

Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies

Michael Tomz
Department of
Political Science
Stanford University
tomz@stanford.edu

Jessica Weeks
Department of
Political Science
University of Wisconsin-Madison
jweeks@wisc.edu

Keren Yarhi-Milo
Department of
Politics
Princeton University
kyarhi@princeton.edu

Version: March 2019

Abstract: Many theories of international relations assume that public opinion exerts a powerful effect on foreign policy in democracies. Previous research, based on observational data, has reached conflicting conclusions about this foundational assumption. In this research note, we use experiments to examine two mechanisms—responsiveness and selection—through which opinion could shape decisions about the use of military force. We tested responsiveness by asking members of the Israeli parliament to consider a crisis in which we randomized information about public opinion. Parliamentarians were more willing to use military force when the public was in favor, and believed that contravening public opinion would entail heavy political costs. We tested selection by asking citizens in Israel and the U.S. to evaluate parties/candidates, which varied randomly on many dimensions. In both countries, security policy proved as electorally significant as economic and religious policy, and far more consequential than non-policy considerations such as gender, race, and experience. Overall, our experiments in two important democracies imply that citizens can affect policy by incentivizing incumbents and shaping who gets elected.

I. Introduction

How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies? This has been a subject of longstanding controversy. Some argue that public opinion has no real impact on foreign policy. They contend that voters focus on domestic concerns, and that leaders pursue foreign policies with relatively little regard for what ordinary citizens think.¹ Others maintain that public opinion shapes foreign policy by affecting who wins elections and constraining what leaders do after taking office.²

Whether public opinion shapes foreign policy has profound importance for theories of international relations. As many have documented, democracies behave differently from autocracies in military disputes, trade, alliances, and other forms of international conflict and cooperation.³ Some theorize that these differences arise because public opinion carries more weight in democracies, or because citizens in democracies have unique preferences about foreign affairs. Accordingly, a growing body of research focuses on the foreign policy attitudes of the mass public as a way to gain insight about international relations.⁴ If public opinion proved

¹ E.g. Almond 1950; Miller and Stokes 1963; Cohen 1973; Jacobs and Shapiro 1999; Page and Bouton 2006; Guisinger 2009; Busby and Monten 2012; Sobel, Furia, and Barratt 2012.

² E.g. Hurwitz and Peffley 1987a; Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989; Holsti 2004; Aldrich et al. 2006.

³ E.g. Russett and Oneal 2001; Mansfield et al. 2000; Leeds 1999, 2003.

⁴ E.g. Herrmann et al. 1999; Gelpi et al. 2009; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Johns and Davies 2012, 2014; Press et al. 2013; Chaudoin 2014; Kertzer et al.

inconsequential in democracies, however, scholars would need to rethink prominent explanations for the democratic peace, trade protectionism, and other regularities in world affairs.

The connection between public opinion and foreign policy is also normatively important. If leaders routinely ignore public opinion on matters such as war, trade, and immigration, is this apparent lack of representation a flaw that democracies need to address? If, on the other hand, leaders follow public opinion even when citizens lack expertise, would it be better to insulate elected leaders and the larger foreign policy establishment from public pressure? Before judging whether democratic institutions ought to be reformed, we need to know how closely the foreign policies of democracies reflect the will of the people, and why.

In this paper, we use experiments to shed new light on the connection between public opinion and decisions about military force. Although previous scholars have made valuable progress, disagreement remains about whether and how public opinion influences this important area of foreign policy. This disagreement may reflect the limitations of available data. Past scholarship, though insightful, has relied on observational data, which is vulnerable to problems of selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders. Moreover, little research has directly measured how *leaders* think about the connection between public opinion and the use of military force. In this research note, we take a fresh approach by presenting experiments involving policymakers and voters. Our experiments complement existing work by helping to illuminate the causal relationship between public opinion and decisions about military force in two geopolitically important democracies: Israel and the United States.

2014; Stein 2019; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Milner and Tingley 2016; Flores-Macias and Kreps 2017; Herrmann 2017; Tingley 2017; Brutger and Kertzer 2018.

We begin by distinguishing two pathways—responsiveness and selection—through which the public could shape foreign policy (Stimson et al. 1995; Fearon 1999). First, incumbent leaders may respond to public opinion out of concern that rebuffing the public could be politically costly. Second, the public could select parties or candidates whose foreign policy preferences reflect their own, whether or not those policymakers respond to public pressure after taking office.

To test the responsiveness mechanism, we provide the first experimental evidence about how leaders at the highest levels incorporate public opinion into decisions about foreign policy. Our experiment presented 87 current and former members of the Israeli parliament with a foreign policy crisis, in which we randomized information about how the public wanted to respond. The experiment indicated that, all else equal, policymakers were more likely to support the use of military force when the public was in favor. For additional insight we asked about the likely consequences of making military decisions that conflicted with public preferences. The vast majority of parliamentarians thought the government would pay significant political costs if it failed to heed public opinion.

To test the selection mechanism, we administered conjoint experiments to citizens in two political contexts: Israel and the U.S. Participants evaluated hypothetical parties (in Israel) or presidential candidates (in the U.S.), which varied randomly in their positions on security policy (the use of military force), economic policy, and religious policy, as well as on non-policy attributes. In both countries, positions about security policy exerted powerful and consistent effects on voting preferences. Our experiments also allowed us to compare the importance of security policy to other electoral considerations. Security policy proved at least as important as

economic and religious policy, and far more consequential than non-policy attributes such as gender, race, and political experience.

Our studies make several contributions to the debate about the importance of public opinion for decisions about military force. By recruiting not only ordinary citizens but also policymakers at the highest level, we test key mechanisms and document how they operate. By using randomized experiments, we provide new data that ameliorate problems of selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders. And by combining data from Israel and the U.S., we not only learn about the effects of public opinion in two important democracies, but also gain confidence that our conclusions hold in diverse political settings. Overall, our studies advance a longstanding debate by providing experimental evidence that public opinion can affect security policy in two ways: by influencing leaders once they take office, and by shaping who gets elected in the first place.

II. How Might Public Opinion Affect Decisions about Military Force?

In nearly all democracies, citizens delegate power to political representatives. Although representative democracy is often praised, it creates the potential for principal-agent problems: elected officials may implement policies that contradict the will of the people. Past scholarship has argued that citizens in representative democracies can influence the policy choices of their elected leaders through two mechanisms: responsiveness and selection.

Responsiveness

Many influential theories in international relations presume that, after taking office, leaders *respond* to current public opinion and/or expectations about future opinion.⁵ Incumbents might worry that ignoring current opinion could prove costly during their time in office. Unfavorable public opinion could, for example, make it harder to surmount institutional checks on war powers, raise funds for foreign interventions (Flores-Macias and Kreps 2013), and amass the political capital to achieve other international and domestic goals (Gelpi and Grieco 2015). Policymakers may also fear that unpopular policies could contribute to defeat in the next election or reduce their margin of victory, weakening their mandate to govern in the future.

