

# Public Attitudes Towards Military Alliances

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## Abstract

Why do Americans support or oppose military alliances? Although public backing for promises to defend other countries shapes the credibility and durability of U.S. alliance commitments, we know little about the foundations of public opinion towards alliances. In particular, existing survey evidence cannot determine whether alliance attitudes are the top-down result of elite cues, or a bottom-up function of individual concerns and perceptions of alliance obligations and partners. In this article, I identify three determinants of public opinion towards alliances: elite cues, individual considerations, and alliance characteristics. I then use two conjoint survey experiments to assess the relative importance of these factors for public attitudes towards forming or maintaining international alliances. I find that partisanship and foreign policy dispositions are the dominant influence on alliance attitudes, as they shape baseline alliance support and how individuals respond to elite cues and alliance characteristics.

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# 1 Introduction

What determines U.S. public opinion towards military alliances? Despite the importance of public attitudes for forming and upholding U.S. alliances, we do not know why the public supports or opposes alliance commitments. Opinion polls measuring public sentiment towards salient alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can describe aggregate support and show changes over time, but they do not explain why individuals express particular alliance attitudes.

In this article, I consider three explanations of public attitudes towards alliances; individual concerns, elite cues, and alliance characteristics. The relative importance of these three factors has implications for a broad debate about whether public foreign policy attitudes are bottom-up or top-down. First, individual concerns such as partisanship, foreign policy dispositions, and economic interests shape public foreign policy attitudes (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). Alliance characteristics such as military capability, economic ties, regime type, common threat, or treaty obligations could also mold individual assessments of alliances, especially by appealing to particular individual concerns. If individual concerns and alliance characteristics are the key drivers of alliance opinions, then public attitudes reflect a bottom-up process. On the other hand, if public sentiment towards alliances responds primarily to elite cues, alliance attitudes permeate from the top down. If partisanship has the dominant influence by shaping receptiveness to elite cues and alliance characteristics, alliance attitudes mix top-down and bottom-up elements as individuals integrate information from multiple sources (Page and Shapiro, 1992).

There are three reasons that understanding U.S. public opinion towards alliances is worthwhile. To start, public support plays a key role in debates over how democracies make reliable promises of military support. If public opinion towards alliances is driven by individual concerns and alliance characteristics, this may lead to relatively stable public opinion and reliable commitments (Gaubatz, 1996). If elite cues are more consequential, then alliance opponents could quickly shift

public opinion and generate a cycles that hinder democratic reliability (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004). Public opinion also affects the political sustainability of alliance commitments.<sup>1</sup> For example, NATO leaders often feared that changing public attitudes would undermine the alliance (Sayle, 2019).

Why the public supports or opposes alliances also speaks to the practical consequences of a prominent debate in U.S. foreign policy. Two competing visions of future U.S. foreign policy depend heavily on alliances. One view believes that the United States should reduce its alliance commitments as part of a more restrained grand strategy (Preble, 2009; Posen, 2014). The other argues that continued deep engagement through alliances is the best way to promote U.S. security and prosperity (Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth, 2013; Brands and Feaver, 2017). If elite cues drive public opinion, policymakers and political leaders have substantial latitude to change U.S. alliance commitments. But if public opinion towards alliances is based on individual intuitions and alliance characteristics, elites risk public disapproval if they undermine popular alliances. For example, some observers feared that Donald Trump's criticism of U.S. alliances would weaken domestic support for alliances. Yet public approval of alliances like NATO remained steady in the United States during the Trump administration (Fagan and Poushter, 2020).

In addition to its practical importance, this study 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 such as multilateral financial institutions (Edwards, 2009) or the United Nations (Torgler, 2008; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015). There is little experimental evidence of why the public supports or opposes alliances. In one study of public opinion and military alliances, Tomz and Weeks (2021) show that the presence of an alliance increases

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<sup>1</sup>Public opinion is important, but it is not deterministic. Kreps (2010) notes that public disapproval may not hinder coalition warfare in formal multilateral alliances, especially when elite consensus favors fighting.

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 a more general experiment on alliance attitudes that spans elite cues, alliance characteristics and individual factors.

There is therefore little evidence to explain why individuals support forming and maintaining military alliances. Tracking changes in public opinion over time in standard surveys gives useful descriptive data on alliance maintenance, but it does not provide causal evidence. For example, surveys of NATO measure public support, but they cannot say whether it is the result of cooperative individual dispositions, backing an alliance with other democracies, or elite support. This study disentangles the three mechanisms by simultaneously assessing the impact of all three on attitudes towards alliance formation and maintenance.

I use two conjoint survey experiments to assess the relative influence of individual concerns, elite cues and alliance characteristics on public opinion towards alliances. Conjoint experiments randomize multiple alliance characteristics and elite cues, so this tool is well-suited to assessing the relative weight of different factors (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). The first study asks individuals to rate five hypothetical new alliance commitments and support or oppose alliance formation. The second asks respondents to rate five hypothetical existing commitments and support or oppose alliance maintenance. Both studies start by measuring individual foreign policy dispositions, ideology, and economic interests. I then follow this with the five choice and rating tasks for hypothetical alliances. This analysis allows me to estimate the relative weight of the three mechanisms while assessing whether public opinion differs across alliance formation and maintenance.

In my analysis, I directly address the puzzle of whether alliance attitudes reflect a top-down or bottom up process. I start by comparing the unconditional average marginal component effects of different elite cues and alliance attributes. To understand the role of individual concerns, I examine how partisanship and foreign policy dispositions shape individual responses to the exper-

imental treatments. In particular, I determine whether elite cues lead public opinion or pander to existing attitudes by assessing whether elite cues impact support regardless of individual predispositions to support or oppose alliances. I assess these predispositions using measures of individual isolationism and hawkishness.

In two nationally representative survey experiments, I find that elite cues and allied democracy exert the largest impact on alliance attitudes. The exact impact of these factors depends on a combination of partisanship and foreign policy dispositions. Hawkish individuals in both parties express strong support for alliances, even if they also hold isolationist views. Small but important subsets of Democrats and Republicans strongly support or oppose alliance participation regardless of elite cues, while most other party members are very responsive to elite cues. This implies that if they pander to a particular section of their party with fixed alliance attitudes, elites could lead many other party members to shift their attitudes.

I also find partisan differences in how individuals weigh the impact of allied democracy. Democrats consistently back alliances with other democracies. Isolationist Republicans place far less emphasis on allied regime type.

Last, I find that alliance formation and maintenance generate very different responses. Even with elite opposition, upholding existing alliances almost always commands majority support. Elite support or opposition can determine whether forming a new alliance has majority or minority support.

The results imply that elites have substantial latitude to shape public attitudes towards alliances. Elite influence on alliance attitudes does not reach all partisans equally, however. Whether elites pander to fixed alliance supporters or skeptics in their party could swing alliance attitudes in the remainder of the party. The impact of these changes on attitudes towards existing treaties is somewhat limited, however. Therefore, although elite cues can weaken public support, they are unlikely to shift alliance attitudes towards majority opposition. Should U.S. allies become less democratic, however, elite cues could stoke further opposition that endangers the alliance.

