

Covert action and public approval: A replication

Introduction

This document presents the analysis of a survey experiment I run with my undergraduate students for the course *Intro to IR* (Fall 2020). The experiment replicates several aspects of the design of [Myrick \(2020\)](#) that assess how the public evaluates decisions to engage in military intervention while notifying the public in advance, or keeping the operation secret (a transparency norm). The main test estimates the proportion of support given to the government decision to intervene when the action was overt (known in advance) or covert (unknown).

The original study employs three experiments with two treatments in each. Since my replication has a much smaller sample (approximately 98 individuals), I run three scenario and in each case, I replicate the main transparency treatment (covert/overt) and other elements.

Below is a screenshot of the two conditions of the main treatment - transparency. In all versions of the experiment, respondents state their degree of support for the intervention (on a 1-7 scale).

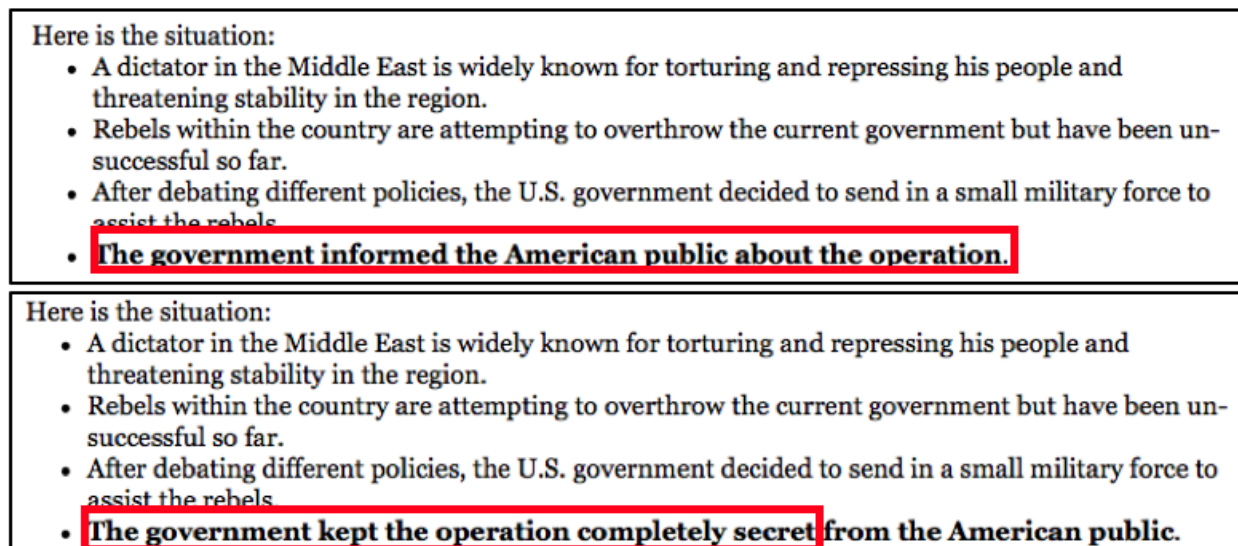


Figure 1: Transparency conditions

Analysis

The analysis focuses on the proportions of responses to the approve/disapprove question. In order to clearly show the effect of the transparency treatment, I display the breakdown of responses for both conditions in separate plots (result from first version of the experiment).

