue will appear more credible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In a working paper, Schultz (2003) evaluates these two mechanisms with a counterfactual analysis of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, finding evidence of both.

<sup>4</sup> A possible related dynamic, which we do not consider due to space limitations, is that voters view hawks who engage in conciliation as inconsistent. Perceptions of inconsistency could dampen hawks’ advantages with regards to credibility and moderation.



## **Does Knowing the Policy Outcome Negate the Hawk's Advantage?**

Finally, it is worth investigating how international outcomes affect the hawk's advantage. Early work did not consider that voters might observe the adversary's reaction and evaluate hawks' and doves' rapprochement policies differently based on whether the adversary responds with cooperation or defection. Studies such as Sigelman and Sigelman (1986), Cuckierman and Tommasi (1998), and Cowen and Sutter (1998) assume that the "election" or "poll" happens before the response by the other state is known and thus before the policy can be deemed successful or not. More recent work (e.g. Clare 2014; Colaresi 2004; Davies and Johns 2016; Schultz 2005) takes into consideration that voters might update their opinions based on the adversary's reaction. Interestingly, these studies formulate quite different expectations about how voters respond to success and failure of conciliatory policies by hawks and doves.

Schultz (2005) argues for a strong version of the hawk's advantage and suggests that even if the adversary cooperates, voters will disapprove of a dove's conciliatory moves, since they expect that the adversary is simply biding its time to take advantage at a later point. At the same time, even if a hawk's efforts at rapprochement fail, voters have incentives to keep the hawk in power, since they would be worse off with a dovish government under these circumstances.

*H5 ("strong hawk's advantage"): Hawks will face a lower penalty/higher reward than doves regardless of outcome.*

By contrast, Clare (2014) argues that voters would reward, not penalize, a dove for successful rapprochement. At the same time, unsuccessful efforts by a hawk should be punished, since they suggest foreign policy failure. Without differentiating between hawks and doves,

Colaresi (2004) makes a similar argument: he suggests that any over-cooperation with a rival that is not reciprocated may lead to loss of office for a leader.<sup>5</sup> Following this line of argument, what matters is not whether the policy was carried out by a hawk or a dove, but whether or not the policy was successful.

*H6 (“outcome swamps type”): Voters will reward hawks and doves equally if the policy succeeds in eliciting cooperation by the adversary and will punish hawks and doves equally if the policy fails to elicit cooperation.*

Whether voters consider the rival’s response, and react differently depending on leader type, has important implications for the scope of the hawk’s advantage. If doves are more likely than hawks to be penalized for making concessions even if they can get the adversary to reciprocate, then doves should indeed face a disincentive to initiate rapprochement. If doves can benefit from rapprochement if it is successful, they might be more willing to pursue such a policy.

### **III. Testing the Hawk’s Advantage: Past Studies**

Several existing studies speak to whether hawks or doves possess an advantage at bringing about international cooperation with an adversary. However, their evidence is far from conclusive. Some studies imply that hawks are in a better position to seek peace (Nincic 1988;

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<sup>5</sup> A recent experimental study found that British voters generally disapproved of policy failures but were especially likely to punish leaders that they thought had over-cooperated with an adversary; though this study does not consider leader type (Davies and Johns 2016).

Schultz 2003; Trager and Vavreck 2011), while others suggest that doves may be advantaged (Clare 2014; Stevens 2014), and yet others produce mixed findings (Chiozza and Choi 2003; Sigelman and Sigelman 1986) or raise doubts that leader type matters at all (Fehrs 2014). Some studies are observational, while others are experimental. Below we discuss the limitations of observational work and argue that existing experimental studies are not specifically designed to assess the hawk's advantage at pursuing international reconciliation.

Attempts to evaluate the hawk's advantage using observational data face several challenges. First, observational studies are prone to selection bias: for example, if doves experience backlash for proposing peace, they will do so rarely and possibly only when they believe they will not face disapproval. It thus becomes difficult to determine whether doves are at a disadvantage relative to hawks (Colaresi 2004; Schultz 2003). Second, studies that map public opinion and election outcomes against leader policies towards a distrusted state cannot conclusively establish that leaders' actions drive public (dis-)approval, given the possibility of reverse causation and confounding. Third, using observational data, it is difficult to uncover the precise mechanisms driving voters to be more supportive of hawks' peace-making efforts—different mechanisms lead to observationally equivalent results.

An experimental approach offers several advantages. Researchers can present subjects with scenarios that are infrequent in the real world due to selection issues, can hold constant characteristics of the situation that may confound the results, and can disentangle underlying causal mechanisms. Moreover, given that most of the relevant theories emphasize the opinions of ordinary citizens, experiments conducted on the mass public are particularly well-suited to assessing the micro-foundations of the argument that hawks are better positioned for peace.