## 2 Three Explanations of Public Opinion Towards Alliances

Public opinion is a critical part of democratic foreign policy and alliance politics. Public approval guides decisions about military force and whether to intervene in foreign conflicts (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020; Lin-Greenberg, 2021). In democracies, anticipation of public disapproval of treaty violation encourages conditional promises of military support (Chiba, Johnson and Leeds, 2015; Fjelstul and Reiter, 2019). Moreover, public attitudes have a key role in disputes about the reliability of democratic alliances (Gaubatz, 1996; Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004). Last, policymakers pay careful attention to public support for alliances (Sayle, 2019).

There is also meaningful variation in public opinion towards military alliances. Figure 1 plots the percentage of respondents supporting NATO in 59 surveys from 1974 to 2020.<sup>2</sup> NATO generally commands majority support in public opinion, but average support has fallen since 2000. Although the general public opinion patterns are clear, this does not explain why individuals support alliances and why support changes over time.

Individual foreign policy dispositions, elite cues, and alliance characteristics are all plausible explanations of alliance attitudes. This in turn generates a puzzle— are public attitudes towards alliances a top-down result of elite cues or a bottom-up function of individual concerns and alliance characteristics? On the one hand, limited public information about alliances could give elite cues and framing substantial influence (Druckman, 2001). On the other, the public opinion towards alliances may depend more on individual dispositions and intuitions about international affairs (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017) and material interests (Rho and Tomz, 2017). A strong role for individual assessments of alliance characteristics implies a bottom up process, as the public uses information about an alliance to form a considered opinion instead of depending on elite cues. If individual concerns are highly influential, they will alter the appeal of specific alliance characteristics. For example, as I detail below, individuals with greater international economic ties might be

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<sup>2</sup>These surveys ask respondents to assess NATO in many ways. I consider favorable opinions, feeling thermometer ratings of 50 or higher, and support for increasing or maintaining U.S. commitment as indicators of support for NATO.

### US Public Support for NATO: 1974-2020

Data from Roper iPoll



Figure 1: US public support for NATO from 1974 to 2020. Each point marks a unique poll, and colors differentiate the percentages of respondents that expressed support, opposition or neutral/no opinion of NATO. Loess lines estimate the average support for each group in every year. Topline data from the Roper Center's iPoll database.

more likely to support alliances with trade partners.

Alliance characteristics could also shape elite cues, but the implications for public opinion are unclear. Foreign policy elites such as elected officials, military leaders and diplomats have diverse ideological, institutional and practical concerns. Particular elites can thus justify or criticize alliance commitments for different reasons, which makes predicting elite cues for specific alliance profiles difficult. Regardless, an elite leading model implies that no matter how elites arrived at their judgment, public attitudes will follow their cues. If individuals discount elite cues and pay more attention to whether specific alliances are worthwhile, that implies a more bottom up process.

The relative importance of the three mechanisms for public opinion towards international alliances thus speaks to fundamental debates about the sources of public opinion on foreign policy issues. In the following, I explain each mechanism in greater detail. I also consider how each factor would explain changes in public attitudes towards alliances over time.

## **2.1 Individual Concerns**

Individual considerations are one determinant of public attitudes towards alliances. Potential individual sources of alliance opinions include foreign policy dispositions, material interests and partisanship. These factors shape perceptions of the costs, benefits and value of international cooperation. As such, the impact of individual concerns will be reflected in divergent perceptions of alliance obligation and benefits that depend on foreign policy disposition, economic interests and partisanship. Put differently, individual concerns will usually shift alliance attitudes by altering the salience of different alliance characteristics.

Many individuals have stable intuitions about the best way to approach international politics. Militant assertiveness and internationalism (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999) are two such foreign policy dispositions. These principles shape how individuals respond to foreign policy decisions, such as backing down from promises of military intervention (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016).



Internationalism reflects an inclination to work with other countries and contribute to international institutions. Internationalist respondents generally support American engagement in foreign affairs and will likely favor alliance commitments. Conversely, isolationist respondents are more skeptical of international institutions and cooperation. Isolationists distrust foreign involvement and often advocate for more emphasis on domestic affairs. As a result, isolationists will be generally skeptical of alliances, and especially opposed to alliances with broad support conditions or deep cooperation.

The relationship between militant assertiveness and alliances is less obvious. Hawkish individuals are more willing to use force to address international problems. Although alliances are a cooperative institution, they also aggregate military capability (Fordham and Poast, 2014). Hawkish respondents may worry that alliance commitments drain U.S. strength, or support capability aggregation through alliance commitments.

In addition to foreign policy dispositions, individuals may have material interests in backing international alliances. Military alliances promote economic ties between members, including trade (Gowa, 1995; Long and Leeds, 2006), foreign investment (Li and Vashchilko, 2010) and currency pegs (Li, 2003). Just as individuals who benefit from international commerce back trade liberalization (Rho and Tomz, 2017), individuals with internationally-oriented occupations and economic interests could support alliances that bolster international commerce or protect trade partners. On the other hand, individuals who lose out from lost trade protection under an alliance (Wolford and Kim, 2017) are more likely to oppose alliances.

Partisanship subsumes some foreign dispositions and material interests. Republicans and conservatives in the United States have a longstanding history of isolationist sentiment, for instance (Kupchan, 2020). As a result, they are usually more skeptical of international engagements like alliances. Republicans also tend to be more hawkish. Partisanship may thus encompass the key foreign policy dispositions and dominate individual alliance attitudes.

Party identification also mixes elite cues and individual concerns, as it may amplify the in-

fluence of some elite cues and diminish the impact of others. Individuals may largely respond to cues from co-partisan elites, for example. Given its capacity to subsume some foreign policy dispositions and shape receptiveness to elite cues, partisanship may be especially influential.

These individual concerns could explain changes in public support for alliances over time through generational shifts and changing economic opportunities. As the experiences of each generation mold their foreign policy dispositions, public opinion of alliances will slowly shift over time. Changes in economic opportunities, including trade shocks from alliances, could also change alliance attitudes. These mechanisms imply that the public opinion towards alliance commitments will usually change gradually.

## **2.2 Alliance Characteristics**

Alliance characteristics are the second potential determinant of public opinion towards alliances. Military alliances take many forms, as states negotiate distinct treaties with diverse partners. Allied capability, shared interests, and the nature of the alliance obligations are all plausible determinants of alliance attitudes. When individuals form an opinion about an alliance, these alliance characteristics are another possible influence. Rather than look to elite cues, the public may weigh the specific merits of each alliance, especially based on their individual concerns.

Limited public information on foreign policy issues may constrain the impact of alliance characteristics, however. Especially if the public relies on elite cues, individual intuitions about the worth of a specific alliance commitment will be weak. But if alliance characteristics shape public opinion more than elite cues, this would increase the stability of public opinion towards international alliances and constrain elite alliance formation and maintenance.

Allied capability is the first major alliance characteristic. Greater allied capability should generally increase the appeal of an alliance. All else equal, alliances with militarily capable states are more valuable (Johnson, Leeds and Wu, 2015). Inasmuch as the public understands that allies with substantial military capability have greater capacity to deter and fight, they will back alliances with

more capable states.

## **Shared Interests**

Perceptions of shared interests with allies are another salient alliance characteristic. Common threat, economic ties, democratic political institutions and recent military operations are all observable indicators of common interests. Public perceptions of a shared threat may be especially important. Alliance treaties make costly promises to intervene in military conflicts. The public may only be willing to hazard the costs of intervention under serious threat. If individuals do not believe that the alliance addresses a security threat, they will be less likely to support protecting foreign states.

