Elite Cues and Public Attitudes Towards Military Alliances

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Abstract

Do elite cues exert extensive, conditional or minimal influence on public support for military alliances in the United States? In this article, I assess the boundaries of elite leadership on public opinion towards alliances by examining whether partisanship and foreign policy dispositions modify individual responses to elite cues. I argue that if co-partisan elite cues change public attitudes regardless of baseline alliance dispositions from isolationism and militant assertiveness, elites exert extensive influence. Using two conjoint survey experiments to examine public attitudes towards forming and maintaining international alliances, I find that elites can lead most of the electorate, but some individuals hold rigid alliance attitudes. These fixed attitudes have a partisan asymmetry, as staunch alliance supporters in the Democratic party and consistent alliance skeptics in the Republican party both discount elite cues. Therefore, elites can lead most public opinion towards military alliances, but strong individual concerns can constrain their influence.

1 Introduction

Do elites lead U.S. public opinion towards military alliances, and if so, who follows their cues? Looking at observational data, the relationship between elite cues and public alliance attitudes is unclear. For example, many observers feared that Donald Trump's rhetoric would undermine domestic support for alliances, yet U.S. public approval of alliances like NATO increased in most years of the Trump administration and remained steady even among Republicans through 2019 (Fagan and Poushter, 2020).

Elite cues could exercise extensive, conditional or minimal influence on public alliance attitudes. Extensive elite leadership of public opinion is possible given limited public information and interest in foreign policy (Canes-Wrone, 2006; Baum and Potter, 2008; Druckman, 2014). Alliance politics has low public salience even within foreign policy, which likely increases elite influence. There is also evidence that leaders often conform their rhetoric to public attitudes, however, so elites might have minimal influence (Barbera et al., 2019; Hager and Hilbig, 2020). Even when the public pays little attention to international affairs, their opinions have consistency and structure (Holsti, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Individual foreign policy dispositions like isolationism and militant assertiveness (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017) could establish alliance attitudes for elite cues to match.[1] Last, perhaps elites exert conditional influence, as some of the public follows their cues and others do not. Some individuals may hold more rigid alliance opinions than others.

The extent of elite leadership shapes the role and relevance of public opinion in alliance politics. If elites cues lead public opinion, then public attitudes are unlikely to constrain elite alliance decisions. But if individual attitudes are unresponsive or conditionally responsive to elite cues, then public opposition could undermine forming new alliances or withdrawing from existing treaties. Thus, elite influence on public opinion is crucial to understanding the domestic politics of U.S.

[1] This article considers the leading or following question for Trump and NATO: `https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/is-trump-fueling-republicans-concerns-about-nato-or-echoing-them/`

alliance formation and maintenance.

Despite the importance of elite-public interactions in alliance politics, we do not know how partisan and other elite cues affect public attitudes towards alliance commitments. Most evidence comes from opinion polls measuring public sentiment towards alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These polls provide useful data, but they cannot establish a causal connection between elite cues and public attitudes.

To delineate the boundaries of elite influence on U.S. alliance attitudes, I assess whether foreign policy dispositions and partisanship change individual responses to elite cues. How co-partisan elite cues impact individuals with different predispositions towards alliances from isolationism and militant assertiveness shows who elites lead because partisanship and foreign policy dispositions set the starting point from which elite cues might alter alliance attitudes. Isolationism increases skepticism of alliances, while militant assertiveness makes individuals more likely to back alliance participation. If co-partisan elite cues sway public opinion regardless of initial dispositions from hawkishness and isolationism, elites exert extensive influence. But if co-partisan elite cues impact a minute or limited portion of the electorate, their influence is minimal or conditional.

I use two conjoint survey experiments to provide causal evidence on elite leadership of public opinion towards alliances. This approach allows me to randomize many alliance characteristics and elite cues (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Unlike in observational data, an experiment that randomly assigns elite cues can leverage information on foreign policy dispositions within parties to distinguish who follows elite cues. The first experiment scrutinizes attitudes towards alliance formation, while the second addresses alliance maintenance.

In two nationally representative samples, I find evidence of extensive elite leadership, albeit with important limits. While most individuals follow co-partisan elite cues regardless of their foreign policy dispositions, a few do not. The strongest Democrat alliance supporters have rigid alliance attitudes, as do staunch Republican alliance skeptics. Partisanship and foreign policy dispositions also set the level from which elite cues move alliance attitudes. Elite cues thus exert

broad influence, but their impact depends on partisanship, militant assertiveness and isolationism. Behind the topline alliance support numbers in polling data, there is substantial variation in alliance attitudes within the U.S. electorate.

I find a partisan divide in rigid alliance attitudes. Hawkish and isolationist Democrats are robust alliance supporters.[2] Dovish and isolationist Republicans are committed alliance skeptics.[3] Therefore, Republicans can lead the most likely alliance supporters in their party and Democrats can lead relative alliance skeptics. If elected leaders follow the strongest alliance attitudes in their party, they will polarize everyone else.

In addition to providing new insight into debates over elite leadership of public opinion, there are two reasons that understanding U.S. public opinion towards alliances is worthwhile. For one, public opinion is central to debates over whether democracies make more reliable commitments than other states.[4] If public opinion towards alliances is indifferent to elite cues, stable attitudes and reliable commitments are more likely (Gaubatz, 1996). If elite cues drive public opinion, then public attitudes may shift quickly, leading to cycles that hinder democratic reliability (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004).

This study also fills a gap in international institutions scholarship. Scholars are more likely to study how international institutions affect public attitudes (e.g. (Kaya and Walker, 2014; Greenhill, 2020)), than scrutinize the sources of public attitudes towards international institutions themselves. Other studies use observational survey data to examine public opinion towards international cooperation in multilateral financial institutions (Edwards, 2009) or the United Nations (Torgler, 2008; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015). That leaves limited causal evidence on why individuals hold particular alliance attitudes. In one study of public opinion and military alliances, Tomz and Weeks

[2]Roughly 25% of Democrats in both experiments express a mix of isolationism and and militant assertiveness by agreeing with staying home instead of addressing international concerns while also expressing willingness to use force in international affairs.