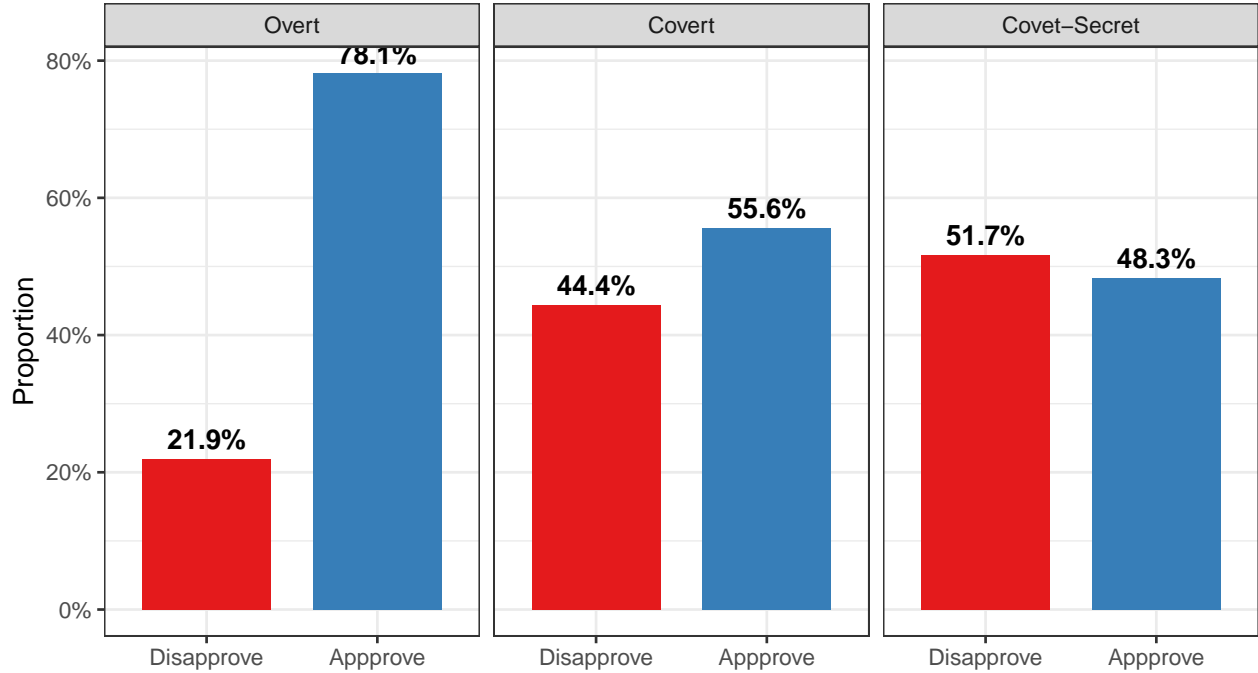


Figure 2: Support for intervention - transparency treatment (binary measure)

The first analysis uses a three-level treatment: in addition to the overt/covert conditions (as in figure 1), a third condition states that the government decides on a covert action despite the fact that experts argued it offers no clear benefits. The results of the analysis show that the degree of approval is higher for an intervention that was known to the public, compared to the two version of a covert action (not much difference between the unknown actions). This offers a preliminary evidence that respondents care about the norm of transparency in foreign policy.

The study by Myrick (2020) suggests that once we provide citizens with information about the outcomes of the policy, the norm of transparency loses most of its ‘appeal’. Therefore, in another version of the first scenario, half of the respondents learn of successful outcome, and the other half read that the intervention failed. Following this information, respondents are asked again to state their degree of approval for the government decision. The plot below unpacks these responses along two dimensions - the three values of transparency (like figure 2), as well as whether the intervention was successful or not.

The results in figure 3 highlight the importance of outcomes, and raise some doubts about the importance of transparency. For unsuccessful intervention, the results show less criticism to an overt action (in other words, being transparent reduced the extent of public disapproval even when the policy fails). However, once the intervention is described as successful, the level of transparency loses most of its ‘appeal’. Whether the action is overt or covert (either version), it garners substantial public approval. This result highlights the dominance of outcomes compared to the process in public evaluation of national security decisions.

To further show the effects of both conditions, I run two regression models. In the first (model 1 in the table below), I show the effects of the transparency treatment on the degree of approval. The negative coefficients for *Covert* and *Covert_Secret* indicate that approval is lower for these versions of the intervention.