Surprisingly few scholars, however, have turned to experiments to assess whether hawks and doves are evaluated differently for the same policy. Sigelman and Sigelman (1986) examine public evaluations of “out-of-character” acts by presidents in a lab experiment, and Trager and Vavreck (2011) use a survey experiment to test whether Democratic and Republican leaders experience audience costs for backing down against an adversary.<sup>6</sup> While these studies provide important insights into leaders’ incentives in crises, they are not specifically designed to test whether hawks have an advantage at initiating rapprochement.

First, past studies focus on presidential behavior in an international crisis rather than on an unprompted decision by the president to pursue reconciliation with a long-term enemy such as Nixon’s outreach to China or Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. International crises differ from non-crisis situations: crises could prompt voters to unite behind the president and to withhold criticism. In the urgency of a crisis, leader attributes that affect approval in non-crisis situations, such as partisanship, could become relatively less important to the public (e.g. Kam and Ramos 2008; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012), and voters might attribute the leader’s decisions to outside circumstances rather than the leader (Sigelman and Sigelman 1986). Crises therefore do not match the typical attempts at rapprochement envisioned in the theoretical literature nor the most prominent historical examples.

Second, past studies operationalize conciliatory behavior as a passive act (“staying out”). However, staying out of a conflict when a third party is threatened is different from actively extending an olive branch to a distrusted adversary, especially if that overture could be exploited

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<sup>6</sup> A recent study by Saunders (n.d.) also examines how elite cues from advisers affect voters’ responses to counter-type and true-to-type actions.

and could have direct negative repercussions for one's home country. Using "staying out" as a conciliatory action risks conflating conciliation with passivity and does not capture the assertive efforts at peace that are the focus of the against-type literature.

Third, existing studies do not provide information about *both* party affiliation and the leader's reputation as a hawk or dove, which could lead to confounding. Sigelman and Sigelman (1986) vary the leader's reputation, but because they omit information about party, we cannot rule out the possibility that part of the effect is due to respondents making assumptions about the leader's party affiliation, which contains information aside from clues about hawkishness. Trager and Vavreck (2011), on the other hand, vary information about party, but do not provide information about the leader's reputation for favoring military force or diplomacy. The effects they find may thus be due to Republicans having a reputation for hawkishness, or some other perceived characteristic of Republican versus Democratic leaders. In sum, these design choices, while certainly appropriate in the context of the studies' research goals, do not allow us to clearly identify differences in domestic evaluations of rapprochement efforts by hawks and doves.<sup>7</sup>

To better understand the public opinion effects of conciliatory policies, we require an experimental scenario that is less likely to evoke a rally effect, that depicts a leader taking a decisive if risky action, and that varies both the leader's partisanship and reputation as a hawk or dove. Such a set-up can also be used to gauge the mechanisms that underlie voter assessments. Existing experimental work has not yet undertaken these tasks, or examined how the adversary's response conditions public approval.

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<sup>7</sup> The Sigelman and Sigelman (1986) study, while prescient for its time and inspiring many of our design choices, is also limited by a small sample size (N=200).

#### IV. Research Design

We fielded a survey experiment to a nationally representative sample of 1,200 U.S.-based subjects recruited by YouGov in April/May 2017. Respondents were first asked a series of demographic and attitudinal questions. Respondents were then told: “We are going to describe a situation the U.S. could face in the future, in 2027. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant.”

We randomly manipulated four core aspects of the scenario: the leader’s type (hawk versus dove); the leader’s party affiliation (Democrat versus Republican); the leader’s policy towards a distrusted adversary (conciliatory versus status quo); and the outcome of the leader’s policy choice (success versus failure at eliciting cooperation from the adversary). We thus used a 2x2x2x2 experimental design.

All participants received the same background information: “The year is 2027. The U.S. President is John Richards. President Richards took office in 2025 after serving in the U.S. Senate for six years.” If we had asked about a president today, or even a few years in the future, subjects would have made assumptions about the identity of the president that could have confounded our inferences about the role of leader type; a hypothetical leader allows us to manipulate perceptions of the leader’s type and political party.<sup>8</sup> By holding constant the leader’s sex and political experience, we further reduce confounding.

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<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, researchers have found little difference in treatment effects when comparing real and hypothetical scenarios (Levendusky and Horowitz 2011). Moreover, our findings replicated across a range of scenarios involving Russia, China, and different forms of rapprochement, indicating that the results do not depend on the specific hypothetical chosen.

