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 paper, I assess the boundaries of elite leadership on public opinion towards alliances by dividing partisan respondents into wings based on isolationism and militant assertiveness and then examining how many of those groups elite cues impact. I argue that if co-partisan elite cues change public attitudes across most or all of the groups within their party, elites exert extensive influence. Elites exert conditional influence if they reach half the wings in their party, and minimal influence if their cues impact one or no groups. Using two conjoint survey experiments to examine public attitudes towards forming and maintaining international alliances, I find that elite cues exert extensive influence, 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 occasionally constrain their influence.

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1 Introduction

Do elites lead U.S. public opinion towards military alliances, and if so, who follows their cues? Prior scholarship implies that elite cues could exert extensive, conditional or minimal influence on public alliance attitudes. Extensive elite leadership of most groups within public opinion is possible given limited public information and interest in foreign policy (Canes-Wrone, 2006; Baum and Potter, 2008; Druckman, 2014). There is also evidence that leaders often conform their rhetoric to public attitudes, however, so elite cues might move few public groups, resulting in 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.

I argue that whether elites exercise extensive, conditional or minimal influence on public alliance attitudes depends on their influence over different wings of the two major parties. Although Republicans and Democrats differ in internationalism and militant assertiveness, there are also substantial foreign policy divisions within both parties. Recently, traditional Republicans and Trump-inspired isolationists disputed control of foreign policy in the Trump administration (Dueck, 2019). Progressive and centrist Democrats also disagree over defense spending and America's global role, as the recent Presidential primary showed.[2] Because U.S. political parties encompass divergent foreign policy visions, elite cues may only move particular wings. Individuals outside the core of their party could be especially unresponsive to cues from mainstream elites.

Elite leadership shapes the role and relevance of public opinion in alliance politics. If elite

[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/

[2] See, for example, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/19/the-real-progressive-centrist-divide-on-foreign-policy/.

cues exert extensive influence 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. 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 alliance attitudes data 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. For example, many observers feared that Donald Trump 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).

To delineate the boundaries of elite influence on U.S. alliance attitudes, I assess whether foreign policy dispositions and partisanship change individual responses to partisan 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 shape who individuals trust. Foreign policy dispositions place individuals within different wings of their parties. Isolationism increases skepticism of alliances, while militant assertiveness makes individuals more likely to back alliance participation.

After classifying individuals as hawks or doves and internationalists or isolationists, there are four possible alliance dispositions. If co-partisan elite cues sway public opinion across three or four of the four dispositions, elites exert extensive influence. Influencing two of the four groups implies conditional influence. Minimal influence occurs when elite cues move alliance attitudes in one or no foreign policy disposition groups within their party.

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 approximately representative U.S. samples, I find extensive elite leadership with two 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 to which elite cues move alliance attitudes. Elite cues thus exert broad influence, but their impact depends on partisanship, militant assertiveness and isolationism.

The partisan divide in rigid alliance attitudes is especially noteworthy. Both rigid groups have foreign policy dispositions outside the mainstream of their party. Hawkish and isolationist Democrats are robust alliance supporters.[3] Dovish and isolationist Republicans are committed alliance skeptics.[4] The hawkish, isolationist Democrats, and dovish, isolationist Republicans with rigid alliance attitudes are minorities outside the mainstream of their respective parties. Republicans can therefore lead the most likely alliance supporters in their party— hawkish and internationalist Republicans. Democrats can lead relative alliance skeptics among doves who are skeptical of forceful international commitments.

Furthermore, public support for alliance maintenance is higher and less responsive to elite cues than support for alliance formation. Even with opposition from one set of co-partisan elites, upholding existing alliances almost always retains majority support. In alliance formation, elite cues determine whether a new treaty has majority or minority support. Therefore, elites have more

[3]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.

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

influence over forming new alliances than changing existing commitments.

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.[5] 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).

The impact of elite cues on alliance attitudes also speaks to the consequences of a prominent scholarly and policy debate. Two competing visions of U.S. foreign policy argue about alliances. One perspective believes that the United States should reduce its alliance commitments to pursue a 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 have extensive influence, leaders will face limited public constraints on implementing their grand strategic vision.

This study also fills a gap in international institutions scholarship. Scholars are more likely to study how international institutions affect public attitudes (e.g. (Grieco et al., 2011; Kaya and Walker, 2014; Greenhill, 2020)), than scrutinize the sources of public attitudes towards international institutions themselves. Other studies use observational surveys to examine public opinion towards international cooperation in multilateral financial institutions (Edwards, 2009) or the United Nations (Torgler, 2008; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015). The result is limited causal evidence on individual alliance attitudes. In one study of public opinion and military alliances, Tomz and Weeks (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

[5]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.

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. One wing of each major party holds rigid alliance attitudes. Also, one set of elites cannot produce majority opposition to existing treaties by themselves, because alliance maintenance commands substantial baseline support. Public backing for new alliance commitments is more responsive to elite cues. Therefore, how political elites respond to contradictory fixed attitudes in the two major parties will shape domestic support for U.S. alliances, especially new commitments.

