**How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies?**


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Abstract: How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies? Previous scholarship has relied on observational data, leading to challenges such as selection bias, reverse causation, and confounding. In this paper we take a fresh approach, presenting a series of experiments involving both voters and policymakers. We distinguish two pathways through which the public could shape policy outcomes: selection and responsiveness. First, the public could exert influence by selecting parties or candidates whose foreign policy positions best match their own. Second, after politicians take office, leaders may respond to public opinion out of concern that rebuffing the public could be politically costly. To test the selection mechanism, we embedded experiments in surveys of citizens in two different political contexts: Israel and the United States. In both countries, foreign policy exerted a powerful and consistent effect on voting preferences. To test the responsiveness mechanism, we administered experiments to 87 current and former members of the Israeli parliament. We provide the first experimental evidence about how leaders at the highest level incorporate public opinion into decisions about foreign policy. Our study advances a longstanding debate by providing strong evidence that public opinion affects foreign policy in democracies, both by shaping who is elected and by influencing leaders once they take office.

## I. **Introduction**

How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies? This question has been a subject of significant controversy. Some argue that public opinion has no real impact on foreign policy. They claim that voters know little about international affairs and tend to focus on domestic concerns, giving leaders leeway to pursue foreign policies regardless of what ordinary citizens think.[1] Others contend that public opinion shapes and constrains foreign policy. They maintain that the foreign policy attitudes of citizens affect who wins elections and constrain what leaders do after taking office.[2]

The debate about the impact of public opinion is important for both practical and normative reasons. At a practical level, insight about public opinion is useful for explaining and predicting the foreign policies of democracies. As many scholars have documented, democracies behave differently from autocracies in a range of policy areas, including military disputes, trade, alliances, and other forms of international cooperation or conflict.[3] Some theorize that these differences arise because public opinion carries more weight in democracies. If public attitudes toward foreign affairs proved inconsequential even in democracies, however, scholars would need to rethink prominent explanations for the democratic peace, trade protectionism, and other regularities in world affairs.

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

Although previous scholars have made valuable progress in studying the role of public opinion, they have also faced roadblocks that reflect the limitations of available data. With very few randomized experiments about the link between public opinion and foreign policy, scholars have needed to rely on observational data. They have used historical records to measure the correlation between public opinion and foreign policy decisions. They have also analyzed surveys in which citizens ranked the importance of foreign policy relative to other factors that might influence their vote; and used post-election surveys to estimate how much foreign policy might have shaped electoral decisions.

These studies, though insightful, suffer from limitations inherent to observational research. One vexing problem is selection bias. When citizens agree about the direction that foreign policy should move, politicians face incentives to converge on that dimension, effectively neutralizing foreign policy as a campaign issue and leaving citizens to vote on other considerations. Thus, in observational datasets, foreign policy may appear electorally

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[1] E.g. Almond 1960, Miller and Stokes 1963; Wildavsky 1966, Cohen 1973, Erikson et al.1980, Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003.

[2] See for example Hurwitz and Peffley 1989a; Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989, Bartels 1991, Holsti 1995, Burstein 2003, Aldrich et al. 2006, Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2006, and Holsti 2004.

[3] Russett and Oneal 2001, Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003, Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000, McGillivray and Smith 200, Leeds 1999, Leeds 2003.

unimportant at precisely the moments when it could have made the biggest difference. More generally, the fact that political actors select their platforms strategically makes it difficult to know the counterfactual: how much support would the candidates have garnered if they had not crafted their platforms with an eye toward winning the election?

A second problem is the possibility of reverse causation. If public opinion is correlated with foreign policy, is this because public opinion is driving foreign policy, or vice-versa? With observational data, it can be difficult to establish the direction of causality, or to estimate the weight of each causal arrow when the relationship is truly bi-directional.

Finally, observational researchers face the problem of confounders: other factors could mask the true relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. Failing to control for confounders would result in bias, but identifying and measuring confounders can be difficult, and attempting to adjust for them can give rise to other problems, including multicollinearity. For all these reasons, it would be instructive to complement observational studies with randomized experiments.

In this paper we take a fresh approach, by presenting a series of experiments involving both voters and policymakers. The experiments reveal how and why public opinion affects foreign policy. We begin by distinguishing two pathways through which the public could shape policy outcomes. First, the public could exert influence by *selecting* parties or candidates whose foreign policy positions are most consonant with their own. Second, after politicians take office, leaders may *respond* to the prevailing winds of public opinion, out of concern that rebuffing the public could be politically costly.

To test the selection mechanism, we embedded experiments in surveys that we fielded to citizens in two different political contexts: Israel and the United States. Participants evaluated hypothetical parties (in Israel) or presidential candidates (in the United States), which varied randomly in their positions on foreign, economic, and religious policy, as well as on several non-policy attributes. In both countries, foreign policy exerted a powerful and consistent effect on voting preferences. Foreign policy proved at least as important as economic and religious policy, and far more consequential than non-policy attributes.

Next, we tested the responsiveness mechanism by administering experiments to 87 current and former members of the Israeli parliament. Our experiments involving elites address a major gap in the literature. Few previous studies have investigated how leaders think about the connection between public opinion and foreign policy, and to our knowledge no studies have used experimental methods to estimate the relationship. We provide the first experimental evidence about how leaders at the highest level incorporate public opinion into decisions about foreign policy.

The parliamentarians in our study read about a scenario in which the Israeli government was considering the use of military force. We randomized information about the level of public support for a potential military strike, and estimated how this information affected the preferences of the leaders in our sample. Our experiment revealed that, all else equal, policymakers were more likely to support a military strike when the public was in favor. For additional insight we asked about the likely consequences of making foreign policy decisions that conflicted with public preferences. The vast majority of parliamentarians deemed it likely that the government would pay significant political costs if it failed to heed public opinion.

Our studies build upon previous research in several ways. By using randomized experiments to address problems of selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders, we put causal inferences on firmer footing. By recruiting not only ordinary citizens but also

policymakers at the highest level, we are able to test key mechanisms and document how they operate. And by combining data from Israel and the United States, we confirm that our conclusions are likely to hold in diverse political settings. Overall, our study advances a longstanding debate by providing strong evidence that public opinion affects foreign policy in democracies, both by shaping who is elected and by influencing leaders once they take office.

## II. How Public Opinion Affects Foreign Policy: Two Pathways

In nearly all democratic countries, citizens delegate power to political representatives. Rather than making policies themselves through public assemblies and national referendums, citizens elect leaders to make policies on their behalf. Although representative democracy is often praised for being efficient, it creates the potential for principal-agent problems. Elected officials may formulate and implement policies that contradict the will of the people.

How can citizens in representative democracies influence the foreign policy choices of their elected leaders? We distinguish two plausible pathways. First, citizens can *select* leaders on the basis of foreign policy. By empowering like-minded leaders (ones with preferences similar to their own), citizens can minimize the risk that representatives would want to act against the public's wishes. Because selection takes place before leaders take office, selection is an *ex-ante* solution to the principal-agent problem.

A second opportunity for influence occurs between elections, when representatives may feel pressure to *respond* to public opinion. They could, for example, fear the consequences of pursuing unpopular policies. Leaders who snub voters could lose support in the polls, hurt their chances of reelection, and squander political capital that would have been helpful for advancing other domestic and international agendas. Beyond these instrumental concerns, leaders might feel a fiduciary duty to respond to constituents. Responsiveness occurs after leaders take office, and can therefore be classified as an *ex-post* solution to the principal-agent problem.

In this section we describe both pathways and clarify when they are likely to operate. In the process, we challenge the assumption that selection and responsiveness require highly informed and active voters.

### *Public Opinion and the Selection of Leaders*

Citizens of representative democracies can shape foreign policy by expressing their will on election day. More specifically, they can use the ballot box to select politicians whose foreign policy preferences are similar to their own. By filling the government with sympathizers, voters can reduce the risk that the government would act against their interests.

It is important to recognize how selection differs from other solutions to the principal-agent problem. Selection reduces the likelihood of shirking, not by incentivizing politicians with carrots and sticks, but by empowering politicians whose own preferences match what the voters

want. Thus, selection can be effective even when citizens cannot punish politicians for stepping out of line.[4]

What conditions are necessary for the selection mechanism to operate? First, voters must have preferences about foreign policy. This condition does not mean that the public must have positions on every foreign policy issue facing the country. Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) show that, despite being only partially informed about the details of foreign affairs, voters hold core foreign policy postures: broad, abstract beliefs that inform more specific foreign policy attitudes and preferences. These postures include beliefs about the proper role of military force (militarism) and the desired degree of engagement in world affairs (interventionism). Holsti (2004) concurs that voters can use "superordinate beliefs to guide their thinking on a broad spectrum of international issues" (55). Thus, even if voters can't name the Secretary General of the United Nations, list the members of ASEAN, or locate Ukraine on a map, they can draw on their core foreign policy beliefs to select like-minded leaders.