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 displays the wording of our treatments. In order to manipulate the leader's hawkishness, we told half of our sample that the president has "a reputation for favoring military solutions over diplomatic ones" and the other half that the president has "a reputation for favoring diplomatic solutions over military ones." We reinforced these treatments by summarizing the leader's past statements on the value of diplomacy and force. We focused on leaders' reputation and verbal statements rather than on past actions to minimize the possibility that our treatments leak information about international threats and/or the president's power relative to Congress. If respondents had been told, for example, as part of the hawk treatment, that the leader had frequently ordered military strikes in the past, they could reasonably have inferred that the country was under greater threat than if they learned, as part of the dove treatment, that the leader had not advocated for military action in the past. Subjects might also have assumed that the hawk was more politically powerful than the dove, since a politically weak leader might not have been able to get congressional support for military action.

Our operationalization of hawk versus dove differs from that of previous studies that measure these concepts based on a leader's party affiliation, with rightist leaders interpreted as signaling hawkishness and leftist leaders signaling dovishness (e.g. Trager and Vavreck 2011). One limitation of focusing on party is that it overlooks the possibility that right-wing leaders may have reputations for dovishness, while left-wing leaders might be relatively hawkish (e.g. Hillary Clinton). Furthermore, voters may not perceive a strong link between foreign policy positions and party ID, although they do associate partisanship with a range of domestic issue positions (Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks 2017). Party affiliation might therefore be a weak treatment as well

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as a compound treatment. By varying hawkishness/dovishness and party affiliation independently, we are able to isolate the effect of our primary theoretical variable.

After learning about the president, participants read about an international situation and the president's policy decision. Our goal was to evoke a distrusted adversary, so our scenario involved China. Over the last 15 years, Americans have consistently placed China among the four "greatest enemies" of the United States (alongside Russia, North Korea, and Iran). Polls show that Americans tend to hold unfavorable views of China and that the vast majority of Americans view China's military power as threatening to the United States.<sup>9</sup>

To anchor participants' views of U.S.-Chinese relations in 2027, we told respondents that relations are very tense, that China remains a non-democracy, that China's military is as strong as the United States', and that the two countries disagree over many important foreign policy issues.<sup>10</sup> We then continued: "One very tense issue is access to the Arctic. The Arctic contains up to 40 percent of the world's oil and gas resources and provides vital shipping routes between continents. In 2027, the U.S. and China both have a major military presence in the Arctic. Each country has thousands of troops in the area and holds frequent military exercises in the region." We focus on the Arctic rather than the South China Sea or Taiwan because any unilateral conciliatory gesture by the U.S. regarding the Arctic is more likely to be interpreted simply as

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<sup>9</sup> For example, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>; Wike (2017).

<sup>10</sup> We held military capabilities equal to ensure that respondents do not perceive U.S.-China's relative power differently depending on the hawk/dove treatment, and to heighten perceptions of threat. This is plausible given frequent news stories predicting that China will soon overtake the U.S. economically (e.g. Patton 2016) and about Chinese military buildups (e.g. Gertz 2016).



the initiation of rapprochement—our treatment of interest— rather than as signaling a withdrawal of support for U.S. allies.<sup>11</sup> The Arctic is also an area in which tensions between the U.S. and China might increase in the future.<sup>12</sup>

Next we described the U.S. president’s policy toward China. All respondents were told: “In his 2027 State of the Union speech, President Richards declares that getting China to cooperate is important for achieving U.S. foreign policy goals.” Half of respondents were then told that he pursued a conciliatory policy, while the other half were told that he maintained the status quo. We varied the president’s policy choice, because it is not possible to derive conclusions about the “hawk’s advantage”- thesis by comparing voter approval of hawks and doves for only a conciliatory policy: voters might respond more favorably to hawks than to doves simply because they generally prefer hawkish leaders to dovish ones, irrespective of the rapprochement policy. To determine whether public opinion is contingent on the policy chosen—the assumption underlying the “hawk’s advantage”- thesis—we need to compare responses to hawks and doves across different policies.

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<sup>11</sup> Introducing alliance considerations would make it difficult to determine whether subjects are reacting to the leader’s rapprochement efforts, or the leader’s abandonment of allies; the conflation of these effects might artificially inflate any penalties leaders experience.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Kuersten (2015) and Wright (2011). In a survey fielded on 702 U.S. subjects via MTurk in March 2017, less than 15 percent of the sample disagreed that “It is likely that by 2027, there will be real-world tensions between China and the U.S. over the Arctic.” Dropping those subjects from the analysis of our pretest data did not change our findings.

For our conciliatory policy treatment, we told respondents that President Richards announces a sharp reduction in the U.S. military presence in the Arctic. In the literature, initial steps at rapprochement are depicted as policies that demonstrate a willingness to improve relations but that are also risky in that the adversary might reject the overture and possibly exploit the conciliatory offer. A one-sided troop withdrawal signals trustworthiness and a desire to reconcile, but also carries security risks (e.g. Kydd 2007).<sup>13</sup> In the status quo treatment, the leader declares that the U.S. will maintain its current military presence in the Arctic. The status quo policy therefore conveys a certain level of assertiveness and avoids implying that the president is showing weakness.

