

## RESEARCH NOTE

# Foreign Voices, Party Cues, and U.S. Public Opinion about Military Action

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Challenging a long-running focus on domestic elites as primary influences on public opinion (Berinsky, 2009; Entman, 2004; Jordan & Page, 1992; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987; Zaller, 1992), a growing body of work indicates that international institutions and foreign officials can significantly shape Americans' attitudes (Dragojlovic, 2013, 2015; Hayes & Guardino, 2013; Linos, 2011; Murray, 2014). For example, presidents appear to get a boost in approval ratings when the United Nations Security Council supports their calls for military intervention (Chapman, 2011; Chapman & Reiter, 2004). Americans may look abroad for a "second opinion" about military endeavors, perceiving U.N. or North Atlantic Treaty Organization views as strong signals about the desirability of a proposed intervention (Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2009; Grieco, Gelpi, & Feaver, 2011; see also Fang, 2008). These effects are especially likely when the U.S. news media devote significant attention to foreign elite perspectives, as has been the case since the end of the Cold War (Althaus, 2003; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Murray, 2014). Moreover, research shows that American political leaders and public diplomacy efforts can shape public opinion in foreign countries (Dragojlovic, 2011; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009; Goldsmith, Horiuchi, & Wood, 2014; Schatz & Levine, 2010). In an increasingly interconnected world, policy perspectives from beyond international borders appear increasingly influential in shaping public attitudes.

Still, evidence for these effects remains tentative and incomplete. Much of the empirical grounding for a relationship between foreign elite messages and U.S. public opinion is based on observational data, which limits our ability to attribute a causal effect to foreign voices. Moreover, this research has not clearly determined whether Americans are likely to respond to messages from the international community when they are simultaneously exposed to messages from prominent domestic political leaders. Because of the sheer frequency and political resonance of partisan

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voices in media coverage, the lack of precise comparisons between the effects of party elite and foreign elite messages represents an important gap in our knowledge.

In this research note, we report the results of a survey-experiment about possible U.S. air strikes on Iranian nuclear installations that was constructed to expand our understanding of the influence of foreign voices on domestic public opinion. Improving on previous study designs, subjects were presented with combinations of messages from the U.N. Security Council as well as Republican and Democratic party elites. We find that people will sometimes resist signals from party leaders in favor of messages from a foreign actor, even when presented with a domestic bipartisan elite consensus in favor of military action. Our experimental results confirm and extend existing empirical evidence on the influence of foreign voices: Messages from these actors can indeed move U.S. public opinion in opposition to messages from party leaders. Our findings suggest that when news media outlets consistently incorporate messages from foreign elites, mass public opinion on foreign policy will be less likely to reflect the positions of Republican and Democratic leaders.

Our study focuses on the United States, but its results are relevant for analogous effects in other countries. While the basic processes of foreign elite influence on domestic public opinion that we describe may hold in other industrialized democracies, cross-national variation in party competition and news media systems is likely to significantly condition these effects. Still, by generating more precise evidence for effects on U.S. public opinion, we illuminate an important influence for burgeoning international political information and communication flows. Future research would do well to examine similar processes in other nations.

### Limitations of Existing Empirical Work

While evidence for the influence of foreign actors on U.S. public opinion is mounting, a lack of empirical clarity remains. There are at least two reasons first, little work in this line of research has provided direct and precise tests of the impact of foreign voices in the presence of party cues. For instance, in Grieco et al.'s (2011) innovative survey-experiment focusing on U.N. and NATO messages, the president was not assigned a partisan identity, and members of Congress were depicted as always in bipartisan agreement, making it impossible to determine how Americans respond to foreign voices when presented with distinct messages from their own (and opposing) party elites. Hayes and Guardino (2013) compared the effects of media coverage of foreign elite opposition to the Iraq War with the effects of domestic elite rhetoric in the news, but their study design cannot determine whether public opinion responded specifically to party leaders, or how such messages may have affected the influence of foreign officials. None of the other related work allows for a clear comparison of the effect of foreign voices and party leaders (Linos, 2011).