Second, selection requires candidates to take foreign policy positions. Again, however, parties and candidates need not have detailed positions on every possible foreign policy issue. They need merely articulate the general principles or postures that will guide their foreign policy decision-making, or provide a record of past decision-making that sheds light on those principles.

Third, the selection mechanism requires that, on average, the public is aware of candidates' foreign policy positions. Voters can learn about the match between their own foreign policy preferences and those of parties or candidates in various ways. They could, for example, read party platforms, listen to campaign statements, or infer candidates' stances from past behavior. The media and opposition parties can help, by informing citizens about the foreign policy positions of incumbents and challengers.[5] Finally, voters could take an indirect approach, choosing candidates based on cues from trusted elites. Importantly, it is not necessary for every *individual* voter to correctly identify candidates' positions. Even if most citizens cannot precisely locate a candidate's foreign policy position, the "wisdom of the crowds" could allow the public to get it right in aggregate. As long as the electorate knows the positions of the candidates on average, errors in individual perceptions will offset each other, and the public can select on the basis of foreign policy.[6]

Finally, selection requires that voters place weight on foreign policy when choosing among candidates. This assumption has generated considerable controversy, with some scholars claiming that voters assign little importance to foreign policy, and others countering that voters view foreign policy as a major criterion in at least some elections. The experiments that we present later in this paper shed new light on this question. By randomizing where candidates stand on foreign policy, we avoid several difficult problems that have hampered observational studies, including selection bias, bidirectionality, and confounders. The experiments thereby permit clean estimates about the effect of foreign policy on voter choice.

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[4] For overviews of the role of selection in government more generally, see for example Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995. Fearon (1999) provides an excellent theoretical overview of the role of selection in affecting public policy.

[5] Aldrich et al. 2006; Berinsky 2009; Baum and Potter 2015.

[6] For a helpful review of the literature on voter knowledgeability about foreign policy, see Holsti (2004).

*Public Opinion and Leader Responsiveness*

A second way that public opinion could matter is that leaders could be responsive to public opinion once they are in office. Many argue that leaders respond to public preferences in anticipation of the political repercussions. Much of this research focuses on the ballot box, showing that voters are more likely to remove leaders who carry out unpopular policies such as backing down from public threats or fighting expensive or unsuccessful wars, and reward leaders who enact popular policies.[7] According to this logic, democratic leaders tailor their policies to take into account the expected electoral consequences of foreign policy decisions.

However, losing public support could also affect leaders when an election is not looming. Leaders could court public opinion because popular leaders find it easier to implement their preferred foreign policies, for example by surmounting institutional hurdles to war[8] and raising the funds necessary for foreign policy initiatives.[9] Popular leaders also find it easier to achieve other domestic and international policy goals.[10] Regardless of whether leaders are concerned about re-election, advancing a broader policy agenda, or both, they should be more responsive to public opinion to the extent that they expect consequences for their foreign policy decisions.

Importantly, this mechanism depends on the beliefs of leaders, not the actual behavior of the public. Leaders should be more responsive if they *expect* that they will be punished or rewarded for their foreign policy decisions, and care about those consequences, regardless of what the public actually does. Under what conditions might leaders expect to be punished or rewarded? The conditions are more permissive than scholars commonly assume. It is not necessary for leaders to believe that all citizens care about foreign policy, that all citizens will monitor developments in foreign policy, that all citizens will vote based on foreign policy, or that all citizens are immune to political rhetoric.[11] Policymakers just need to believe that some voters have foreign policy preferences; that some citizens are aware of their foreign policy decisions (either because they follow the foreign policy news, or because voters will pay attention to parties or interest groups who monitor foreign policy); and that some voters will use that information in the ballot box.

We conclude with a clarification about the relationship between selection and responsiveness. The selection mechanism not only gives voters an opportunity to empower leaders who share their views, but also allow them to incentivize leaders to adapt to changes in public sentiment. If, for example, public opinion shifts between elections but foreign policy does not move in tandem, voters can use the next election to remove unresponsive leaders. If, on the other hand, incumbents adapt to changes in public opinion, voters can reward that responsiveness by reelecting those leaders. Thus, the selection and responsiveness mechanisms can reinforce each other to tighten the correspondence between public opinion and foreign policy.

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[7] e.g. Fearon 1994; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, 2003; Reiter and Stam 2002; Weeks 2014; Croco 2015; Croco and Weeks forthcoming. See also Stairs 1999, Everts and Isernia 2001 (ed.), Johns 2006, Howell and Pevehouse 2007, and Alberro and Schiavon 2010.

[8] Morgan and Campbell 1991; Lindsay 1994; Hildebrandt et al. 2013.

[9] Hartley and Russett 1992; Narizny 2003; Flores-Macias and Kreps 2013.

[10] Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Edwards 1997; Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Gelpi and Grieco 2015.

To summarize, there are two pathways by which public opinion could influence foreign policy. First, voters could select leaders on the basis of the match between their own foreign policy preferences and those of candidates. Second, leaders could be responsive to public opinion once in office. Below, we discuss the challenges to studying these pathways with observational data, and then describe a series of experiments that we designed to advance the existing body of knowledge about selection and responsiveness.

## III. Challenges to Studying Selection and Responsiveness

Past scholarship has used observational data to explore the connection between public opinion and foreign policy. Scholars have estimated the correlations between foreign policy and vote choice, between public opinion and policy outputs, and between policy outputs and the fate of leaders. Although these studies have produced important insights, they have also suffered from three challenges that are common to observational research: selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders. Research has also been constrained by the paucity of data from the perspective of leaders who ultimately make foreign policy. We review these challenges and explain how they have limited the ability of researchers to estimate the causal effect of public opinion on foreign policy.

### *Selection Bias*

The first concern is selection bias. Most existing research about the effect of foreign policy on elections has used observational data from real-world elections. Scholars have used standard surveys to estimate the relationship between the foreign policy positions of respondents and their support for actual candidates (e.g. Page and Brody 1972; Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989; Miller and Shanks 1996; Anand and Krosnick 2003; Hillygus and Shields 2004; Gadarian 2010).[12] This analytical approach is vulnerable to selection bias. Candidates and parties have incentives to choose platforms that will garner electoral support (e.g. Downs 1957). As a consequence, the platforms that voters observe in real elections typically do not represent the full range of positions candidates could take if they were not acting strategically to maximize their votes.

To the extent that strategic selection is at play, it will cause researchers to underestimate the effects of foreign policy preferences on voting. For example, when faced with a hawkish public, traditionally dovish candidates would have incentives to drop out of the race or to try to rebrand themselves as hawks. We might then observe a field of hawkish candidates. In such a situation, citizens would have trouble distinguishing candidates on the basis of foreign policy, and would be forced to vote on other considerations. Ironically, the correlation between foreign policy preferences and voting decisions would appear weak, even though the candidates converged on hawkish positions in response to public opinion about foreign policy.[13]

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[12] See also various studies devoted specifically to the impact of the Iraq War on the 2004 election, e.g. Klinkner 2006; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007.

[13] Page and Brody (1972) acknowledge this issue in their study of the 1968 election, in which Nixon and Humphrey ran on very similar platforms. They find that when comparing voters'

Unfortunately, this problem cannot be circumvented by focusing on elections in which the parties had dissimilar foreign policy platforms. First, those could be the very elections in which foreign policy mattered least, giving parties the freedom to advocate diverse foreign policies. Second, the platforms might have diverged to an even greater extent if parties had not felt pressure to field candidates whose positions reflected the prevailing public mood.

Of course, selection bias also affects research on other policy dimensions, including economic and social issues. With candidates acting strategically on many dimensions simultaneously, it is difficult to isolate the causal importance of each, and to assess their relative importance.[14] By designing an experiment that randomizes candidates' positions on a wide range of issues, we can not only estimate the effects of foreign policy on voting, but also compare its importance to other electoral considerations.

Selection bias also plagues studies that attempt to assess whether foreign policy decisions have political consequences. For example, scholars disagree about the extent to which leaders of democracies are punished or rewarded for their country's performance in a war (e.g. Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Debs and Goemans 2010; Croco and Weeks forthcoming).[15] These studies are affected by selection bias: leaders who anticipate punishment are likely to avoid the very situations in which punishment would be observed (Schultz 2001). When we see a leader making an unpopular decision, it could be because he or she has reason to believe that she can escape negative consequences, or because the international or domestic circumstances were unusual in some way. This problem is difficult to skirt with observational data. Thus, scholars have increasingly turned to experiments to study the consequences of foreign policy decisions on support for leaders (e.g. Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Davies and Johns 2013; Chaudoin 2014; Kertzer and Brutger 2016), an approach we adopt below.

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evaluations of two candidates with more divergent preferences – Eugene McCarthy and George Wallace – voters' hawkishness on Vietnam was a much better predictor of vote choice than for the choice between Nixon versus Humphrey.