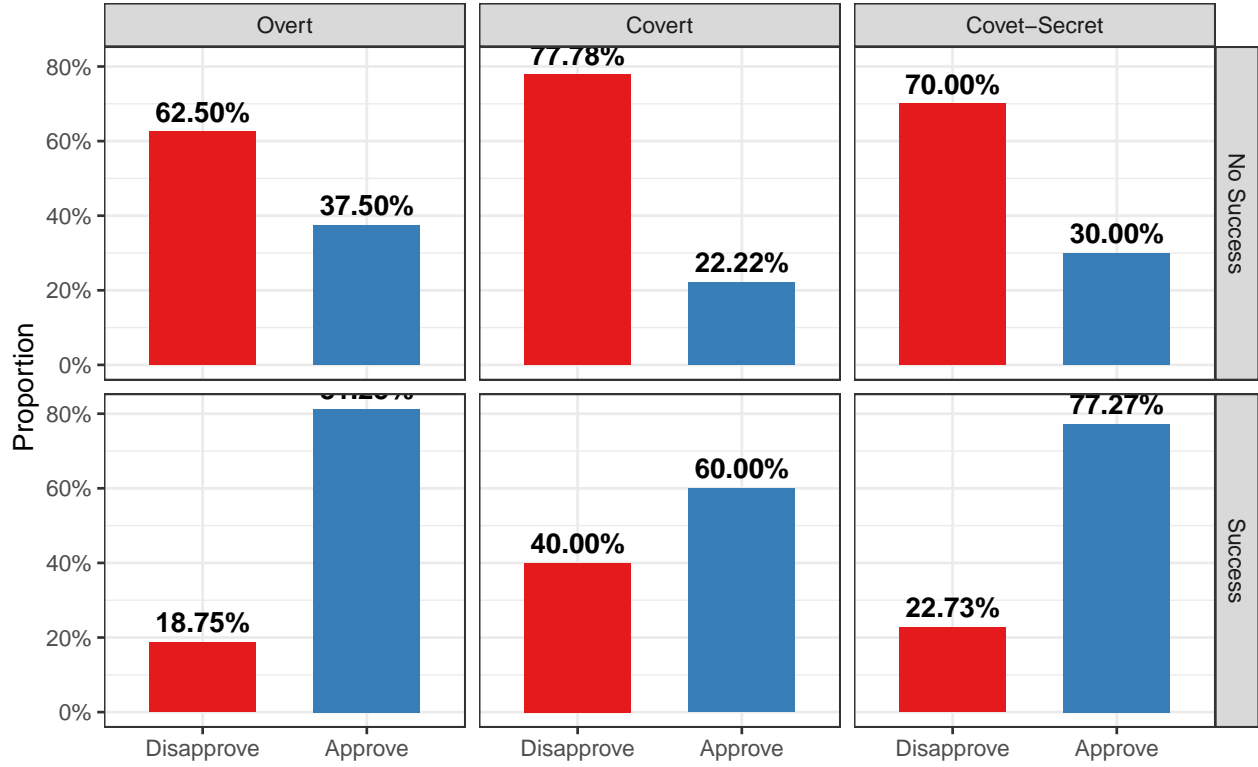


Figure 3: Support for intervention - transparency and outcomes treatments

In model 2, I test how information about the outcomes affects the approval ratings of the intervention. The coefficient *Success* suggests that positive outcomes increase the level of approval compared to an unsuccessful one. Also, the transparency conditions are no longer significant, further strengthening the argument that once we provide information about the outcomes, transparency does not matter for the evaluation of the decision.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	4.083*** (0.528)	1.864*** (0.560)
Covert	-0.875** (0.430)	-0.242 (0.437)
Covert_Secret	-0.935** (0.417)	0.093 (0.423)
Gender	0.501 (0.358)	0.466 (0.360)
Party	0.175* (0.089)	0.264*** (0.089)
Success		1.667*** (0.361)
Num.Obs.	98	98
R2	0.109	0.290

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The second scenario also describes a security situation. In this case, the US government contemplates to support the rebels by implementing one of two policy options: sending small military force, or providing financial support for the opposition. As in the previous scenario, I also describe the policy as either overt or covert, and collect responses on the degree of approval for the intervention.

In the figure below, I plot the distribution of approval across the policy type conditions. The figure shows that overall, an overt policy garners more approval than a covert one¹.