Partisan elites, who are typically ubiquitous in the U.S. media (Baum & Groeling, 2010; Bennett, 1990), have been shown to be particularly influential in shaping Americans' policy attitudes and other political evaluations (Baker & Oneal, 2001; Berinsky, 2009; Cohen, 2003; see Bullock, 2011 for a thorough review). A large literature grounded in political psychology, however, suggests it is theoretically plausible that foreign elite messages can shape public opinion even in the presence of

domestic party messages. These studies demonstrate that people's substantive predispositions—that is, their general, relatively enduring, policy-relevant social outlooks and political values (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Zaller, 1992)—can sometimes mitigate or counteract the influence of partisan cues (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Herrmann, Tetlock, & Visser, 1999; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). These effects are especially likely when partisan identifiers receive messages from their own party's leaders that contravene their predispositions, and when they have access to other messages that communicate policy-relevant information (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Bullock, 2011; Feldman, Huddy, & Marcus, 2015; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Nicholson, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, previous research demonstrates that Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. public differ significantly in their general foreign policy predispositions. Most significantly for our study, Democrats tend to be more favorable toward multilateral approaches, defined simply as a preference for cooperating with other countries and international institutions (Doherty & Smith, 2015; Hayes & Guardino, 2013; Holsti, 2004; Page & Bouton, 2006; Poushter, 2016). This may make them more likely than Republicans both to seek cooperation with non-U.S. actors and to see foreign voices as credible sources of policy views when encountering such actors in media coverage. These predispositional factors suggest that Democrats' opinions might be influenced by views expressed by foreign actors when those views are consistent with Democrats' predispositions, and when the messages conflict with the positions staked out by their own domestic party elites. Despite the theoretical plausibility of these effects, however, we lack precise and explicit empirical evidence for the influence of foreign elite messages in the presence of party cues.

Second, as most studies of foreign voices and public opinion do not employ randomized experiments, they are not well-suited to identify causal relationships. Chapman (2011, p. 101–121), for instance, examines survey data during debates over military interventions and finds a relationship between U.N. Security Council votes and presidential approval. Increases in approval ratings, however, could stem not only from Security Council support of a president's proposal, but also from shifts in domestic elite discourse, information provided by news coverage, or other factors. Chapman and Reiter (2004) try to account for domestic elites' positions in their study of Security Council effects on presidential approval, but their models find an inconsistent relationship between bipartisan support for the president and public opinion. Moreover, their aggregate analysis cannot determine whether bipartisan support has different effects on the president's co-partisans and members of the opposite party. And although Hayes and Guardino (2013) control for the presence of messages from domestic officials in the media, their observational analyses cannot demonstrate that the people who moved against the Iraq War were those who were exposed to foreign elite messages. Meanwhile, Grieco et al.'s (2011), Linos' (2011), Chapman's (2011, p. 121–126), and Tingley and Tomz's (2012) experiments offer more causal leverage, but the absence of party cues set up as explicit and direct comparisons with foreign

<sup>1</sup>There is also a burgeoning literature on audience costs that considers how partisan cues about the use of military force can affect the public in different ways under different conditions (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012; Trager & Vavreck, 2011).

elite messages in these studies limits both their explanatory power and external validity: In actual policy debates, Americans almost always have access to domestic partisan messages, so experimental designs that leave those messages aside are limited in what they can reveal about how people process information in those debates.<sup>2</sup> In the next section, we describe an experiment that improves empirical confidence in the influence of foreign voices by randomly exposing people to realistic treatments that test the possible effects of U.N. messages in the presence of domestic party cues.<sup>3</sup>

## Experimental Design and Results

Our experiment centered on the debate in 2012 about whether the United States should undertake military action in response to Iran's nuclear program.<sup>4</sup> We study Americans' support for military intervention because that has been the focus of most research on foreign actors and U.S. public opinion, and because the U.S. news media's frequent inclusion of foreign voices during these debates suggests that non-U.S. actors are most likely to be influential in such contexts (Althaus, 2003; Hayes & Guardino, 2013). Our experiment was embedded in George Washington University's module of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a nationally representative survey of American adults.<sup>5</sup>

In the postelection wave of the CCES, 815 respondents were assigned to one of four treatments in which they read a vignette about the debate over the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> In every treatment, subjects were told that President Barack

<sup>2</sup>Chapman (2011) reports parallel experiments in which he tests the effects of party cues (Barack Obama versus John McCain), but those messages are not presented in conjunction with messages about United Nations Security Council positions.