Scholars have used observational data to test responsiveness in three ways. First, they have estimated the correlation between public opinion and government policy. Some have found that security policy follows public opinion (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1983; Russett 1990), while others have uncovered little evidence of responsiveness (e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 1999; Jacobs and Page 2005; Page and Bouton 2006). Scholars employing this approach acknowledge, however, that “when opinion and policy correspond, it is extremely difficult to sort out whether public opinion has influenced policy, or policy has influenced opinion, or there has been some mixture of reciprocal processes; or, indeed, whether an outside factor, by affecting both, has produced a spurious relationship” (Page 1994, 26).⁶ Problems like these, which could lead

⁵ E.g. Fearon 1994; Leeds 1999, 2003; Reiter and Stam 2002.

⁶ On how leaders shape public opinion, see Jacobs and Shapiro 1999; Foyle 1999; Gershkoff and Kushner 2005; Berinsky 2009; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Baum and Potter 2015; Saunders 2015.

researchers to overestimate *or* underestimate the effect of public opinion on foreign policy, are unfortunately “a curse of nonexperimental sciences” (Page 1994, 28).

Second, authors have used historical data to measure the price leaders paid for defying public opinion. Research has examined whether democratic leaders suffered public backlash or fell from power when they lost wars and enacted other unpopular foreign policies, with different scholars reaching conflicting conclusions (Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Croco 2015; Snyder and Borghard 2011). This research strategy is prone to selection bias, however. When the anticipated costs of bucking public opinion are high, leaders will tend to avoid that path, depriving researchers of the opportunity to observe the penalties and causing them to underestimate the risks of going against public sentiment (Schultz 2001).⁷ Recognizing this problem, scholars have begun using experiments to estimate how potentially unpopular decisions might affect public opinion (Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Kertzer and Brutger 2016). However, these experiments have been conducted on citizens; we still know relatively little about whether *leaders* expect to be punished/rewarded, and how they weigh these expectations in their decision calculus.

Third, a few authors have used case studies or personal interviews to infer the motivations of decisionmakers. Unfortunately, case studies have produced mixed evidence about

⁷ A related approach compares foreign policy across institutional contexts (e.g. Reiter and Stam 2002). But democracies and dictatorships differ on various dimensions—many hard to measure and control—that could produce differences in foreign policy even if the public played no role. Scholars have also compared types of democracies (Baum and Potter 2015) and contrasted term-limited leaders with leaders facing re-election (e.g. Potter 2016).

the extent to which leaders respond to public opinion (e.g., Foyle 1999; Jacobs and Shapiro 1999). Moreover, while case studies are informative about particular leaders, it is difficult to draw general conclusions from them. Interviews have focused on bureaucrats rather than elected officials, and have reached varied conclusions about the importance of public opinion (e.g., Cohen 1973; Powlick 1991).

In summary, previous studies of responsiveness have reached conflicting conclusions, faced challenges associated with observational research, and been constrained by the paucity of data about the perceptions of leaders who make foreign policy. This paper helps advance the debate by using experiments to estimate how leaders at the highest levels respond to public opinion.

Selection

Less research in international relations has focused on a second solution to the principal-agent problem: *selecting* leaders based on expectations about the foreign policies they would pursue if elected. By empowering like-minded leaders (ones with policy preferences similar to their own), citizens can minimize the risk that representatives would want to act against the public's wishes. Voters can use various sources of information, including campaign statements, party platforms, and past decisions, to infer whether candidates share their preferences (Fearon 1999).

Selection does not require voters to have detailed views on every specific policy issue. Research shows that voters hold core foreign policy postures—for example, general beliefs about the proper role of military force or the appropriate degree of engagement in world affairs—that inform specific foreign policy preferences (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987a, b). Voters can use these

“superordinate beliefs” to guide their thinking about foreign policy issues and select like-minded leaders (Holsti 2004, 55).

It is important to recognize how selection differs from responsiveness. Selection reduces the likelihood of shirking, not by incentivizing politicians with carrots and sticks, but by empowering politicians whose preferences match what the voters want. Thus, selection can be effective even when citizens cannot punish politicians for stepping out of line, and even if leaders are unresponsive to public pressure once elected. Nonetheless, the two mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and can complement each other to tighten the correspondence between public opinion and foreign policy.⁸

Scholars have used two main approaches to infer how much weight voters place on foreign policy when choosing leaders. First, they have analyzed polls in which American voters name the “most important problem” facing the country. In these polls, voters often rank domestic problems higher than foreign ones, leading some to conclude that foreign policy is relatively unimportant in elections (Almond 1950; Busby and Monten 2012). However, issues can be electorally consequential even when they are not ranked first in the public mind. Moreover, surveys about the “most important problem” conflate whether an issue is important, and whether the status quo on that issue is problematic (Wlezien 2005). Voters could care deeply about foreign policy, yet find the domestic status quo more problematic than the foreign one.

Second, scholars have used public opinion surveys to estimate how positions on foreign policy have affected support for candidates in historical elections. Early studies of this nature, focusing on the U.S., found that foreign policy had little electoral effect (e.g. Page and Brody

⁸ On the interaction between selection and responsiveness, see Fearon 1999.

1972).⁹ However, selection bias could lead researchers to underestimate the effect of foreign policy on voting. When citizens agree about the direction foreign policy should move, politicians face incentives to converge on that dimension, effectively neutralizing foreign policy as a campaign issue and giving observers the mistaken impression that citizens didn't care about foreign policy.¹⁰ Given that the 1940s through the 1960s were “the era of bipartisan consensus in American foreign policy” (Aldrich et al. 2006, 488), it makes sense that foreign policy might not have been a major influence on vote choice during that period.

Later research adopting this approach found that foreign policy had a substantial effect on elections (e.g. Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Gadarian 2010; Reifler et al. 2011). However, reverse causation could have led these studies to overestimate the effect of foreign policy on support for candidates. As Berinsky (2009) has noted, voters could adopt the foreign policy positions of their preferred candidate, rather than the other way around. Without accounting for this endogeneity, observers could overstate the effect of foreign policy attitudes on voting.

Finally, both early and recent studies about the electoral effects of foreign policy are vulnerable to confounding. Evaluating how foreign policy affects vote choice requires holding constant other factors—such as domestic policy and leaders’ personal characteristics—that

⁹ Stokes (1966) and Hess and Nelson (1985) measured voter *evaluations* of candidates in the area of foreign policy. They claimed that foreign policy evaluations had a weak and inconsistent effect on individual support for candidates.

¹⁰ Page and Brody 1972 volunteered that this dynamic could explain their findings (pp. 994–995).

influence voting and are correlated with foreign policy. For all these reasons, it is hard to know whether studies of historical elections have underestimated or overestimated the effects of foreign policy on voting behavior.

In sum, previous research provides an unclear picture of how foreign policy affects public evaluations of candidates and parties. We complement previous research by taking an experimental approach. Our conjoint experiments, administered in two different democratic contexts, provide to our knowledge the first experimental evidence about how foreign policy positions affect voting. While survey experiments feature their own limitations, including concerns about external validity (Barabas and Jerit 2010; Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007), randomizing information about the policy positions and other attributes of candidates/parties offers two distinct advantages. First, it allows us to study the effects of foreign security policy while reducing potential problems such as confounding, selection bias, and reverse causation. Second, it allows us to compare the importance of security policy to other electoral considerations.