[3]Approximately 8% of Republicans in both samples hold isolationist and dovish views, as most Republicans score highly on militant assertiveness.

[4]Public opinion is important, but it is not deterministic. Kreps (2010) notes that public disapproval may not hinder coalition warfare, especially when elite consensus favors fighting.

(2021) address a different question by showing that the presence of an alliance increases public support for foreign military intervention. Chu, Ko and Liu (2021) explore how values and interest based elite cues shape public attitudes towards alliance maintenance. I build on these works with more general experiments on alliance formation and maintenance that clarify the reach of partisan and other elite cues while accounting for many alliance characteristics.

The finding that elite cues have substantial influence on public alliance attitudes while some individuals hold rigid opinions has important implications for U.S. alliance politics. Although elite cues affect public support for U.S. alliances, they do not reach the whole electorate. Also, one set of elites alone cannot produce majority opposition to existing treaties, because alliance maintenance commands substantial support. Bipartisan opposition to alliances could reduce public support enough for leaders to withdraw from an alliance with little backlash, however. Public backing for new alliance commitments is more responsive to elite cues. Therefore, whether political elites follow the contradictory fixed attitudes in the two major parties will shape domestic support for U.S. international engagement through alliances, especially for any new alliance commitments. Support for existing treaties is more rigid, but still responds to elite cues.

2 Elite Leadership and Alliance Attitudes

Public opinion molds democratic foreign policy and alliance politics in several ways. First, it affects military intervention decisions (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020; Lin-Greenberg, 2021). In democracies, anticipation of paying public audience costs for alliance treaty violation encourages limited promises of military support (Chiba, Johnson and Leeds, 2015; Fjelstul and Reiter, 2019). Moreover, public attitudes are central to disputes about the reliability of democratic commitments (Gaubatz, 1996; Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004). As a result, policymakers track public support for alliances (Sayle, 2019).

Even as policymakers track alliance attitudes, observed opinions are subject to a longstanding

puzzle in public opinion on foreign policy. When we observe elite and public support for alliances, it is unclear if public attitudes follow elite cues, if only some of the public responds to elite cues or if elite cues reflect public opinion. All three perspectives offer plausible models.

Evidence on whether elites lead or follow public opinion is divided. Some suggest that elites are more likely to lead public opinion. Canes-Wrone (2006) finds that U.S. Presidents rarely follow public preferences they disagree with and have ample freedom to lead foreign policy attitudes. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) argue that elites track public opinion to manipulate it, not conform to it. Kreps (2010) notes that public disapproval did not constrain participation in NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Moreover, foreign policy is a secondary concern for many voters, so elite foreign policy views and rhetoric can diverge from public attitudes with few political repercussions (Busby and Monten, 2012).

Other findings suggest that elites conform their rhetoric and policy stances to public opinion. Barbera et al. (2019) use social media data to show that legislators are more likely to follow than lead public opinion, including on some foreign policy issues. Hager and Hilbig (2020) find that exposure to public opinion research moves speech and policy positions by German politicians closer to majority opinion. Haesebrouck (2019) uncovers little evidence that European elites led public support for military interventions in Libya and the Islamic State. Bechtel et al. (2015) find that elite cues and frames led Swiss individuals, especially those with low knowledge, to reinforce their prior immigration attitudes. Even military elites who have no electoral concerns shape their recommendations in response to public opinion (Lin-Greenberg, 2021).

Conditional elite influence is also possible. Page and Shapiro (1992) note that public opinion is broadly consistent and rational, and changes in predictable ways in response to information from multiple sources, including elite cues. Guisinger and Saunders (2017) claim that for issues with low partisan polarization, information effects dominate public opinion, though elite cues matter more for polarized issues like cap and trade schemes.[5] Democrats express higher support for

[5]Guisinger and Saunders (2017) map the boundaries of elite influence across issues. In the following, I focus on

alliances like NATO than Republicans (Fagan and Poushter, 2020), but the partisan gap in alliance attitudes falls in between polarized issues like the Iran nuclear program and more technical issues such as the International Criminal Court treaty Guisinger and Saunders (2017).

Understanding alliance attitudes addresses a fundamental debate about public opinion on foreign policy. In the following, I examine the extent of elite cues' influence on public opinion towards alliances.[6] In doing so, I demarcate the boundaries of elite influence by assessing whether all, some, or little of the electorate responds to elite cues, based on their predispositions towards alliances. The remainder of this argument explains how partisanship and foreign policy dispositions provide leverage to understand who holds rigid or plastic alliance attitudes, and which responses to elite cues reflect extensive elite leadership. To begin, I outline the general process of elite cue leadership.

2.1 Elite Cues

Under a simple elite cues model the public follows trusted elites in forming their opinion, so elite portrayals of alliances bolster or undermine public support. Public opinion towards alliances thus permeates down from the top and is endogenous to elite views (Druckman, 2014). There is substantial evidence that elites influence public foreign policy attitudes (Baum and Potter, 2008). The media often convey elite cues and frames. Social media may further amplify elite influence (Baum and Potter, 2019).

Elite support or opposition could shape alliance attitudes because individuals rely on trusted elites in an issue environment with little alternative information. Information shortcomings make individuals more responsive to elite framing and cues (Druckman, 2001; Peterson, 2017) and the public has limited foreign policy information (Baum and Potter, 2008). Furthermore, alliance politics has low salience within foreign policy. Alliances are less prominent than international

who responds to elite cues in alliance politics.

[6] I do not fully address if elite cues follow public opinion, as I do not show what drives elite cues. Rather, I assess a crucial component of elite leadership that cannot be inferred from observational data.

conflict, which is the most common subject in studies of foreign policy opinions.