[14] To our knowledge, scholars have not carried out cross-national studies that assess whether foreign policy preferences affect the final electoral outcome, such as whether hawkish publics tend to produce hawkish leaders, and dovish publics tend to select dovish leaders. This problem also plagues research using self-reports of the most important issue in voting for a presidential candidate; the most important issue could depend on the diversity of the options, which is prone to selection bias.

[15] Using a single-country approach, studies such as Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) find that foreign policy events appear to significantly affect U.S. presidential approval. Gelpi and Grieco (2015) find that when the public disapproves of how a president handled a military dispute, this negatively affects the president's ability to score domestic legislative victories. However, these kinds of studies are also vulnerable to selection bias, as well as the endogenous relationship between presidential approval and foreign policy approval mentioned below.

*Reverse Causation*

Another thorny problem is reverse causation. Some researchers have aimed to estimate the effect of voters' evaluations of foreign policy on support for leaders (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987b; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2007; 2009) or the incumbent's ability to pass domestic legislation (Gelpi and Grieco 2015). However, it is also possible that the relationship runs in reverse: support for leaders could shape voters' preferences and evaluations.[16] As an illustration, in the 2004 election, attitudes about the Iraq War were strongly correlated with vote choice, with those who thought that Bush did the "right thing" by invading Iraq being much more likely to vote for Bush (e.g. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009). Berinsky (2009) argues, however, that prior support for Bush versus Kerry affected whether individuals approved of the Iraq War, rather than the other way around.[17] Because of the genuine difficulty in isolating the direction of causation using observational data, we cannot be confident, based on the exiting scholarship, about the extent to which foreign policy attitudes, once formed, affect vote choice.

*Confounders*

A third problem involves confounders. This problem is especially evident in studies that draw inferences about leader responsiveness by studying the correspondence between public opinion and policy output. Several studies have found that changes in public opinion about foreign policy tend to be followed by changes in actual policy, suggesting that leaders are responsive (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1983; Russett 1990; Bartels 1991). Others have found little correspondence between constituents' foreign policy preferences and legislators' voting records (e.g. Miller and Stokes 1963). However, these studies cannot rule out the possibility that omitted variables, such as external events, are influencing both public opinion and legislator behavior.[18] The timing can be suggestive—for example if changes in public opinion precede changes in policy—but existing research does not preclude the possibility that external events are causing both opinion and policy to change, even if there is no causal relationship between the two.[19]

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[16] In addition to endogeneity, studies of this nature could be subject to omitted variable bias, where a third factor leads to both perceptions of the leader's foreign policy competence and support for the leader.

[17] E.g. pp. 76–84 and 102–107.

[18] These studies also cannot rule out explanations other than responsiveness for a correlation between public opinion and foreign policy outputs. Even if leaders are entirely unresponsive one in office, the selection mechanism might still lead to a correlation if voters select leaders who share their preferences.

[19] Other studies have examined whether leaders at the end of their term-limited time in office behave differently than leaders who are up for re-election and therefore might be sanctioned by the public. See, for example, Gaubatz 1991, Reiter and Tillman 2002, Williams 2013, Zeigler, Peerskalla, and Mazumder 2014, Haynes 2012, Conconi, Sahuget and Zanardi 2014, and Potter 2016. The most recent study on the topic, Carter and Nordstrom n.d., finds that a) butting up against a term limit does not increase conflict initiation overall; b) butting up against a term limit makes conflict initiation less likely for doves; but c) butting up against a term limit has no effect on conflict initiation by hawks. In conclusion, on average, leaders do not change their behavior

One might attempt to measure and control for confounders. Unfortunately this solution brings its own challenges. Data on confounders might not be available, and controlling for confounders could introduce problems of collinearity. For example, many scholars have used data from historical elections to study the link between voters' foreign policy preferences and vote choice. But if the foreign policies of candidates are correlated with their domestic policies, it will be difficult to disentangle how much of the correspondence between voter and candidate hawkishness has to do with foreign policy, versus how much is an artifact of agreement on other issues, such as economic or social policy. It is also difficult to assess the effect of different combinations of foreign and domestic policy positions—for example, whether foreign policy matters if the candidates have extreme views on domestic policy, or whether it only matters when the candidates are tied on other issues.

*Lack of data on elites*

Finally, past studies have largely focused on the perceptions of the public rather than those of policymakers. But the policy responsiveness mechanism depends on elite perceptions. Do *policymakers believe* that they should respond to public opinion, and when given information about public opinion, how do they factor that in to their decision?

Given the difficulty of gaining data about the beliefs, perceptions, and behavior of individual policymakers, only a few pioneering studies have pursued such an approach. Powlick (1991) carried out an original elite survey of members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and found that a strong majority of the U.S. officials he contacted said that they thought that public opinion should play a role in influencing policy decisions. Foyle (1999) used a qualitative historical research design, inferring the effect of public opinion from leaders' statements and records of deliberations.[20]

While these studies are path-breaking, a skeptic might respond by pointing to the same issues with observational research described above, including endogeneity, collinearity, and omitted variable bias. Moreover, it is hard to rule out that the evidence was affected by social desirability bias: officials could either fear an uproar if they had said that they think the government should ignore the public, or if they appeared to lack principles. This could affect responses to survey questions as well as the kind of information that found its way into U.S.

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when they are no longer facing an election. However, it is difficult to know exactly how to interpret this evidence when it comes to sanctioning versus responsiveness.

[20] Jacobs and Page (2005) examine elite opinion using the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) survey, but their approach is to compare the relationship between the foreign policy preferences of the public and other opinion groups (such as business leaders), and the opinions of policymakers. However, this approach cannot rule out the possibility that unobserved factors affect all three variables simultaneously: public opinion, the opinion of other groups, and policymakers' opinions. Page and Barabas (2000) compare public and elite survey data and find that they have different foreign policy beliefs. They conclude from this that leaders are not particularly responsive to the public. However, a lack of perfect correspondence does not mean that leaders are not influenced by the views of the public; there can be influence even if there is not a perfect correspondence between public and elite opinion (Canes-Wrone 2006). See also Hughes 1978, Kull and Destler 1999.

presidential archives. Obtaining credible information from the perspective of policymakers is crucial as we seek to uncover whether and how public opinion affects leaders' decisions about foreign policy.

In sum, existing research suffers from problems of selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders, as well as the absence of detailed data about the perceptions of the elites who ultimately make policy. Below, we discuss a series of experimental studies, which we designed to overcome these challenges.

## IV. Testing the Selection Pathway: Do Citizens Choose Leaders on the Basis of Foreign Policy?

*Experimental Evidence from Israel*

To what extent do citizens choose parties/candidates on the basis of foreign policy, and how does the weight of foreign policy compare to the weight of other electoral considerations? We approached these questions by designing a conjoint experiment, which we embedded in surveys of the mass public in Israel and the U.S.

We begin by discussing the study we fielded in Israel, an important country whose foreign policy decisions influence international patterns of war and peace. In order to recruit a representative sample of the Israeli Jewish population, we worked with iPanel, a respected Israeli polling firm.[21] iPanel interviewed 1067 Israeli adults in March 2016.

The survey began by measuring each person's preferences on foreign, economic, and religious policy. For each dimension, we measured the respondent's overarching postures or superordinate beliefs, instead of asking about specific and narrow policy proposals. "On matters of foreign affairs and security," we inquired, "do you support a dovish (left) or a hawkish (right) approach?" In our sample, 9% of participants classified themselves as "definitely dovish"; 27% said they were "more dovish than hawkish"; 39% deemed themselves "more hawkish than dovish"; and 25% said they were "definitely hawkish."

To quantify preferences about economic policy, we followed the Israeli National Election Study by asking: "About the structure of economic life in the country, do you support a capitalist or a socialist approach?" Responses were definitely socialist (11% of the sample), more socialist than capitalist (53%), more capitalist than socialist (30%), or definitely capitalist (5%). Finally, to capture views about religious policy, we inquired: "To what extent should the government require Jewish religious traditions in public life?" The options were never (36%), sometimes (40%), often (16%), or always (8%).

After measuring each respondent's policy preferences, we asked them to evaluate pairs of political parties. We focused on parties given the structure of Israeli elections, in which people vote for a party rather than an individual candidate. Our preface explained, "On the following

[21] iPanel recruited subjects using benchmarks for gender, age, education, and area of residence. For other recent studies using iPanel, see for example Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Courtemanche, 2015; Grossman, Manekin, and Miodownik 2015; and Renshon, Yarhi-Milo, and Kertzer 2016. Our focus on the Israeli Jewish population in this survey is due entirely to logistical constraints, specifically the inability of online polling companies in Israel to provide anything close to a representative sample of the minority Israeli Arab population.

screens we will describe a number of political parties. The parties are hypothetical; they are not actual parties in Israel today. The vast majority of candidates in each party are Jewish, and each party is expected to pass the electoral threshold and enter the Knesset. Please read the descriptions carefully, and then tell us which party you would prefer."

