

Would You Like to Know More? Selection, Socialization, and the Political Attitudes of Military Veterans*

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Abstract

Although an initial wave of research during the Vietnam War era suggested that the political attitudes of American veterans were not significantly different from those of the public at large, more recent studies argue that this may not hold for the all-volunteer military. Thus far, however, the reason for this difference has gone unexplored: are veterans from the volunteer era different because a certain type of person is drawn to military life (selection), or are their attitudes shaped by their experience of service (socialization)? Using new survey data on the political attitudes of Americans, and statistical techniques designed to tease out the difference between selection and socialization effects, we examine this question, assessing the extent to which the two factors play a role in this attitudinal difference. Our results have implications for political representation, civil-military relations, and the role of formative experiences in political and psychological development more generally.

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Introduction

Military service is a formative experience for many young people. Men and women who opt to serve often transition immediately from the lifestyles in their parents' homes, or with their college roommates, to a highly-regimented way of life, in which they are expected to follow (and, in the case of young officers, to give) orders, and to think of themselves not only as individuals, but as part of a larger group. These changes can have profound effects on personal development. But does the experience of military service affect an individual's ideology, philosophy, or political attitudes?

Recent work on the political attitudes and voting behavior of veterans of the all-volunteer U.S. military suggests—contrary to the findings of studies that concentrated on draft-era veterans (e.g., Johnson 1976) or political elites (e.g., Feaver and Gelpi 2004)—that, among the mass public, military service is generally associated with more conservative and more hawkish political views, and a propensity to vote for Republicans (Bishin and Incantalupo 2008; Klingler and Chatagnier 2013, e.g.). However, the data in these recent studies are insufficient to determine *how* veteran status affects attitudes and behavior. Does service shape the individual's ideology? Or are conservative Republicans simply more likely to serve?

We attempt to answer these questions with data and methodological techniques designed to isolate the effects of non-reluctant military service.¹ Using new data, drawn from the 2015 Survey of American Veterans (SAVe), we uncover results that are broadly similar to more recent findings by other scholars on the relationship between attitudes and service. However, we are also able to examine the robustness of these findings to controls for potential confounding factors and to pre-treatment characteristics. Our initial results suggest that veterans do differ significantly from non-veterans, though this may not be due entirely to the experience of military service. We also

¹In this paper, we focus on undrafted veterans who report that the draft was not ongoing or did not influence their decision to serve, and compare these non-reluctant veterans (see Oi 1967 for a discussion of reluctant service) to Americans who did not serve in the military. The data include a significant subsample of reluctant volunteers and a smaller subsample of conscripted veterans; we choose to focus on non-reluctant volunteers because this group best represents the modern U.S. military. In our analysis and discussion, we refer to non-reluctant veterans simply as “veterans” unless otherwise indicated, and to those who have never served as “non-veterans.”

compare and contrast the effects of service identified in the Vietnam-era military with those of service in the contemporary all-volunteer military.

Our key contributions to the literature on veterans' political attitudes are twofold. Theoretically, we build upon work on identities and attitudes to make an argument for why military service might have a significant effect on the views and behavior of veterans. Empirically, our contribution lies in our ability to isolate the effect of military service on respondents' preferences. While some studies have found an impact for service, they have been unable to distinguish between effects based on selection into the military and effects from service itself. Unlike previous research, our data contain information about a number of important pre-treatment factors (i.e., conditions that influence the decision to join the military). By matching treated and untreated respondents on these characteristics, we are able to separate out the effect of the service experience, distinguishing it from selection. We argue that both of these contributions represent major steps forward in the veterans research program.

Previous Research

Although veterans are generally believed to think and behave differently from civilians, relatively few scholars have studied their political opinions. Indeed, a 2007 article in *Armed Forces and Society* found, after surveying the literature, that much of the existing research was undertaken during the draft era, and may not apply to the modern, all-volunteer military (Camacho and Atwood 2007). Given this state of affairs, they called for more research on veterans as a distinct voting bloc. What research does exist on the contemporary public opinion of veterans tends to be relatively narrow in scope (e.g., concentrating only on vote choice), or to concentrate on specific sample groups (e.g., only elites or only Latinos). Little extant research looks at the general political views of veterans at a mass level.

Previous studies of veterans have concentrated largely on turnout and voting behavior. With respect to turnout, authors have found that attributes such as civic virtue or a belief in duty

make veterans systematically different from the rest of the population. Volunteer soldiers may have greater affinity for their country, making them more willing to endure sacrifices, such as the costs associated with voting (Bachman et al. 2000; Teigen 2006). This, combined, with the fact that the military "makes specific efforts to inculcate its members with patriotism" (Teigen 2007, 414), should predispose veterans toward participating, increasing their likelihood of voting, relative to non-veterans. Indeed, much of the literature on voter turnout and veteran status finds evidence supporting this thesis (Ellison 1992; Leal 1999; Teigen 2006).

In terms of vote choice, scholars argue that these very same qualities make veterans more likely to identify with the Republican Party. Indeed, given Republican "ownership" of the national security issue (Norpeth and Buchanan 1992; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003), those who volunteer for military service are likely to have ideological overlap with individuals who support Republicans. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics of veterans have historically been more similar to those of the Republican Party.² In general, these factors together should increase the probability of a Republican vote being cast by a veteran. Empirical research into the area, however, has been mostly inconclusive. While some (e.g., Bishin and Incantalupo 2008) find that veterans tend to be more likely to vote Republican than the general public, others (such as Barreto and Leal 2007) report that prior service increases the likelihood of a Democratic vote.³ Still others find little or no relationship between veteran status and vote choice (Teigen 2007).

One reason for the lack of consensus may be that veterans' political views are more complex than those put forth in the arguments above. The decision to vote for a Republican or a Democrat depends on a variety of factors. Even an especially hawkish military veteran will not necessarily cast a vote for any given Republican candidate. If, for example, veterans tend to be more liberal on domestic issues—as was true of Vietnam veterans (Johnson 1976)—then the expected relationship between demographic characteristics and vote choice may not hold. Instead, a disaggregated analysis would be more useful in determining the effect of service on political attitude. However,

²As is addressed later in the paper, veterans tend to be wealthier, and to be more likely to be male or married than the population at large. On the other hand, a disproportionately large number of minorities—who are more likely to be Democrats—are veterans.

³It should be noted that this holds specifically for Latinos in 2004.

relatively few studies have taken the necessary step of looking at the individual political opinions of veterans. Those few that have usually found little effect of veteran status on political opinions (Jennings and Markus 1977; Schreiber 1978). The chief exception has been for elites, in the realm of foreign policy, where veterans tend to be more *dovish* than non-veterans, believing that force should only be used in particularly threatening situations (Gelpi and Feaver 2002; Feaver and Gelpi 2004).

While interesting for its counterintuitive results, Gelpi and Feaver's work tells us only about the foreign policy beliefs of elites. It does not speak to attitudes about domestic politics or the effect of service on the average American veteran. Several recent studies have worked to expand on Gelpi and Feaver's population of interest by focusing on cadets in the service academies. The United States Military Academy at West Point (hereafter, simply "West Point") has been given particular attention. West Point is a highly selective institution, and its graduates often (eventually) serve as decision makers at the elite level. Accordingly, understanding political socialization among West Point cadets can help generate explanations for the phenomena observed by Gelpi and Feaver. Studies of cadets have found evidence that they view political conservatism as a component of the officer identity, shaping the cadets as they become officers, and that, relative to comparable civilians, cadets tend to be more politically conservative individuals, exhibiting greater threat perception, nationalism, and authoritarianism (Dempsey 2010; Jost, Meshkin and Schub 2017). In foreign policy matters, cadets, who exhibit higher aggregate levels of these characteristics, initially show greater support for using military force than their civilian counterparts, but as they are exposed to the costs of such actions, their support for the use of force declines.