Multiple elites can give public alliance cues. Elected officials, diplomats and military leaders all participate in alliance politics. The public visibility and influence of elected leaders is well-established. Cues from military leaders can shape public opinion about the use of force (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018), so military endorsements may also move alliance attitudes. Diplomatic elites are high profile domain experts. Public perceptions that military leaders and diplomats are well-informed about alliances will likely increase their influence.

In an elite cues model, support for alliances by trusted elites should increase individual support for alliances, and elite opposition will reduce support. Partisanship is an important way that elites establish trust, and it makes co-partisan elite cues more influential (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). Under partisan polarization, individuals distrust and discount messages from out-partisan elites. As a result, bipartisan elite cues will have a large impact. Berinsky (2007) finds that unified elite support for war leads to robust public support.

Elite cues are a straightforward and compelling explanation of alliance attitudes. Even information about alliance characteristics like allied democracy or military spending likely reaches the public through elite rhetoric. This makes extensive elite influence on alliance attitudes plausible. When they receive elite messages, individuals also hold prior attachments, intuitions and beliefs, however. Individual foreign policy dispositions and partisanship could set initial alliance dispositions and modify whether alliance attitudes are rigid or plastic under elite cues.

2.2 Foreign Policy Dispositions and Partisanship

Foreign policy dispositions and partisanship shape individual perceptions of international politics. These individual concerns have two consequences for alliance attitudes. First, they establish individuals' baseline alliance support, or willingness to back alliances in general.[7] Second, individual concerns might change individual responses to elite cues. Individuals could hold prior

[7] Another way to think of baseline support is an individual disposition to support an average or typical alliance.

attachments so tightly that elite cues have minimal influence, or alliance predispositions could make some individuals responsive and others unresponsive, resulting in conditional elite influence.

Foreign policy dispositions are intuitions about international politics (Kertzer and Tingley, 2018). Such principles shape how people respond to decisions such as backing down from military intervention threats (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016). Militant assertiveness and internationalism are two key foreign policy dispositions (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999). Both these dispositions might mold alliance attitudes.[8]

Internationalism is an inclination to engage with other countries and contribute to international endeavors. Internationalists support general U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. As such, they are more likely to favor alliance commitments. Conversely, isolationists are skeptical of international institutions and cooperation, dislike foreign involvement and prioritize domestic affairs (Kertzer, 2013). As a result, isolationists should dislike alliances, and there is substantial documentation of this tendency. Isolationist senators like Robert Taft were the core of U.S. opposition to ratifying NATO (Kaplan, 2007). The U.S. tradition of discomfort with "entangling alliances" only broke after World War II (Kupchan, 2020).

Militant assertiveness reflects individual approbation of using force to address international problems (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999). Dovish individuals are low on militant assertiveness and prefer nonviolent policies. Hawkish individuals are more willing to employ force. Although alliances are cooperative institutions that attempt to deter conflict, they also aggregate military capability and obligate members to fight. Military intervention obligations will reduce the appeal of alliances to doves. General skepticism of using military force should make doves less likely to support military alliances. European pacifists are among the most consistent NATO opponents, for example (Thies, 2015).

Unlike doves, I expect that hawks value capability aggregation through alliances and are more

[8]While internationalism and militant assertiveness are continuous concepts, I discuss them in categorical terms to maintain consistency with the experimental results, which require categorical foreign policy disposition indicators.

willing to hazard foreign wars and capability aggregation. Committing to fight and investing defense is less problematic for hawkish individuals. In-group loyalty is a key source of militant assertiveness (Kertzer et al., 2014) and could increase support for alliance participation by emphasizing group cohesion in the face of external pressures.

Internationalism and militant assertiveness set inclinations towards alliances before individuals receive elite cues.[9] These dispositions create a baseline from which elite cues might impact alliance attitudes. Whether and how individuals respond to elite cues given their prior dispositions will provide insight into elite influence.

In conjunction with internationalism and militant assertiveness, partisanship has an important role in alliance attitudes. First, party identification connects elite cues and individual concerns by determining which elite cues individuals trust. Moreover, partisanship is correlated with militant assertiveness and internationalism. Conservatives in the United States have a longstanding history of isolationism (Kupchan, 2020). Republicans are more hawkish than Democrats as well (Gries, 2014).

Understanding alliance attitudes thus requires careful attention to elite cues, partisanship and foreign policy dispositions. Although elites are likely influential, the extent of elite influence is unclear because partisanship changes individual perceptions of elite cues and is correlated with foreign policy dispositions that could shape individual alliance attitudes. Perhaps Republican leaders' opposition to alliances does not decrease Republican support for alliances, it reflects isolationism in the Republican party, for instance. Hawkish or isolationist individuals might also discount elite cues and rely on their disposition towards alliances.

[9]To give a related example from a different domain, Kertzer and Brutger (2016) leverage foreign policy dispositions to decompose audience costs into belligerence and consistency costs.

2.3 The Boundaries of Elite Influence

To assess elite leadership, I examine how partisan elite cues impact Democrats and Republicans with different predispositions towards alliances. Partisanship, militant assertiveness and isolationism create distinct individual inclinations to back or oppose alliance participation. These inclinations set baseline alliance attitudes. How elite cues move attitudes relative to baseline opinions then shows who elites lead. If co-partisan elite cues move most of the electorate regardless of foreign policy dispositions, elites exert extensive influence on alliance attitudes. If co-partisan elite cues only move some attitudes, elite influence is conditional. Minimal elite influence means few individuals respond to elite cues.

I expect that internationalism and hawkishness increase baseline alliance support. Individuals may be isolationist and hawkish, internationalist and hawkish, isolationist and dovish, or internationalist and dovish,[10] so relative weight of overlapping dispositions is an important concern. Dovish isolationists are the most likely alliance skeptics, while hawkish internationalists are the most likely alliance supporters. I do not have strong priors about the relative strength of hawkishness and isolationism, however.[11] One effect could dominate the other, the two factors could offset, or they could interact in unexpected ways.