We then displayed a table that described two parties, A and B, which varied randomly on seven dimensions: foreign, economic, and religious policy; the size of the political party, and the military experience, political experience and gender of the party leader. We portrayed policies along the same spectra we had used earlier. Thus, each party's foreign policy was randomly assigned to be definitely dovish, more dovish than hawkish, more hawkish than dovish, or definitely hawkish. Likewise, economic policies ranged from socialist to capitalist, and religious policies ranged from never requiring to always requiring Jewish religious traditions in public life.

When describing the military experience of each party leader, we randomized whether the leader had served no more than the mandatory minimum, had risen to the rank of junior officer, or had attained the rank of senior officer. For political experience, we randomly drew an integer between 0 and 30 to capture the number of years the party leader had been in national politics. Finally, we indicated whether the party leader was male or female, and we mentioned whether the party was (or was not) one of the three largest parties in the political system. For robustness we randomized the order in which respondents saw this diverse set of considerations.

We intentionally randomized each of the seven dimensions independently to produce an extremely diverse set of combinations, including combinations of policy and leadership that are not common in current Israeli politics. This approach not only avoided multicollinearity, but also allowed us to estimate the consequences of taking the full range of policy positions, including ones that might be electorally disadvantageous.

We concluded by asking, "If you had to choose, which party would you vote for?" We repeated the exercise with three additional pairs of parties: C versus D, E versus F, and G versus H. Thus, each participant reviewed eight party profiles, giving us a large number of judgments about an extremely rich political space.[22]

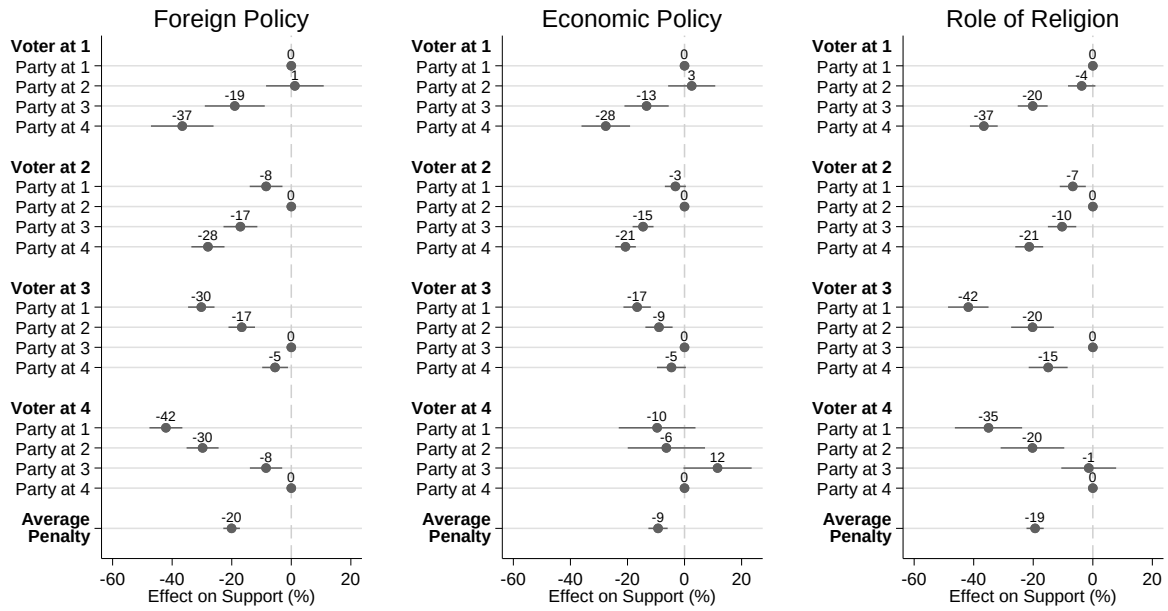
In the analysis below, we simplify the exposition by presenting the effect of each attribute, averaging over all the other dimensions of the experiment. To quantify the effect of gender, for example, we would measure how much better (or worse) parties with male leaders fared in our experiment, averaging over all other characteristics the party might have, and over all characteristics the opposing party might have. In the literature on conjoint experiments, this effect is called the "average marginal component effect" (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).

We first consider how the foreign, economic, and religious positions of parties affected support at the polls. The left side of Figure 1 shows the effects of foreign policy. As shorthand, we represent each policy position with a number: 1=definitely dovish, 2=more dovish than

[22] Before asking respondents to choose between the parties, we measured attentiveness by asking whether the parties were identical or different on each of the seven dimensions. The table remained on the screen during this exercise, so respondents did not have to answer from memory. We used the data from this exercise to flag respondents who were going through the motions without reading the content of the survey. Of the 1,277 respondents who completed the survey, our analysis focuses on the 1,067 who correctly answered at least 85% of the attention checks. The appendix shows that the effects were similar, but smaller, when we included respondents who were not paying attention to the survey.

hawkish, 3=more hawkish than dovish, and 4=definitely hawkish. We estimated how these four groups of voters responded to parties that agreed or disagreed with their own opinions.

**Figure 1: Effects of Policy Positions in Israel**




The left side of Figure 1 shows that voters awarded substantially less support to parties with distant foreign policy views, than to parties who concurred with them about foreign policy. For instance, dovish voters (voters at 1) gave 37 points less support to hawkish parties (parties at 4) than to parties who shared their dovish ideal point. Likewise, hawkish voters (people at 4) awarded 42 points less support to dovish parties (parties at 1) than to parties who sympathized with their own hawkish preferences. These effects were not unique to extreme voters; moderate voters penalized deviations, as well. Moderate doves (voters at 2) were 28 points less supportive of parties at 4 than of parties at 2. Similarly, moderate hawks (voters at 3) were 30 points less supportive of parties at 1 than of parties at 3.

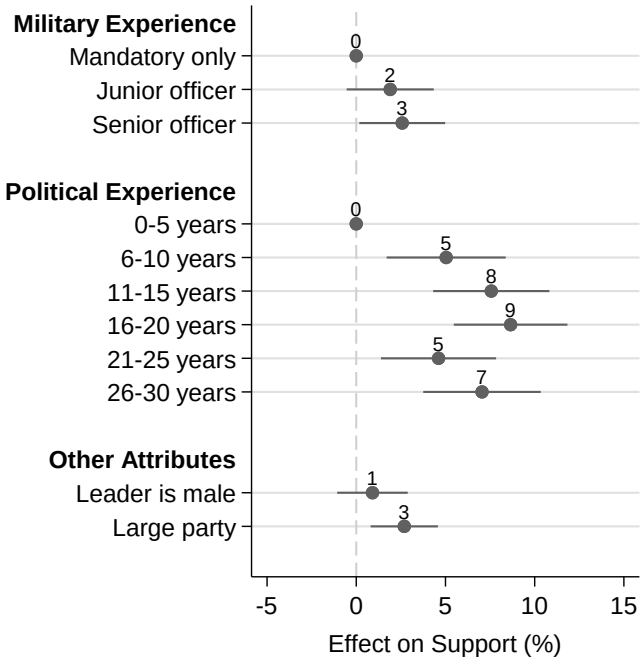
The figure also shows an interesting asymmetry in reactions: voters in our experiments were more tolerant of parties on their own side of the issue, than of voters on the opposite side of the issue. For example, voters at 2 were substantially more negative about parties at 3 than about parties at 1. Likewise, voters at 3 docked parties at 2 to a much greater degree than parties at 4. Other voters exhibited similar patterns: they imposed smaller penalties when deviations were confined to their own side of the issue, than when parties were located on the opposite side of the dove-hawk space.

The second and third columns of Figure 1 present analogous estimates for economic and religious policy. To summarize the estimates and compare the electoral importance of the three policy dimensions, the bottom row of each panel gives the average penalty that voters assigned to a party that did not share his or her ideal point on that dimension (averaging across each of the twelve possible ways that a party's position could differ from the voter's preference). The average penalty for being out of step with the voter on foreign policy was 20 percentage points,

compared to 9 points for economic policy and 19 points for religious policy. We conclude that in Israeli elections, foreign policy is as important as religious policy and more important than economic policy.

Foreign policy not only rivaled religious and economic policy, but also outweighed the four nonpolicy attributes in our experiment. Figure 2 summarizes the average effect of the party leader's military experience, political experience, gender, and the size of the party. The top portion shows that, other factors equal, respondents preferred leaders with extensive military experience. In our experiment, all party leaders had completed compulsory service, but some exceeded the minimum and attained an officer's rank. Overall, parties led by former senior officers performed 3 points better, and parties led by former junior officers performed 2 points better, than parties whose leaders had left the military after their satisfying their mandatory service.