2 Elite Leadership and Alliance Attitudes

Public opinion molds democratic foreign policy and alliance politics in several ways. First, it affects elite 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).

Policymakers must track alliance attitudes because pubic opinion towards military alliances changes over time. Figure 1 plots the percentage of U.S. respondents supporting NATO in 59 surveys from 1974 to 2020.[6] Most surveys show majority support for NATO, but average support fell after 2000.

[6]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.

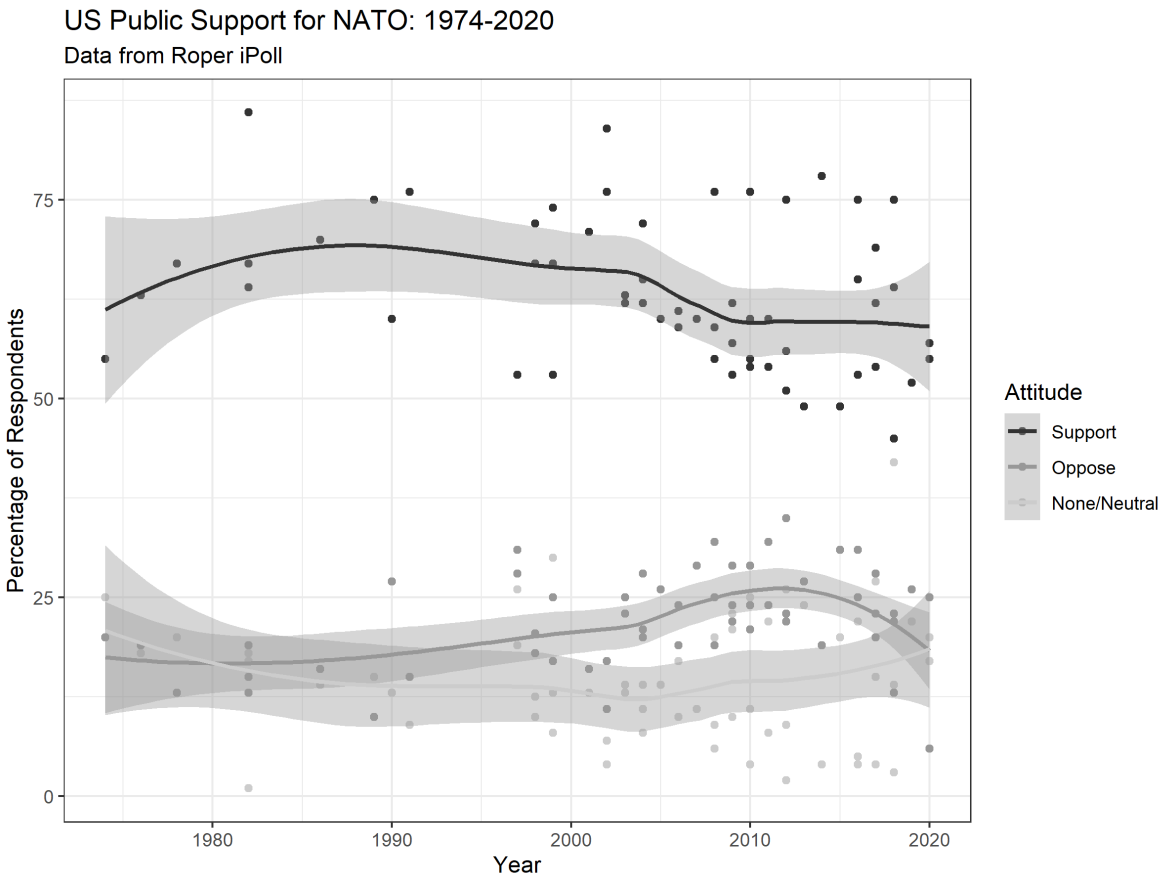

Figure 1: US public support for NATO from 1974 to 2020. Each point marks a unique poll, and colors differentiate the percentages of respondents that expressed support, opposition or neutral/no opinion of NATO. Loess lines estimate the average support for each group in every year. Topline data from the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

There is clear variation in Figure 1, but what drives public alliance attitudes is unknown. Specifically, the role of elite cues in observed alliance opinions is 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 have minimal influence on public attitudes.

Elites could therefore exert extensive, conditional or minimal influence on alliance attitudes. Limited public information about alliances could encourage extensive elite influence, where most or all of the major groups within U.S. parties respond to elite cues. Conditional elite influence where elite cues reach only half the wings of their party is also possible. Some alliance attitudes may be more plastic than others, given varying trust in particular elites. Finally, elite cues could have minimal influence, and reach one or no wings of a given party. Public opinion towards alliances might instead depend on individual concerns.

Other research suggests that all three elite cues perspectives are plausible. There is ample evidence to back extensive elite leadership of 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.[7] 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, and thus have minimal influence. 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

[7]Kreps (2010) notes that public disapproval did not constrain participation in NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

European elites led public support for military interventions in Libya and the Islamic State. Even military elites who have no electoral concerns shape their policy recommendations in response to public opinion (Lin-Greenberg, 2021).