III. Testing Responsiveness

To test how leaders respond to public opinion, we surveyed 87 current and former members of the Israeli Knesset (MKs) in 2015.¹¹ Israel is a parliamentary democracy in which elected MKs also populate the executive branch. Many legislators are, therefore, directly

¹¹ Respondents had impressive levels of political experience. Two-thirds had served in more than one Knesset, and 43% had served as either a minister or a deputy minister. See appendix for details about our sampling frame, subject recruitment, and the representativeness of our sample.

involved in decisions about military force. Moreover, Israeli election cycles are short, political turnover is common, and coalitions are fluid, creating opportunities for members to serve on the cabinet at some point in their political careers. By surveying current and former MKs, we not only sampled lawmakers but also accessed current, former, and potentially future members of the executive branch.

Our survey contained an experiment in which each MK considered the following vignette:

“Ten armed terrorists emerged from an underground tunnel in northern Israel, close to the border with Lebanon. The terrorists were planning to attack a Jewish town, take civilian hostages, and bring them back to Lebanon. The Israel Defense Forces caught some of the terrorists, but others escaped back into Lebanon. Several IDF soldiers were wounded during the operation.

The cabinet discussed whether Israel should send special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases in Lebanon.

The security establishment is divided over whether Israel should carry out this military operation. Supporters say the operation would punish the terrorists, reduce the threat from the tunnels, and deter future attacks. Opponents say the operation would lead to IDF casualties, would cause terrorists to retaliate against Israeli cities, and would escalate into a large-scale military conflict.”

We then randomized information about public opinion. In half the vignettes, the public supported military action; in the other half, the public opposed.

“The public strongly [supports/opposes] taking military action against the terrorists. The

media has covered the situation extensively, and polls show that more than 75% of voters think Israel [should/should not] attack the terrorist bases. Citizens have started demonstrating [for/against] the military action and sending letters to their representatives.”

Having manipulated perceptions of public opinion, we asked: “Would you favor or oppose sending special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases?”¹²

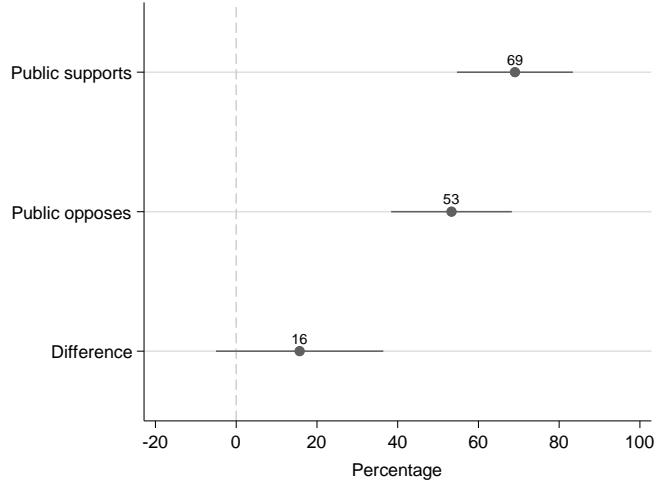
Among MKs, willingness to strike was nearly 16 percentage points higher when citizens supported a strike than when citizens opposed a strike (Figure 1). The estimated effect, though large, fell just shy of conventional statistical significance ($p=.135$ for a two-sided test and .068 for a one-sided test). When dealing with elite samples, it would be difficult to gain more precision. To detect a 16-point effect at a significance level of .05, we would have needed responses from 290 MKs, more than the number of living MKs for whom we found contact information.¹³ (Given these constraints, the sample is not large enough for precise estimates

¹² One could imagine a third vignette that did not mention public opinion. We omitted this condition for three reasons. First, the condition would not be externally valid. In most cases involving war, MKs would have at least some information about public preferences. Second, the condition would reduce experimental control by allowing each MK to make their own assumptions about public opinion. On the inferential problems with this type of experimental design, see Chu (forthcoming). Third, introducing another vignette would have reduced statistical power by spreading the 87 respondents across three cells instead of two.

¹³ This calculation assumes no change in effect size or variance given a larger sample.

within smaller demographic or political subgroups.) We believe the treatment effect is informative, even if not estimated with the precision one sees in mass public surveys.

Figure 1: Effect of Public Opinion on Support for Military Strike



Note: Horizontal lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

When presenting the scenario, we randomized information about public opinion as a whole, instead of varying sentiments within the respondent's political party. We did this to enhance external validity, by not administering unlikely treatments to MKs from predominantly dovish or hawkish parties. Having found that MKs care about public opinion in general, though, it seems likely that MKs would care even more about the views of co-partisans and swing voters. In addition, we informed MKs about current public opinion, even though opinion on the eve of the next election may be more important to leaders (Foyle 1999). In these ways, our experiment established a lower bound on how MKs would have responded if we could have manipulated information about the opinions of specific voter groups or what public opinion would be at the time of the next election.

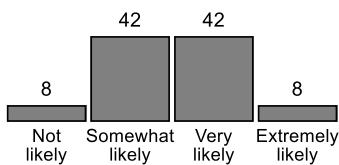
We supplemented the experiment by directly asking: “When you consider whether to use military force against a foreign adversary, to what extent do you take domestic public opinion into account?” Around 33% said that public opinion influenced their military decisions to a large extent; 38% gave medium consideration to public opinion; 26% weighed public opinion to a small extent; and only 3% did not consider public opinion at all. Could answers to this question have been tainted by social desirability bias? Three factors help allay such concerns. First, respondents were guaranteed anonymity, reducing the incentive to respond in socially desirable ways. Second, it is unclear whether any lingering biases would cause MKs to overstate or underestimate the role of public opinion. Some policymakers might see value in appearing deferential to ordinary citizens, but others might want to portray themselves as autonomous, relying on their own expertise and values when making decisions about military force. Third, the responses corroborate our experimental findings by suggesting that public opinion exerts a substantial but not overdetermining effect on elite decisions about war.

Finally, to understand *why* MKs respond to the public, we measured the anticipated costs of contravening public opinion. “If the public strongly opposed war, but the government nonetheless decided to go to war,” would it be extremely likely, very likely, somewhat likely, or not likely that the government would lose support in the polls; lose seats in the Knesset; find it difficult to get support for other foreign and domestic policies; and/or fall from power? As the left side of Figure 2 shows, 61% of MKs thought at least one of these adverse outcomes was very or extremely likely. We also asked what might happen if the government avoided a popular war (right side of Figure 2). Again, a majority (53%) thought at least one of the negative consequences was very or extremely likely. Clearly, the repercussions of going against public opinion loom large for Israeli politicians.