**Figure 2: Effects of Non-Policy Attributes in Israel**




The middle portion of Figure 2 shows that Israelis preferred seasoned politicians over newcomers. Parties guided by leaders who had been in national politics for more than five years performed substantially better than otherwise comparable parties with less experienced leadership. Finally, the bottom portion of Figure 2 presents the average effect of gender and party size. Perhaps contrary to expectations, Israeli voters did not, on average, show a preference for male leaders over female ones.[23] Voters also threw 3% more support behind large parties than behind other otherwise comparable parties that did not rank among the top three. This could be

[23] We also tested for gender preferences among male versus female respondents (not shown), but neither group assigned any importance to the gender of the leader, after other factors were taken into account.

taken as evidence that at least some Israelis engage in strategic voting: supporting large parties that might stand a better chance for forming governments and leading coalitions.

We ran many auxiliary tests to confirm the robustness of our findings (for details, see the appendix). First, we checked that the results were robust to the specification of the dependent variable. In addition to asking which party subjects preferred, we measured the strength of their preferences, and we asked them to rate each party individually on a scale of 0 to 10. When we operationalized our dependent variable to take into account the strength of voters' preferences, or studied party ratings rather than the comparisons between the parties, our conclusions about the absolute and relative effects of foreign policy remained unchanged.

Second, we investigated whether the effects of foreign policy were conditional on the stances parties took on other issues. The average penalty for deviating from voters' foreign policy preferences was similar, regardless of whether the party took leftist positions on both economic and religious policy, espoused right-wing positions on the economy and religion, or took a mixed stance. We also wondered whether foreign policy might be more consequential for parties with moderate positions on other issues. To evaluate this possibility, we distinguished between parties with moderate positions (2 or 3) on both economic and religious policy, parties with an extreme position (1 or 4) on either economic or religious policy, and parties with an extreme position in both of those policy areas. Foreign policy proved highly consequential, regardless of the party's moderation or extremism in other areas.

We also checked whether the effects of foreign policy depended on non-policy characteristics of the party or party leader. We found that foreign policy was equally important for small and large parties, and did not vary according to the party leader's military experience, number of years in politics, or gender.

Finally, we investigated whether the weight of foreign policy varied across different types of voters. In our analysis, foreign policy swayed subjects regardless of the voter's gender, age, education, income, military service, religiosity, and ideology. The effects were the same, if not stronger, when we restricted attention to the most politically interested and involved members of society.

In sum, our evidence indicates that foreign policy profoundly affected support for parties in Israel. Our experiments, which randomly and independently manipulated the foreign policy positions of parties, allowed us to estimate the effect of foreign policy while averting problems of selection bias, reverse causation, and confounders. Foreign policy swayed voters regardless of the parties' other attributes, and mattered to voters across the social, economic, and political spectrum.

*Experimental Evidence from the U.S.*

One might wonder whether our findings generalize beyond Israel, a country that faces unusually severe security challenges. We therefore replicated our experiment in the United States, with minor adjustments for the U.S. political context. While both Israel and the U.S. are established democracies, they differ on several important factors, including electoral system, size, geographic location, and threat environment. In fact, one might view the U.S. as a "hard test" for the selection argument, given claims that Americans are not particularly interested in

foreign policy and that other electoral issues loom larger.[24] Finding similar results in the U.S. would greatly increase our confidence that the effects of foreign policy generalize to other democracies.

In April 2017, Survey Sampling International recruited a sample of 1,420 U.S. adults, who were chosen for demographic representativeness according to age, education, gender, income, race, and region. As in the Israeli experiment, we began by asking subjects about their preferences over foreign policy. "Some people think military force should be used frequently in U.S. foreign policy. They are called 'hawks.' Other people think U.S. foreign policy should be based on diplomacy, and the U.S. should rarely if ever use military force. They are called 'doves.' Which approach to U.S. foreign policy do you prefer?" Roughly 15% said they were definitely dovish, 50% described themselves as more dovish than hawkish, 27% were more hawkish than dovish, and the remaining 9% deemed themselves definitely hawkish.

To capture preferences about economic policy, we inquired: "Some people favor capitalist economic policies. They think the government should play only a small role in the economy, and should let the market determine economic outcomes. Other people favor socialist economic policies. They think the government should play a large role in the economy by regulating businesses and redistributing income. Which approach to U.S. economic policy do you prefer?" Around 5% were definitely socialist (large government role), 28% were more socialist than capitalist, 39% were more capitalist than socialist, and 28% were definitely capitalist (small government role).

Finally, to measure views about the role of religion in government, we asked: "How big of a role do you think religion should play in shaping government policy in the United States?" The options were no role (favored by 46% of respondents), small role (21%), medium role (20%), or large role (14%).

We then presented participants with a table featuring two hypothetical presidential candidates, A and B. The candidates varied randomly in their positions on foreign, economic, and religious policy, as well as four non-policy attributes: the candidate's home region (Northeast, South, Midwest, or West), race (White, Black, or Hispanic), gender, and political experience (years in politics, which varied from 0 to 30).[25] We concluded the scenario by asking, "If you had to choose, which candidate would you vote for?" The options were definitely

[25] To control for perceptions of religion, we informed respondents that all the candidates were Christian. We intentionally chose not to include information about the candidate's political party. Party labels are informative precisely because they contain information about candidates' policy positions. Providing information about both policy positions and party affiliation would have produced treatments that were double-barreled and potential contradictory. If, for example, we presented a Republican candidate who was socialist, subjects would doubt either the candidate's position on economic policy or his/her partisan leanings.

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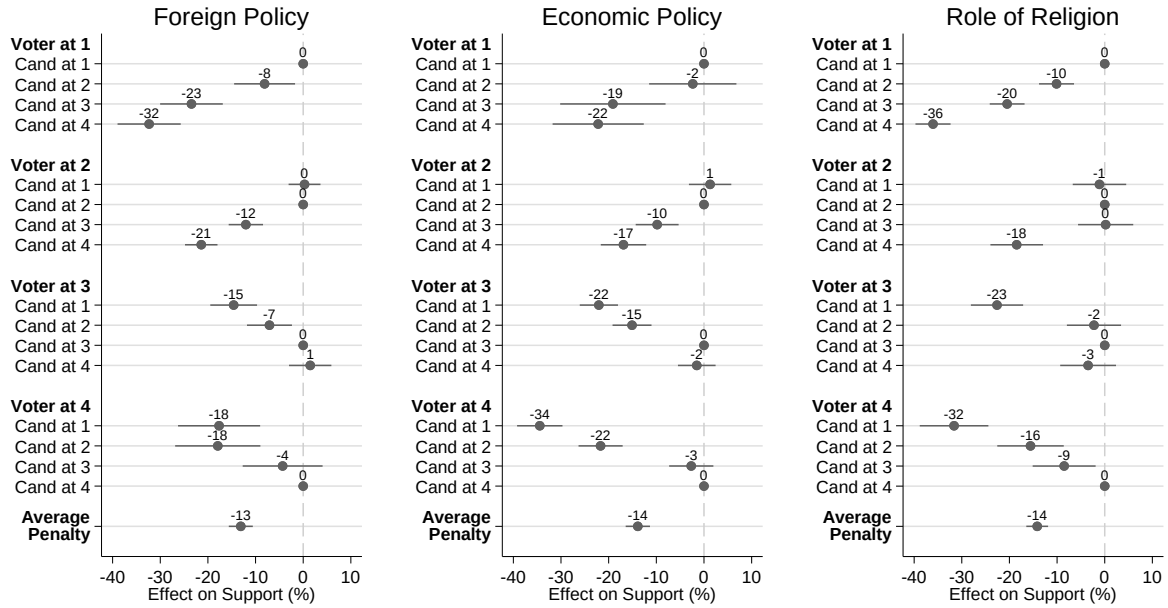
Candidate A; probably Candidate A; probably Candidate B; and definitely Candidate B. We then repeated this exercise three times, yielding data on four candidate pairings per respondent.[26]

Figure 3 displays the effects of policy positions on preferences over presidential candidates. The left column shows that U.S. citizens strongly favored candidates who shared their preferences on foreign policy. For instance, dovish voters (people at 1) were 32 percentage points less supportive of candidates with hawkish platforms (candidate at 4). Other voters reacted similarly, but extending substantially less support to candidates whose foreign views did not match their own. Finally, as in Israel, we observed an interesting asymmetry; voters showed more tolerance for candidates on their side of the hawk-dove spectrum, than for candidates who took the opposing side. Overall, foreign policy has a powerful effect on the selection of U.S. candidates.

The effects of foreign policy were not only large in an absolute sense, but also comparable to the effects of economic and religious policy. The bottom row of Figure 3 summarizes the average penalty for deviating from the voter's ideal point. On average, mismatches on foreign policy reduced support for the candidate by 13 percentage points. The effects for economic and religious policy were similar: around 14 points, on average. These findings confirm that the powerful effects of foreign policy are not specific to Israel.