Conditional elite influence is a third possibility. 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.[8] Democrats express higher support for alliances like NATO than Republicans (Fagan and Poushter, 2020) and this 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 Guisinger and Saunders (2017).

Understanding alliance attitudes thus 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.[9] To do so, I examine whether differences in foreign policy dispositions change individual responses to co-partisan elite cues. Predispositions towards using force and international engagement create distinct wings within the two major parties, and elite cues may reach most, some, or none of those subgroups. The remainder of the argument starts by outlining the general process of elite cue leadership. I then detail how partisanship and foreign policy dispositions determine baseline alliance attitudes and divide parties into distinct wings. Finally, I explain which subgroup responses to elite cues reflect extensive elite leadership.

[8]Guisinger and Saunders (2017) map the boundaries of elite influence across issues. In the following, I build on this research by focusing on who responds to elite cues in alliance politics.

[9]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.

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. In this perspective, public opinion towards alliances 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 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 lacks foreign policy information (Baum and Potter, 2008). This public response overcomes limited information with a heuristic of trusting perceived in-group elites. Alliance politics is a less salient foreign policy issue than other common subjects in studies of foreign policy opinions, so elite cues may exert substantial influence.

Multiple elites can give public alliance cues. Elected officials, diplomats and military leaders all participate in alliance politics and are potential figures of public trust. 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 experts.[10] 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 helps elites establish trust and 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

[10]Some diplomatic elites like the Secretary of State are political appointees, which complicates public interpretation of their cues. Even so, they remain key foreign policy actors with a distinct voice from other political elites.

result, bipartisan or unified elite cues encourage robust public support (Berinsky, 2007).

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 determine whether alliance attitudes change under elite cues by shaping which elites individuals trust.

2.2 Foreign Policy Dispositions and Partisanship

Foreign policy dispositions and partisanship shape individual perceptions of international politics. These individual concerns modify the impact of elite cues. First, they establish individuals' baseline alliance support, or willingness to back alliances in general.[11] This creates differences in typical alliance attitudes between and within parties. Within-party differences in foreign policy dispositions might change individual responses to co-partisan elite cues. If individuals believe that elites diverge from their foreign policy dispositions and are from a different party wing, they may discount elite cues. If enough individuals hold prior attachments tightly, elite cues will have minimal or conditional 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). Dispositions set baseline inclinations towards alliances before individuals receive elite cues and shape affinity with party elites.[12] Whether and how individuals respond to elite cues given their prior dispositions provides insight into elite influence.

Militant assertiveness and internationalism are two key foreign policy dispositions for alliance

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

[12] Kertzer and Brutger (2016) leverage foreign policy dispositions to decompose audience costs into belligerence and consistency costs.

attitudes (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999).[13] Internationalism is an inclination to engage with other countries and contribute to international endeavors. Internationalists support U.S. involvement in foreign affairs and 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). Isolationist senators like Robert Taft were the core of U.S. opposition to ratifying NATO (Kaplan, 2007). A 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. General skepticism of using military force should make doves less likely to support military alliances that commit their country to fight. 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 willing to hazard foreign wars. Committing to fight for allies is less problematic to 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.

There are four potential foreign policy dispositions around alliance attitudes. Individuals may be isolationist and hawkish, internationalist and hawkish, isolationist and dovish, or internationalist and dovish.[14] The relative weight of overlapping dispositions on baseline attitudes is therefore

[13] 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.

[14] 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.

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.[15] One effect could dominate the other, the two factors could offset, or they could interact in unexpected ways.

Partisanship and foreign policy dispositions interact to create differences in baseline alliance attitudes between and within parties. 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).

Differences in foreign policy dispositions across parties are well-known, but there is also substantial variation in foreign policy disposition within parties. (Dueck, 2019) divides Republicans into three foreign policy groups based on their attitudes towards international engagement and using force, for example. Nonintervention Republicans abhor international engagement and using force. Hawkish unilateralism reflects a willingness to use force, but skepticism of international entanglements. Last, conservative internationalists are more supportive of international engagement and using force abroad, though they retain some skepticism of multilateral institutions.

The Democratic party also has substantial internal foreign policy disagreements. Progressive Democrats favor multilateral international engagement, but are often more dovish. Centrist Democrats are usually more hawkish, but still favor international engagement. The 2020 presidential primaries revealed disagreements between progressive Democrats like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and centrists such as Joe Biden (Robinson, 2019).

Within-party disagreements on foreign policy create potential constraints on elite influence. Divergent dispositions may drive individuals who identify as Democrats or Republicans to disagree with elites in their own party about foreign policy. If individuals believe that elites are not part of

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

their group within the party itself, they will not trust elites or follow their cues. As a result, elite cue influence may depend on shared foreign policy dispositions.

Elite cue-givers thus do not send messages to a unified partisan group. Rather, common elite cues reach different partisan wings, with potentially divergent consequences. Whether the in-group trust effect of partisanship overcomes potential out-group dynamics within parties is an open question.