These studies, taken together, offer fascinating insight into how hawkish recruits may be transformed into more dovish (but still conservative) elites by emulating the characteristics comprising the perceived officer identity, and taking cost exposure into account. However, these works do not examine the larger group of veteran voters who have left active duty. One study that has looked at the ideology and policy preferences of veterans drawn from the mass public in the post-draft era is that of Klingler and Chatagnier (2013). Unfortunately, while their study presents findings

that are stronger than those found in previous analyses—they find both that veterans tend to be significantly more conservative and more likely to identify as Republican than non-veterans, and that they voice more conservative and hawkish opinions on an issue-by-issue basis—it has two major shortcomings. First, the authors lack sufficient data to control for potentially confounding factors. Thus, it is possible that some or all of these findings are spurious, being driven by other variables. Second, their hypotheses are not grounded in a coherent theoretical framework. We take an improved approach to their research question, which addresses these two problems. First, we present a novel and consistent theoretical structure, which explains how service can affect individuals' political views. We then test the implications of our theory using a new survey of nearly 2,000 Americans, approximately half of whom served in the military.

Military Service and Political Attitudes

The extant literature provides divergent results on the effect of service on political attitudes, with more recent work suggesting that military veterans are distinct from the general public in ways that contrast with the studies of the 1970s. The source of these differences is unclear. One possibility is that citizens who select into military service have simply become increasingly conservative and Republican as partisan and ideological polarization has dissuaded more left-leaning and Democratic individuals from choosing to spend time within the institution.⁴ In this case, the more recent findings remain in line with the theoretical underpinnings of earlier research, which found limited effects of military service on political attitudes. Therefore, we find it worthwhile to draw from the conceptual foundations of these studies. In particular, we focus on mechanisms by which military service can have an effect on political *attitudes*, such as ideological self-placement, partisan identification, or positions on specific policy matters.

The early literature on veterans' attitudes found that service had relatively little impact. While some efforts to study conscription-era veterans through cross-sectional data found the group to

⁴And these left-leaning individuals no longer find themselves subject to conscription, which may have influenced results in earlier studies.

be generally anti-authoritarian and somewhat left-leaning on social issues, analysis of longitudinal data found few distinctions between veterans and non-veterans (Johnson 1976; Jennings and Markus 1977; Schreiber 1978). Arguably, socialization arising from prolonged exposure to the totalizing, hierarchical institution of the military can inculcate respect for and obedience to superiors and to the entity that they represent (i.e., the United States). This idea was supported to some degree by Vietnam-era panel data. Most notably, military service was associated with slightly higher levels of trust in government, and lower levels of political cynicism (Jennings and Markus 1977). Additionally, while military service was found to have little impact on civic tolerance overall, (Jennings and Markus 1977, 142) report that “more senior enlisted men at any given point in time will probably be less tolerant and less likely to take a civil libertarian and non-chauvinistic approach to politics.” Importantly, members of the all-volunteer force (AVF), being unconscribed, are presumably more likely to view the military as a *chosen* profession, re-enlisting at higher rates and looking more like the “senior enlisted men” described by Jennings and Markus. We argue that the force that connects service to political attitudes can be found in identity, which has been shown to play a major role in the formation of such attitudes for officers in training at military service academies.

West Point cadets, as described by Dempsey (2010), aspire to adopt the officer identity and take on the characteristics of their officer instructors, who serve as models for this aspiration. During academy formation, cadets work to earn the identity of officer by passing through a long evaluation process designed to sort out those who do not entirely fit the officer “type” and to produce a limited class of newly-commissioned officers each year (Prudente 2014). To the degree that this identity is valuable, cadets have a strong incentive to represent themselves as the perceived officer type, and even to convince themselves that they fit this type more closely than they would otherwise (Bénabou and Tirole 2002). In fact, during the process of adopting the officer identity, Dempsey (2010) argues cadets internalize politically-relevant attitudes exhibited by their models, along with other visible characteristics. Thus, the political views and behaviors of these cadets are driven in part by this identity.

A similar dynamic is at work among military veterans. Unlike cadets, veterans have completed their service.⁵ Rather than aspiring to a particular identity, they hold the identity of “veteran” already. But this identity includes several different components, or types, of varying social and personal value, which is likely highly influenced, if not determined, by the veteran’s reasons for joining the military . For example, the veteran identity may signal the type of a damaged victim of post-traumatic stress, the shrewd beneficiary of subsidized education and career advancement opportunities, the poor student who “gets stuck in Iraq” for lack of other options, or the selfless citizen who chose to bear the costs of national defense (Faris 1981; Baker and VandeHei 2006; Dempsey 2010; Philipps 2015; Davich 2017). A groundbreaking work in this literature clearly distinguishes between “one group responding primarily to marketplace factors, and a second group for which family tradition and normative values are conducive to military service” (Faris 1981, pg. 545). In the United States, the latter identity type is particularly valuable as veterans are widely lauded for choosing to bear the costs of national defense, and it is common for citizens to thank veterans for their service. Thus, signaling the selfless citizen type, which views military service as something of a “calling,” may provide significant personal benefits, while other types receive less positive regard (Philipps 2015; Davich 2017).

Moreover, given the fallibility of memory and the young age at which many decide to serve the military, individuals may often be uncertain of their true type(s). This provides them with incentives to convince themselves that they are a more desirable type even if this was not originally the case.⁶

⁵This is a key point that separates veterans from active duty personnel. Veterans have distinct policy interests, but while active duty military must bear the costs of military intervention or cuts in military expenditures, military veterans are not directly affected by the costs of those policies. The policy attitudes of veterans, to the degree that they are distinct from active duty military, are indirectly influenced by the service experience, through information gathered during service, the salience of particular issues, the characteristics of the type of veteran experience, and empathy toward current servicemembers (Horowitz and Stam 2014; Lupton 2017).

⁶Though Bénabou and Tirole (2002) focus on self-deception as a means of enhancing motivation, they also acknowledge the consumption benefit of holding a positive view of the self, as well as the assistance self-deception would provide in displaying a false type to others, which would be most relevant in this case. Relatedly, however, if a veteran’s military experience creates the impression that personal sacrifices were wasted and causes them to see service as a calling was naïve, foolish, or even dangerous, he or she may gain a greater consumption benefit from adopting a more transactional identity, such as that of the shrewd beneficiary of government-provided opportunities. If this perception of wasted sacrifice is correlated with combat experience within poorly-defined missions, this mechanism would explain a degree of dovishness among veterans with combat experience in counterinsurgency or

The social benefits and the positive self-regard inherent in the calling type incentivizes veterans to adopt the identity retroactively. Similar to the case of West Point officers-in-training, veterans may internalize the politically relevant attitudes exhibited by their own perceptions of the calling type. This furthers the parallels between veterans and cadets, as scholars have noted that cadets and officers are more likely to join the military as a calling and to exhibit greater levels of threat perception, authoritarianism, and nationalism Dempsey (2010); Jost, Meshkin and Schub (2017). It is likely that individuals who serve as a calling do so because high nationalism, deference to authority, and perceived degree of threat implicitly justify the use of force to resolve foreign policy concerns, and require that dutiful individuals volunteer to participate in these acts (though this association merits additional direct examination). Nevertheless, it is plausible that military veterans, once their service is complete, have an incentive to exhibit greater threat perception, authoritarianism, and nationalism in order to represent themselves as the valuable veteran type who chose to serve as a calling, regardless of their initial motivations for service.⁷