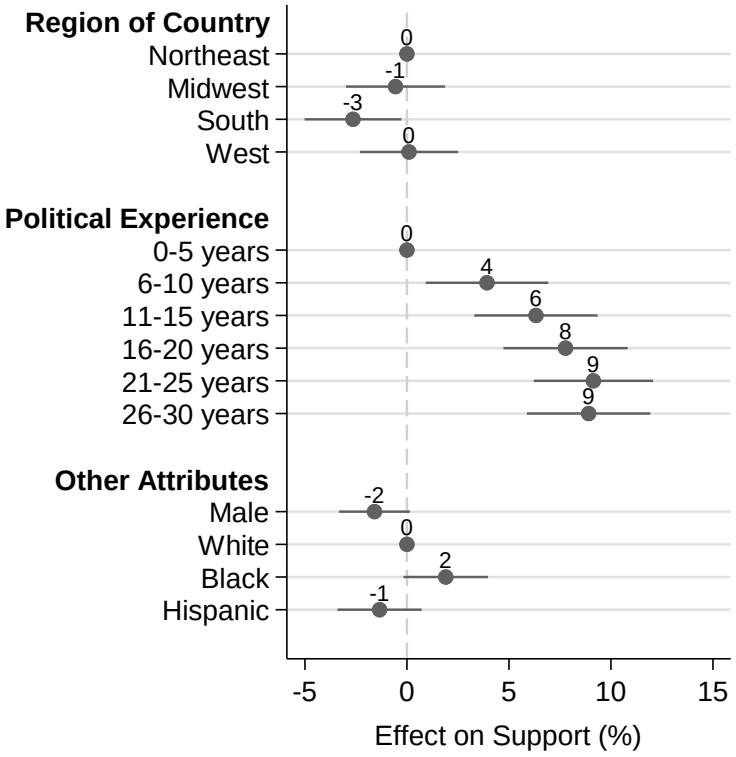
**Figure 3: Effects of Policy Positions in the United States**




[26] As in Israel, we administered simple attention checks, which respondents could answer by referring to the table that was on the screen. Of the 2,051 people who completed the survey, we restricted our analysis to the 1,420 who answered at least 85% of the attention checks correctly. Patterns were similar, albeit weaker, when we included respondents who did not pay attention to the survey.

In our experiment, non-policy attributes mattered to a lesser degree. Figure 4 shows that region, gender, and race had minor effects on preferences over presidential candidates. Political experience mattered more; voters rewarded candidates who had spent more time in politics by up to 9 percentage points, on average.

**Figure 4: Effects of Non-Policy Attributes in the U.S.**




Finally, we probed the robustness of our findings (for supporting figures, see the appendix). As in Israel, the results held when we switched to a multi-level dependent variable that took into account the strength of subjects' preferences over candidates, and when we modeled the effects of the randomized treatments on candidate ratings rather than vote choices. The effects of foreign policy remained strong regardless of candidates' stances on economic and religious policies, and independent of their home region, political experience, gender, and race. Finally, foreign policy exerted powerful effects, regardless of the voter's gender, age, race, education, income, religion, religiosity, party affiliation, and home region. As in Israel, the effects of foreign policy were slightly stronger among those who were more politically active and interested in politics.

*Can voters correctly identify parties' and candidates' positions?*

Our experiments provided respondents with information about the policy positions of candidates and parties. Some readers might object that, in actual elections, voters might not know where the contenders stand. Strictly speaking, such knowledge is not necessary for

effective selection. A large body of research confirms that voters exhibit low-information rationality. With the aid of widely available cues, even voters with little knowledge of politics can behave as if they were more fully informed. For example, trusted advisors could guide citizens to vote for the candidate whose foreign policy views are closest to their own. Nevertheless, it can be instructive to measure public knowledge about the options they face.

We therefore measured public knowledge about the foreign policy positions of parties in Israel. Participants in our March 2016 survey placed several major parties on a scale from 1 (dovish) to 7 (hawkish) with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. All participants rated the two largest parties, Likud and the Zionist Union, which held 30 and 24 seats, respectively, at the time of the survey. In addition, each person was randomly assigned to score one party with a dovish platform (either Meretz or the Joint List), one party with a centrist platform (either Yesh Atid or Kulanu), and one party with a hawkish platform (either Yisrael Beiteinu or HaBayit HaYehudi).

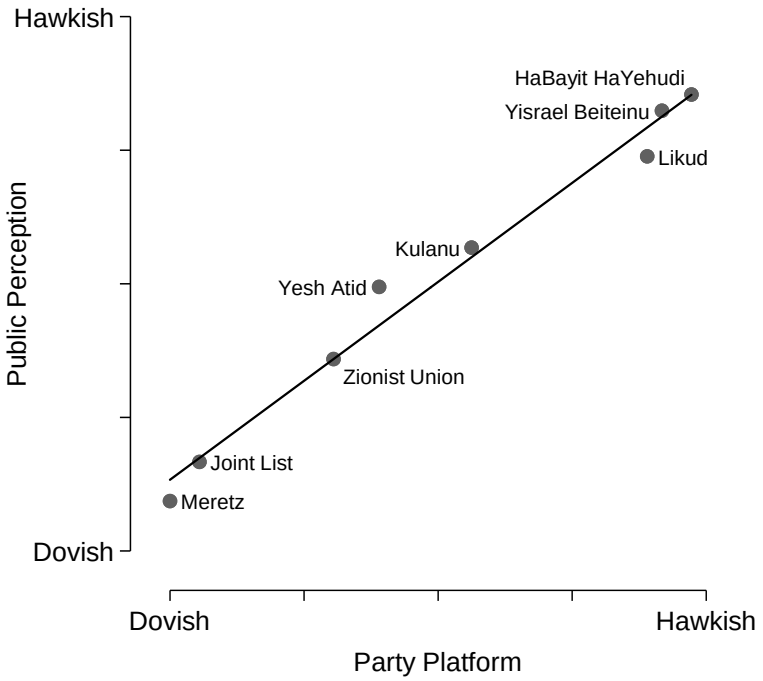
We compared public perceptions with actual platforms, as summarized by the Election Compass project. To infer where parties stood on foreign and domestic issues, Compass researchers examined "official documents, speeches, legislative activity, and statements in the mass media." Multiple coders reviewed the data, calibrated issue positions, and checked for accuracy. Before finalizing the coding, the Compass team solicited feedback from panels of journalists and from the parties themselves. The Compass is, therefore, a good gauge of party positions and has been used in recent research (e.g., Arian et al 2011, Grossman, Manekin and Miodownik 2015).

We used Compass data to measure the foreign policy platforms of Israeli parties on the eve of the 2015 election. For each party, the Compass assigned a score from 1 to 5 on each of nine policy issues related the Palestinian conflict and Israeli-Arab relations. We averaged across the nine issues to produce an overall assessment of the party's place on the dove-to-hawk spectrum. Meretz, which took strongly dovish positions on all nine issues, received the lowest score in our study. In contrast, HaBayit HaYehudi (Jewish Home), which was strongly hawkish on all issues except relations with Iran, received the highest overall score. The remaining parties were distributed between these extremes, giving Israeli voters a rich menu of options on matters of foreign policy.

Figure 5 plots the average public perception of each party against the content of its platform, as scored by the Election Compass.[27] The axes are on different scales, with perceptions measured from 1 to 7, and platforms scored by averaging nine policies that were each coded on a 5-point scale. Nevertheless, the linear fit between platforms and perceptions is nearly perfect. Indeed, the regression line in Figure 5 explains 98% of the variance, implying that nearly all the variation in public perception can be explained by referencing party platforms. This is, we believe, a striking example the "wisdom of the crowds," the idea that large groups of citizens are often right on average, even though the beliefs of individual members may differ from the truth. The wisdom of the crowds is a powerful force that contributes to accurate selection—and effective representation—in democracies.

[27] The appendix reports not only the averages, but also the full distribution of perceptions for each of the eight parties in our study.

**Figure 5: Average Public Perceptions versus Party Platforms in Israel**




We also studied perceptions in the United States by asking how Americans perceived the foreign policies of the Democratic and Republican parties and their presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Unfortunately, the U.S. analogue to the Election Compass is not detailed enough to quantify the contestants' overall views on foreign policy. We therefore conducted our own analysis of official party platforms, which were formally adopted at each party's national convention.

The platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties devoted substantial space to foreign policy, and revealed significant differences on the issues of diplomacy versus military force. The Democratic platform repeatedly referred to the need for diplomacy and depicted military force as a tool to be used only if other options had been exhausted. One passage said, "We believe the smart use of diplomacy, development, and economic statecraft can prevent crises, foster stability, and make us safer… We believe that war must always be the last resort, never the first choice."[28] Similar statements appear throughout the document, which also rejected sending ground troops to fight ISIS, endorsed diplomacy with Iran, and called for strengthening or signing various international agreements.