Under extensive elite leadership, elite cues should change opinion regardless of individual predispositions towards alliance participation. For example, co-partisan elite support will increase support for alliance participation even among isolationists. Similarly, if elite opposition reduces support among hawkish individuals who would otherwise back an alliance, elite cues have extensive public opinion influence. Such responses imply broad and direct elite influence.

If elite cues have no effect on alliance attitudes or only impact some of the population, then elite leadership is more constrained. Strong predispositions from isolationism and militant assertiveness

[10] While some existing research does not divide isolationists into hawks and doves and distinguishes between cooperative and militant internationalists (Kertzer et al., 2014), I divide isolationists by hawkishness to assess the net impact of competing dispositions. To streamline discussion across the four categories, I do not use the terms cooperative and militant internationalism in the manuscript, though the concepts are present.

[11] As a result, parts of the following analysis are exploratory.

could minimize the direct impact of elite cues, or limit it to part of the electorate. Elites might still exercise indirect leadership by shaping alliance salience and presenting specific information, but null or conditional effects imply limited direct influence to match classic elite cues arguments.

Before discussing the research design, there are two important considerations. First, alliance formation and maintenance are distinct processes (Snyder, 1997). Therefore, I consider alliance formation and maintenance in separate survey experiments to assess whether the public views making a new alliance commitment and upholding an existing treaty differently.

Second, feedback between elite cues and public opinion is plausible in the long run. Perhaps public opinion shapes elite cues, which in turn alter public opinion. Elites could respond to growing alliance skepticism by encouraging opposition, or attempting to lead countervailing alliance support. Such feedback takes time, and would be most obvious in the context of longstanding alliances. This analysis can therefore establish part of a potential feedback cycle by identifying who responds to elite cues. If elites have conditional or minimal influence, feedback is more limited. I now describe how I assess elite cues and alliance attitudes.

3 Research Design

I use two conjoint survey experiments to unpack public support for forming and maintaining military alliances in the United States. Information about observed alliances bundles elite support and alliance characteristics. Conjoint experiments allow researchers to decompose such composite phenomena and compare multidimensional treatments (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014).

Both experiments ask individuals to rate and support participation in defensive military alliances with randomly generated profiles of alliance characteristics and elite cues. In the alliance formation experiment, I ask respondents about five hypothetical new alliances. The alliance maintenance experiment presents five hypothetical existing alliances.

In the experiments, I first measure key respondent characteristics. Individual pretreatment measures of partisanship, militant assertiveness and internationalism structure subgroup analyses examining how individual concerns shape baseline support for alliance participation and responses to experimental treatments. After measuring key individual factors, I present a hypothetical alliance with a randomly generated profile of elite cues and characteristics in a table. Once respondents read the table, I ask them to rate the hypothetical alliance on a scale from 0 to 100 and express approval of alliance formation or maintenance with a yes/no question. I then present four more randomly generated alliance profiles so each respondent rates five hypothetical alliances in a single-profile conjoint design.

Each alliance partner profile is drawn from fourteen attributes with multiple levels. The set of attributes and values captures theoretically interesting alliance characteristics and generates plausible profiles.[12] I randomize attribute order at the respondent level, so the table of attributes is consistent for each respondent. Drawing alliance profiles at random and providing multiple rating tasks in a conjoint experiment makes estimating the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each alliance attribute straightforward (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014).

The alliance profiles include many salient attributes, which I present in an appendix table. Support or opposition from Republican and Democratic Senators, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of State provides elite cues from elected officials, military leaders and diplomats. Independent randomization of elite cues helps differentiate which elites are most influential.

Media reports often include other information besides elite cues (Baum and Potter, 2008), so the experiments also present a series of alliance characteristics. I include key alliance characteristics such as trade ties (Fordham, 2010), regime type, shared threat, military capability (Johnson, Leeds and Wu, 2015), conditions on support, defense cooperation (Morrow, 1994; Leeds and Anac, 2005), and issue linkages (Poast, 2012). All of these factors shape the perceived value

[12]There are no restrictions on value combinations in the alliance profiles. I employ this uniform randomization because all of these alliance profiles are plausible. This also generates crucial variation in elite cues.

of an alliance. The regime type indicator includes nondemocracy, fragile democracy, and consolidated democracy, as individuals may believe that democracies should cooperate because they share common concerns and values (Chu, Ko and Liu, 2021). The financial costs reflect the most conservative association between an alliance commitment and U.S. military spending from Alley and Fuhrmann (2021). Recent military cooperation can establish a partner's reputation (Crescenzi et al., 2012; Gannon and Kent, 2020). I also randomize the region of the hypothetical alliance partner to mitigate confounding on other dimensions like cultural similarity.

The experiments use hypothetical alliances to generate general results through random assignment of crucial country and alliance characteristics. Meaningful experimental variation permits inferences about elite cues and allied characteristics that are fixed in many observed alliances.[13] Accounting for many alliance characteristics limits confounding on elite cues, as greater detail reduces that likelihood that any impact of elite cues is driven by inferred alliance characteristics. It also mimics media presentations that bundle elite cues and information about an alliance and provides insight into what information alters public attitudes. With fourteen unique alliance characteristics, the conjoint experiments give a detailed portrait of each alliance with more information than most media presentations.

Including fourteen attributes for each hypothetical alliance also ensures that attributes do not mask one another, but also that respondents are not overwhelmed and reduce the effort they put into assessing the full profile. Studies of satisficing in conjoint experiments suggest that including fourteen attributes in a profile is unlikely to reduce data quality (Bansak et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is little evidence of satisficing when respondents are asked to rate or compare five profiles (Bansak et al., 2018).

[13]While this raises potential confounding concerns, the regional indicator should help avoid confounding on other dimensions.

3.1 Sample and Individual Measures

Two separate experiments address alliance formation and maintenance. Each nationally representative sample contains 1,500 U.S. respondents, recruited through Lucid Theorem. With an effective sample size of 7,500 from 1,500 respondents completing five rating tasks, the estimates will be under powered for very small effects, but should have enough power to pick up large differences and interactions.