Economic ties are another indicator of shared interests. Protecting trade ties often motivates asymmetric alliances between large and small states (Fordham, 2010). As individuals value foreign trade and investment and see it as an indicator of common interests, they will approve of alliance commitments with trade partners. Individual economic interests likely modify the salience of trade ties, however.

Democratic citizens may also prefer alliances with other democracies. At a minimum, the democratic public rarely supports military strikes against other democracies (Tomz and Weeks, 2013). Individuals may believe that democracies should cooperate because they share common concerns and values. Values are a plausible justification of alliance participation (Chu, Ko and Liu, 2021). Domestic political regimes thus offer a simple heuristic for a trustworthy and valuable alliance partner.

Recent military operations are the final salient indicator of shared interests. If the United States and a potential alliance partner or current ally recently participated in a common military operation, the public could believe that they share common concerns and interests. Recent military operations would also suggest that the other state will bear substantial costs to support the United States. This applies to both alliance formation and maintenance. For example, U.S. allies participated in

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but so did states such as Georgia and Ukraine who did not have a formal defense treaty.<sup>3</sup>

Indicators of shared interests and changes in allied capability could explain temporal variation in alliance attitudes. Threat perceptions and recent military operations are both salient contextual factors. If public perceptions of common interests wane, support for alliances will fall. For example, reduced allied capability could create beliefs that partners are not pulling their weight or contributing enough capability. Democratic backsliding might also lead the public to question whether allies share U.S. interests and values.

### **Alliance Obligations**

In addition to shared interests, the nature of the alliance obligations may shape public support for alliances, especially alliance formation. There is immense variation in alliance treaty content (Leeds et al., 2002). Potential alliance members must agree on whether they are willing to offer military support, conditions on that support, and how they will contribute to deterrence and/or war fighting (Poast, 2019). These issues are reflected in alliance treaties, which stipulate military intervention, conditions on allied support, defense cooperation, and issue linkages, all of which could impact alliance attitudes.

Half of all defensive alliances restrict promises of military support to particular circumstances such as non-provocation, certain locations, or specific adversaries. These promises reduce the risk of entrapment (Benson, 2012), as unconditional support exposes states to violating the treaty or supporting an ally in unwanted conflicts. If the public fears entrapment in foreign conflicts or reckless allies, they will prefer alliances with conditional obligations.<sup>4</sup> Most U.S. alliances restrict promises of intervention to attacks on allies and conflicts in specific regions.

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<sup>3</sup>Some states may have participated in wartime coalitions to seek closer alignment with the United States (Gannon and Kent, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>(Chiba, Johnson and Leeds, 2015) find that democracies are more likely to design alliances with conditional promises of military support, and they attribute this to elite attempts to make alliance commitments they are able to fulfill. Public disapproval of unconditional support could also explain this relationship, however.

Other alliances supplement the core promises of military support with peacetime defense cooperation (Morrow, 1994; Leeds and Anac, 2005). These treaties include basing rights, integrated military commands, military aid, formal organizations or other costly cooperation to coordinate policies and establish credible commitments. Almost half of all military alliances have some defense cooperation (Leeds et al., 2002), and many U.S. alliances include formal organizations, bases, and military aid. The public may prefer more arms-length commitments, or back strong ties with allies.

In addition to formal treaty obligations, military alliances increase U.S. defense spending (Alley and Fuhrmann, 2021). While the public may accept the costs of alliances, alliance skeptics often highlight the financial costs of alliance commitments (Posen, 2014). Growing financial costs could easily reduce public support for alliance commitments, especially among Republicans and isolationists.

Last, formal and informal issue linkages often support credible alliance commitments (Poast, 2013). Connecting other issues like trade rights or economic aid to alliance negotiations can facilitate agreement (Poast, 2012). With issue linkages, states make concessions in different areas to conclude a general agreement. Perceptions that an alliance brings further trade or foreign policy concessions could increase public approval.

Alliance obligations are less likely to explain changes in public opinion over time than individual dispositions or contextual factors like threat, trade and allied democracy. Fixed treaty obligation cannot explain variation in alliance attitudes over time. Treaty obligations could affect public support for treaty formation, however.

Both alliance characteristics and individual considerations are bottom-up mechanisms of public opinion towards alliances. In these frameworks, individual characteristics and intuitions drive support for alliances and may constrain elite policies. A bottom up framework can also explain cross-sectional support and changes in support over time, either through generational change or shifting circumstances. Elite cues offer another explanation for public attitudes, however.

## 2.3 Elite Cues

Although the confluence of individual concerns and alliance characteristics is a plausible explanation of alliance attitudes, elite cues are equally plausible. The public often relies on co-partisan elites for guidance (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). In this case, elite portrayals of alliances bolster or undermine public support for alliance commitments as the public follows the lead of trusted elites in forming their opinion. The elite cues framework implies that public opinion towards alliances is endogenous to elite views (Druckman, 2014).

If elite cues are the most important factor, public opinion towards alliances is largely a top-down phenomenon. There is also substantial evidence that elites influence public foreign policy attitudes. The media inform the public, but they also convey elite frames (Baum and Potter, 2008) and social media may further amplify elite influence (Baum and Potter, 2019).

Furthermore, information shortcomings make individuals more responsive to elite framing and cues (Druckman, 2001; Peterson, 2017). The public has limited information about foreign policy relative to domestic issues, and alliance politics are not usually salient even within foreign policy. Therefore, elite support or opposition could have a profound influence on alliance attitudes as individuals rely on trusted elites.

Elected officials, diplomats and military leaders are all potentially influential in alliance politics. Cues from military leaders can shape public opinion about the use of force (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018), so military endorsements may be especially influential. Public perceptions that military leaders and diplomats are well-informed about alliances will likely increase their influence.

Partisanship also shifts how elected leaders exert influence. With extensive partisan polarization, individuals discount messages from out-partisan elites. Conversely, trust increases the influence of messages from copartisan elites. Support for alliances by co-partisan elites should increase individual support for alliances, and elite criticism would reduce public support. Unified elite cues would be especially influential by tapping support on both sides of partisan divides. For example, Berinsky (2007) finds that unified elite support for war also increases public support.

The elite cues model offers a different process for understanding changes in alliance attitudes over time. In this framework, shifting public attitudes reflect new elite cues. Conversely, stable public opinion would indicate consistent elite views.

Elites, especially elected leaders, might pander to existing public attitudes, however.<sup>5</sup> Under a pandering framework, convergence between elite rhetoric and public opinion reflects elites conforming their support to public opinion, rather than shaping public attitudes. If elite rhetoric on alliances is mostly pandering to opinions that were derived from individual and alliance characteristics, then elite cues will have little effect on alliance opinions.

Evidence on whether elites pander to or lead public opinion is divided. Some evidence suggests that elite pandering is rare. Canes-Wrone (2006) finds that Presidents rarely pander to the public unless they already agree with public preferences. 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 studies suggest that elites match their rhetoric to public opinion. Barbera et al. (2019) use social media data to show that legislators are more likely to follow than lead public opinion on issues. Similarly, Hager and Hilbig (2020) find that exposure to public opinion research moves speech and policy positions by German politicians closer to majority opinion. Guisinger and Saunders (2017) note that for issues with low partisan polarization, information effects can dominate public opinion, though elite cues matter more for polarized issues like cap and trade schemes. Even military elites may shape their recommendations in response to public opinion (Lin-Greenberg, 2021).