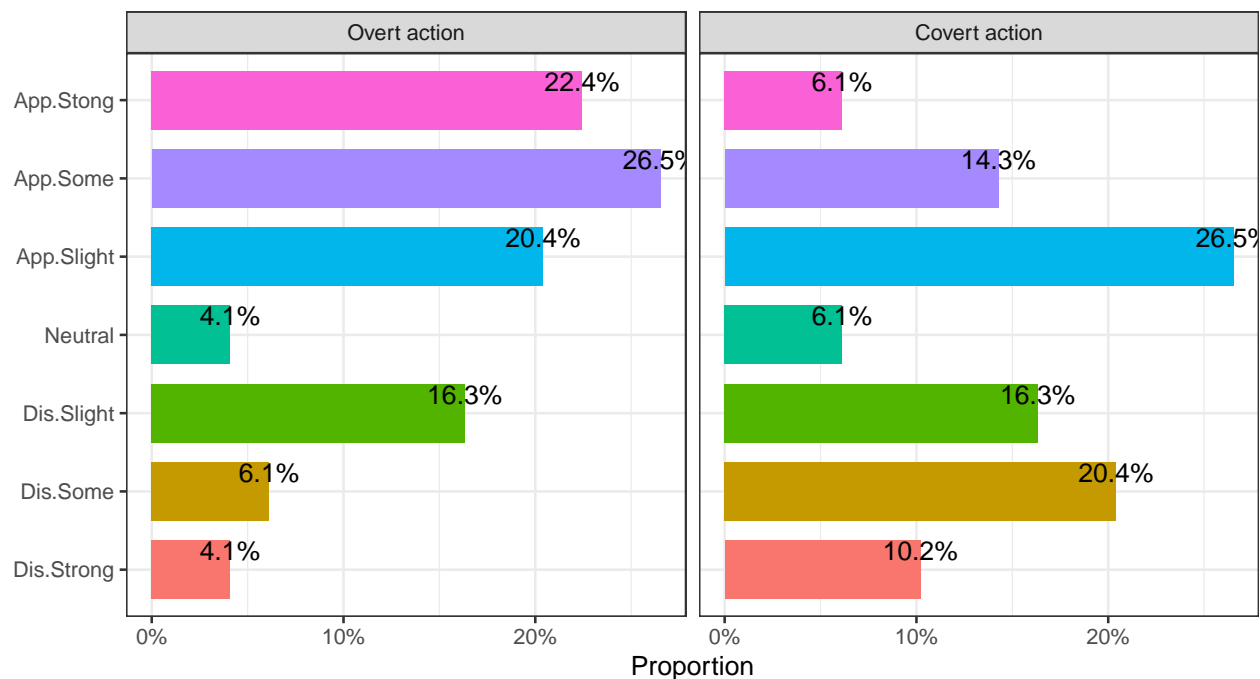


Figure 4: Support for intervention - transparency (scenario 2)

In the third and final scenario, the US government evaluates the implementation of sending military force to support the rebels using with covert or overt action. Another factor in-play is information about an overall opposition within the public for any American intervention in the region. Half of the respondents read this information, and the other half do not. The expectation is that general opposition to US involvement will reduce the degree of approval for the intervention decision.²

The main findings that is consistent across all three scenarios is that transparency matters, but to a point. Once individuals read about the outcomes of the intervention (overt or covert), they care much less about this issue and their approval for the government decision is mostly a function of the outcomes. The figure below shows the average level of approval based on both the policy type (covert/overt) and outcomes (success/not) conditions. I separate the results to experiments 2 and 3 (both include a similar transparency condition).

The figure demonstrate the main finding of this survey, as well as the work by [Myrick \(2020\)](#) - transparency is an important concept for democratic citizens, but not as much as the outcomes of a foreign policy.

¹I also run a test for the outcomes factor, similar to scenario 1 above. The details of the code are available on the R code file in the Github folder

²The code to generate the figures for this analysis is detailed in the R code file.