I measured key individual correlates of alliance attitudes for each respondent, focusing on partisan affiliation[14] and foreign policy dispositions. I used standard questions to measure internationalism and militant assertiveness (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016). Analyzing subgroups in conjoint experiments requires categorical measures of foreign policy dispositions and partisanship. I divided respondents into isolationists and internationalists by coding agreement with the most common survey measure of isolationism as isolationism and disagreement or a neutral stance as internationalism. The hawkishness index sums three questions about the use of force and war. Hawks scored above the midpoint of three on this scale, while doves scored three or lower. Finally, I interacted party affiliation, hawkishness and isolationism to analyze foreign policy dispositions within partisan groups.

The analysis starts with unconditional average marginal component effects (AMCEs). This establishes the overall impact of elite cues. After that, I explore the extent of elite influence by examining how partisanship and foreign policy dispositions modify the impact of elite cues. To analyze alliance support in the partisan and dispositional subgroups, I estimate the overall mean choice for each group, then compare it to the marginal means of support under each attribute level. Marginal means estimate average choices or ratings for each conjoint attribute level, averaging over all other treatments. I also employ omnibus F-tests to assess aggregate subgroup differences (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020) and find clear divergences between the subgroups.

[14] I classified independent "leaners" as Democrats or Republicans, respectively. I coded pure independents or others that expressed no partisan lean as independents.

4 Results

I find that elites exert extensive but incomplete leadership over alliance attitudes. The precise consequences of elite cues depend on partisanship and foreign policy dispositions because in addition to wide variation in baseline alliance support, some affiliates of both parties hold rigid opinions. First, Figure 1 presents the AMCEs of elite cues and some alliance characteristics on individual choices in the alliance formation and maintenance experiments. Given the large number of factors, all results figures highlight the elite cues AMCE estimates.[15]

The unconditional AMCE estimates suggest substantial elite influence on alliance attitudes. Elite cues increase public support for alliance formation and maintenance. Support from political and military elites is especially influential. The partisan elite support AMCEs are the largest estimates in both experiments. Backing from the Secretary of State increases support for alliance formation and has a small positive effect on alliance maintenance choices.

The estimates in Figure 1 assume that individuals respond in the same way to different cues and alliance characteristics. But individual concerns with partisanship and foreign dispositions structure foreign policy attitudes. Examining how these factors change individual responses shows who elite cues lead.

Therefore, I estimate support for alliances across respondents with different partisan affiliations and foreign policy dispositions to show who elite cues lead in public opinion towards alliances. Extensive elite leadership implies that elite cues change attitudes regardless of foreign policy dispositions. In the following, I plot the marginal means of support for alliance participation given distinct foreign policy dispositions within the two major parties.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the marginal means of support for alliance formation and maintenance from elite cues across partisan and foreign policy disposition subgroups.[16] Each panel plots the marginal mean of support for each elite cue within every categorical combination of mil-

[15] See the appendix for details on the different alliance characteristics.

[16] See the appendix for details on the distribution of foreign policy dispositions across party identification.