After providing a bullet-point summary of the scenario, we asked participants whether they “approve of how President Richards is doing his job” and measured responses on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve.” We followed with questions designed to assess causal mechanisms. For the credibility mechanism, we asked respondents whether “President Richards chose the best strategy for dealing with China.”<sup>14</sup> To test the moderation mechanism, we presented subjects with the statements “President Richards is

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<sup>13</sup> This gesture bears some similarity with appeasement, which also tends to be unilateral, but is undertaken to avoid *impending* conflict (and thus is often seen as rewarding aggression), and does not necessarily seek to elicit reciprocity. The policy we depict pursues cooperative relations in a non-crisis setting rather than under the threat of war. It is the initial step, or “opening gambit,” in an effort to achieve rapprochement (Kupchan 2010). See web appendix for further discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Measured on a 5-point scale from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”.

a pacifist” and “President Richards is a warmonger”; agreement with either statement would indicate a perception that the president has extreme, rather than moderate, views.

After recording the participants’ evaluations of President Richards and his policy, we again reminded them of the basic facts of the scenario, and then described China’s response. All participants were told that China responded “soon after” the president’s announcement. Half learned that China became more cooperative, indicating that the president’s policy was successful. The other half read that China doubled down on its confrontational behavior, indicating policy failure. We then asked the participants once again to rate their approval of how President Richards is doing his job, and about our causal mechanisms.<sup>15</sup>

## V. Empirical Results

We first test our central hypotheses: whether hawkish or dovish leaders have a domestic political advantage at undertaking risky conciliatory actions towards an adversary. We are agnostic about whether domestic audiences will generally be skeptical of rapprochement efforts; the “hawk’s advantage”- hypothesis is simply that voters will question conciliatory policies more if the leader is a dove. To test for this possibility, we created a dummy variable, *disapproval*, that indicates whether the respondent strongly or somewhat disapproves of how the president is doing

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<sup>15</sup> Balance tests indicated that randomization succeeded in assigning individual treatment conditions irrespective of demographic or attitudinal factors that could also influence subjects’ approval of the president. We also affirmed that our findings were not sensitive to the inclusion of covariates. Results are in the appendix.

his job.<sup>16</sup> Our results can thus be interpreted as the percent of respondents that disapprove of the president's chosen policy.

As mentioned earlier, we cannot simply compare disapproval for hawks and doves conditional on reconciliation efforts, because any differences in evaluation could be due to voters' overall preferences for hawks versus doves, or the specific policy choice. Rather, to determine whether the penalties for attempts at rapprochement are different for hawks than for doves, we must calculate the difference in disapproval when pursuing a conciliatory policy relative to maintaining the status quo for each type of leader, and then compare these differences across the two leader types. Our operationalization of H1—the hawk's advantage—is therefore:

$$\begin{aligned} &Disapproval_{(Conciliatory | Hawk)} - Disapproval_{(Status Quo | Hawk)} < \\ &Disapproval_{(Conciliatory | Dove)} - Disapproval_{(Status Quo | Dove)} \end{aligned}$$

Our experimental results are shown in Table 2. While both hawks and doves face increased disapproval for conciliatory policies toward China, the penalty is far less severe for hawks than for doves. For hawks, a conciliatory policy (i.e., withdrawing troops from the Arctic) leads to a 12 percentage point increase in disapproval compared to maintaining the U.S. military presence in the Arctic. Doves, in contrast, face a 35-point increase in disapproval. The main quantity of interest—the difference in the effect of initiating rapprochement for hawks and doves (i.e. the hawk's advantage)—is a massive 23.5 points and is highly statistically significant.

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<sup>16</sup> We focus on disapproval, because, in our experiment, rapprochement was viewed unfavorably by respondents. We detect the same patterns as those reported below when we instead carry out our analyses using the raw five-point scale.

Hawks experience 23.5 points *less* disapproval for shifting from the status quo to a conciliatory policy than doves. Our experiment shows that the pursuit of rapprochement is much less of a political liability for hawks than for doves, confirming H1. By contrast, H2 is not supported.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

It is also interesting to analyze the data by column rather than by row. When the leader maintains the status quo, we find that respondents are more disapproving of hawks than of doves. We interpret this as our subjects having a baseline preference for leaders who emphasize diplomacy over force. However, when the leader engages in conciliation, this relative aversion to hawks disappears. A dove who extends the olive branch is at least as unpopular as a hawk.<sup>17</sup> Analyzing the data this way affirms why it is important to compare the *difference* in the effect of initiating rapprochement relative to maintaining the status quo for hawks versus doves. This is because the costs for pursuing rapprochement can take the form of an opportunity cost: doves who conciliate are punished relative to a current status quo in which they are relatively more popular, while hawks take less of a relative hit.