To the extent that previous research has uncovered an effect for service, it suggests an association with greater trust in government, reduced cynicism, and less tolerance. This is consistent with the views that would be espoused by the highly-respected type that sees service as a calling. As a result of this increased faith in government and lack of tolerance, we expect that military service should be (at least weakly) associated with support for state intervention in the economy, as well as support for conventional social mores. This generates the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Veterans will be more likely than the general public to support fiscally liberal and socially conservative policy positions.*

Related to veterans' reduced propensity to support civil libertarianism, we also expect the authoritarianism linked with viewing service as a calling to instill in veterans a reduced tolerance for rule-breaking, and a preference for law and order. Indeed, previous studies have shown veterans to be more likely than non-veterans to be upset when young people break the law while protesting,

other imprecise interventions. While this is an interesting point, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷In fact, Dempsey (2010, pg. 46) posits that "People who have served for a long time may increasingly come to view their motivations for joining as primarily altruistic."

to approve of the police using force against demonstrators, and—among Vietnam veterans—to approve the use of physical force by policemen (Schreiber 1978). ⁸ While previous findings have been relatively weak, we still expect military service to be associated with more authoritarian positions on law enforcement.

Hypothesis 2. *Veterans will be more likely than the general public to support law-and-order measures.*

Jennings and Markus (1977) hypothesize that veterans—who serve in a position in which they may be called upon to apply military force—should be more likely to support the use of military force in conflicts, in order to reduce any cognitive dissonance that might result from negatively viewing an act for which they were responsible. However, they do not find consistent support for a relationship between military service and increased support for military intervention. Similarly, Gartner (2008) finds that veterans were more supportive of the Iraq War, but that the effect mostly disappears when controlling for relevant demographic factors. While the relationship between military service and support for intervention is weak at best, other research suggests that veterans (and those closely linked to veterans) tend to prioritize national security, a strong defense, and the armed forces, along with general military spending (Johnson 1976; Ivie, Gimbel and Elder 1991). Although personal experience appears to influence the impact of military service on foreign policy positions (Kirkpatrick and Regens 1978), the mechanism of dissonance reduction should still play a strong role with respect to general objectives and broad institutions, such as support for national defense and military spending as a whole. Additionally, if, as argued above, veterans gain respect and positive self-regard from perceptions that they acted on a calling to expose themselves to the costs of national defense, then military intervention highlights these sacrifices, increasing the value of the identity.⁹ The fact that veterans who have adopted the calling identity can expect to

⁸Interestingly, veterans who exhibited higher levels of political alienation were found to be more *anti*-authoritarian than well-integrated veterans on several issues (Johnson 1976).

⁹As an example of this mechanism in action, after the September 11th terrorist attacks, first responders serving far from New York, Northern Virginia, or Pennsylvania were lauded by the public for their willingness to make sacrifices for others to a larger extent (Brown 2013; Sternberg 2017).

benefit from U.S. use of force suggests that they should be more likely to support such actions.¹⁰

Hypothesis 3. *Veterans will be more likely than the general public to support military intervention and prioritize national defense.*

Across specific policy areas, our hypotheses suggest that military veterans will be at least marginally more supportive of state intervention, on both fiscal and social matters, which tends toward a form of authoritarianism aligned with conventional social mores. We also expect veterans to support stricter law enforcement policy and a more robust national defense, even if they are not more likely to back specific interventions. These positions are consistent with a form of “big-government conservatism.” While these issue stances are not completely congruent with the policy positions of the Republican Party during the last 40 years,¹¹ they approximate the platforms of the GOP more closely than those of the Democratic party. Accordingly we articulate one final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Veterans will identify more strongly than the general public with conservatism and the Republican Party.*

Data and Methods

We use data drawn from the 2015 Survey of American Veterans. This is a survey of 1,983 voting-age U.S. citizens, conducted on behalf of the authors by the Ipsos polling firm in the summer of 2015. The survey is intended to be used to study veterans’ political attitudes and psychological characteristics. For this reason, it oversamples those who report having served in the military, such that they account for about 45% of the sample. This is notable because, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately 21.3 million veterans in the United States, accounting for just over 6.7% of the population.¹² Oversampling brings with it two benefits: first, it provides

¹⁰We expect that this effect will be moderated by the relative importance of the veteran identity for overall self concept, as well as the capacity of individuals to empathize with active duty individuals who will bear the cost of intervention. A direct test of this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹¹Although they are not dissimilar from the right-populist style of campaign run by President Trump in 2016.

¹²See <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/veterans/about/veterans-day.html>.

us with sufficient veteran observations to conduct significant analyses on this particular subset of Americans; second, it gives us an opportunity to match respondents across a larger set of observations. Our survey also asks questions that are especially pertinent to those with a military background. The relevant portion of the questionnaire is available in the supplementary appendix. The full questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.

Our analysis comprises two complementary components. The first portion is a simple comparison of responses by veterans and non-veterans. In doing so, we use the same procedure and questions used by Klingler and Chatagnier (2013) with our data. However, SAVe allows us to improve upon their methods in two important ways. First, because they use the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) data—which ask only whether an individual has ever served in the military—and are interested in understanding how service affects the attitudes of those who join the military of their own volition, they are forced to eliminate all draft-eligible veterans (i.e., all male veterans who were born prior to 1954). While this decision is understandable, it throws away informative data. We are also interested in understanding the effects of military service for those who choose to join. Fortunately, our survey allows us to distinguish between draftees, reluctant volunteers, and non-reluctant or “true” volunteers.¹³ Thus, in analyzing the response of non-reluctant veterans, we are able to include a relatively large subset of veterans who served prior to the end of conscription, giving us a more robust sample than the CCES provides.¹⁴ Second, the SAVe includes many of the same policy questions asked in the 2006 CCES survey. However, whereas the latter simply asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with a given policy, our survey inquires as to the intensity of the preference (i.e., respondents answer on a scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”). This provides us with a greater level of insight into respondents’ preferences. We see these two changes as marked improvements over previous research.¹⁵

¹³For the wording of the question, see the appendix.

¹⁴Of the 895 veterans in our sample, 505 were males who were born prior to 1954. While nearly three-quarters of these veterans responded that they were drafted or influenced by the draft, we are able to maintain 128 respondents (around 14% of all veterans in our sample, and 46% of non-reluctant veterans) who would otherwise have been eliminated.

¹⁵The full text of these questions is available in the appendix. For presentation purposes, where applicable, we

The first portion of the analysis, then, is intended to uncover the presence or absence of differences between the two samples. However, veteran status is not randomly assigned: in today's military, individuals choose whether or not to serve. Not only is selection non-random, but many of the factors that predict political attitudes may also drive decisions about service. Thus, it is important to examine the differences between veterans and non-veterans, after conditioning on these factors. Fortunately, the literature on causal inference in political science (e.g., Ho et al. 2007; Sekhon 2009) provides a solution that is precisely applicable to this situation: given a set of pretreatment (i.e., pre-service) variables, we can identify the average effect of a given treatment (here, military service) on a sample. For this reason, part two of the analysis is intended to isolate the effects of service itself. The SAVe includes a number of questions about pretreatment variables that may have influenced decisions about joining the military. We are able to leverage these variables to calculate the effects of service on political preferences. To account for non-randomness, we preprocess the data on the relevant pretreatment variables before re-examining differences between the two groups. Our preprocessing technique matches non-reluctant veterans to individuals with similar pretreatment characteristics who reported never having served in the military. Although we cannot randomly assign veteran status, we can identify covariates that are expected to be associated with each respondent's probability of receiving the veteran "treatment," and examine differences between respondents who received the treatment and similar respondents who did not. This allows us to estimate the effect of our treatment, having controlled for confounding factors.