Understanding alliance attitudes thus requires careful attention to elite cues, partisanship and foreign policy dispositions. Elite influence depends on whether elite cues move most, some, or none of the key wings within each party. In the next section, I detail the three potential responses to elite cues.

2.3 Assessing Elite Influence

To assess elite leadership, I examine how partisan elite cues impact Democrats and Republicans in four potential wings of each party. Partisanship, militant assertiveness and isolationism create distinct alliance attitudes within and between both parties. 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 impact three or more groups within their party, elites have extensive influence. Extensive influence implies that elites lead most of the electorate regardless of foreign policy dispositions. If co-partisan elite cues move attitudes in two of the four disposition groups, elites exert conditional influence. Conditional influence likely reflects deep intra-party divisions on foreign policy. Finally, minimal elite influence occurs when one or no groups heed elite cues.

Dividing partisan respondents by partisanship and foreign policy disposition thus provides leverage over who holds plastic or rigid alliance attitudes. Some individuals may trust their own party elites more than others. Especially when a wing falls outside a foreign policy consensus within their party, individuals in that group may discount elite cues.

Under extensive elite leadership, elite cues change public opinion with little regard to individual

predispositions towards alliance participation. For example, co-partisan elite support will increase support for alliance participation even among some isolationists. Similarly, if elite opposition reduces support among hawkish individuals who would otherwise back an alliance, elite cues have extensive influence.

If elite cues have minimal or conditional impact, then intra-party disagreements constrain their influence. Strong predispositions from isolationism and militant assertiveness could condition or minimize any direct impact of elite cues. 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.

Table 1 summarizes these predictions. Extensive elite influence requires elites to move most or all of the potential wings in their party. Conditional influence takes place when elites reach half of the four groups. Finally, minimal influence means that elites reach one or none of the groups within a political party.

Influence	Extensive	Conditional	Minimal
Number of Groups Following Elite Cues	3 or 4	2	1 or 0

Table 1: Criteria for assessing the extent of elite influence on alliance attitudes. There are four potential groups within each party between hawkish or dovish and internationalist or isolationist foreign policy dispositions.

Before discussing the research design, there are two important considerations. First, alliance formation and maintenance are distinct processes (Snyder, 1997). I therefore consider alliance formation and maintenance in separate survey experiments. This assesses whether public views of new and existing alliance commitments diverge.

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 appear in longstanding alliances. This paper 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, however. I now describe how I assess elite cues and alliance attitudes.

3 Research Design

I unpack public support for forming and maintaining military alliances in the United States with two conjoint survey experiments. 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. I employ a single-profile conjoint design in both experiments, with two dependent variables— a binary indicator of support and a continuous rating of the alliance.

The experiments 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.

Each alliance partner profile is drawn from fourteen attributes, each with multiple levels. The set of attributes and values captures theoretically interesting alliance characteristics and generates plausible profiles.[16] 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 detail in Table 2. 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 many 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 perceived alliance value. 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 a conservative association between an alliance commitment and U.S. military spending from Alley and Fuhrmann (2021). Recent military cooperation can bolster 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

[16]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.

Attributes	Values
Republican Senators	Support an alliance with this country.
	Oppose an alliance with this country.
Democratic Senators	Support an alliance with this country.
	Oppose an alliance with this country.
The Joint Chiefs of Staff	Support an alliance with this country.
	Oppose an alliance with this country.
The Secretary of State	Supports an alliance with this country.
	Opposes an alliance with this country.
Trade Ties	The United States has minimal trade ties with this country.
	The United States has modest trade ties with this country.
	The United states has extensive trade ties with this country.
Partner Political Regime	This country is not a democracy, and shows no sign of becoming a democracy.
	This country is a democracy, but shows signs that it may not remain a democracy.
	This country is a democracy, and shows every sign that it will remain a democracy.
Partner Military Capability	10,000 soldiers and spends 1% of their GDP on the military.
	80,000 soldiers and spends 2% of their GDP on the military.
	250,000 soldiers and spends 3% of their GDP on the military.
Shared Threat	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.
Recent Military Cooperation	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.
Financial Cost	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.
Conditions on Support	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.
Defense Cooperation	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.
Related Cooperation	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.
Region	Europe.
	Africa.
	The Middle East.
	Asia.
	The Americas.

Table 2: Table of alliance attributes in conjoint experiment profiles. I use the same set of attributes as treatments in the alliance formation and maintenance experiments.

inferences about elite cues and allied characteristics that are fixed in many observed alliances.[17] Accounting for many alliance characteristics limits confounding 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 without respondents feeling overwhelmed and reducing their effort in 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 researchers ask subjects to rate or compare five profiles (Bansak et al., 2018).

3.1 Sample and Individual Measures

Two separate experiments address alliance formation and maintenance. Each sample contains 1,500 U.S. respondents, recruited through Lucid Theorem, which approximates a representative sample through quota sampling. Coppock and McClellan (2019) find that this platform provides a good approximation of demographic and experimental results in other contexts, and note that convenience samples like this are a good fit for estimating experimental treatments for the population of U.S. adults. 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

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

partisan affiliation[18] 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 a 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 capture average choices or ratings for each conjoint attribute level, averaging over all other treatments. I also estimate omnibus F-tests (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020) that find clear differences between the subgroups.