In our experiment, both hawks and doves are penalized for conciliatory policies. In such a domestic political context, efforts to pursue rapprochement with an international rival may seem

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<sup>17</sup> Why might doves be more popular than hawks at the status quo? Our data indicate that at the status quo, respondents perceive doves to be more moderate than hawks, and they give dovish leaders credit for having chosen a wise policy. However, when the leader chooses rapprochement, these advantages fade. Doves no longer get an advantage on perceptions of the policy, and are viewed as much more extreme in their foreign policy preferences. These assessments appear to offset the edge that doves had over hawks at the status quo.

unlikely. Yet, leaders might still opt for such a policy if, for example, they need to lower defense expenditures to pursue domestic policy goals, to free up resources to counter a more threatening international enemy, or to pave the way for joining an international organization that requires members to resolve their disputes. Our experiment suggests that, if these other rationales for rapprochement exist, hawks should be more likely to conciliate, since they suffer relatively lower public opinion costs, i.e. their net utility for rapprochement is higher. Additionally, we believe that the pronounced dislike of rapprochement in our experiment may well be a reflection of the particular context of U.S. politics at the time. At other points in history or in other countries, voters might view rapprochement efforts more favorably, thus creating a distinct public opinion incentive for leaders—especially hawks—to pursue these policies.<sup>18</sup>

The results in Table 2 are robust to controlling for the individual’s political ideology, sex, age, education, political interest, religiosity, internationalism, hawkishness, international trust, and whether the president was a Democrat or a Republican. When we subset on the president’s party, which we also randomized, we find that the hawk’s advantage is statistically significant for both Republican and Democratic presidents but that the effect is larger in magnitude for the former. While the leader’s party appears to moderate perceptions of a leader’s hawkishness/dovishness, we found that party ID by itself does not produce a hawk’s advantage: subjects did not respond differently to rapprochement efforts by Democrats and Republicans.

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<sup>18</sup> Our difference-in-difference approach allows us to separate out any potential hawk’s advantage from broader, context-dependent public opinion trends, such as whether the public prefers hawks or doves in general, and how the public feels about reconciliation versus the status quo.

This could be because we provided subjects with specific information about hawkishness and dovishness, and so voters did not rely on party to provide additional cues on that dimension. In the remainder of the analysis, we pool across party and focus on the effect of hawks versus doves.

In an effort to assess the political consequences of our findings, we also examined the hawk's advantage for two electorally important subsamples: politically active respondents and respondents without a firm party affiliation. In the web appendix, we show that among the most politically active respondents, doves received an even greater relative penalty for rapprochement: the difference between hawks and doves was nearly 42 percentage points. Among nonpartisans, the hawk's advantage is similar to our broader sample: 20 percentage points.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, our experimental evidence indicates that hawks have a political advantage over doves in risking rapprochement with a distrusted adversary. While existing studies show that voters penalize leaders who deviate from past commitments, we find that leaders whose policy choices run counter to their overall reputation but are not explicitly at odds with their past statements or actions do not necessarily face additional domestic penalties.

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<sup>19</sup> Future research could explore how perceptions vary across hawkish and dovish respondents (e.g. Brutger and Kertzer 2018).

## Mechanisms

Next, we assess *why* hawks have a domestic political advantage at extending the olive branch.<sup>20</sup> The credibility mechanism suggests that voters are more confident that rapprochement is in the national interest when it is carried out by a hawkish leader. To evaluate this possibility, we turn to our measure of respondents' perceptions of whether the leader had chosen the "best strategy for dealing with China." The first row of Table 3 indicates that respondents were generally skeptical of the merits of rapprochement, but much more so when the president was a dove. When a hawk made a peaceful overture, voters were 15.6 percentage points less likely to agree that the policy was the best one, compared to when the hawk chose the status quo. However, when a dovish president reconciled, voters were 41.4 points less likely to agree that the leader had chosen the best strategy, compared to the status quo. The difference in effect between hawks and doves was 25.8 points, and highly statistically significant.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

We also verified that policy evaluations affected our primary dependent variable, disapproval: the web appendix shows that for both hawks and doves, more favorable views of the policy predicted significantly lower disapproval. Using techniques developed by Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010) and Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto (2010), we then computed the average causal mediation effect of these policy evaluations for both hawkish and dovish leaders.<sup>21</sup> For both types, perception of the policy was a significant mediator of the effect of reconciliation

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<sup>20</sup> Details regarding the mediation analyses are in the web appendix.

<sup>21</sup> We implemented the causal mediation analysis using the *mediation* package in STATA (Hicks and Tingley 2011). The full replication code is available in the supplemental files.



efforts on disapproval. However, because the public was more confident in the policy when it was implemented by a hawk, this causal pathway produced much smaller disapproval for hawks (an approximately 6-point increase in disapproval) than for doves (an approximately 14-point increase in disapproval).