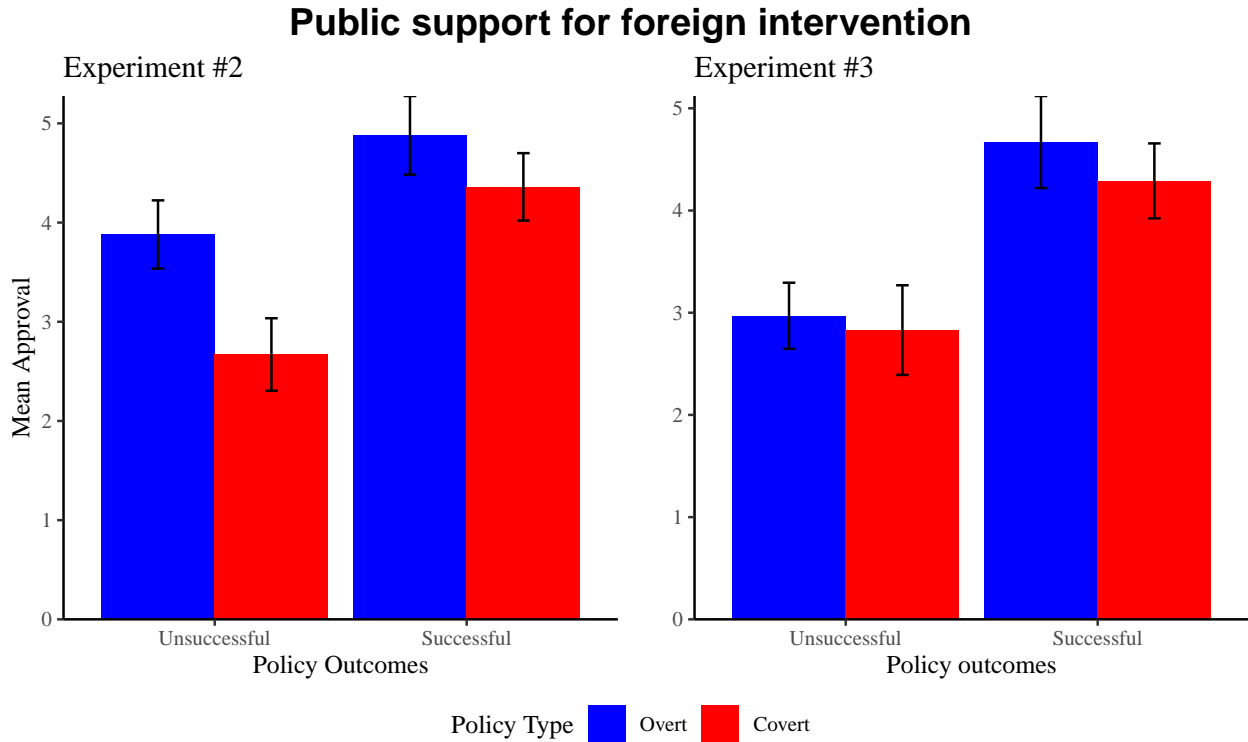


Figure 5: Support for intervention

I include one last analysis in this document. In the survey, I added a continuous measure for respondents level of trust in the government (0-100 scale). Then, I use the data collected for the third intervention scenario and test how the degree of trust in the government affects the approval of the intervention decision³.

The figure below displays the predicted probabilities of approval (binary) based on the type of policy (covert or overt), and different levels of trust in government. The first finding is that trust in government has a stable effect on the predicted approval of the intervention. That is, higher levels of trust in the government lead to higher probability of approving the intervention decision, regardless of its type (overt or covert, stil, overt has higher means of approval).

³As in the analysis depicted in figures 2 and 3 above, I collapse the 'Neutral' category and aggregate the responses to fit a binary *approve/disapprove* measure.

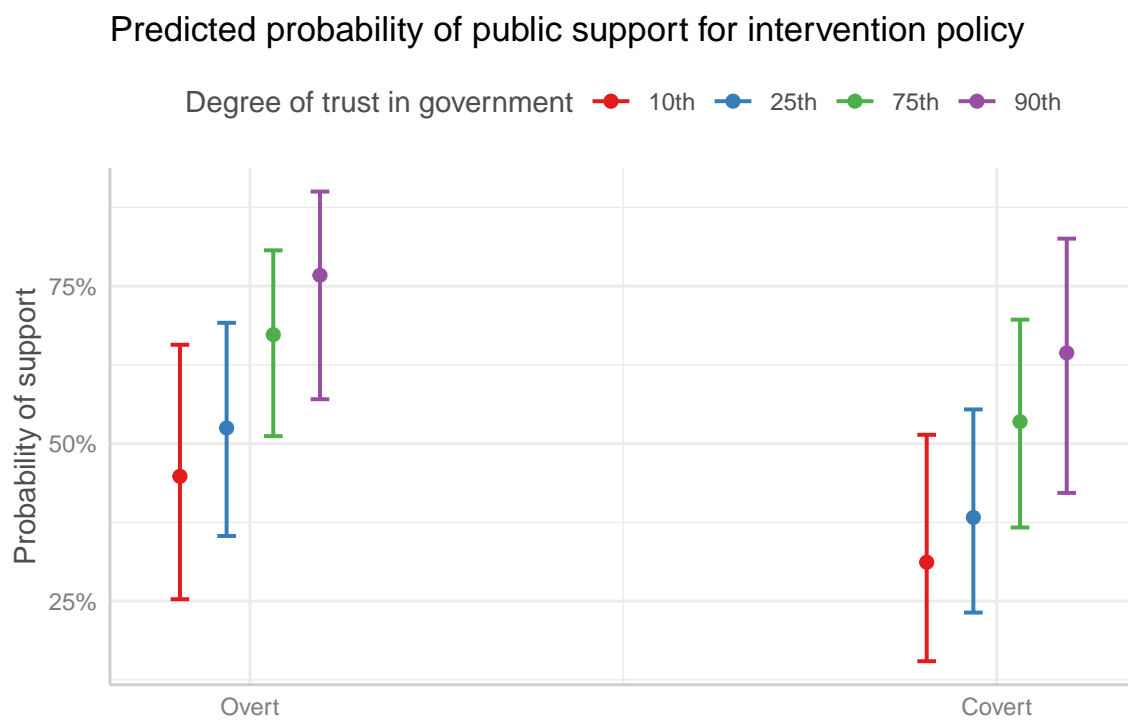


Figure 6: Predicted support for intervention, an interaction model