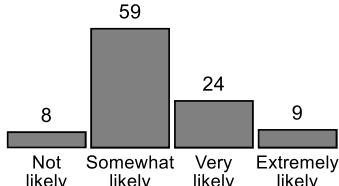
Figure 2: Expected Consequences of Contravening Public Opinion

**Effects of Waging
an Unpopular War**

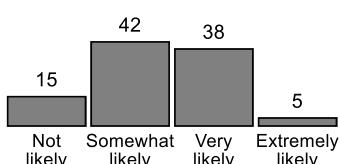
Lose support in polls



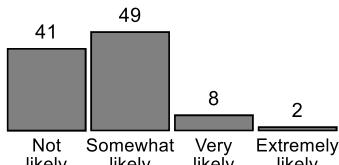
Lose seats in Knesset



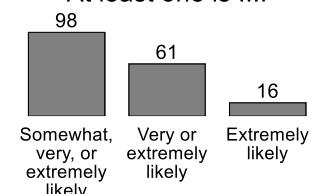
Hard to pass other policies



Government would fall

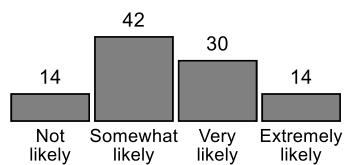


At least one is

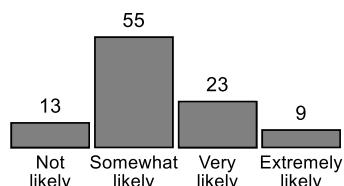


**Effects of Avoiding
a Popular War**

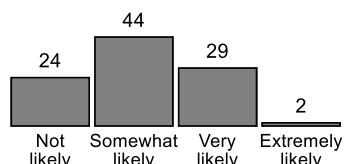
Lose support in polls



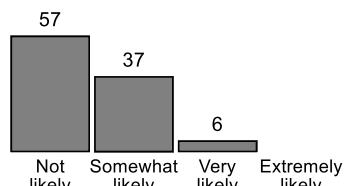
Lose seats in Knesset



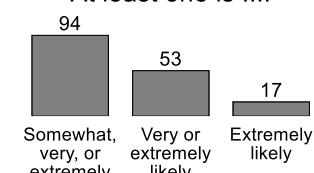
Hard to pass other policies



Government would fall



At least one is



Note: Percentage of MKs selecting each option.

Would our findings generalize to elites in other democracies? In some senses, Israel represents a hard case for the responsiveness mechanism. Given mandatory military service, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, and frequent terrorist attacks, Israeli policymakers presumably hold *a priori* preferences about how to react, which could reduce the effect of new information such as public opinion (Mintz et al. 1997). For these reasons, our estimates could underestimate policymaker responsiveness. At the same time, protracted conflict between Israel and its neighbors could make security policy especially important to Israeli voters, increasing policymakers' incentives to respond. As demonstrated below, however, security policy is a weighty electoral consideration not only in Israel, but also in the U.S. This suggests that Israeli policymakers should not be unique in expecting domestic political consequences for their decisions about using military force.

IV. Testing Selection in Israel

To what extent do citizens select representatives based on security policy, and how does security policy compare to other electoral considerations? As a step toward answering these questions, we hired iPanel to recruit a representative sample of 1,067 Jewish adults in March 2016.¹⁴

The survey began by measuring respondents' policy preferences. Since selection does not require voters to have detailed views about specific issues, we focused on overall orientations toward security policy, economic policy, and religious policy. To measure public attitudes about

¹⁴ iPanel recruited using benchmarks for gender, age, education, and area of residence. Online polling companies cannot reliably sample the minority Israeli Arab population.

security policy we asked about hawkishness, a traditional cleavage in Israel.¹⁵ “On matters of foreign affairs and security,” we inquired, “do you support a dovish (left) or a hawkish (right) approach?” Options were definitely dovish (27% of the sample); more dovish than hawkish (9%); more hawkish than dovish (39%); and definitely hawkish (25%).

We took a similar approach to measuring economic and religious policy orientations. For economics, we asked: “About the structure of economic life in the country, do you support a capitalist or a socialist approach?” Responses were definitely socialist (11%), more socialist than capitalist (53%), more capitalist than socialist (30%), or definitely capitalist (5%). To capture views about religious policy, we inquired: “To what extent should the government require Jewish religious traditions in public life?” The options were never (36%), sometimes (40%), often (16%), or always (8%).

After measuring policy preferences, we administered a conjoint experiment in which respondents evaluated pairs of hypothetical political parties that varied randomly on seven dimensions: security, economic, and religious policy; military experience, political experience, and gender of the party leader; and party size.¹⁶ Each party’s security policy was randomly

¹⁵ Arian 1995; Shamir and Arian 1999.

¹⁶ We chose hypothetical rather than named parties because party labels convey information about foreign, economic, and religious policy. If we had named parties and randomly varied their policy positions, subjects would have discounted information that did not match the party’s current platform, confounding our estimates of how policy positions affect voter attitudes. In one of the U.S. experiments described below, however, we present evidence that security policy strongly affects voting even in the presence of party labels.

assigned to be definitely dovish, more dovish than hawkish, more hawkish than dovish, or definitely hawkish. Likewise, economic policies ranged from socialist to capitalist, and religious policies ranged from never to always requiring Jewish religious traditions in public life.

For military experience, we randomized whether the leader had served only the mandatory minimum, risen to junior officer, or attained the rank of senior officer. For political experience, we drew an integer between 0 and 30 representing the years the party leader had been in national politics. Finally, we randomized whether the party leader was male or female, and whether the party was one of the three largest in the political system. We presented the information in a table.

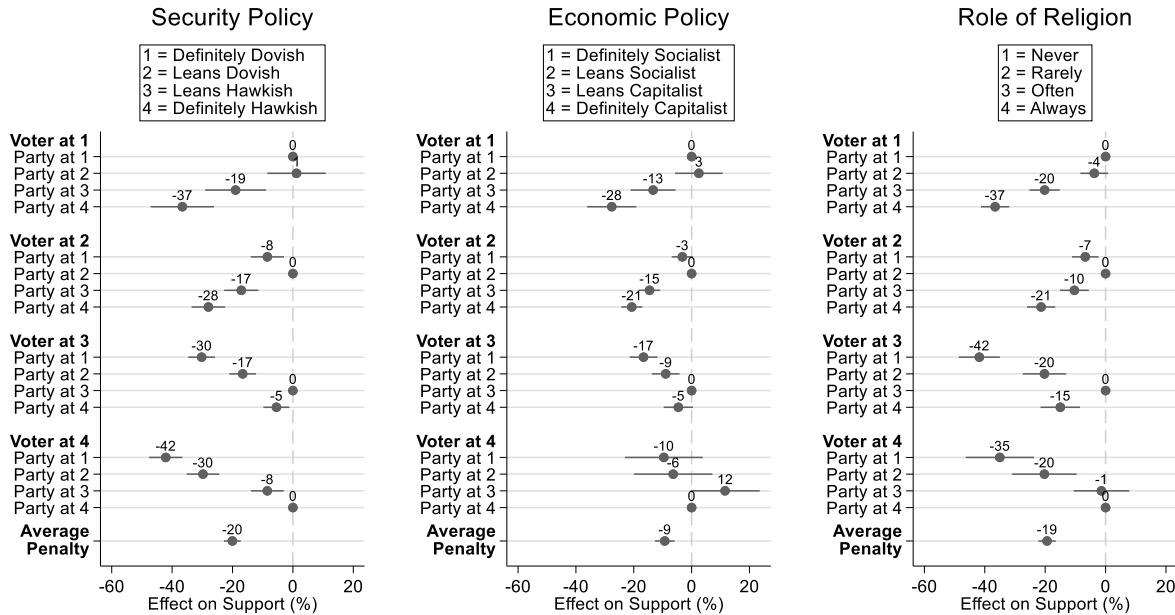
We randomized the seven dimensions independently, and concluded by asking, “If you had to choose, which party would you vote for?” Full randomization reduced confounding; allowed us to estimate reactions to all combinations of policy positions, including ones that might have proven electorally disadvantageous; and enabled us to estimate how much weight (if any) voters attached to each piece of information. Each participant reviewed four pairs of parties, yielding many judgments about a rich political space.¹⁷