We next turn to the moderation mechanism. We conjectured that hawks who pursue reconciliation should be seen as moderate on foreign policy—a quality favored by voters—while rapprochement efforts by doves would mark them as extremists. To evaluate this possibility, we created a dichotomous variable to capture whether the individual thought that the leader was moderate (i.e., did not think that the leader was a “pacifist” or a “warmonger”).<sup>22</sup>

We found that when a hawkish president engages in conciliation, voters increase their belief that the leader has moderate foreign policy preferences. In contrast, when a dovish president attempts rapprochement, respondents conclude that the president is more extreme than previously thought. Table 3 shows that hawks who conciliate are almost 19 points more likely to be seen as having moderate preferences than under the status quo. For doves, the effect of conciliation is 23.3 points in the opposite direction: doves who conciliated were viewed as *less* moderate than those who stayed neutral. The difference between hawks and doves was nearly 42.2 points, and highly significant.

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<sup>22</sup> If these terms were simply picking up pejorative views and signaling disapproval, we would expect “warmonger” and “pacifist” to be positively correlated. Instead, they are negatively correlated, indicating that respondents conceptualized a spectrum from extremely hawkish to extremely dovish.

We then checked how perceptions of moderation affect disapproval, and found that for both leader types, being perceived as moderate carries significant rewards. Combining these two parts of the causal chain through causal mediation analysis indicates that, on average, this mechanism mutes disapproval for hawks by 5 points, but amplifies disapproval for doves by 1 point. This is because hawks who conciliate are associated with moderation, which reduces disapproval, while doves who extend the olive branch are branded as extremists, which increases disapproval.

In sum, we find support for the hypotheses that perceptions of the wisdom of the policy and of the leader's moderation affect respondents' evaluations of hawkish and dovish leaders' conciliatory policies. Both mechanisms contribute to the hawk's advantage.

### **The Importance of Policy Outcomes**

Our analysis so far has focused on how respondents rate the president and his policies *before* learning whether the attempt at rapprochement was successful. We now explore whether knowledge of the outcome negates the hawk's advantage. After measuring the mediators described above, we told half of the subjects that the policy successfully elicited cooperation and the other half that the policy only made things worse. We then asked subjects to again evaluate the president's performance, using the same approach as earlier.

We tested two hypotheses. H5 suggests that hawks will always fare better than doves after initiating rapprochement, regardless of whether the policy succeeds or fails. H6 predicts that outcome swamps type: voters will reward hawks and doves equally if the policy is successful and will punish them equally if the policy fails.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Table 4 shows the relationship between leader type, conciliation, and public disapproval, both when the policy fails to improve relations with China and when the policy succeeds. Consistent with H5, hawks face a lower penalty for rapprochement efforts whatever the outcome. When conciliation fails (top panel), most voters disapprove. However, the penalty for having initiated conciliation is significantly lower for hawks (30.9 points) than for doves (49.5 points). When conciliation succeeds, hawks end up being rewarded (disapproval drops by 10 points for successful rapprochement compared to a successful status quo policy), while doves continue to face a penalty for conciliation (disapproval is 5.6 points higher for conciliation than for the status quo policy). The difference in effects for hawks and doves is large and statistically significant both when the policy fails (an 18.7-point difference) and when it succeeds (a 15.9-point difference). Further analysis indicates that, when the policy is successful, respondents continue to have more confidence in the policy if the leader was a hawk rather than a dove; when the policy is a failure, that relationship is muted. Irrespective of the policy's success or failure, respondents continue to view hawks who pursue rapprochement as more moderate, while doves are perceived as more extreme.

In sum, we find that both hawks and doves face sharp disapproval when a reconciliation attempt fails, suggesting that leaders should be selective about pursuing rapprochement regardless of type. Indeed, the steep penalties for failed rapprochement suggest that leaders have incentives to champion conciliation plans that guarantee reciprocation. However, hawks and doves continue to be evaluated differently even after the public learns about the outcome; the hawk's advantage persists regardless of the ultimate policy result. Perhaps surprisingly, doves are punished for rapprochement efforts, relative to the status quo, even when the policy is followed by a decrease in tensions with the adversary.

## Generalizability

We also consider whether our findings generalize to other adversaries and other conciliatory gestures. In a survey experiment fielded on 2,192 U.S.-based respondents via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTURK) in July and October 2016, we used a survey instrument virtually identical to the one described above, but with one important difference: rather than describing the U.S.-China relationship, we described relations with Russia, another country that is widely viewed as a distrusted enemy. We uncovered nearly identical results: a hawk's advantage of 27.4 points, which was highly statistically significant. Our results thus do not appear to be idiosyncratic to China.