Therefore, the top-down and bottom-up approaches are both plausible models of public opinion towards alliances. The public is unlikely to have substantial information about alliance politics,

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<sup>5</sup>See this article for a discussion of pandering and leading in the case of Trump and NATO.

which should increase elite influence. At the same time, individual foreign policy dispositions are an influential factor in public opinion (Herrmann, Isernia and Segatti, 2009; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017), so intuitions about the value of alliances or salient alliance characteristics might be more influential.

It is also possible that alliance attitudes has both top-down and bottom-up elements. 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. Partisanship is especially important in this respect.

If partisanship has a large role in shaping the impact of elite cues and alliance characteristics, then alliance attitudes mix top-down and bottom-up elements. Party identification is tied to both elite cues and individual concerns, as it makes individuals more receptive to specific elite cues and encompasses key material and ideological concerns. In the following data, Republicans are slightly higher on isolationism and military internationalism than Democrats or Independents, for instance. Partisans may therefore value different alliance characteristics.

The confluence of partisanship and foreign policy attitudes also creates some scope to explore how much elite rhetoric leads public opinion. If isolationist individuals are skeptical of alliances in general, they should be less responsive to cues from co-partisan elites. But if elites can lead public opinion, elites cues will increase support for alliance participation even among isolationists.

Before discussing how I examine the weight of individual concerns, alliance characteristics and elite cues, there are three important considerations. First, alliance formation and maintenance are distinct processes (Snyder, 1997). Forming a new alliance and upholding an existing commitment are subject to different considerations. 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, individual concerns, alliance characteristics and elite cues likely interact. Understanding how the impact of alliance attributes vary across partisanship, foreign policy dispositions, and



economic interests is essential to assessing the impact of individual concerns. To give two examples, isolationists would express greater disapproval of unconditional alliances, while individuals with international economic ties should support treaties with substantial trade or economic issue linkages. Furthermore, Republicans and Democrats will more responsive to cues from co-partisan elected officials. In the analysis, I first estimate unconditional effects of elite cues and alliance characteristics, before analyzing differences in between partisan, economic, and isolationist and militant internationalist subgroups. The subgroup analyses provide crucial evidence on the role of individual concerns.

Finally, feedback between elite cues and public opinion is plausible in the long run. It is possible that public opinion shapes elite cues, which in turn alter public opinion. For example, elites could respond to growing public opposition to an alliance by pandering and adopting more skeptical rhetoric. Elites could also attempt to lead public opinion and restore alliance support, however. Such feedback would take time, and would be most obvious in the context of longstanding alliances. For such a cycle to exist, elite cues must influence public alliance attitudes, however. This analysis can therefore establish part of a potential feedback cycle. I now describe how I assess the importance of elite cues relative to individual concerns and alliance characteristics.

### **3 Experimental Design**

I use two conjoint survey experiments to assess how individual considerations, alliance characteristics, and elite cues shape public support for forming and maintaining alliances in the United States. As with many political phenomena, multiple alliance attributes could affect individual attitudes. Alliances bundle elite support and characteristics like threat and treaty obligations, each of which is a potential experimental treatment. Conjoint experiments allow researchers to decompose composite phenomena to estimate and compare the impact of multidimensional treatments (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). For example, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) use

a conjoint experiment to identify what types of immigrants Americans favor. Bechtel and Scheve (2013) assess how institutional design affects public approval for climate cooperation agreements with a conjoint experiment in four countries.

Both conjoint experiments ask individuals whether they support participation in a defensive alliance that has a randomly generated profile of alliance characteristics and elite cues. In the alliance formation experiment, I ask respondents to assess five hypothetical new alliances. In the alliance maintenance experiment, respondents rate five hypothetical existing alliance commitments.

Before presenting the alliance rating tasks, I measure key respondent characteristics, especially economic interests, political ideology, and foreign policy disposition. These measures provide the basis of the subgroup analyses examining how individual concerns shape alliance attitudes. The subgroup analyses assess whether support for alliance participation differs across groups as well as variation in the impact of different cues and alliance characteristics.

After measuring key individual factors, I present respondents with a table of information about a hypothetical alliance with a randomly generated profile of elite cues and characteristics. Once respondents read the table, I then ask them to rate the alliance on a scale from 0 to 100 and express approval of alliance formation or maintenance with a yes/no question. I will then present four more randomly generated alliance profiles, so each respondent rates five hypothetical alliances in a single-profile conjoint design.<sup>6</sup>

Each alliance partner profile is randomly generated from the attributes in Table 1. Every attribute has multiple potential values and I produce the full alliance profile by randomly selecting one value from each attribute. I chose the set of attributes and values to capture theoretically interesting alliance characteristics and generate plausible profiles.<sup>7</sup> I randomize the order of the attributes in the table at the respondent level, so the order is the same for each respondent. Drawing

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<sup>6</sup>A two profile design would ask respondents to choose between two alliances, each with a random set of characteristics.

<sup>7</sup>There are no restrictions on value combinations in the alliance profiles and I employ this uniform randomization because all of these alliance profiles are plausible.

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).

As Table 1 shows, I include many salient alliance attributes. Support or opposition from Republican and Democratic Senators, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of State provide elite cues from elected officials, military leaders and diplomats. Other attributes cover key alliance characteristics such as trade ties, regime type, shared threat, military capability, conditions on support, defense cooperation, and issue linkages. The regime type indicator includes nondemocracy, fragile democracy, and consolidated democracy to examine whether democratic backsliding affects public attitudes towards alliances. The distribution of costs is based on the most conservative average effect of alliances from Alley and Fuhrmann (2021). I also randomize the region of the hypothetical alliance partner to mitigate confounding.

Each hypothetical alliance has fourteen attributes. This 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), as is the case in this study.<sup>8</sup>

Besides disentangling the impact of different alliance attributes on public support, this research design facilitates estimating interactions between the conjoint treatments and individual considerations.<sup>9</sup> In particular, I test whether partisanship and international economic interests modify the impact of elite cues and economic issue linkages. I undertake these subgroup analysis by examining the marginal means of support across different groups and employing omnibus F-tests to assess aggregate differences (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020).

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<sup>8</sup>I find little difference in treatment effects across rating tasks, which suggests that satisficing is not a major concern.

<sup>9</sup>In the appendix, I consider treatment interactions and alternative distributions of alliance profiles (de la Cuesta, Egami and Imai, 2021).