We simplify the discussion by presenting the effect of each attribute, averaging over all the other dimensions of the experiment. The left side of Figure 3 shows that voters awarded

¹⁷ Before asking respondents to choose between the parties, we measured attentiveness. Our analysis focuses on the 1,067 (out of 1,277) respondents who correctly answered at least 85% of the attention checks. The appendix shows that the effects were similar, but smaller, when we included inattentive respondents. Because each respondent rated four pairs of parties, we clustered the standard errors by respondent.

substantially less support to parties with distant security policy views, than to parties who concurred with them about security policy. For instance, dovish voters (located at 1) gave 37 points less support to hawkish parties (located at 4) than to parties who shared their dovish ideal point. Likewise, hawkish voters (located at 4) awarded 42 points less support to dovish parties (located at 1) than to parties who sympathized with their own hawkish preferences. Moderate voters also penalized deviations from their ideal points. Moderate doves (located at 2) were 28 points less supportive of parties at 4 than of parties at 2. Similarly, moderate hawks (located at 3) were 30 points less supportive of parties at 1 than of parties at 3.

Figure 3: Effects of Policy Positions in Israel



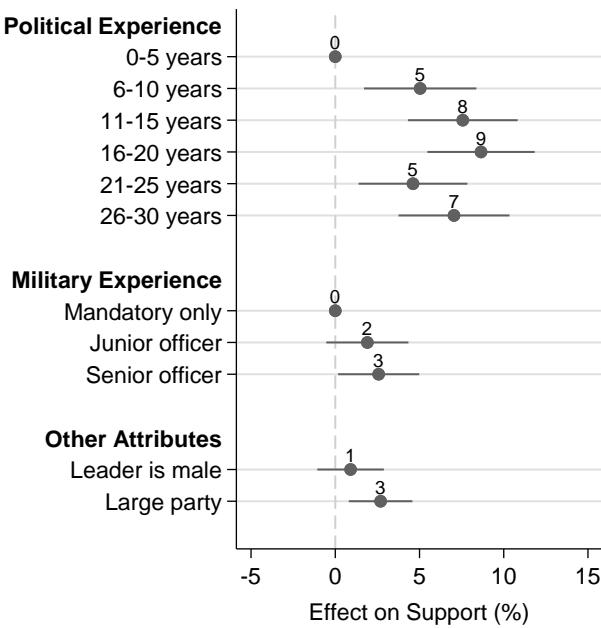
The second and third columns of Figure 3 present analogous estimates for economic and religious policy. To summarize the electoral importance of the three policy dimensions, the bottom row gives the average penalty that voters assigned to a party that did not share his or her ideal point on that dimension (averaging across the twelve ways that parties and voters could diverge). The average penalty for being out of step with the voter on security policy was 20

percentage points, compared to 9 points for economic policy and 19 points for religious policy.

Thus, in our study, security policy was as important as religious policy and more important than economic policy.

Security policy also outweighed the four non-policy attributes in our experiment. Figure 4 summarizes the average effect of the party leader's political experience, military experience, and gender, and the size of the party. Other factors equal, parties guided by leaders who had been in national politics for more than five years performed substantially better than otherwise comparable parties with less experienced leadership. Israelis also preferred leaders with extensive military experience. Overall, parties led by former senior officers performed 3 points better, and parties led by former junior officers performed 2 points better, than parties whose leaders had left the military after satisfying their mandatory service. Israeli voters did not, on average, show a preference for male leaders over female ones, but did throw 3% more support behind large parties. This could be taken as evidence of strategic voting, since large parties might stand a better chance of forming governments and leading coalitions.

Figure 4: Effects of Non-Policy Attributes in Israel



We ran many auxiliary tests to confirm the robustness of our findings.¹⁸ Our results were robust to different specifications of the dependent variable. Moreover, the effects of security policy were strong regardless of the non-policy characteristics of the party/leader or characteristics of voters, including gender, age, education, income, military service, religiosity, ideology, political interest, and political involvement. Finally, security policy remained an important electoral consideration regardless of the stances parties took on other policy dimensions. For example, the effects remained strong when we eliminated parties that were hawkish but non-religious, or dovish but highly religious. More generally, security policy mattered greatly whether parties took extreme or moderate positions on economic and religious policy.

¹⁸ See appendix.

V. Testing Selection in the U.S.

To assess the generalizability of our findings, we replicated our selection experiment in the U.S. Israel and the U.S. differ in important ways, including electoral system, size, geographic location, and threat environment. Finding similar results in the U.S. would increase confidence that the selection mechanism operates in other democracies.

In April 2017, Survey Sampling International recruited 1,420 U.S. adults, chosen for demographic representativeness according to age, education, gender, income, race, and region. As in the Israeli experiment, we began by asking subjects about their policy preferences. On security policy, 15% were definitely dovish, 50% were more dovish than hawkish, 27% were more hawkish than dovish, and the remaining 9% were definitely hawkish.¹⁹

For economics, we inquired: “Some people favor capitalist economic policies. They think the government should play only a small role in the economy, and should let the market determine economic outcomes. Other people favor socialist economic policies. They think the government should play a large role in the economy by regulating businesses and redistributing income. Which approach to U.S. economic policy do you prefer?” Around 5% were definitely socialist (large government role), 28% were more socialist than capitalist, 39% were more capitalist than socialist, and 28% were definitely capitalist (small government role). Finally, we asked: “How big of a role do you think religion should play in shaping government policy in the

¹⁹ As in Israel, we focused on the hawk-dove axis because previous research has found that dimension fundamental to how Americans think about foreign affairs (e.g. E.g. Hurwitz and Peffley 1987a; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; and Holsti 2004)

United States?” The options were no role (46%), small role (21%), medium role (20%), or large role (14%).

We then presented pairs of hypothetical presidential candidates, which varied randomly in their foreign, economic, and religious policy positions, as well as four non-policy attributes: home region (Northeast, South, Midwest, or West), race (White, Black, or Hispanic), gender, and political experience (years in politics, from 0 to 30).²⁰ We concluded by asking, “If you had to choose, which candidate would you vote for?” Each respondent evaluated four pairs of candidates.²¹

²⁰ To control perceptions of religion, we portrayed all candidates as Christian. In this experiment, we intentionally avoided associating the candidates with political parties; below we present a follow-up experiment with party affiliations.