While there are a number of potential matching algorithms, we note that propensity score matching has recently been criticized by methodologists who argue that such preprocessing can actually *increase* imbalance in data, resulting in biased estimates of survey average treatment effects (SATT) (King and Nielsen 2015). A proposed alternative is coarsened exact matching (CEM) (Iacus, King and Porro 2012), which requires no assumptions about the data-generating process and avoids the problems inherent in equal percent bias reducing techniques, such as propensity recode the responses so that higher values consistently indicate more conservative, interventionist, or pro-military positions.

score matching. After identifying a set of variables associated with the decision to serve, we can then *coarsen* these variables into a reduced number of categories, which facilitates matching. For example, we may break up continuous variables into discrete, but substantively similar, intervals of values. Alternatively, we could combine the values of ordinal variables into broader ordered categories. This allows us to increase the probability that a given respondent has a match on a particular variable, while preserving qualitative differences across categories. We then *exactly* match respondents that did and did not receive the treatment, based on their coarsened responses to questions related to the determinants of service.

We preprocess the data using the `cem` package in R (Iacus, King and Porro 2009). We match on thirteen different pretreatment factors, which previous studies suggest should influence the decision to serve in the military: *parental military service, high school GPA, urban or rural background, U.S. citizenship status, parental education, race/ethnicity, family military ties, social ties to military, gender, age, region, socioeconomic status, and family structure*. We coarsen each of these variables (with the exception of gender), in order to match exactly on pretreatment covariates.¹⁶ After eliminating non-responses, we are left with a total of 1,051 observations (364 veterans and 687 nonveterans), and are able to obtain exact matches on 156 of them (72 veterans and 84 non-veterans).

Preprocessing the data allows us to purge the effects of pretreatment variables, and to obtain the average effect of military service on a number of political attitudes. Bringing this together with the simple analysis on the raw data allows us to make inferences about *both* socialization and selection effects. The presence of a significant treatment effect is sufficient evidence that military service itself alters attitudes in some way, above and beyond any possible selection effects. Conversely, if we uncover a difference between the two groups, but are unable to find evidence for a treatment effect, we can infer that selection may play a role in the divergence of attitudes. Furthermore, we can assess the relative directions and magnitudes of the two differences to make inferences about cross-cutting and complementary effects, where relevant. Thus, our analysis

¹⁶More information on the predictors of military service and the coarsening scheme used for each are available in the appendix.

provides a simple, direct, and powerful means of understanding the political attitudes of veterans.

Analysis

We begin by examining differences between civilians and non-reluctant veterans on general self-placement measures, as well as several specific policy dimensions. We look first at ideology and party identification, and then examine 29 questions along five different policy dimensions—social, economic, use of force, foreign policy, and law and order—to uncover precisely where the two groups diverge.¹⁷

Figure 1 presents the differences in average self-placement on five-point ideological and seven-point party identification scales for veterans and civilians. The filled shapes indicate the differences in means, while the thicker and thinner bars extending outward depict 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. For each item, the upper point is the difference of means for the raw data (i.e., the simple difference between the two), while the lower point is the difference after preprocessing (i.e., the average treatment effect for military service). Consistent with findings from previous work, the results in Figure 1 suggest that veterans and non-veterans do, in fact, perceive themselves differently, on average. In particular, veterans identify as both more conservative and more strongly Republican than do non-veterans. In the case of ideology, this is driven, at least in part, by the experience of military service. We find a significant average treatment effect, which suggests that military veterans are more conservative than they were when they entered the service. With respect to party identification, while we see that veterans tend to be more strongly Republican than non-veterans, we are unable to identify a significant effect from service itself. This could mean that Republicans are simply more likely than Democrats to join the military. Alternatively, given the relative magnitude of the difference and the size of the confidence interval on party ID, our result may simply be due to imprecision. That is, although we cannot be certain that the difference in partisan identification is due to the experience of service, it remains a

¹⁷Exact wording for each of the 31 questions can be found in the appendix.