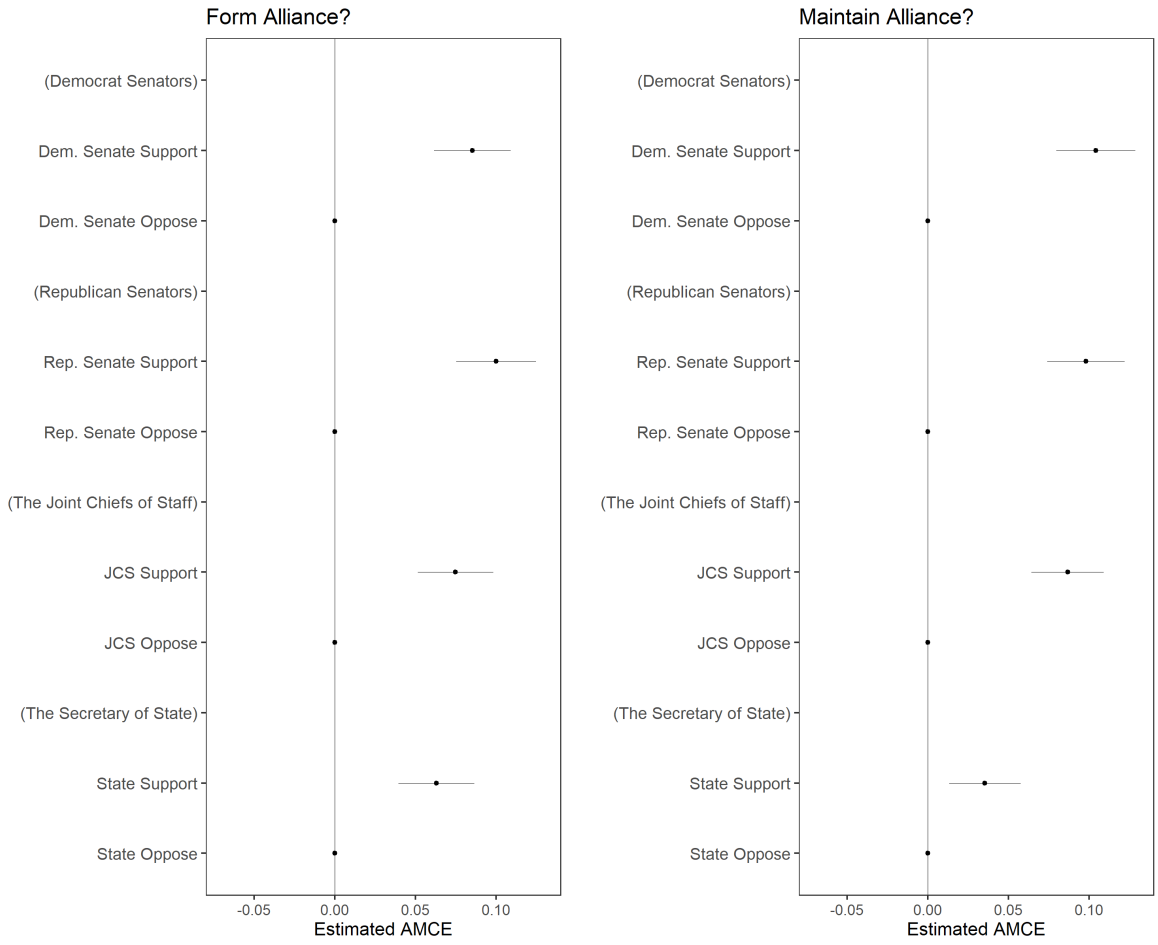

Figure 1: Average marginal component effect of elite cues on public support for forming or maintaining a hypothetical military alliance. Feature names in parentheses. Estimates with a dot at zero are the base attribute level. Components marked with abbreviated labels and all alliance characteristic attributes omitted to make the plot more legible.

itant assertiveness, internationalism and partisanship. The solid vertical line in every facet marks a marginal mean of .5 and a dashed line summarizes the average alliance choice across all attributes and levels for that group. The average choice in all experimental conditions and tasks establishes a rough baseline attitude for each group. Both figures show how individuals in each group respond to elite cues.

There are three key findings in Figure 2 and Figure 3. First, co-partisan elite cues influence most alliance attitudes, which suggests extensive elite influence. One subgroup of each major party holds rigid alliance attitudes, however. Moreover, the support levels after elite cues depend on foreign policy dispositions and partisanship.

Individual concerns drive baseline alliance attitudes. The same foreign policy dispositions have distinct implications for alliance attitudes among Republicans and Democrats, so partisanship matters. At the same time, foreign policy dispositions produce substantial differences in alliance attitudes within parties. Among Democrats and Republicans, hawkishness increases general support for alliance participation. Hawkish Democrats express higher support for alliance participation than hawkish Republicans, however. Isolationist and hawkish Democrats are the strongest alliance participation backers. Hawkishness also increases approval of alliance participation among isolationists.

The strongest alliance opposition comes from skeptics of international engagement and military force. Isolationist and dovish individuals are the greatest skeptics of alliance formation and maintenance. Although few Republican are doves, they are integral to alliance skepticism in the GOP, especially when they also hold isolationist views. Dovish Democrats are also more likely to oppose alliance participation.

In addition to shifting baseline alliance attitudes, foreign policy dispositions change individual responses to elite cues. Isolationists are less likely to heed elite cues. Internationalist Democrats respond to support from Democratic Senators, and also follow cues from the Secretary of State and Joint Chiefs of Staff. Hawkish and isolationist Democrats express consistent high support for

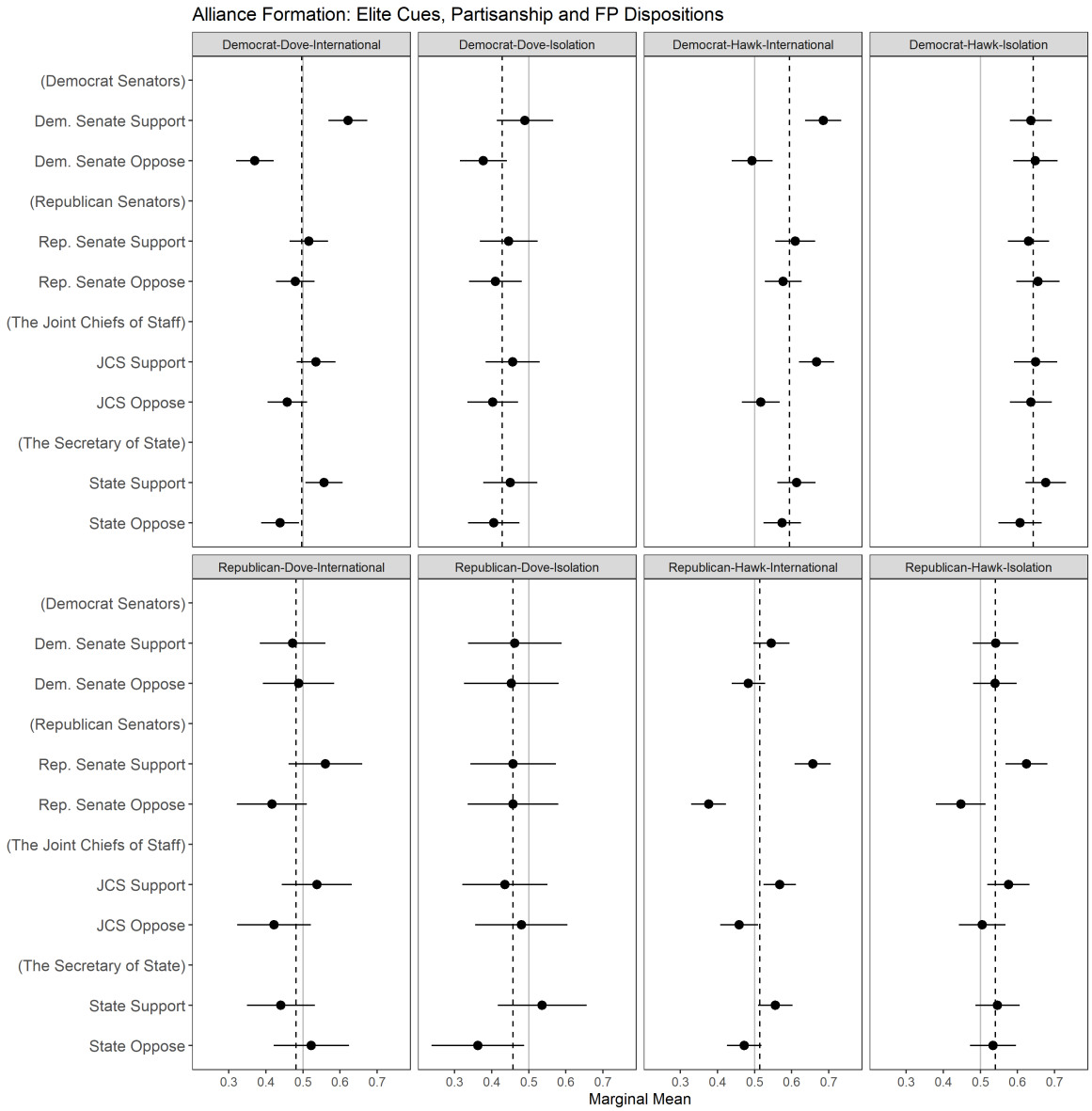

Figure 2: Marginal means of support for forming hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions given different elite cues. For each group, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. The solid vertical line highlights a marginal mean of .5, while the dashed line marks the average choice across all levels. Components given abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible. Independents omitted.