²¹ As in Israel, we restricted analysis to the 1,420 (of 2,051) respondents who answered at least 85% of the attention checks correctly. See the appendix for similar patterns when including inattentive respondents.

Figure 5: Effects of Policy Positions in the U.S.

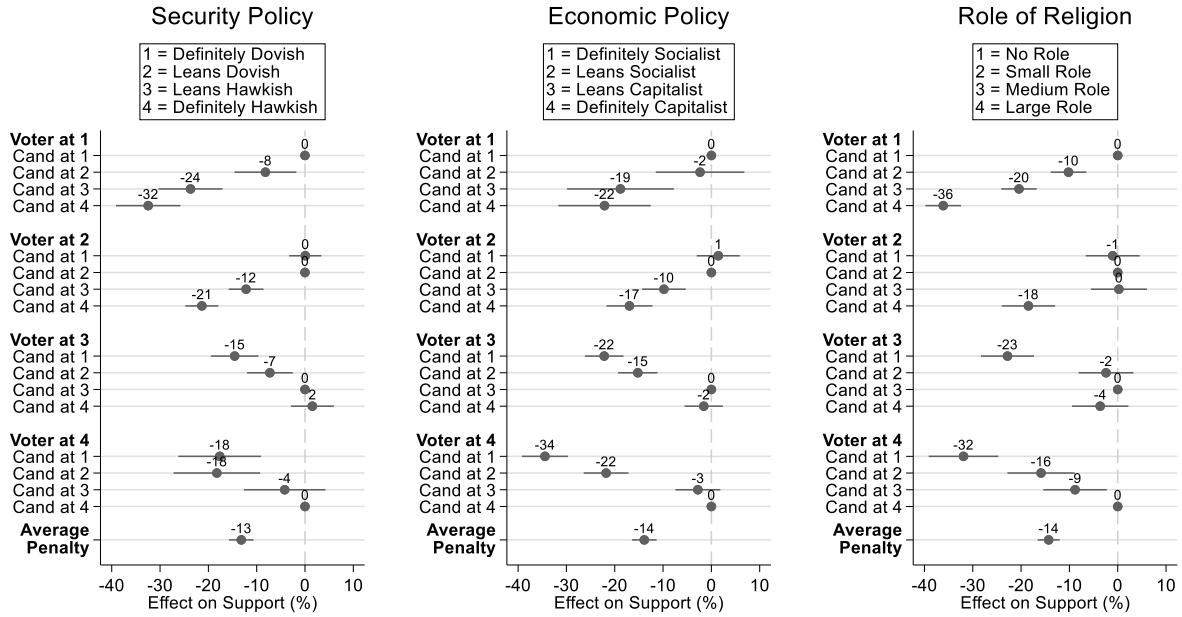
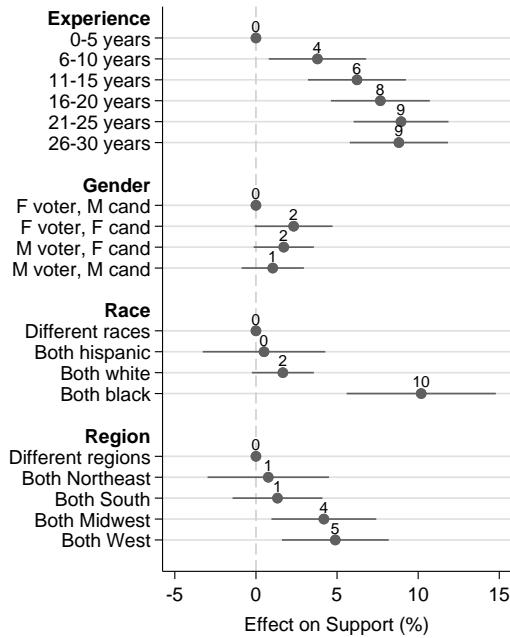


Figure 5 shows that security policy had powerful effects in the U.S. Dovish voters (1's)

were 32 percentage points less supportive of candidates with hawkish platforms (4's). Other groups of voters reacted similarly, extending substantially less support to candidates whose security policy views diverged from their own. The effects of security policy were not only large in an absolute sense, but also comparable to the effects of economic and religious policy. The bottom row of Figure 5 summarizes the average penalty for deviating from the voter's ideal point. On average, mismatches on security policy sapped support by 13 percentage points. The effects for economic and religious policy were similar: 14 points, on average. These findings indicate that the powerful effects of security policy are not limited to Israel.

Non-policy attributes mattered to a lesser degree. Figure 6 shows that region and gender had minor effects on preferences over presidential candidates. Race was relatively unimportant, as well, although black voters favored black candidates by 10 percentage points. Finally, voters rewarded candidates who had spent more extensive time in politics by up to 9 percentage points.

Figure 6: Effects of Non-Policy Attributes in the U.S.



As in Israel, the effects of security policy remained strong regardless of the specification of the dependent variable; the home region, political experience, gender, and race of candidates; and the gender, age, race, education, income, religion, religiosity, party affiliation, home region, political activism, and political interest of voters. Moreover, as in Israel, security policy had a large effect regardless of whether candidates took extreme or moderate positions on economic and religious policy.²²

We opted not to associate the candidates with existing U.S. parties. If we had independently randomized party labels, the policy positions of many candidates would have contradicted their party membership. For instance, some Republicans would have advocated

²² For example, effects were similar after dropping candidates who favored socialism but wanted religion to play a large role in politics. See appendix.

socialism, and some Democrats would have called for a major role for religion in politics—combinations that might seem unusual today. Subjects who encountered such candidates might have doubted their policy positions, party allegiance, or both.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to ask whether security policy influences voting when respondents know the party affiliations of candidates. To answer this question, we administered a follow-up experiment to 1,462 U.S. adults in September 2017.²³ This experiment retained the core design of the earlier study, with a few necessary changes. First, within each pair, one candidate was a Democrat and the other was a Republican.²⁴ Second, to reduce potential contradictions between party and policy, we held all economic policies constant at “more capitalist than socialist” and had all candidates favor a “small role” for religion in shaping government policy. As in our previous experiment, we independently randomized gender, race, political experience, and security policy.

As expected, partisanship mattered: other factors equal, Democratic voters favored Democratic candidates 76% of the time, Republicans favored co-partisans 79% of the time, and independents were indifferent to party. Personal attributes such as political experience, gender, and race showed patterns similar to our earlier U.S. study (see appendix).

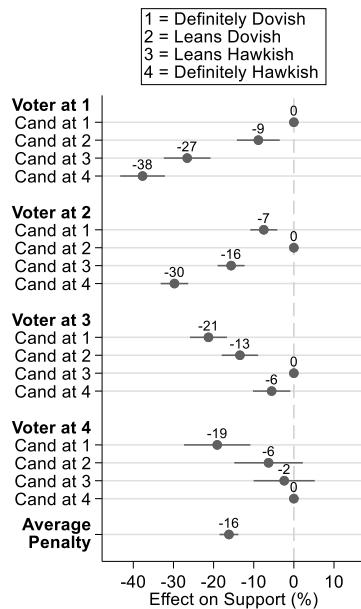
Nonetheless, security policy positions remained important. Figure 7 shows the effect of security policy when subjects chose between Democratic and Republican candidates. As in our earlier study, voters were much more likely to support candidates whose security policy positions

²³ We recruited respondents via MTurk. 31% identified as Democrats, 37% identified as Republicans, and the remainder were independent or affiliated with other parties.