We also varied the *type* of conciliatory policy, in two different ways. In a survey that was administered to 1,092 U.S.-based subjects in February 2016 using MTURK, we again introduced the Russia scenario but also described a different act of rapprochement. Instead of withdrawing troops, the U.S. president either sharply reduced sanctions on Russia or increased sanctions. In this set-up we found a smaller, though statistically significant hawk's advantage: a 16-point difference between hawks and doves. Sanctions reduction may be perceived as less risky than troop withdrawal and thus might not require the same level of assurance about the wisdom of the policy and the leader's motivation. Nonetheless, even with this less risky policy choice we observe that hawks possess a domestic political advantage.

Finally, in another MTURK survey experiment with 702 respondents conducted in March 2017, we introduced a scenario in which the U.S. president concluded a written joint demilitarization agreement with China before withdrawing forces from the Arctic. Our goal was to see whether the hawk's advantage is muted when the rapprochement gesture occurs in a context where the expectation of reciprocity is explicit. We found the hawk's advantage to be

similar to our main experiment: a statistically significant 25-point difference between hawks and doves. Our findings thus suggest that hawks enjoy an advantage over doves regardless of the specific adversary, and when it comes to forms of rapprochement other than unilateral troop withdrawals.<sup>23</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

The “only Nixon could go to China” adage suggests that hawks possess a domestic political advantage over doves at initiating rapprochement with a distrusted adversary. The counterintuitive nature of the idea has sparked significant scholarly interest, but empirical findings have been inconclusive, due in part to the significant challenges inherent in evaluating these arguments using historical evidence.

Here we clarified competing arguments about the hawk’s advantage and elucidated their implications for public opinion. We then described the results of a series of survey experiments designed to test whether, why, and when hawkish leaders are advantaged at conciliation with an adversary. Overall, our results suggest that hawks are indeed better positioned domestically to deliver the olive branch.

In the short run, before the outcome of the policy became known, voters in our experiment penalized both hawks and doves for opting for rapprochement over a status quo policy, but the penalty was much more severe for doves. Both a credibility and a moderation

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<sup>23</sup> The effect of the hawk/dove treatments on the mediators was similar across experiments.

There were some differences for post-outcome results that we report in the web appendix, though these may be due to smaller survey sample sizes.

mechanism help account for the hawk's advantage: when hawks risk conciliation, voters are more likely to believe that the leader chose the best policy for dealing with the adversary. Voters are also more likely to regard hawks who seek rapprochement as more moderate, while they view doves who carry out such policies as more extreme.

In the longer run, after the outcome of the policy became known, the hawk's advantage held. When the policy failed and the adversary responded aggressively, both hawks and doves were penalized, but doves significantly more so. When the policy succeeded in eliciting a positive response by the adversary, the hawkish leader was rewarded, while the dovish one was punished. Together, these findings suggest that doves are generally worse off than hawks when they pursue conciliatory policies, regardless of the policy's outcomes.

Of course, in the real world, the hawk's advantage may be affected by situational factors and elite and media cues. Moreover, even hawks' attempts to pursue rapprochement may still face political challenges. In the specific scenarios we studied, rapprochement was less popular with domestic audiences than staying with the status quo, even for hawks. Furthermore, leaders often face competing policy priorities, and other international factors, such as considerations about how rapprochement will be perceived by third states, may constrain policy choice. As in any experiment, we are by necessity abstracting away from other factors that enter the decision calculus of both voters and leaders. Nevertheless, our findings show there is micro-level support for the thesis that hawks are better positioned domestically to bring about peace.

Our study also suggests many avenues for future research. First, it is worthwhile to investigate the role of rhetoric in shaping evaluations of rapprochement policies as well as whether doves can take measures to reassure audiences. Doves might overcome domestic political disadvantages if they can justify their policies, if they offer assurances in the form of

more hawkish foreign policies towards other states, and/or if influential advisers send supportive signals (Baum and Groeling 2010; Kreps, Saunders, and Schultz n.d.; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Russett 1990; Saunders n.d.).<sup>24</sup>

Second, future research might explore whether there are conditions under which the advantages of acting counter-to-type are offset by the negative effects of perceptions of inconsistency. Recent research indicates that voters tend to penalize politicians for flip-flopping (e.g. Levy et al. 2015; Tomz 2007; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012).<sup>25</sup> It is thus possible that the hawk's advantage could diminish when there is a pronounced and explicit disjuncture between the leader's past positions and the leader's policy.

Third, scholars should examine how leaders establish reputations for hawkishness/dovishness in the first place and how resilient these reputations are. Depending on the stickiness of these labels, leaders might be able to strategically take actions that change the public's perception of their type and to then reap the rewards of seemingly counter-type behavior.<sup>26</sup>

Fourth, it is worthwhile to examine the reverse of the hawk's advantage at rapprochement, i.e. whether doves have an edge over hawks when pursuing conflictual policies. We found that doves experience less disapproval for status quo policies than hawks, and Trager and Vavreck (2011) suggest that doves may be better off when pursuing an actively conflictual

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<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, *foreign* rhetoric may affect domestic opinion (Gottfried and Trager 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Though see Kertzer and Brutger (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Future research could also study *country*-specific reputations for hawkishness, as opposed to the leader-specific reputations we study here. See Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018.

policy. These findings imply additional support for the causal mechanisms of credibility and moderation, but further investigation into these mechanisms and the conditions under which this effect holds is certainly warranted.