Attributes	Values
Republican Senators	Support an alliance with this country.
Democratic Senators	Oppose an alliance with this country.
The Joint Chiefs of Staff	Support an alliance with this country.
The Secretary of State	Oppose an alliance with this country.
Trade Ties	Supports an alliance with this country.
Partner Political Regime	Opposes an alliance with this country.
Partner Military Capability	The United States has minimal trade ties with this country.
Shared Threat	The United States has modest trade ties with this country.
Recent Military Cooperation	The United States has extensive trade ties with this country.
Financial Cost	This country is not a democracy, and shows no sign of becoming a democracy.
Conditions on Support	This country is a democracy, but shows signs that it may not remain a democracy.
Defense Cooperation	This country is a democracy, and shows every sign that it will remain a democracy.
Related Cooperation	10,000 soldiers and spends 1% of their GDP on the military.
Region	80,000 soldiers and spends 2% of their GDP on the military.
	250,000 soldiers and spends 3% of their GDP on the military.
	The United States and this country face minimal common threats.
	The United States and this country face modest common threats.
	The United States and this country face serious common threats.
	This country has not participated in recent U.S. military operations.
	This country recently supported U.S. airstrikes against terrorists.
	This country recently supported U.S. counterinsurgency operations.
	This country recently fought with the United States in a war.
	This alliance requires \$5 billion in annual U.S. defense spending.
	This alliance requires \$10 billion in annual U.S. defense spending.
	This alliance requires \$15 billion in annual U.S. defense spending.
	The alliance treaty promises military support in any conflict.
	The alliance treaty promises military support only if this country did not provoke the conflict.
	The alliance treaty promises military support only if the conflict takes place in this country's region.
	None.
	The alliance treaty provides basing rights for U.S. troops.
	The alliance treaty includes a shared military command.
	The alliance treaty includes an international organization to coordinate defense policies.
	None.
	The alliance is linked to greater trade and investment with the United States.
	The alliance is linked to greater support for the United States in the United Nations.
	Europe.
	Africa.
	The Middle East.
	Asia.
	The Americas.

Table 1: Table of alliance attributes in conjoint experiment profiles. I use the same set of attributes as treatments in the alliance formation and maintenance experiments.

### 3.1 Sample

I ran separate alliance formation and maintenance experiments to assess alliance attitudes. Each nationally representative sample contains 1500 U.S. respondents, recruited through Lucid Theorem. These results will be under powered for very small effects, but have enough power to pick up most large differences and interactions.

For each respondent, I measured key individual correlates of alliance attitudes, including age, and partisan affiliation.<sup>10</sup> I also used standard batteries to measure internationalism, international trust, and militant assertiveness (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016). These measures provide the basis of a series of subgroup analyses.

## 4 Results

In these results, I first present the unconditional average marginal component effect of elite cues and alliance characteristics. I then examine partisan differences in individual responses to alliance treatments. In the final stage of the analysis, I consider how the combination of partisan identification, hawkishness and isolationism shapes alliance attitudes. I find that alliance attitudes are a complex mix of partisanship and foreign policy dispositions.

Figure 2 shows the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of elite cues and alliance characteristics on individual choices in the alliance formation and maintenance experiments. Support for alliance formation by senators, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State all strongly increase individual support for alliance formation.

Although elite cues were the most important consideration, alliance characteristics had some impact on support for treaty formation. Democracy, especially established democracy, in a potential partner increased support for alliance formation. Allied regime type is just as influential as

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<sup>10</sup>I classified independent “leaners” as Democrats or Republicans, respectively. I coded independents or others that expressed no partisan lean or affiliation as independents.

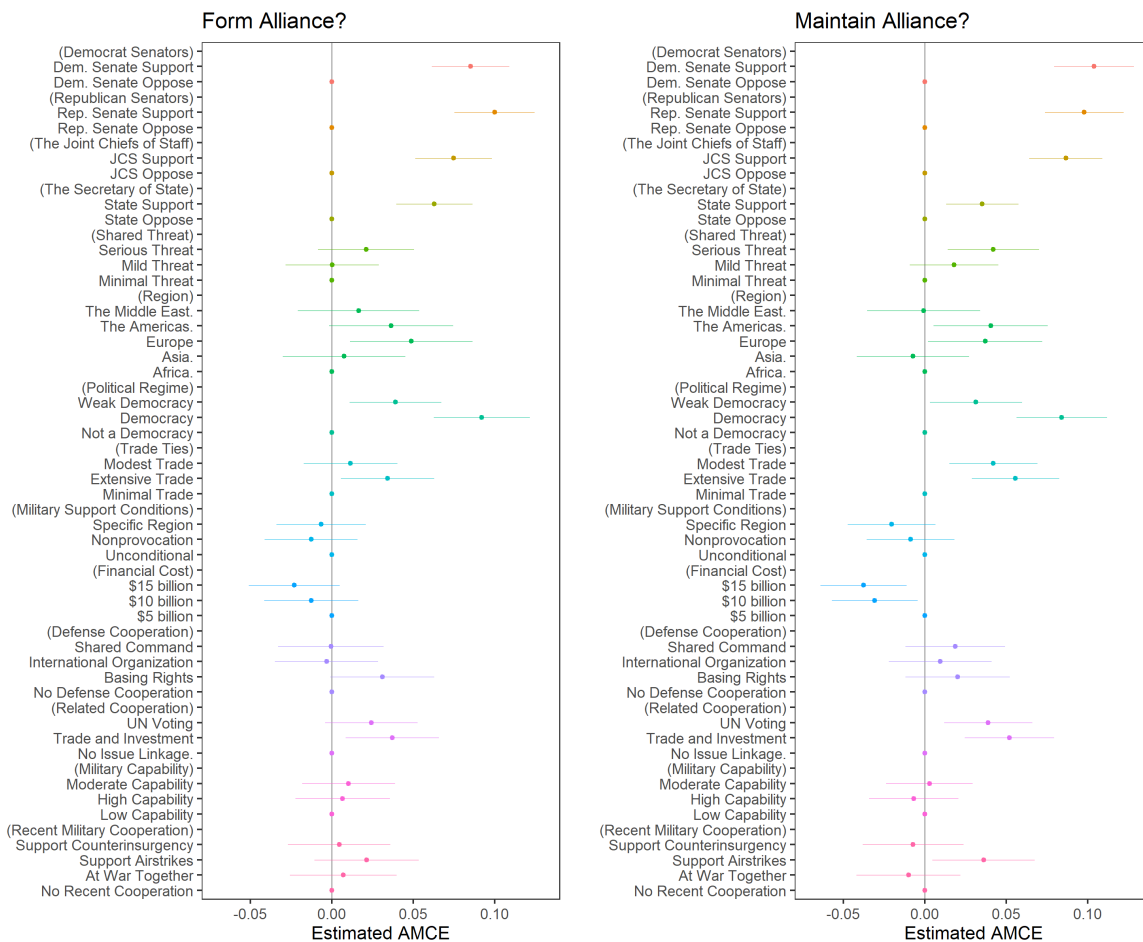


Figure 2: Average marginal component effect of elite cues and alliance characteristics on public support for forming or maintaining a hypothetical new military alliance. Feature names in parentheses. Components marked with abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible.

elite cues.

Issue linkages also encouraged individuals to back alliance formation and maintenance. Linkages to trade and investment with the United States were especially influential, relative to an alliance with no such linkages. Political issue linkages in the United Nations increased individual support as well, albeit in a more limited way. This suggests that issue linkages can facilitate alliance agreements by boosting popular support for a new alliance (Poast, 2012). Last, trade ties and serious common threat encouraged support for alliance maintenance.

Like alliance formation, elite cues clearly increase support for alliance maintenance, as the right panel of Figure 2 shows. Backsliding democracies are marginally more likely than non-democracies to receive public support as well. Democracy has a substantial impact on public perceptions of the value of existing alliances.