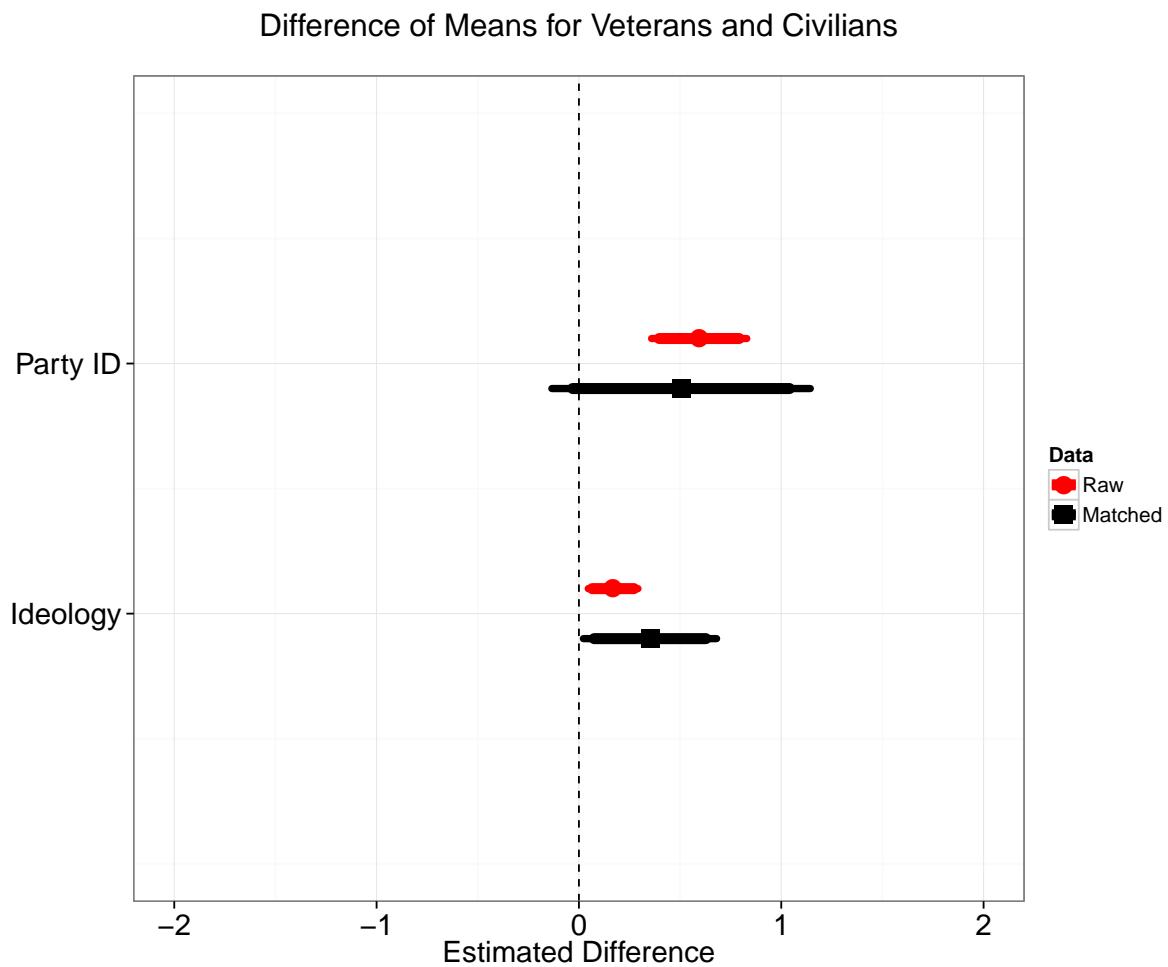


Figure 1: Estimated effect of military service on ideology and party ID

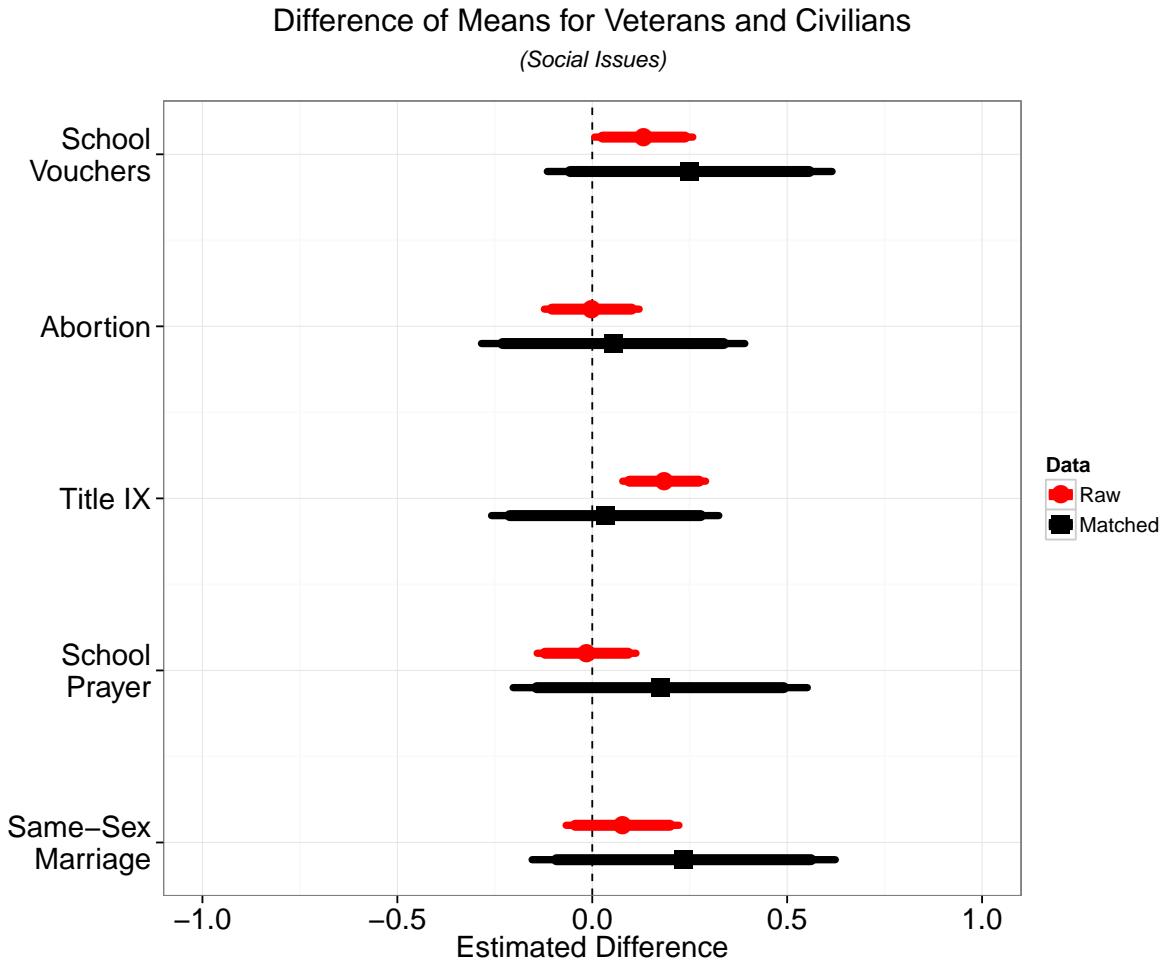


Figure 2: Estimated effect of military service on social conservatism

possibility.

Figure 2 depicts the results for our first set of policy questions. In general, veterans appear to be relatively similar to non-veterans on social issues. There are only two such issues on which the groups diverge: support for school vouchers and support for equal funding of men's and women's athletic programs. On the three more religiously-oriented questions—abortion, school prayer, and same-sex marriage—we find no significant difference between the two groups. Looking at the treatment effects, we see a consistent rightward effect, which is never statistically distinguishable from zero. Given the small estimated effect on the Title IX question, it seems

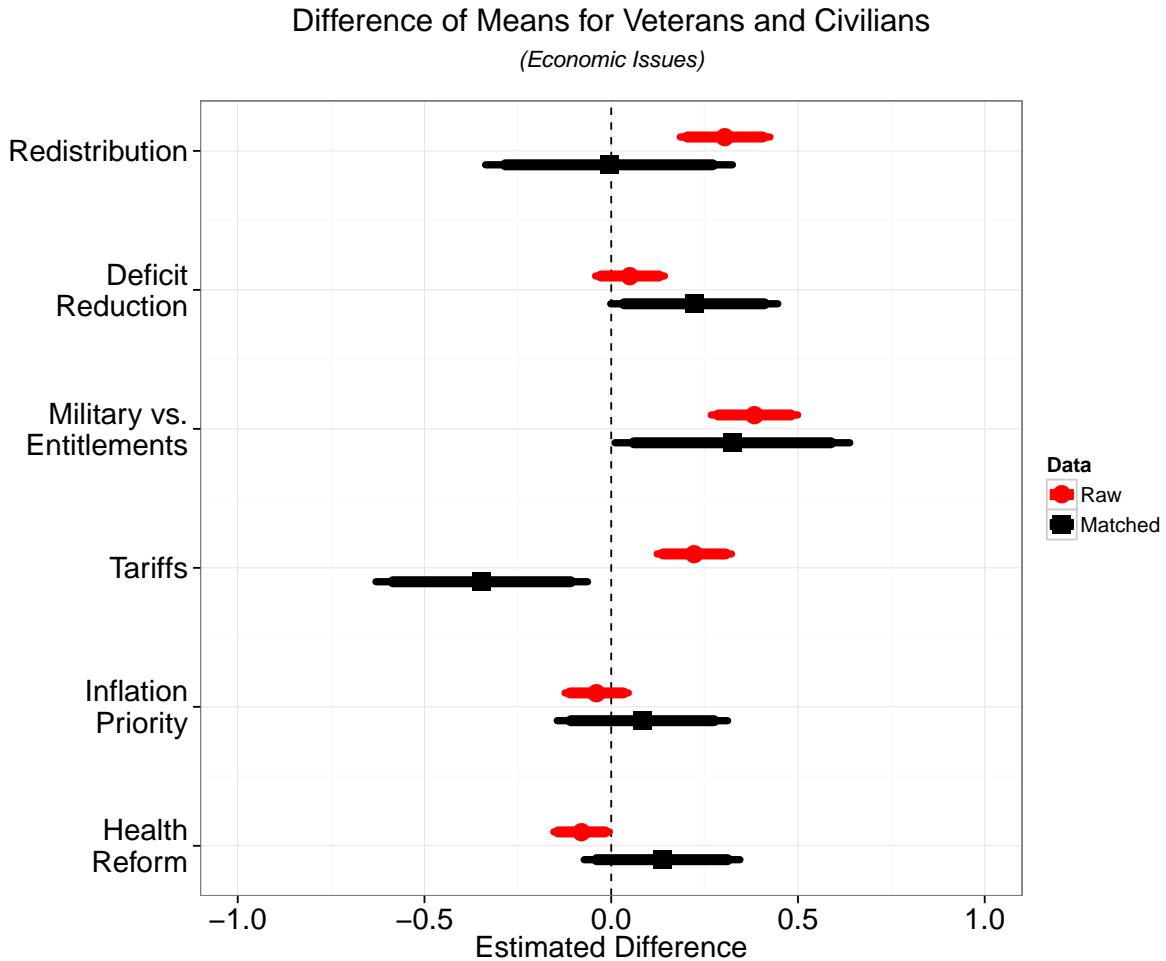


Figure 3: Estimated effect of military service on economic conservatism

likely that opinions on equal funding of men's and women's programs are formed prior to service, with no discernible effect from service itself. For two questions—school vouchers and same-sex marriage—the magnitude of the effect is relatively large, suggesting that service could have an effect on these issues, though the confidence intervals are too wide to be certain.