In contrast to the bulk of recent experimental work focusing on audience costs during crises, we seek a better understanding of how domestic audiences respond to leaders' deliberate peace-time decisions to pursue unilateral conciliation towards international adversaries. Given the persistence of international rivalries such as those between the U.S. and China, Russia, and North Korea, it is important to gain insight into the domestic conditions that favor rapprochement. Our study suggests the hawk's domestic advantage at rapprochement might indeed be quite pronounced.



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**Table 1: Experimental Treatments**

HAWK/DOVE	
<i>Hawk</i>	<i>Dove</i>
... has a reputation for favoring military solutions over diplomatic ones. He has repeatedly emphasized that military force is essential to protecting American national security. President Richards says that he will not shy away from using force where necessary. He has long said that “the only way to achieve peace is to be ready for war.”	... has a reputation for favoring diplomatic solutions over military ones. He has repeatedly emphasized that military force is not the answer to protecting American national security. President Richards says that he believes in diplomacy and negotiations and will use military force only as a last resort. He has long said that “the only way to achieve peace is to act peacefully.”
PARTY AFFILIATION	
<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>
... is a lifelong member of the Republican Party.	... is a lifelong member of the Democratic Party.
POLICY CHOICE	
<i>Conciliatory</i>	<i>Status Quo</i>
... announces that he is sharply reducing the U.S. military presence in the Arctic. He is withdrawing a third of the U.S. forces currently in the Arctic and is calling off planned military exercises in the region.	... announces that he is maintaining the current U.S. military presence in the Arctic. He will continue to keep U.S. forces in the Arctic and will carry through with planned military exercises in the region.
OUTCOME	
<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
... the Chinese leader pulls Chinese military forces out of the Arctic and says that he will cooperate with the U.S. in sharing natural resources in that region. He also cancels all military exercises.	... the Chinese leader sends additional Chinese military forces to the Arctic and refuses to cooperate with the U.S. in sharing natural resources in that region. He also orders additional military exercises.

**Table 2: The Effect of Conciliation by Hawks and Doves on Voter Disapproval**

	Conciliatory Policy	Status Quo Policy	Effect of Conciliation
Hawk	38.2 <i>283</i>	26.2 <i>317</i>	12.0 (4.5 to 19.4)
Dove	42.1 <i>328</i>	6.6 <i>271</i>	35.4 (29.3 to 41.6)
Difference			-23.5 (-33.1 to -13.8)

*Note:* The table shows the percent of respondents who disapprove. Cell sizes are in italics, and 95 percent confidence intervals are in parentheses. Numbers may not sum due to rounding.

**Table 3: The Effect of Conciliation on Perceptions of Policy Credibility and Leader Moderation**

<i>Net Effect of Conciliatory Acts</i>			
<u>The President...</u>	<u>Hawk</u>	<u>Dove</u>	<u>Difference</u>
...chose the best strategy for dealing with China.	-15.6 (-23.4 to -7.9)	-41.4 (-48.7 to -34.2)	25.8 (15.2 to 36.4)
... is not a pacifist or a warmonger.	18.9 (11.3 to 26.5)	-23.3 (-31.1 to -15.4)	42.2 (31.2 to 53.1)

*Note:* The *net effect of conciliatory acts* is the effect on respondents' agreement with the statement when the leader shifts from the status quo to a conciliatory policy. The *difference* in net effects of conciliatory acts subtracts the net effect for doves from that for hawks. 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.



**Table 4: The Effect of Conciliation Conditional on the Outcome**

<i>FAILURE</i>			
	Conciliatory	Status Quo	Effect of Conciliation
Hawk	60.6 <i>142</i>	29.7 <i>165</i>	30.9 (20.2 to 41.6)
Dove	67.7 <i>161</i>	18.2 <i>132</i>	49.5 (39.7 to 59.3)
Difference			-18.7 (-33.2 to -4.1)
<i>SUCCESS</i>			
	Conciliatory	Status Quo	Effect of Conciliation
Hawk	2.8 <i>141</i>	13.1 <i>153</i>	-10.2 (-16.3 to -4.2)
Dove	7.8 <i>167</i>	2.2 <i>139</i>	5.6 (0.9 to 10.4)
Difference			-15.9 (-23.5 to -8.2)

*Note:* The table shows the percent of respondents who disapprove. Cell sizes are in italics, and 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses. Numbers may not sum due to rounding.