Public attitudes towards existing alliances respond to financial cost. Relative to the lowest annual cost, annual costs of \$10 billion or more decrease support for upholding an alliance. Recent military support could somewhat offset cost concerns, however. Allied backing for recent U.S. airstrikes on terrorists encourages individual support for an alliance.

The above results assume that individuals respond in the same way to different cues and alliance characteristics. But as noted above, individual concerns may modify the role of alliance attributes. To start, I compare partisan responses to alliance formation and maintenance.

## **4.1 Partisan Differences**

As elite cues models expects, Democrats and Republicans respond primarily to copartisan elites. Figure 3 shows this relationship by plotting the marginal mean of support for alliances with different characteristics across Democrats, independents, and Republicans. Figure 3 also plots the estimated difference in means between these groups.

Support for new and existing alliances is much higher for Democrats when Democratic Senators support the alliance. Similarly, Republicans are more likely to support alliances when Re-

publican Senators express support. Independents are more likely to support alliances with backing from Republican Senators, but otherwise less responsive to alliance characteristics and elite cues. These elite cues and other gaps create substantial differences between the partisan groups. As the estimates in Figure 3 suggest, an F-test finds significant differences between models that interact partisanship and the various treatments for alliance formation and maintenance.

Besides elite cues, there are other salient differences in how partisan respondents respond to alliance attributes. Democrats are more likely to support alliance formation and maintenance regardless of alliance characteristics, relative to Republicans. Independents are similar to Republicans in their attitudes towards alliance maintenance, but they are very skeptical of forming new treaty commitments. Republicans also place more weight on recent military cooperation.

Republicans are less concerned with allied regime type than Democrats. Democrats are less likely to support alliances with weak democracies or nondemocracies than Republicans. Established democracy in an ally does increase Republican support, but democracy exerts more influence on Democrats. These differences are less pronounced in the alliance formation experiment, however.

There are also interesting partisan differences in regional alliance attitudes. Republicans are less likely to support new or existing alliances with African countries. Existing Middle Eastern alliances also have lower support among Republicans, relative to Democrats.

There are clear partisan differences in alliance attitudes. Partisans respond primarily to cues from co-partisan elites, but they also value difference alliance characteristics. Although these differences are interesting and informative, Figure 3 does not convey whether they are the result of partisan itself, or foreign policy dispositions that are correlated with party identification.

## **4.2 Partisanship, Hawkishness, Isolationism, and Alliance Attitudes**

Partisanship is bound up with foreign policy attitudes, however. Republicans tend to be more hawkish and isolationist, for example. As a result, it is unclear whether alliance attitudes and



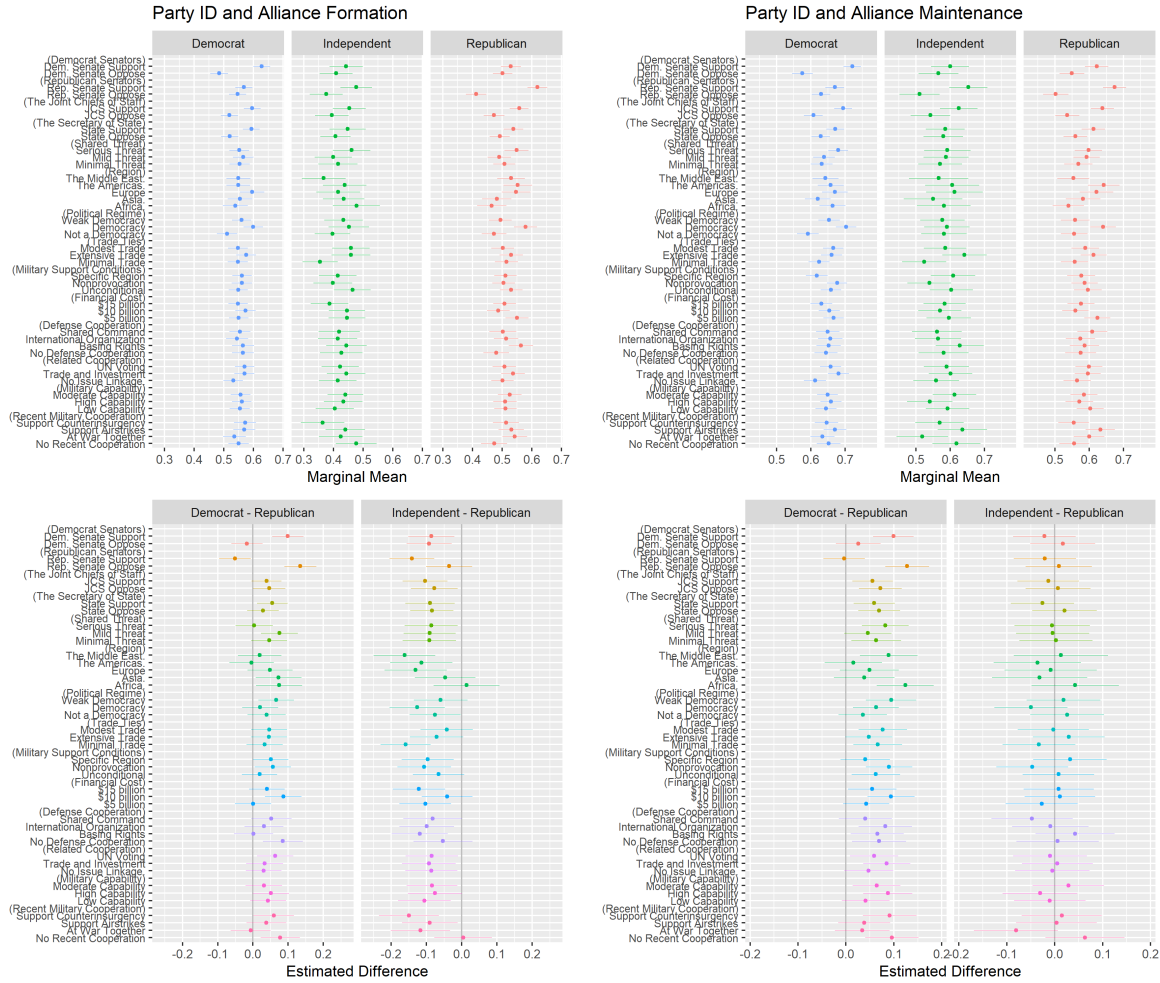


Figure 3: Marginal means of support for forming or maintaining a hypothetical alliances by partisanship. For each experiment, the left two panels plot the marginal mean of support for maintaining an alliance among Democrats and Republicans under different alliance treatments and the right-most panel plots the difference between these groups. Components marked with abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible.

responses to elite cues reflect foreign policy dispositions or partisanship. In this section, I disentangle support for alliances across respondents with different partisan affiliations and foreign policy dispositions.

This analysis is especially useful for establishing whether leaders pander to or lead public opinion. If elite cues exert little impact on likely alliance skeptics and increase backing by likely alliance supporters, elites are largely pandering. On the other hand, if elites cues increase alliance support among likely alliance skeptics and backers alike, this suggests elites can lead public opinion.