In contrast, the Republican platform called for strengthening the U.S. military and placed less emphasis on diplomacy. One passage read: "…the first order of business for a Republican president and Congress will be to restore our nation's military might. Republicans continue to support American military superiority which has been the cornerstone of a strategy that seeks to

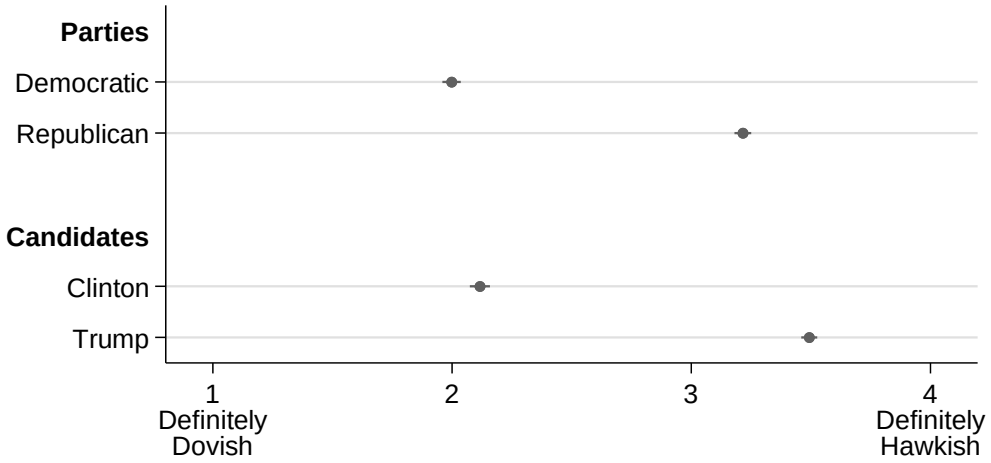
[28] 2016 Democratic Party Platform, p. 35. https://www.democrats.org/party-platform

deter aggression or defeat those who threaten our vital national security interests."[29] The text repeatedly referred to enhancing the U.S. ability to fight wars, criticized the Iranian nuclear deal, called for mobilizing "military assets" to fight ISIS in Iraq,[30] and advocated withdrawal or non-ratification of a host of international treaties.[31]

Did Americans recognize these differences between the two major parties and their presidential nominees? To find out, we asked participants in our April 2017 survey to gauge the hawkishness of the two major parties and their presidential candidates. "Now we would like your impressions about several figures in American politics. In your opinion ...Which statement best describes Donald Trump's views about foreign policy?" The answer options were definitely hawkish, more hawkish than dovish, more dovish than hawkish, or definitely dovish. We asked the same question about Hillary Clinton, the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party.[32]

Figure 6 plots average perceptions of the hawkishness of these four political actors. Voters in the U.S. regarded the Democratic Party as much more dovish than the Republican party, and Hillary Clinton as much more dovish than Donald Trump. As in Israel, Americans are aware of significant differences in the foreign policy stances of the main political actors.

**Figure 6: Average Public Perceptions in the U.S.**




In sum, we find strong evidence for the selection mechanism in both Israel and the United States. Voters in both countries not only know the positions of the main parties, but also treat foreign policy as a major criterion for voting. Our experiment shows that, when foreign policy positions were exogenously assigned, voters strongly preferred parties or candidates whose foreign policy positions matched their own. In both countries, foreign policy was as important as

[29] 2016 Republican Party Platform, p. 42. https://www.gop.com/the-2016-republican-party-platform/
[30] p. 47
[31] p. 51
[32] The Appendix shows the full distribution of perceptions for the parties and candidates.

economic or religious policies, and far more potent than any of the nonpolicy attributes we studied.

## V. Testing the Responsiveness Pathway: Do Leaders Respond to Public Opinion Once in Office?

Having found strong support for the selection mechanism, we now examine whether politicians respond to public opinion after taking office. To answer this question, we recruited a unique sample of former and current members of the Israeli legislature (the Knesset) and administered a survey with an embedded experiment. The survey was fielded between July and October 2015. Of 288 current and former MKs at the time of our study, 87 (approximately 30%) answered our survey.

By focusing on the Israeli Knesset, we gained valuable insight into leaders who actually make foreign policy. Israel is a parliamentary democracy in which elected members of the Knesset also populate the executive branch. Many legislators are, therefore, directly involved in decisions about the use of force. Moreover, Israeli election cycles are short, political turnover is common, and coalitions are fluid, creating opportunities for many members to serve on the cabinet at some point in their political careers. By surveying current and former members of the Knesset, we are not only sampling lawmakers, but also accessing the beliefs of current, former, and potentially future members of the executive branch.

Consistent with these expectations, participants in our study had impressive foreign policy experience. Roughly 67% had served on the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee; 29% had served at least in the capacity of a Deputy Minister, and 12% had reached the highest category of elite experience which included serving as Cabinet members. In the appendix, we provide more details about recruitment, describe the Knesset sample in further detail, and discuss its representativeness relative to the universe of Israeli political leaders in the past 20 years.

A key part of this survey was an experiment designed to test the effect of public opinion on support for a hypothetical military strike. We presented all MKs with the following vignette:

> "We would like your opinion about the following hypothetical scenario.
>
> Ten armed terrorists emerged from an underground tunnel in northern Israel, close to the border with Lebanon. The terrorists were planning to attack a Jewish town, take civilian hostages, and bring them back to Lebanon. The IDF caught some of the terrorists, but others escaped back into Lebanon. Several IDF soldiers were wounded during the operation.
>
> The cabinet discussed whether Israel should send special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases in Lebanon.
>
> The security establishment is divided over whether Israel should carry out this military operation. Supporters say the operation would punish the terrorists, reduce the threat from the tunnels, and deter future attacks. Opponents say the operation would lead to IDF

casualties, would cause terrorists to retaliate against Israeli cities, and would escalate into a large-scale military conflict."

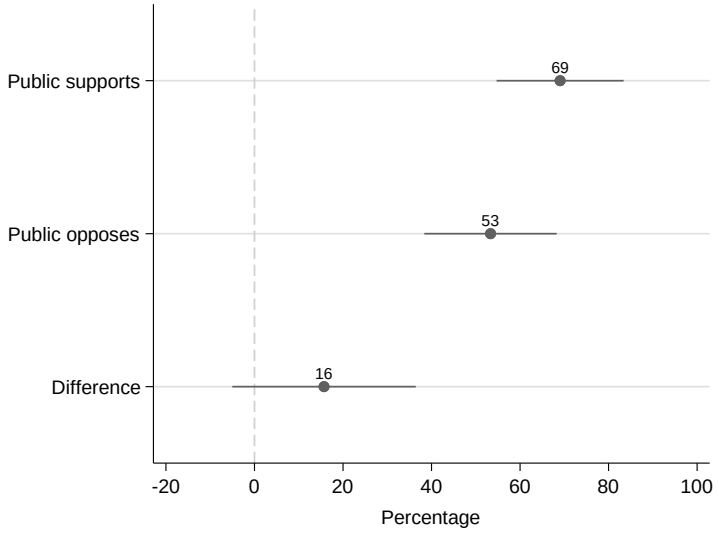
We then randomized information about public support for a military operation. Half of the MKs were told that public opinion was strongly in favor of military action, while the other half were told that the public firmly opposed the idea:

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

Having manipulated perceptions of public support for military action, we asked: "In this situation, would you favor or oppose sending special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases?"

Figure 7 shows the percentage of MKs who supported a military strike, conditional on the randomized treatment they received. Support for a military strike was nearly 16 percentage points higher when a majority of citizens favored a strike, than when most citizens opposed a strike. Some might object that the estimated effect, though large, falls short of conventional standards for statistical significance; the *p*-value associated with the treatment effect is .135 for a two-sided test and .0675 for a one-sided test. When dealing with elite samples, though, it would be difficult to gain more precision. To detect an effect of this size with conventional standards of significance ($\alpha = .05$), we would have needed the participation of 290 MKs, more than the number of living MKs for whom we found contact information. We believe the treatment effect is informative, even if is not estimated with the precision one is accustomed to seeing in surveys of the mass public.

**Figure 7: Effect of Public Opinion on Support for Military Strike**



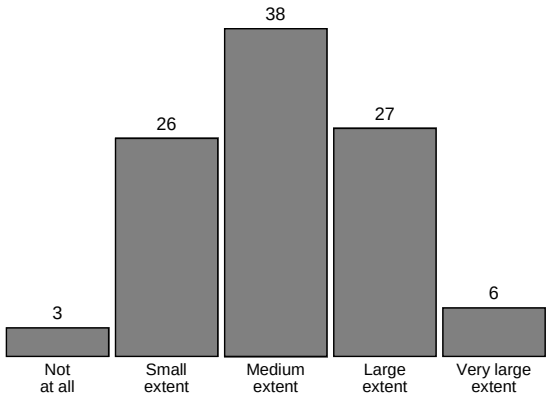

*Note: the horizontal lines depict 95 percent confidence intervals.*

When presenting the scenario, we randomized information about public opinion as a whole, instead of varying sentiments within the respondent's own political party. We did this, in part, to avoid administering implausible treatments to MKs who hailed from predominantly dovish or hawkish parties, and might have doubted the suggestion that most within their own party supported (or opposed) military action. Having shown that MKs care about public opinion in general, though, it seems likely that MKs would care even more about the views of their own co-partisans. In this sense, our experiment establishes a lower bound on how MKs would have responded, if we could have manipulated the opinions of voters from their own party.