We examine economic issues in Figure 3. Here, we find greater distinction between veterans and non-veterans, as well as interesting effects for selection and socialization. Perhaps least surprisingly, we find that veterans are significantly more likely to favor cuts to entitlements over cuts to military spending. Moreover, we find a significant treatment effect, suggesting that at least

some of the difference in opinion is caused by the experience of military service. On two issues—health care reform and the importance of fighting inflation—we find that veterans express slightly more liberal preferences than civilians do (though the difference for the latter is not statistically significant). In both of these cases, the estimated treatment effect of military service actually pulls in the conservative direction, though it is not significant for either issue. On health reform in particular, this suggests that individuals who support state intervention in healthcare are more likely to join the military.

On the remaining three issues, veterans tend to express more conservative positions. First, we see that veterans are far less likely to support redistributionist policies. Moreover, our estimated treatment effect, though imprecise, is effectively zero, providing strong evidence for a selection effect: more fiscally conservative (i.e., anti-redistributionist) individuals are more likely to opt for service. When confronted with the choice of raising taxes or cutting spending, veterans express a greater, but non-significant, preference for spending cuts. Interestingly, however, we find a significant ($p \approx 0.053$) treatment effect in the same direction, suggesting that any difference between the two groups is due to the experience of service. Finally, our most interesting finding concerns economic protectionism. We find that, relative to civilians, veterans express significantly greater levels of opposition to tariffs; however, military service itself is associated with a strong and statistically significant *pro-tariff* shift in attitudes. This implies that individuals who choose to serve strongly support free trade, but that this attitude is dampened to some extent by military service. This may be indicative of a form of economic nationalism rising from the experience of service, and associated with the inculcation of patriotism in recruits. This provides modest support for our first hypothesis with respect to economic intervention and some support for our hypothesis that military service should increase support for a strong military in the form of increased support for spending on the armed forces.

Figure 4 presents the results from six different scenarios concerning the use of military force. In general, the treatment effects that we identify for these responses are small and insignificant. We find significant differences between the two groups in only three instances: destruction of