²⁴ We dropped home region to keep the number of candidate attributes at seven.

matched their own. For example, dovish voters (voters at 1) were 38 percentage points less likely to favor strong hawks (candidates at 4). On average, voters were 16 points less likely to prefer candidates whose security policy positions diverged from their own. The appendix shows that security policy positions mattered not only for independents but also for Democrats and Republicans, who often crossed party lines to find better matches on security policy.

Figure 7: Effect of Security Policy in the U.S., with Party Labels



Did our experiments occur at a time when foreign policy was unusually important to American voters, posing a threat to external validity and reducing the generalizability of our findings? To assess this possibility, we analyzed survey data about the “most important problem” facing the country.²⁵ During the months our surveys were in the field, around 12-15% of Americans named a foreign policy issue as the most important problem facing the country. This

²⁵ See appendix. On limitations of this measure, see Wlezien 2005.

compares to a median of 23% between 1939 and 2015. Thus, the perceived importance of foreign policy (measured by most important problem) was lower than usual, increasing confidence that the powerful effects we found were not due to the timing of our experiments.

VI. Conclusion

There has been much debate about whether and how public opinion influences foreign policy. In this article we complement previous work by using randomized experiments to test two mechanisms—selection and responsiveness—through which public opinion could affect decisions about military force. Our experiments, administered to Israeli elites and Israeli and American voters, shed new light on an important debate, with empirical, theoretical, and normative implications.

Broadly, our findings increase confidence that scholars can gain insight into foreign policy by studying the opinions of ordinary citizens, an approach taken by a recent wave of international relations scholarship. Moreover, our experiments bolster many influential theories of international relations in which citizens play prominent roles in shaping foreign policy. The long list includes, for example, work on liberalism, the democratic peace, selectorate theory, audience costs, diversionary war, the democratic advantage, two-level games, and theories about how citizens help enforce international law and promote international cooperation. These theories, and many more, presume a strong connection between domestic opinion and foreign policy.

Our evidence that security policy plays an important role in elections also has implications for theories about the effect of leaders on foreign policy. Recent work demonstrates that the ideologies, experience, and demographic characteristics of leaders shape decisions about war (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Saunders 2011). We contribute to this growing literature

by uncovering the criteria citizens use to select leaders. Our experiments reveal that, when voting, Israeli and American citizens not only place heavy weight on the security policy positions of parties and presidential contenders, but also select on the basis of experience and—to a lesser extent—race. By illuminating the electoral processes that contribute to variation in leader type, we show important ways in which the public can influence international relations.

Our findings suggest many avenues for future research. We focused on public opinion about the use of military force, but scholars could adapt our experimental approach to explore the effect of public opinion on decisions about international trade, foreign aid, and climate change.²⁶ Following Trager and Vavreck (2011), scholars could also use experiments to study how voters select leaders on the basis of foreign policy outcomes, rather than positions.

Future studies could also explore how voters obtain information about foreign policy. Our selection experiments exposed respondents to seven pieces of information about parties and candidates. The experiments should, therefore, be interpreted as estimating how voters would decide if they knew—in broad strokes—about the personal attributes and policy positions we presented. In actual campaigns, though, knowledge varies across individuals, countries, and time. Future research could, therefore, study how much citizens know about their political options, and how party competition, the media, and individual effort affect information at their disposal.

Future scholarship could also investigate to what extent political elites can—or believe they can—manage public preferences and perceptions. While some scholars have argued that elites can shape what the public thinks (e.g. Gershkoff and Kushner 2005; Berinsky 2009;

²⁶ For reviews of research on these policy areas, see Guisinger 2017; Milner and Tingley 2016;

Bernauer 2013.

Saunders 2015), others do not see public opinion as being at the command of policymakers (Gelpi 2010; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). Still others have found that elite cues are important only in some issue areas (Guisinger and Saunders 2017) or that the ability of elites to shape public opinion varies over time (Baum and Potter 2008, 2015; Baum and Groeling 2010). New experiments, building on the methods described here, could shed additional light on these questions.²⁷

Our findings also raise questions about whether responsiveness and selection are more powerful in some countries and political contexts than in others. For instance, leaders may be more responsive when they are eligible for re-election and face serious political competition, leading to differences between parliamentary and presidential systems and dual versus multiparty environments (Risse-Kappen 1991; Baum and Potter 2015). Responsiveness and selection could also depend on levels of domestic polarization (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Guisinger and Saunders 2017), the media environment (Baum and Potter 2019), or international consensus (Kreps 2010). Finally, both responsiveness and selection should depend on public attention to foreign policy, which could vary across and within countries as a function of geographic location, security relationships, political structures, and campaign strategies. These are rich areas for future research.

²⁷ For example, in our elite experiment, we assessed the effect of current public opinion on support for initiating military strikes. Future research could explore whether leaders are more responsive at certain stages of a conflict, and to what extent they believe they can anticipate future opinion, evade negative consequences by ending military engagements quickly, or persuade citizens to change their public beliefs about hawkishness versus dovishness.

Finally, our experiments raise important normative questions. We found that citizens use security policy as a criterion in choosing their representatives, and that representatives are sensitive to public attitudes once in power. This is good news from the standpoint of political representation. However, the powerful role of public opinion underscores the importance of educating citizens to make sound decisions about weighty matters such as the use of military force. Future research should deepen our knowledge of how voters form opinions about foreign affairs, who they look to for information, and how to increase the likelihood that the public will make sensible judgments about international politics.

References

- Aldrich, John H., John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida. 1989. “Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting.” *American Political Science Review* 83(1):123–41.
- Aldrich, John H., Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, Jason Reifler, and Kristin Thompson Sharp. 2006. “Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9(1):477–502.
- Almond, Gabriel A. 1950. *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Arian, Asher. 1995. *Security Threatened: Surveying Israeli Opinion on Peace and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barabas, Jason, and Jennifer Jerit. 2010. “Are Survey Experiments Externally Valid?” *American Political Science Review* 104(2):226–42.
- Baum, Matthew A., and Tim J. Groeling. 2010. *War Stories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Baum, Matthew A., and Philip B.K. Potter. 2008. “Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11:39–65.
- . 2015. *War and Democratic Constraint*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2019. “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump.” *Journal of Politics* 81(2).
- Berinsky, Adam J. 2009. *In Time of War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernauer, Thomas. 2013. “Climate Change Politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16:421–48.