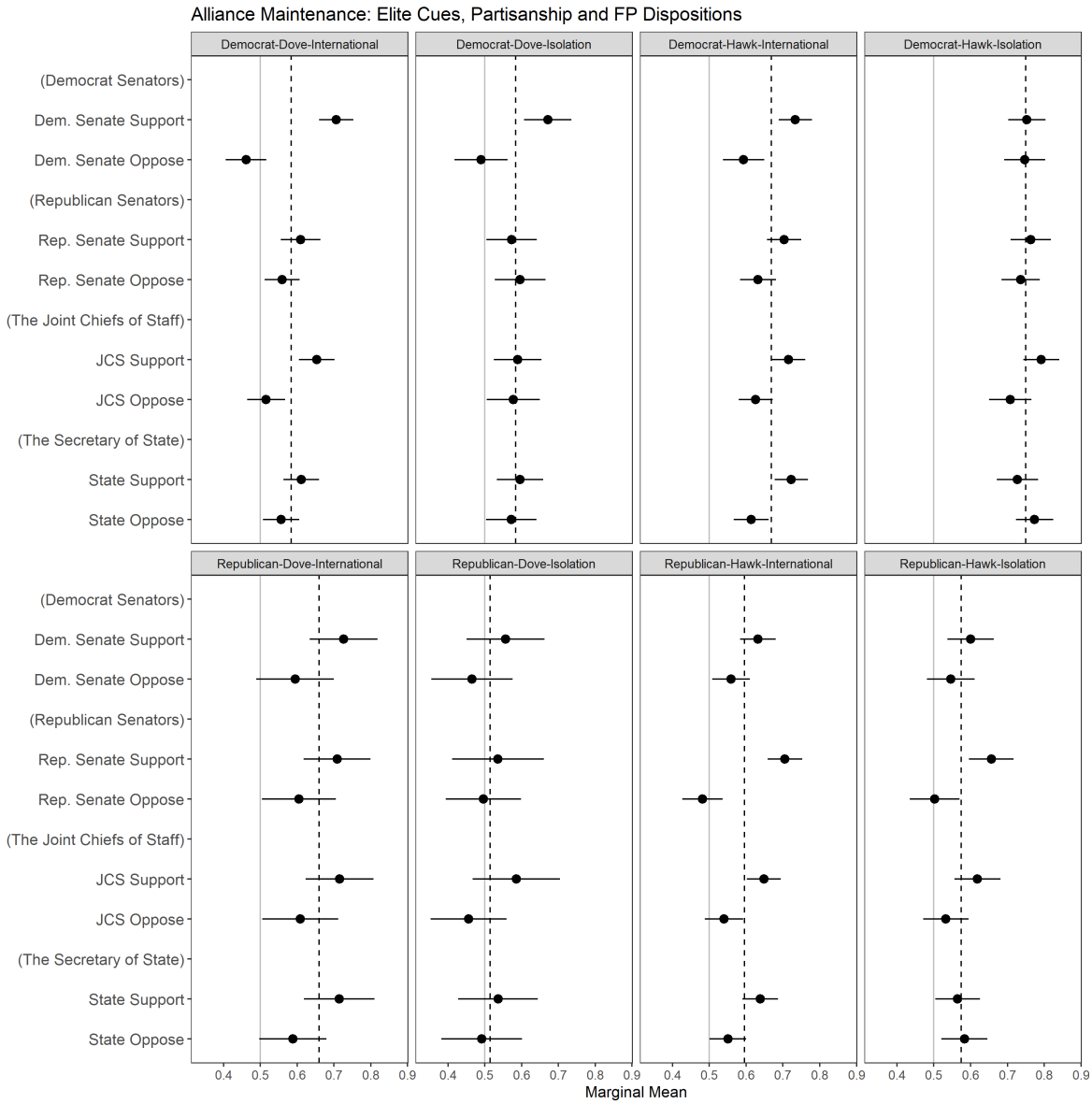

Figure 3: Marginal means of support for maintaining hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions given different elite cues. For each group, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. The solid vertical line highlights a marginal mean of .5, while the dashed line marks the average choice across all levels. Components given abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible. Independents omitted.

forming and maintaining alliances regardless of partisan elite cues, though they may pay some attention to military elite cues on alliance maintenance. The strongest alliance supporters in the Democratic party thus hold rigid alliance attitudes.

Among Republicans, hawks are most receptive to elite cues. Regardless of their view of international engagement, there are clear differences in alliance support for hawkish Republicans based on Republican Senate support or opposition. Hawkish Republicans also follow cues from military elites, and internationalist hawks in the GOP pay further attention to diplomatic elites. As a result, Republican elites can lead alliance attitudes among individuals who are disposed to support forceful international engagement, so their opposition can constrain alliance support among the most likely alliance backers in their party. The gap in hawkish Republican attitudes from differences in Republican elite support is especially pronounced in the alliance formation experiment. Dovish and isolationist Republicans pay little attention to elite cues. The most frequent alliance opponents in the Republican party hold rigid alliance attitudes, which is the reverse of the Democratic party.