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 2 presents the AMCEs of elite cues on individual choices in the alliance

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

formation and maintenance experiments.[19]

The unconditional AMCE estimates suggest substantial elite influence on alliance attitudes. Elite cues increase public support for alliance formation and maintenance. The partisan elite support AMCEs are the largest AMCE estimates in both experiments. Partisan elite cues are therefore a salient influence on alliance attitudes for at least some respondents.

Other elite cues also impact overall support for alliance participation. Public attitudes respond to cues from military leaders nearly as much as partisan elites, which is unsurprising given widespread public deference to the military (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018). Backing from the Secretary of State increases support for alliance formation and has a small positive effect on alliance maintenance choices. Less deference to bureaucratic actors and partisan affiliations for the Secretary of State are two potential explanations for limited influence from the Secretary of State.

The estimates in Figure 2 are average effects across the whole sample that ignore differences in how partisanship and foreign dispositions. These aggregate effects cannot tell us who responds to elite cues. The next set of estimates addresses this issue and establishes which wings follow elite cues within the Democratic and Republican parties.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the marginal means of support for alliance formation and maintenance from elite cues across party wings.[20] Each panel plots the marginal mean of support for each elite cue within every categorical combination of militant 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 in each group.

There are three key findings in Figure 3 and Figure 4. First, co-partisan elite cues influence three of the four wings in both parties, which suggests extensive elite influence. Second, one subgroup of each major party holds rigid alliance attitudes, in part because they are outside the for-

[19]To facilitate presentation of the findings, all results figures show elite cues estimates. See the appendix for details on alliance characteristics.

[20]The appendix summarizes the distribution of foreign policy dispositions within the parties.

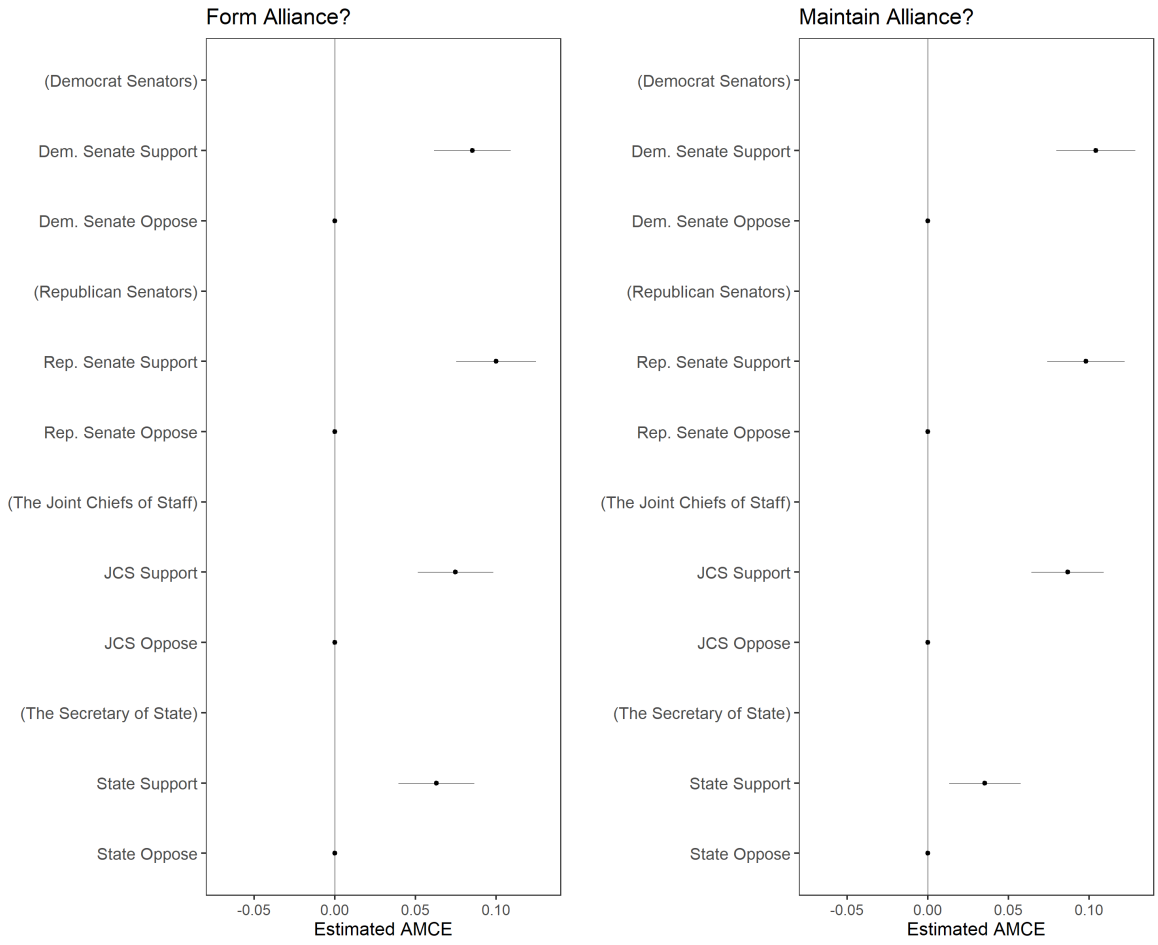

Figure 2: Average marginal component effect of elite cues on public support for forming or maintaining a hypothetical military alliance. Feature names in parentheses. Estimates with a dot at zero are the base attribute level. Components marked with abbreviated labels and all alliance characteristic attributes omitted to make the plot more legible.