- Brutger, Ryan, and Joshua D. Kertzer. 2018. "A Dispositional Theory of Reputation Costs." *International Organization*.
- Busby, Joshua W., and Jonathan Monten. 2012. "Republican Elites and Foreign Policy Attitudes." *Political Science Quarterly* 127(1):105–42.
- Chaudoin, Stephen. 2014. "Promises or Policies? An Experimental Analysis of International Agreements and Audience Reactions." *International Organization* 68(1):235–56.
- Chiozza, Giacomo, and Hein Erich Goemans. 2011. *Leaders and International Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chu, Jonathan. Forthcoming. "Reciprocity, International Humanitarian Law, and American Opinion on the Treatment of POWs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.
- Cohen, Bernard. 1973. *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Croco, Sarah E. 2015. *Peace at What Price?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fearon, James D. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88(3):577–92.
- . 1999. "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians." In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, eds. Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flores-Macías, Gustavo A., and Sarah E. Kreps. 2013. "Political Parties at War." *American Political Science Review* 107(4):833–48.
- . 2017. "Borrowing Support for War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(5):997–1020.
- Foyle, Douglas C. 1999. *Counting the Public In*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Gadarian, Shana Kushner. 2010. "Foreign Policy at the Ballot Box." *Journal of Politics* 72(4):1046–62.
- Gaines, Brian J., James H. Kuklinski, and Paul J. Quirk. 2007. "The Logic of the Survey Experiment Reexamined." *Political Analysis* 15(1):1–20.
- Gelpi, Christopher. 2010. "Performing on Cue?" The Formation of Public Opinion toward War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54(1):88–116.
- Gelpi, Christopher, Peter D. Feaver and Jason Reifler. 2009. *Paying the Human Costs of War*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Gelpi, Christopher, and Joseph M. Grieco. 2015. "Competency Costs in Foreign Affairs." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2):440–56.
- Gelpi, Christopher, Jason Reifler, and Peter Feaver. 2007. "Iraq the Vote." *Political Behavior* 29(2):151–74.
- Gershkoff, Amy, and Shana A. Kushner. 2005. "Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(3):525–537.
- Guisinger, Alexandra. 2009. "Determining Trade Policy." *International Organization* 63(3):533–557.
- _____. 2017. *American Opinion on Trade*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Guisinger, Alexandra, and Elizabeth N. Saunders. 2017. "Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues." *International Studies Quarterly* 61(2):425–41.
- Herrmann, Richard K. 2017. "How Attachments to the Nation Shape Beliefs About the World." *International Organization* 71(S1):S61–84.
- Herrmann, Richard K., Philip E. Tetlock, and Penny S. Visser. 1999. "Mass Public Decisions to

Go to War: A Cognitive- Interactionist Framework.” *American Political Science Review* 93(3):553–73.

Holsti, Ole R. 2004. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Horowitz, Michael C., Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis. 2015. *Why Leaders Fight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hurwitz, Jon, and Mark Peffley. 1987a. “How Are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model.” *American Political Science Review* 81(4):1099–1120.

_____. 1987b. “The Means and Ends of Foreign Policy as Determinants of Presidential Support.” *American Journal of Political Science* 31(2):236–58.

Jacobs, Lawrence R. and Benjamin I Page. 2005. “Who Influences U.S. Foreign Policy?” *American Political Science Review* 99(1):107–23.

_____. 1999. “Lyndon Johnson, Vietnam, and Public Opinion.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. 29(3):592–616.

_____. 2000. *Politicians Don’t Pander*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Johns, Robert, and Graeme AM Davies. 2012. “Democratic Peace or Clash of Civilizations?” *Journal of Politics* 74(4):1038–52.

_____. 2014. “Coalitions of the Willing?” *Journal of Peace Research* 51(6):767–81.

Kertzer, Joshua D., and Ryan Brutger. 2016. “Decomposing Audience Costs.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60(1):234–49.

Kertzer, Joshua D., Kathleen Powers, Brian C. Rathbun, and Ravi Iyer. 2014. “Do Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Preferences?” *Journal of Politics* 76(3):825–40.

- Kertzer, Joshua D., and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2017. “A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(3):543–58.
- Kreps, Sarah E. 2010. “Elite Consensus as a Determinant of Alliance Cohesion.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6:191–215.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley. 1999. “Domestic Political Institutions, Credible Commitments, and International Cooperation.” *American Journal of Political Science* 43(4):979–1002.
- . 2003. “Alliance Reliability in Times of War.” *International Organization* 57(4):801–827.
- Levendusky, Matthew S., and Michael C. Horowitz. 2012. “When Backing Down Is the Right Decision.” *Journal of Politics* 74(2):323–38.
- Mansfield, Edward, Helen Milner and B. Peter Rosendorff. 2000. “Free to Trade.” *American Political Science Review* 94(2):305–22.
- Miller, Warren E. and Donald E. Stokes. 1963. “Constituency Influence in Congress.” *American Political Science Review* 57(1):45–56.
- Milner, Helen V., and Dustin Tingley. 2016. *Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mintz, Alex, Nehemia Geva, Steven B. Redd and Amy Carnes. 1997. “The Effect of Dynamic and Static Choice Sets on Political Decision Making.” *American Political Science Review* 91(3):553–66.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1994. “Democratic Responsiveness?” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27(1):25–29.
- Page, Benjamin I. with Marshall M. Bouton. 2006. *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Page, Benjamin I., and Richard A. Brody. 1972. "Policy Voting and the Electoral Process." *American Political Science Review* 66(3):979–95.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1983. "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy." *American Political Science Review* 77(1):175–90.
- Potter, Phillip B.K. 2016. "Lame-Duck Foreign Policy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 46(4):849–867.
- Powlick, Philip J. 1991. "The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion among American Foreign Policy Officials." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35(4):611–41.
- Press, Daryl G., Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino. 2013. "Atomic Aversion." *American Political Science Review* 107(1):188–206.
- Reifler, Jason, Thomas J. Scotto, and Harold D. Clarke. 2011. "Foreign Policy Beliefs in Contemporary Britain: Structure and Relevance." *International Studies Quarterly* 55(1):245–66.
- Reiter, Dan, and Allan C. Stam. 2002. *Democracies at War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Risse-Kappen, Thomas. 1991. "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies." *World Politics* 43(4):479–512.
- Russett, Bruce M. 1990. *Controlling the Sword*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Russett, Bruce M. and John R. Oneal. 2001. *Triangulating Peace*. New York: Norton
- Saunders, Elizabeth N. 2011. *Leaders at War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
-
- _____. 2015. "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force." *Security Studies* 24(3):466–501.

- Schultz, Kenneth. 2001. "Looking for Audience Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45(1):32–60.
- Shamir, Michal, and Asher Arian. 1999. "Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel." *American Political Science Review* 93(2):265–277.
- Snyder, Jack, and Erica D. Borghard. 2011. "The Cost of Empty Threats." *American Political Science Review* 105(3):437–56.
- Sobel, Richard, Peter Furia, and Bethany Barratt, eds. 2012. *Public Opinion and International Intervention: Lessons from the Iraq War*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books.
- Stein, Rachel M. 2019. *Vengeful Citizens, Violent States*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Stimson, James A., Michael B. Mackuen, and Robert S. Erikson. 1995. "Dynamic Representation." *American Political Science Review* 89(3):543–65.
- Tingley, Dustin. 2017. "Rising Power on the Mind." *International Organization* 71(S1):S165–88.
- Trager, Robert F., and Lynn Vavreck. 2011. "The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3):526–45.
- Wlezien, Christopher. 2005. "On the Salience of Political Issues." *Electoral Studies* 24(4):555–79.