Alliance attitudes reflect a complex combination of foreign policy dispositions and partisanship. The same foreign policy dispositions have distinct implications for alliance attitudes among Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, partisan alliance attitudes also vary with foreign policy dispositions. Therefore, partisanship and foreign policy dispositions both influence alliance attitudes. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show these differences. Both figures plot the marginal means of alliance support for Democrats and Republicans with different combinations of hawkishness and isolationism.<sup>11</sup>

Among Democrats and Republicans, hawkishness strongly increases support for alliance participation, as Figure 4 and Figure 5 show. This relationship is subject to partisan differences, however, as hawkish Democrats express higher support for alliance formation than hawkish Republicans. Hawkish and isolationist Democrats are especially strong supporters of alliance participation. Hawkishness also increases support for alliance participation among isolationist Republicans. This implies that willingness to use force to achieve foreign policy aims can offset some skepticism of international engagement in alliance attitudes.

Isolationism alone does not lead to systematically lower support for alliance participation, as one might expect. Rather, isolationist and dovish individuals are the greatest skeptics of alliance formation and maintenance. The combination of isolationism and limited willingness to use force

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<sup>11</sup>See the appendix for details on the distribution of foreign policy dispositions across party identification.

Partisanship, FP Dispositions, and Alliance Formation

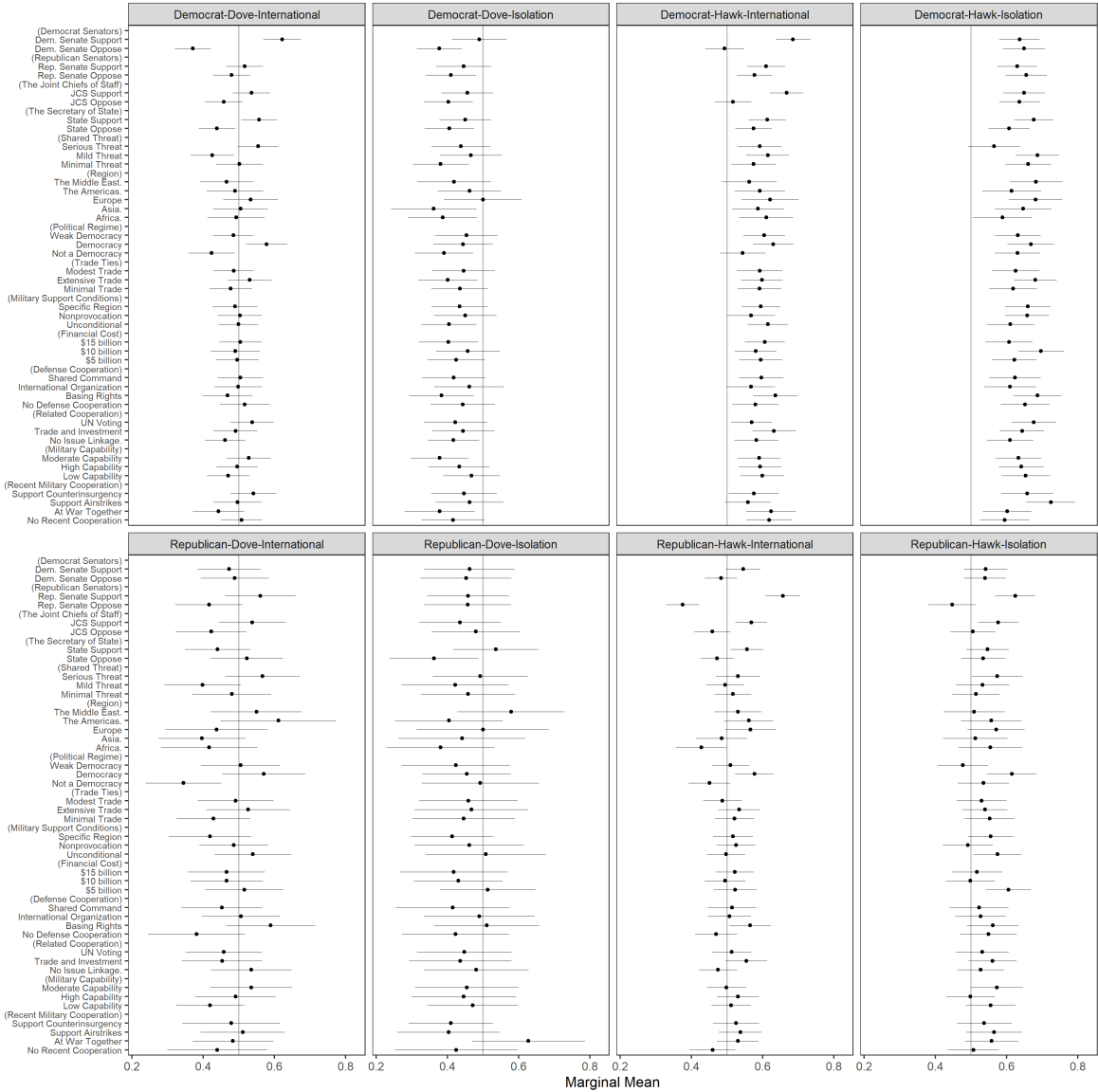


Figure 4: Marginal means of support for forming a hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions. For each experiment, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. Vertical line marks a marginal mean of .5, which is the threshold for majority support. Components marked with abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible. Independents omitted.

is essential to the most committed alliance opponents. Although there are few Republican doves, they are integral to alliance skepticism in the GOP.

Foreign policy dispositions change how individuals respond to elite cues. Attitudes towards international engagement does Democrats' receptiveness to elite cues. Internationalist Democrats respond strongly to support from Democratic Senators, and show some evidence of relying cues from the Secretary of State and Joint Chiefs of Staff. Hawkish and isolationist Democrats are largely indifferent to elite cues, as they express high support for forming and maintaining alliances across most cues and alliance characteristics.

Hawkish Republicans pay more attention to elite cues. There are clear differences in the marginal means of support for Republican Senator's support or opposition for hawkish Republicans, regardless of their view of international engagement. As a result, the perceived impact of Republican elite support on co-partisan alliance attitudes largely reflects responses from individuals with some pre-disposition to support international engagement through alliances. At the same time, Republican elites can dampen alliance support among individuals that might otherwise back alliance participation. The gap in hawkish Republican attitudes is especially pronounced in the alliance formation experiment.

Figure 4 and Figure 5 also show that baseline support for forming new alliances is lower than support for maintaining existing treaties. A bare majority of respondents support alliance formation in many circumstances. Elite cues are especially important for new alliances, as whether elites support or oppose an alliance determines whether it has majority or minority support within each party. Regardless of the exact alliance characteristics or elite cues, the marginal means of support for alliance maintenance are almost all above .5. Even dovish isolationists in both parties are roughly divided in support for alliance maintenance.