eign policy mainstream of their party. Finally, support for alliance maintenance is more rigid than support for alliance formation, perhaps because extant commitments activate moral considerations (Tomz and Weeks, 2021).

Foreign policy dispositions produce substantial differences in alliance attitudes within parties, in addition to the differences between both parties. Among Democrats and Republicans, hawkishness increases general support for alliance participation. Hawkish Democrats express higher support for alliance participation than hawkish Republicans, however. Willingness to use force translates into greater support for military cooperation. Internationalism offsets some of the negative impact of dovish dispositions on alliance support, but not completely.

Isolationists are more skeptical of alliances, but hawkishness can override this tendency. Isolationist and hawkish Democrats are the strongest alliance participation backers. Hawkishness generally outweighs skepticism towards international engagement in alliance attitudes.

The strongest alliance opponents are skeptics of international engagement and using military force. Isolationist and dovish individuals are less likely to support 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. 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 forming and maintaining alliances regardless of partisan elite cues, though they may heed military elite cues on alliance maintenance. The strongest alliance supporters in the Democratic party thus hold rigid alliance attitudes.

Among Republicans, hawks respond to elite cues, as most Republican elites are hawkish themselves. 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 Re-

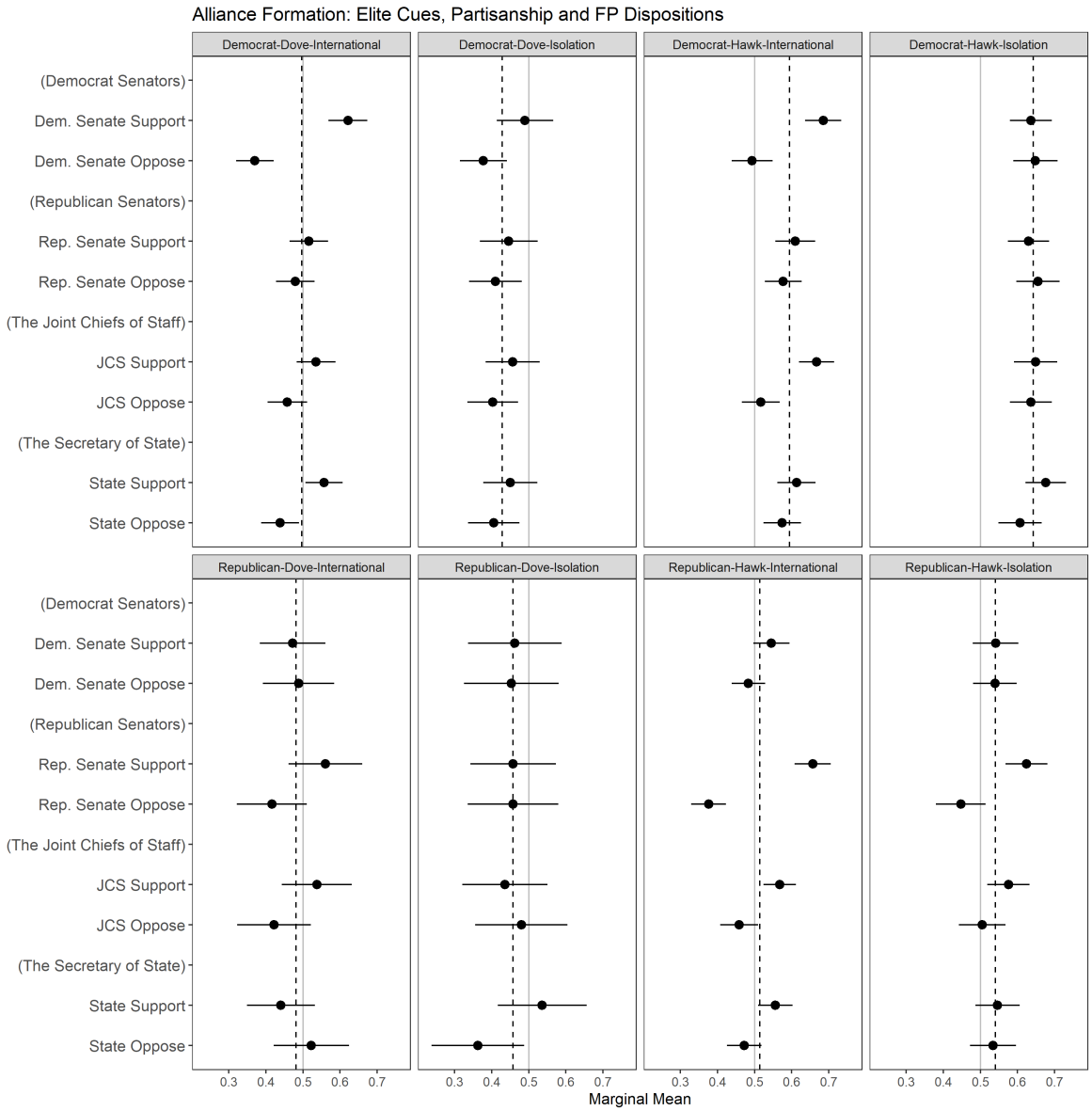

Figure 3: Marginal means of support for forming hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions given different elite cues. For each group, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. The solid vertical 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.

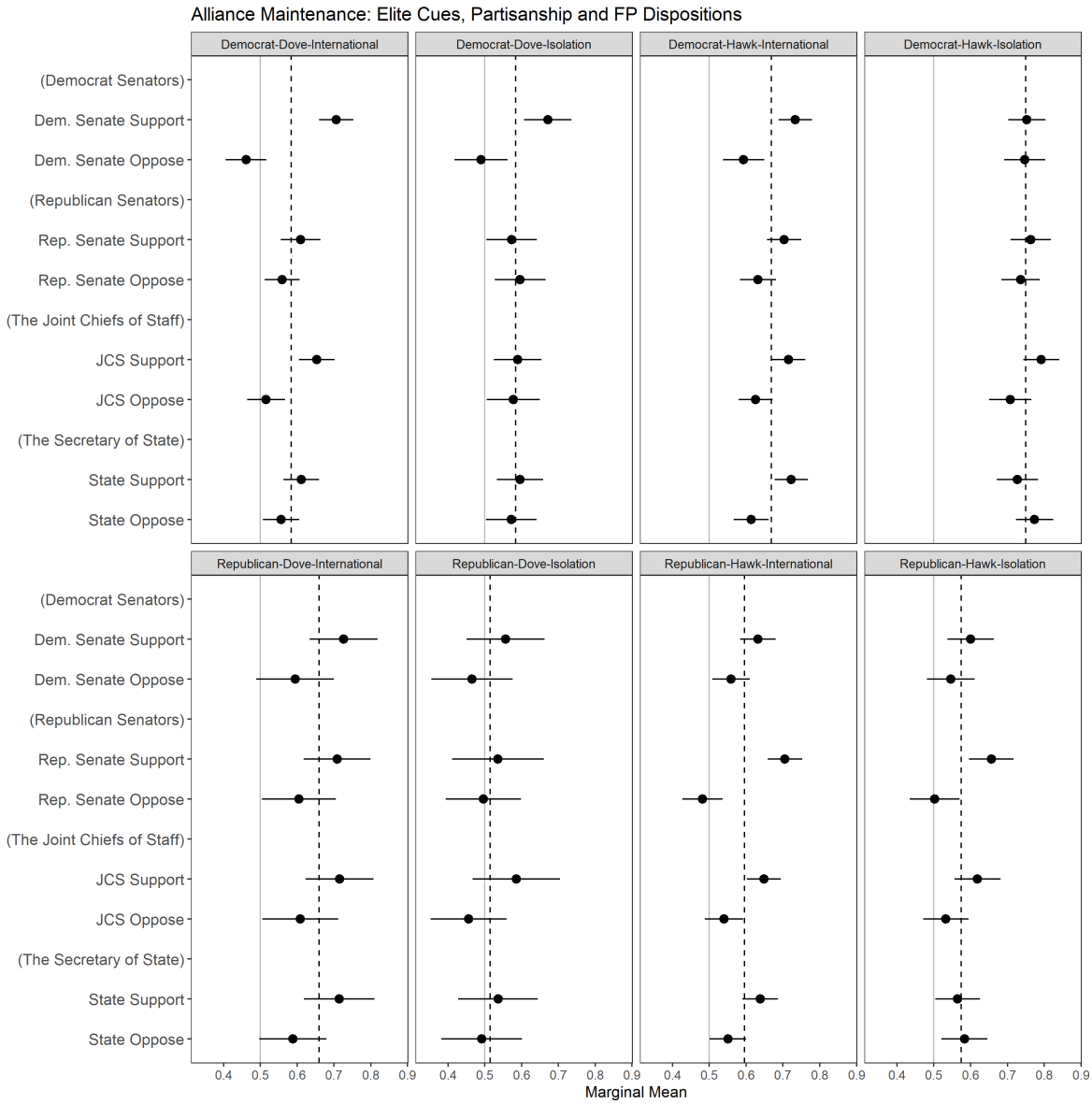

Figure 4: Marginal means of support for maintaining hypothetical alliances across party identification and foreign policy dispositions given different elite cues. For each group, the estimates mark the marginal mean of support for alliance participation under different alliance treatments. The solid 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.

publicans also follow cues from military elites, and internationalist hawks in the GOP further look to diplomatic leaders. 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 consistent alliance opponents in the Republican party hold rigid alliance attitudes, which is the reverse of the Democratic party.