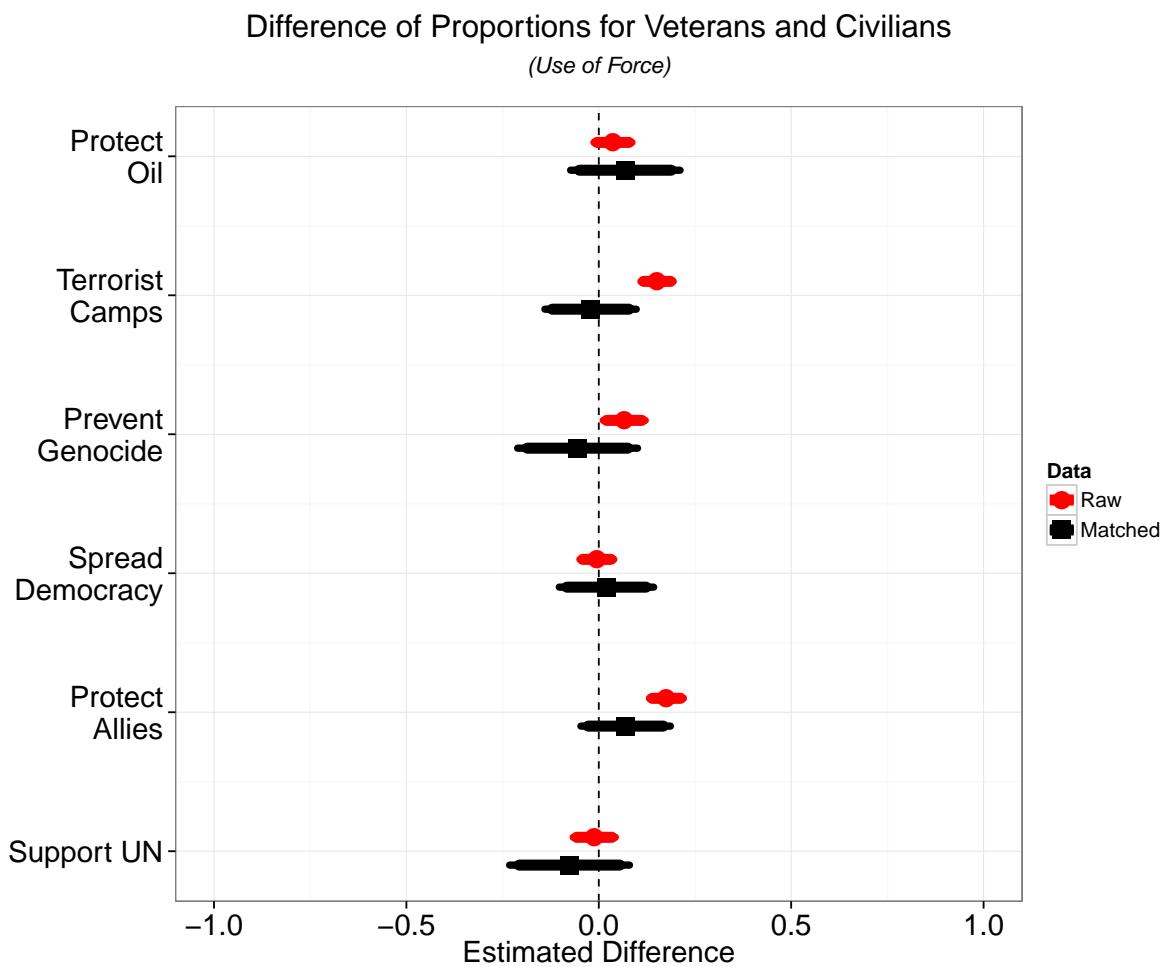


Figure 4: Estimated effect of military service on willingness to use force

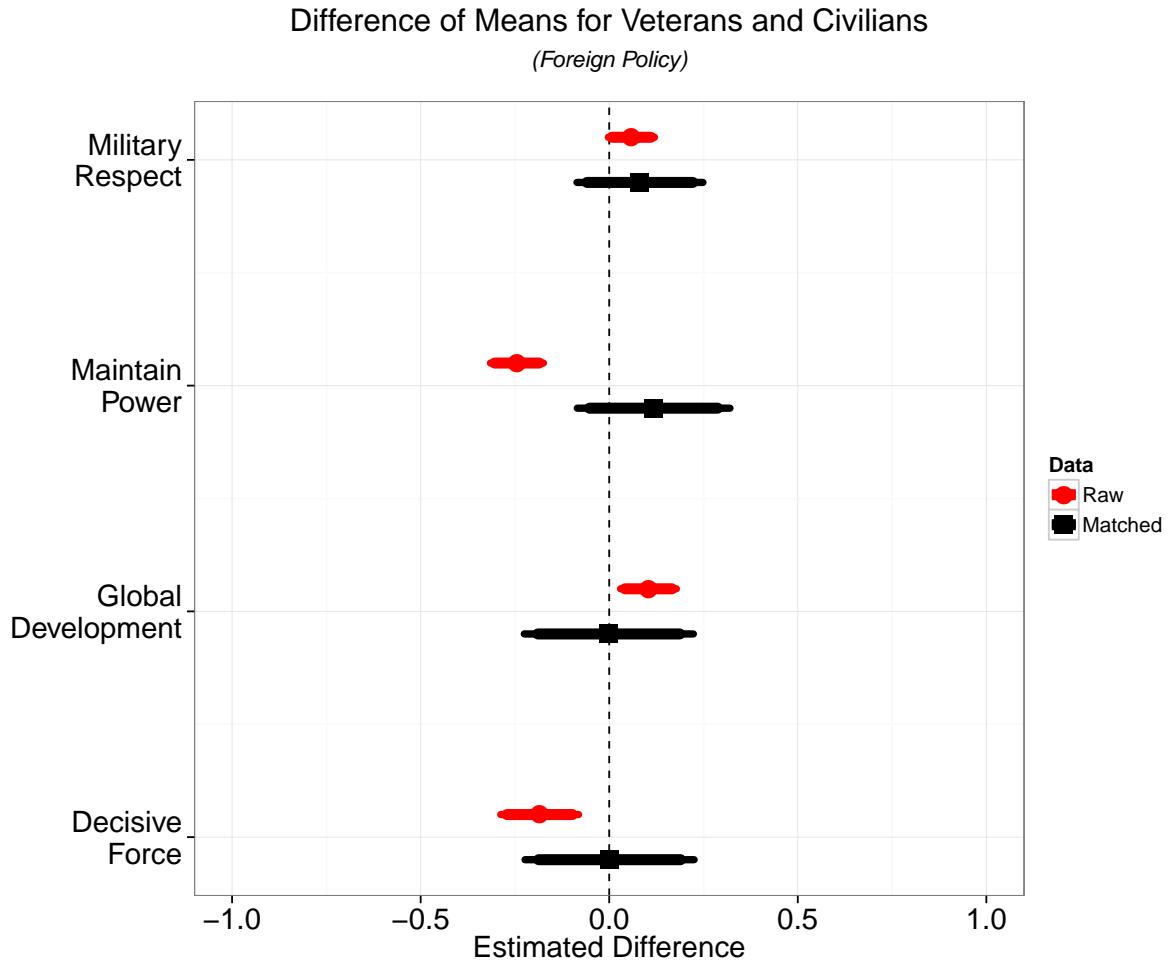


Figure 5: Estimated effect of military service on foreign policy interventionism

terrorist camps, prevention of genocide, and protection of allies. In each of these situations, veterans are more likely than non-veterans to endorse the use of force. The lack of a significant treatment effect across these three cases suggests that individuals likely join the military with these attitudes already established. Those who believe in the importance of fighting terrorism, preventing genocide, or protecting allies are simply more likely to serve. Given the missions of the armed forces in recent decades, this is not especially surprising: those who most approve of the mission are most ready to sign on to promoting its goals.

In addition to the use of military force, we ask about four general foreign policy questions,

shown in Figure 5. Here, we find that the two groups differ on all four questions.¹⁸ However, the effect of service is non-significant in each case, and its estimate is essentially zero for the promotion of global development and for the use of overwhelming force, rather than gradual escalation. Combined with the results from Figure 4, our findings suggest that foreign policy attitudes seem to be established prior to military service, and to remain unchanged afterward. Interestingly, however, we see a mix of interventionist and non-interventionist opinions here. The lack of a constrained foreign policy ideology among veterans, combined with the relative unimportance of service itself is one of the most surprising findings in our study. These results do not provide support for our hypothesis that military service should increase support for military intervention or the importance of a strong military, though they are largely consistent with null findings from the Vietnam era.

Last, we examine several law and order issues, the results of which are provided in Figure 6. Here, we find significant differences between veterans and non-veterans on most questions, with veterans expressing more conservative opinions in general. The two exceptions are on “three strikes” laws (where the difference is insignificant) and an unwillingness to convict the innocent in order to punish the guilty.¹⁹ While there is some variation in raw differences between the two groups, it is notable that the treatment effects—though rarely significant—all point toward greater levels of conservatism. The effect of service is statistically different from zero in three cases. When asked whether they believed societal problems were caused by moral decline, veterans were more likely to answer in the affirmative, and we find that service increases that propensity to a significant extent ($p \approx 0.078$). On the subject of the use of corporal punishment in schools, veterans tend to be more supportive than civilians, and the estimated effect of service is nearly identical to this difference, suggesting that the change in attitudes is likely driven entirely by military service.

Finally, in considering Blackstone’s Formulation, we find an especially interesting effect. Al-

¹⁸For the question of whether the military receives sufficient respect, $p \approx 0.06$

¹⁹We use the term “Blackstone’s Formulation” in the figure above, in reference to William Blackstone’s famous saying that “It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer.”