Finally, as a robustness check, we probed whether our main treatment effect changed when we controlled for additional covariates. Supplementary analyses in the appendix indicate that our results remained roughly the same when we controlled for the party affiliation, political ideology, hawkishness, or military experience of the decision-makers.

In addition to gauging the effect of public opinion experimentally, we also asked directly—in a different part of the survey—about the role that public opinion plays in decisions about the use of force. "In general," we asked, "when you consider whether to use military force against a foreign adversary, to what extent do you take domestic public opinion into account?" Consistent with the findings from our experiment, MKs reported that public opinion played an important role. As Figure 8 shows, only 3% of respondents said that they did not consider public opinion at all; 26% said they weighed public opinion to a small extent; 38% gave medium consideration to public opinion; and the remaining 33% said that public opinion influenced their military decisions to a large or very large extent.

**Figure 8: How often MKs consider public opinion when deciding whether to use military force**




Finally, we measured MKs' perceptions of the *consequences* of failing to heed public opinion. To introduce this sequence of questions, we said: "We would now like you to think about Israel's use of military force more generally. Please consider the following hypothetical situations." The first hypothetical situation involved an unpopular war: "Suppose an Israeli government was considering whether to go to war against a foreign adversary. If the public strongly opposed the war, but the government nonetheless decided to go war, please rate the likelihood that each of the following events would happen in the short term."

We asked whether the government would lose support in the polls; lose seats in the Knesset; find it difficult to get support for other foreign and domestic policies; and whether the government itself would fall. MKs indicated whether each potential consequence was extremely likely, very likely, somewhat likely, or not likely.

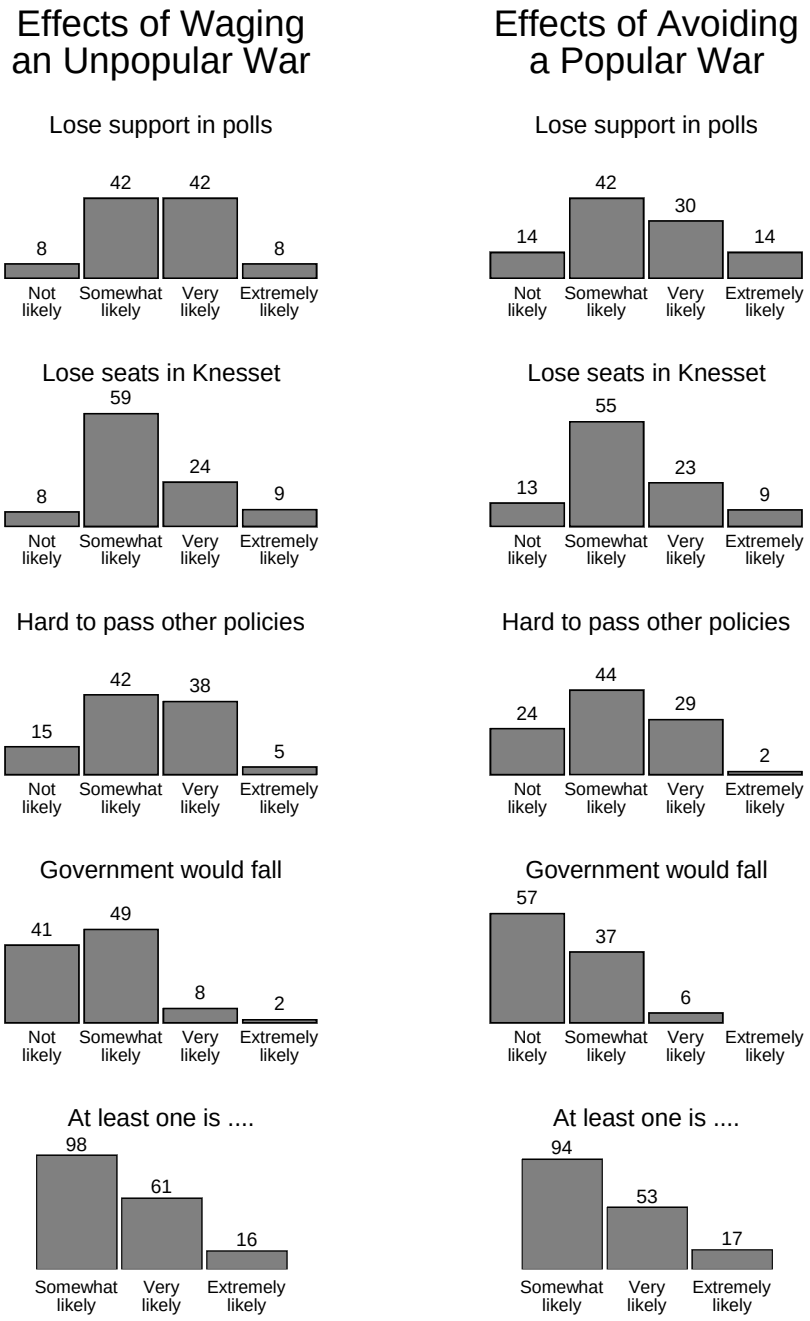
In a similar way, we elicited expectations about what would happen if the government failed to engage in a war that the public wanted: "Suppose an Israeli government was considering whether to go to war against a foreign adversary. If the public strongly favored the war, but the government nonetheless decided not to go to war, please rate the likelihood that each of the following events would happen."

As Figure 9 reveals, Israeli decision-makers anticipated adverse consequences both for waging an unpopular war, and for avoiding a popular war. When it came to fighting an unpopular war, nearly all of the MKs (98 percent) thought that at least one of the four adverse outcomes was somewhat likely. Moreover, 61 percent thought that at least one negative consequence was very likely, and 16 percent thought that at least one was extremely likely.

Knesset members also anticipated sanctioning if the government stayed out of a popular war. In this case, 94 percent of MKs thought that at least one of the four adverse outcomes was somewhat likely, 53 percent thought at least one was very likely, and 17 percent thought that at least one was extremely likely. Comparing both halves of the figure, MKs generally thought that waging an unpopular war would be slightly worse than avoiding a popular war. In both cases, though, they anticipated political costs. Given the seriousness of the consequences we listed and the high proportion of MK's anticipating these results, we conclude that the consequences of going against the public loom large for Israeli politicians.

In sum, we have presented unique micro-level evidence that public opinion continues to influence foreign policy even after decision-makers enter office. In our experiment, members of the Israeli Knesset shifted their views about military action in response to randomized information about public opinion. When asked directly about public opinion, most said that it played a significant role in decisions about military force, and the vast majority anticipated that rebuffing the public would bring serious political consequences.

**Figure 9: Expected Consequences of Going Against Public Opinion**




*Note: the figure reports the percent of MKs in our sample selecting each option.*

## VI. Conclusion

Scholars have long debated whether and how public opinion influences foreign policy. Existing scholarship has made valuable contributions, but suffers from limitations inherent to observational research. In this paper we introduced a fresh experimental approach designed to overcome hurdles such as selection bias, reverse causation, and confounding.

We identified two mechanisms through which public opinion could affect foreign policy, selection and responsiveness. We then tested the mechanisms by conducting three experimental studies, fielded on the U.S. public, the Israeli public, and a unique sample of former and current Israeli parliamentarians. All three studies found evidence that "politics does not stop at the water's edge."

Our experimental tests of the selection mechanism indicated that foreign policy profoundly affected support for parties (in Israel) and candidates (in the U.S). In both countries, foreign policy matched or outweighed economic and religious policy as an electoral consideration, and swamped the effect of nonpolicy attributes. Moreover, foreign policy mattered to voters across the social, economic, and political spectrum.

Our experimental study of the responsiveness mechanism involved a unique sample of Israeli parliamentarians. We found that decision-makers not only took public opinion into consideration when making decisions about the use of force, but also that they anticipated adverse political consequences for ignoring the public will. Taken together, we find that public opinion shapes foreign policy both by affecting who is elected and by influencing leaders once they take office.

Future scholarship could build on our approach in several ways. First, in this paper we chose to focus on the security aspect of foreign policy. It is also important to explore how public opinion shapes other areas of foreign policy. What role does public opinion on issues such as international trade agreements, international climate change agreements, or military aid to foreign countries play in the selection of political representatives? How decision-makers respond to public opinion on these issues? New experiments could address these questions.

Future work could also investigate the conditions under which selection and responsiveness operate. For instance, selection processes could vary depending on cross-cutting issues and the strength of party identification. Leaders may be more responsive when they are eligible for re-election and face serious political competition, and less responsive when politics are highly polarized (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). Both mechanisms should depend on public attention to foreign policy, which could vary across countries depending on the state's political structures (Risse-Kappen 1991; Baum and Potter 2015). Public attention could also ebb and flow within a single country in response to objective circumstances and the rhetoric of political elites. These are rich areas for future research.

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