Rigid alliance attitudes are rare. In the alliance formation experiment, 7% of Republicans and 25% of Democrats hold foreign policy dispositions that limit their response to co-partisan elite cues. In the alliance maintenance experiment, 9% of Republicans and 23% of Democrats have similarly rigid alliance attitudes. Republicans are thus more likely to respond to elite cues.

Individuals express distinct attitudes towards alliance formation and maintenance. Forming new alliances has lower baseline support than maintaining existing treaties, so elite cues are crucial for new alliances. Only hawkish Democrats express clear support for alliance formation—other respondents are divided or oppose new treaties on average. Dovish isolationists dislike new alliances, though elites can persuade Democrats with this disposition. Whether elites support or oppose an alliance determines whether it has majority or minority support within each party.

Alliance maintenance commands more robust support than alliance formation. Regardless of elite cues, the overall average and marginal means of support for alliance maintenance are almost all above .5. Even dovish isolationists in the GOP express a split verdict on alliance maintenance

on average. Although elite cues can change public attitudes, their direct impact on support for existing alliances has substantive limits.

These results suggest that elite cues exert extensive influence on alliance attitudes, albeit with a few important conditions. Partisanship and foreign policy dispositions set where elite cues lead different parts of the electorate. There is an important partisan asymmetry in alliance attitudes as well. Democrat elites can lead alliance skeptics and have less influence over the most committed alliance supporters. Republican elites can lead alliance supporters, but do not persuade committed alliance skeptics. As a result, elite cues have substantial influence on most individuals in both parties, but the strongest alliance attitudes condition their impact.

An online appendix provides further support for these results. In the appendix, I present conditional marginal means for key alliance characteristics, examine marginal means by partisanship and foreign policy dispositions alone, analyze responses to an open-ended question, and compare results with the continuous rating measure of alliances to inferences from the choice question. All the checks are consistent with these findings.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

I find extensive elite leadership of public alliance attitudes with slight limits. Most individuals follow co-partisan elite cues, but their exact response depends on partisanship, hawkishness and isolationism, as individual concerns set their initial attitudes. Moreover, a few individuals hold rigid alliance attitudes.

Although elite cues have extensive influence on public opinion towards alliances, some individuals hold rigid alliance attitudes. The most committed alliance supporters —hawkish and isolationist Democrats— pay little attention to elite cues. Similarly, elite cues have no impact on the most committed alliance skeptics — dovish and isolationist Republicans. Republicans can lead co-partisan alliance supporters, while Democrats can lead co-partisan alliance skeptics.

These findings have three implications for understanding public attitudes towards U.S. alliances like NATO. First, the Republican and Democratic parties contain committed alliance skeptics and supporters, respectively. In my two representative samples, roughly a quarter of Democrats are strong alliance supporters and approximately 8% of Republicans are staunch alliance skeptics. Outside these groups and independents, most Americans follow partisan elite cues in forming alliance attitudes. This makes whether elites follow fixed alliance attitudes in their party a critical issue, because it would polarize alliance attitudes in everyone else.

Second, my findings support the view that elite-driven public opinion cycles could make democratic commitments less reliable (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004). Although the results suggest that many members of the public hold considered opinions (Page and Shapiro, 1992), they also show substantial elite influence. Elite opposition rarely pushes alliance attitudes into majority opposition to existing treaties, but elite cues can reduce aggregate support in both major parties. In the Republican Party, elite opposition creates an even split in alliance maintenance attitudes. Negative cues from military or diplomatic elites could bolster the impact of skeptical politicians and cut public support.

Finally, these results help us understand public opinion towards alliances like NATO during the Trump administration. Although Trump often criticized U.S. allies, alliance commitments usually commanded majority support throughout his administration (Fagan and Poushter, 2020). The relative stability of alliance attitudes reflects Democrats' aversion to Trump, countervailing cues from other elites and high baseline support for existing alliances.[17] For many Republicans, hawkishness offsets isolationism in alliance attitudes. Although Trump likely increased Republican skepticism of alliances, his influence on attitudes towards existing commitments faced meaningful constraints.

These findings have some limitations. For one, while the sheer variety of alliances means that the above profiles are plausible, extrapolating from the survey experiments to observed alliances is inexact. The artificial nature of a survey experiment provides essential control to disentangle

[17]The AMCE estimates in Figure 1 also suggest that democracy in most U.S. allies bolstered public support.

public attitudes, but no hypothetical alliance can fully reflect real world commitments. Some confounding of elite cues is possible, as the experiment cannot include every potentially relevant alliance characteristic. Moreover, elites have other ways to move public opinion besides direct cues. As such, this may be an easy first test of how elite cues impact alliance attitudes.

While this paper provides new insight into elite leadership of foreign policy opinion, it does not give a comprehensive account of the issue. It shows that elites can lead, but not when and why they choose to exercise that influence. How much and when elites might decide to follow fixed alliance attitudes in their party also falls outside the scope of this paper. Understanding the long-run dynamics of leading and following along with when elites employ different strategies is a crucial subject for future research.

Furthermore, this study focuses on the United States, which has an unusual alliance network. Though public opinion towards alliances in the United States is important, attitudes in other countries matter as well. Future research should examine the sources of alliance attitudes in other countries.

These results provide a foundation for further inquiry into the domestic politics of military alliances. Two questions are especially interesting in this respect. First, how much feedback takes place between public opinion and elite cues? When do politicians follow rigid alliance attitudes or lead in a competing direction? Politicians might view marginal opinion shifts due to threat or allied democracy changes as an opportunity to encourage or arrest further changes in public support. Second, would leaders face significant public disapproval if they withdrew from an alliance? This study focused on generic support, but future research should build on Tomz and Weeks (2021) and examine specific alliance policy changes.

These questions address how elites form and maintain domestic coalitions around international engagement. In the 75 years since the end of World War II, shifting elite cues, partisanship, generational experiences and allied characteristics may mean different groups back alliances today than in 1950. Tracking changes in the domestic coalitions backing alliances is another worthwhile task

for future research.

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