The capacity of foreign policy dispositions to create in vs out group dynamics *within* parties explains the asymmetric partisan rigidity in alliance attitudes. Isolationist, hawkish Democrats and dovish, isolationist Republicans hold opposite alliance attitudes, but they share a position outside the mainstream in their party. Isolationism and hawkishness places militant and unilateral Democrats outside the more dovish and multilateral core of the Democratic party. Dovish isolationism is outside the hawkish mainstream of Republican politics as well. Thus, even within ostensible partisan in-groups, these two groups view elites from their party as out-group members.

Rigid alliance attitudes are rare in this sample. 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. These findings suggest that Republicans are more likely to respond to elite cues, in part because they hold more unified foreign policy views.

Individuals express distinct attitudes towards alliance formation and maintenance. Forming new alliances draws lower baseline support than maintaining existing treaties, so elite cues are crucial. 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 impact on support for existing alliances has substantive limits.

Why are individuals more supportive of existing alliances? Tomz and Weeks (2021) argue that reputation and moral concerns may motivate support for backing a partner. Moral foundations are more important than reputation for generic alliance attitudes. Saying a state is an ally activates loyalty concerns by portraying that partner as part of an international "in-group" (Tomz and Weeks, 2021, pg. 814). Supporting an in-group partner is distinct from deciding whether to admit another country as a partner. Once made, honoring commitments has intrinsic worth, while making new commitments is subject to more cost/benefit and national interest calculations.

While partisan elites exert extensive influence, military and diplomatic elites have less consistent influence. Dovish Republicans do not respond to cues from military elites, perhaps due to skepticism of forceful international engagement. Isolationist doves are especially unresponsive to military elite cues.

Hawkish and internationalist Democrats and Republicans hold the most plastic alliance attitudes under military elite cues. Hawkish internationalism is closest to typical views among military elites (Zwald and Berejikian, 2021). Even for military elites, their influence is greatest among individuals who share their foreign policy disposition.

Responses to the Secretary of State may also reflect mass perceptions of mainstream foreign policy among elites. Again, hawkish and internationalist respondents in both parties are most responsive to cues from the Secretary of State. Besides this most malleable subset of the electorate, internationalist and dovish Democrats pay some heed to the Secretary of State.

These results suggest that elite cues exert extensive influence on alliance attitudes, especially for new treaties. That influence is subject some important conditions, the most salient of which

is a partisan asymmetry in rigid alliance attitudes. Democrat leaders 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 foreign policy dispositions condition their impact.

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

5 Discussion and Conclusion

I find extensive elite leadership of public alliance attitudes with some limits. Most individuals follow co-partisan elite cues, but their exact response depends on partisanship, hawkishness and isolationism, as these foreign policy dispositions divide parties into wings. Support for alliance maintenance is less responsive to elite cues than support for alliance formation.

Individuals with rigid alliance opinions hold foreign policy views that may diverge from elites in their party. 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. Republican and Democratic cue leadership depends in part on

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 these two 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.

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 explain why despite Trump's criticism of U.S. allies, alliance commitments usually commanded majority support throughout his administration (Fagan and Poushter, 2020). First, Trump's isolationist foreign policy instincts diverged from other elites, so many Republican elites gave competing cues. The hawkish and internationalist wing of the Republican party likely followed other elite cues or downplayed Trump's cues. Hawkishness offsets the tendency of isolationism to increase alliance skepticism for many Republicans. Although Trump likely increased Republican opposition to alliances, other wings of his own party constrained his influence. Outside the Republican party, Democrats' aversion to Trump limited the impact of his cues, as did high baseline support for existing alliances.

How does the argument and finding in this context relate to prior findings that elites heed public opinion in security decisions? Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020), Lin-Greenberg (2021) and Chu and Recchia (2021) conduct elite experiments with public opinion information, and find that policymakers are less likely to support policies that the public opposes. These experiments and my results suggest feedback between elite cues and public opinion, but isolated experiments cannot capture such cycles. They also suggest that elites, especially elected officials, may respond more to particular segments of the electorate than others. Whether political elites look to opinion

in their party generally or within specific wings of their party is a worthwhile subject for future research.

These findings have some limitations. For one, while the sheer variety of alliances means that the above profiles are plausible, any extrapolation to observed alliances is inexact. The artificial nature of a survey experiment provides essential control to disentangle 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, so this may be a simple first test of how elites shape alliance attitudes.

While this paper provides new insight into elite leadership of foreign policy opinion, it does not give a comprehensive account of elite-public interactions. It shows that elites can lead, but not when, how and why they exercise influence. How much and when elites might decide to follow alliance attitudes in their party also falls outside the scope of this analysis. Understanding the long-run dynamics of leading and following as well as 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? 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.

In conclusion, elite cues exert extensive influence on alliance attitudes, subject to some important limits. Most individuals heed elite cues, but subsets of both major parties hold rigid alliance attitudes. Partisan differences in elite cues and rigid alliance attitudes will thus play an important role in the future of alliance politics.

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