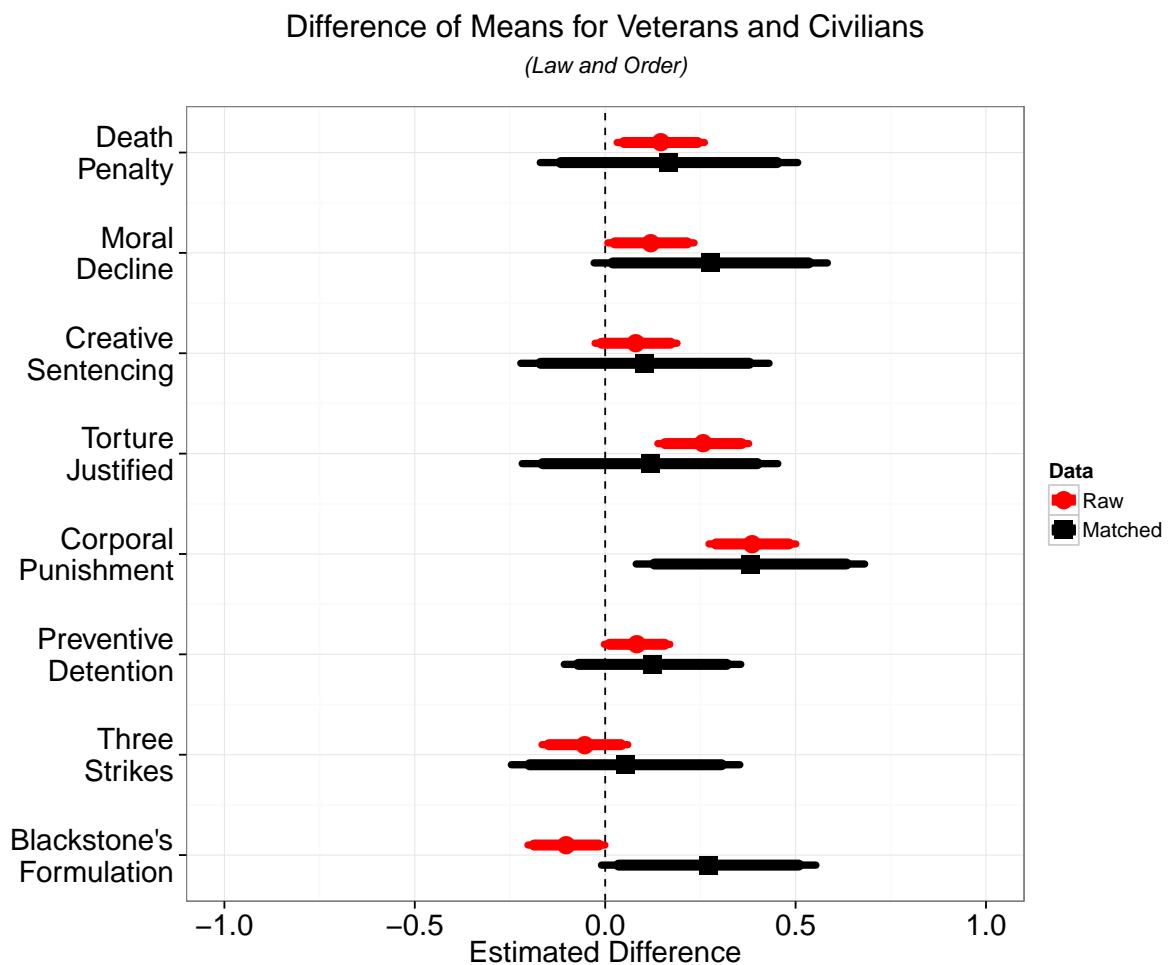


Figure 6: Estimated effect of military service on preferences for law and order

though veterans are less willing to see innocent people harmed in order to punish the guilty, the effect of military service appears to mitigate this attitude to a significant extent ($p \approx 0.06$). In other words, military service decreases respondent support for defendants' rights, but this effect is not sufficient to overcome the strong bias *in favor* of the defendant for those who choose to join the military. The direction of the treatment effect may be due to an increased level of trust in government, leading veterans to endorse greater prosecutorial powers. Overall, we find support for our hypothesis that military service should result in more support for law-and-order positions on law enforcement, which is consistent with prior work (in particular, Schreiber 1978).

Reflecting on our analysis as a whole, we find some evidence that military service by true volunteers increases conservatism in self-reported ideology, though we find no clear treatment effect for party identification. Furthermore, the small group of issues for which we can identify significant treatment effects are mostly linked to law and order issues, funding of the military, and tariffs. When considering the pattern of these effects as a whole, we note that the experience of service in the U.S. military seems to push individuals to adopt political attitudes that are roughly authoritarian and nationalistic in nature. We also find evidence that suggests that military service *attracts* individuals who are relatively more conservative and more Republican. On an issue-by-issue basis, volunteers tend to be more fiscally conservative and hawkish than those who opt out of service, and they seem to be at least slightly more willing to endorse law-and-order policies.

Discussion

This paper builds on prior work and provides additional evidence that veterans of the United States military hold political opinions that are distinct from Americans who have not completed a term of military service. Using new data and techniques that allow us to separate the effect of service from the consequences of self-selection, we are able to determine that volunteer service in the military leads individuals to identify as more conservative later in life, though not necessarily as Republicans. When we examine specific issue areas and positions, there are few significant

treatment effects, but those we do see, such as support for higher tariffs, corporal punishment, and a willingness to risk punishing the innocent to avoid letting the guilty go free, suggest that volunteer service pushes individuals toward nationalistic, authoritarian attitudes in several domains which reflect a high degree of perceived threat.²⁰ Our ability to differentiate between pre- and post-treatment effects with respect to military service is a significant step forward in understanding veterans' political attitudes, and it suggests a number of fruitful paths for future research.

First, the theory advanced in this study is grounded on the empirical regularity discovered in previous studies that several groups of active duty servicemembers who are more likely to hold the beneficial type of viewing service as a calling also tend to be more authoritarian, nationalistic, and perceptive of threats in the aggregate. The perception that authoritarianism, nationalism, and high threat perception are linked with viewing service as a calling is sufficient to induce attitude change as outlined in our theory. However, future work should push further to examine if this association holds broadly at the individual level, and assess the degree to which these characteristics are linked in the minds of veterans. The Survey of American Veterans includes data on the value respondents place on duty, courage, and personal honor, and we intend to search for treatment effects of military service on these values, and for relationships between valuing these virtues and professing nationalistic and authoritarian policy attitudes. The Survey of American Veterans also collected data on individuals' reasons for joining, which will allow examination of the relationship between viewing service as a calling and policy attitudes more directly. It would also be helpful to collect additional data on the values placed on patriotism and American ethnicity, and to examine the effect of service on the Big Five personality traits, focusing on conscientiousness and agreeableness. Finally, the results here have suggested that subsequent data collection should include other traits, such as authoritarianism and moral foundations.

²⁰These findings may help to explain what the *Washington Examiner* implied was a surprising level of support for President Trump during the GOP primary (see <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/why-troops-and-vets-are-voting-for-trump/article/2584171>), in addition to his showing in the general election, where he won the veteran vote nearly two-to-one. Given the effects that we uncover here, President Trump's platform—which has been variously characterized as populist, nationalistic, and authoritarian—likely appealed to those who have been involved in military service, even if he personally did not.

Our questionnaire and a portion of our research design drew upon previous work that used Robert Heinlein's (1959) novel, *Starship Troopers*, to develop a theory about the relationship between ideology and service. In particular, they argue that those who serve will, on average, place a higher priority on virtue and civic duty than will those who opt not to serve. They expected this to lead veterans to be "hawkish libertarian[s]" (Klingler and Chatagnier 2013, 677). While some of our findings coincide with theirs, their idea of the veteran as a small-government war hawk seems to be misplaced. There is only slight evidence of hawkishness among veterans: we uncover no effect of service on any of our foreign policy questions, and although veterans are more hawkish in some areas, it is not always the case. Additionally, we find no indication that veterans are ideologically libertarian. On the contrary, they tend to favor conservative social policy, a mix of economic policies, and authoritarian law and order policies. Thus, our results suggest that a United States in which only veterans had the right to vote—the thought experiment put forth in that essay—would look relatively little like Heinlein's world.

Methodologically, given the size of the standard errors in our analyses, future studies might build upon this work by surveying broader samples or using imputation methods to expand the sample sizes available for matching, in order to obtain additional precision. These additional matched observations would be useful for examining differential treatment effects of service for subsamples of veterans as well. We are particularly interested in analyzing differences in treatment effects by race and ethnicity, as well as reason for joining, age, and military rank. These techniques could also be used to compare volunteers to draftees or reluctant volunteers. All of these steps will improve our understanding of the effects of military service.

Ultimately, scholars should try to explain when and why veterans develop their peculiar political attitudes. Identifying links between service, persistent values and traits, and political attitudes through CEM is useful, but panel data would be even more enlightening in addressing our research questions. A panel of young adults that gathers information on persistent values, traits, and political attitudes before, during, and after military service would allow us to measure treatment effects directly, and to examine how selection enhances the political distinctiveness of this group.

A well-designed panel would also identify the points in the experiences of a veteran at which notable changes occur.

Veterans make up a significant and diverse proportion of the population. They have shared and separating life experiences, and they have demonstrably distinctive attitudes on policy. In this way, they are much like many other groups in American society that have been studied more thoroughly. This analysis, along with future research along the lines discussed above can help to develop better explanations for why veterans are distinctive among Americans. It could also aid in the formulation of policy recommendations to close the military-civilian gap. Ultimately, it is our hope that these findings and any subsequent work helps to draw additional attention to this understudied group of Americans.

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