In addition to elite cues, foreign policy dispositions and partisanship mold individual responses to alliance characteristics. Democrats are fairly consistent in their responses to allied democracy, regardless of their foreign policy views, especially in the alliance maintenance experiment. Re-

Partisanship, FP Dispositions, and Alliance Maintenance

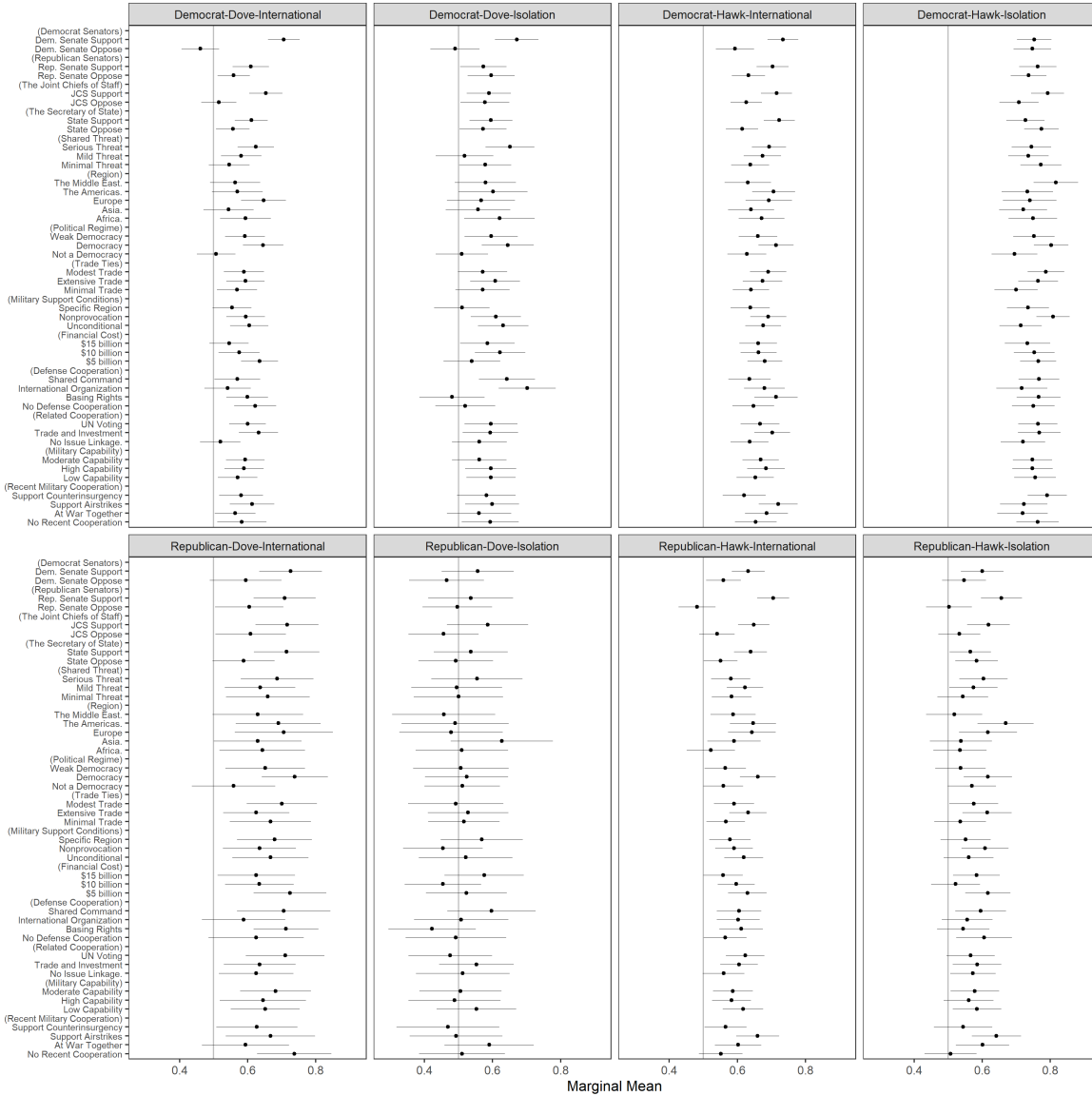


Figure 5: Marginal means of support for maintaining a hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions. For each experiment, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. Vertical line marks a marginal mean of .5, which is the threshold for majority support. Components marked with abbreviated labels to make the plot more legible. Independents omitted.

publicans express more mixed views of allied regime type. While internationalist Republicans are fairly similar to Democrats in their views of allied democracy, isolationist Republicans place far less weight on allied democracy.

Both experiments also show partisan differences in attitudes towards alliances in different regions. Hawkish Republicans are the primary skeptics of alliances with African countries. Democrats with similar foreign policy dispositions express no such regional preferences.

These results suggest that partisanship and foreign policy dispositions interact to shape alliance attitudes. Most Republicans are hawks, and that increases their responsiveness to cues from co-partisan Senators. Democrats are more divided in their foreign policy dispositions, but only Democrats with strong support for alliance participation do not respond to elite cues. As a result, the impact of elite cues depends on individual concerns, but cues exert substantial influence.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

I find that elite cues and allied democracy are the dominant influence on alliance attitudes, though their exact impact is subject to particular partisan and foreign policy concerns. Partisans respond largely to cues from co-partisan elites, and the magnitude of this response depends on individual hawkishness and isolationism in a given partisan context. Issue linkages, shared threat, financial cost and trade have a more limited but noticeable impact.

On balance, this evidence suggests that elites have substantial latitude to lead public opinion on alliances. Elite leading has limits, however. The most committed alliance supporters —hawkish isolationist Democrats— pay less attention to elite cues. Similarly, elite cues are unlikely to convince the most committed alliance skeptics — dovish and isolationist Republicans. The precise impact of elite cues also depends on partisanship and foreign policy dispositions.

These findings have three key implications for understanding public attitudes towards alliances like NATO. First, the Republican and Democratic parties have small but important sets of alliance

skeptics and supporters, respectively. Outside these groups and pure independents, most Americans are fairly responsive to elite cues in their alliance attitudes. At the same time, elite opposition rarely pushes alliance attitudes into majority opposition.

Second, allied democracy is crucial to continued public support for alliances. Many Americans, especially Democrats, dislike alliances with non-democracies. Democratic backsliding in U.S. allies could therefore undermine public support for alliances.

Finally, these results may help explain 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). Some of this reflects Democrat's aversion to Trump, but concern that Trump would inspire resurgent isolationism in the Republican party may have been overstated in alliance politics. The hawkishness of many Republicans somewhat offsets isolationist tendencies in alliances. Isolationist and dovish Republicans did not change their alliance attitudes in response to Trump's rhetoric, as it pandered to their views.

These findings have some limitations. For one, while the sheer variety of alliances means that the above profiles are plausible, generalizing from survey experiments can be challenging. The artificial nature of a survey experiment provides the necessary control to disentangle different sources of public attitudes, but no hypothetical alliances can perfectly reflect real world commitments.

This study also 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 could examine the sources of alliance attitudes in other countries.

In addition to examining countries outside the United States, 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 is there between public opinion and elite cues? Politicians might view marginal changes in opinion due to changes in threat or allied democracy 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?

These questions speak to the general process by which elites form and maintain domestic coalitions for or against international engagement. In the 75 years since the end of World War II, shifting elite cues, partisan attitudes and allied characteristics may mean that different groups back alliances today than supported them in 1950, even if the headline support numbers are similar. Tracking changes in the domestic coalitions backing alliances is another worthwhile task for future research.

In conclusion, public opinion towards alliances is largely a function of elite cues, allied democracy, partisanship and foreign policy dispositions. Elites have substantial influence on alliance attitudes, but foreign policy dispositions shape their exact influences. Alliances attitudes are therefore a complex mixture of top-down and bottom up considerations.



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