<sup>3</sup>Because Democrats and Republicans have long exhibited clear and significant differences in many general values and beliefs that are relevant to our policy case (Holsti, 2004; Page & Bouton, 2006), we use partisan self-identification as a proxy measure for substantive predispositions. For practical reasons, we did not include in our survey an extensive battery of generalized, abstractly worded items that would allow us to gauge subjects' predispositions more directly.

<sup>4</sup>We conducted our experiment before the United States in 2013 entered into negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Focusing on a contemporary policy issue of course raises questions about "pre-treatment" effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012), in which a respondent's existing beliefs about Iran or related issues may contaminate the effects of our experimental treatments. An alternative approach is to create a wholly fabricated scenario or ask respondents to consider the prospect of military action in an entirely abstract way. Each approach involves trade-offs, but our strategy seeks to maximize external validity. Just as in actual policy debates, respondents' preexisting attitudes are relevant to opinion formation, and we believe our design allows us to effectively estimate the real-world influence of foreign voices and party cues.

<sup>5</sup>The results in the present study are similar to a pilot study of 392 respondents conducted through Mechanical Turk in June 2011. Those results are described in detail in the Appendix. Using realistic news stories, a different foreign source (U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon), and a slightly different set of treatments, we found that subjects responded to international messages. This bolsters our confidence in the main findings we report here.

<sup>6</sup>The CCES is a collaborative effort of dozens of universities led by Stephen Ansolabehere at Harvard University. The 2012 election survey was conducted by the research firm YouGov, which recruits samples to participate in online academic and marketing surveys. More information about the design and administration of the CCES is here: <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces>.

Obama suggested that the United States should consider launching air strikes, a plausible scenario given the administration's rhetoric at the time.<sup>7</sup> In the first treatment—in which all elites, including members of the U.N. Security Council, were united in support—the vignette read:

There has been a lot of debate recently about Iran's nuclear program. This month, President Obama suggested that the United States should consider launching air strikes against suspected Iranian weapons facilities. Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner has said he supports the air strikes. Members of the United Nations Security Council also have said they support the air strikes.

We refer to this as the elite consensus condition. The remaining three treatments (whose wording is shown in the Supplementary Appendix) varied whether Boehner and Security Council members supported or opposed military action. In Figure 1 below, we refer to these as “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Con”; “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Pro”; and “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Con.” After seeing the vignette, subjects answered the following question: “Would you say that you support or oppose U.S. military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities?” Subjects could answer that they “strongly” or “somewhat” supported or opposed action. We dichotomize responses into support or opposition, which eases interpretation of the treatment effects. After dropping those who said “don't know,” we were left with 695 respondents.<sup>8</sup> Aggregate support for military intervention ranged from 40% to 65% across the treatments.

The left side of Figure 1 displays the predicted effects of the treatments on the likelihood of supporting military action, compared with the elite consensus condition. The estimates are based on a logistic regression model (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Appendix), where the dependent variable is coded 1 if a respondent supported air strikes, 0 if she opposed them.<sup>9</sup> We find that messages from foreign voices can move public opinion, even in the face of bipartisan domestic elite support for a policy proposal.

In the top row, changing the vignette so that subjects are told that Security Council members oppose air strikes reduces the likelihood of support among all subjects by a statistically significant 0.16. Messages from the international community can affect

<sup>7</sup>Obama said multiple times that “all options are on the table” in dealing with Iran's nuclear program (see <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/>), indicating a willingness to consider preemptive military action. Thus, his stated position in the experiment likely would not have seemed unrealistic to our subjects, all of whom were debriefed after the study.

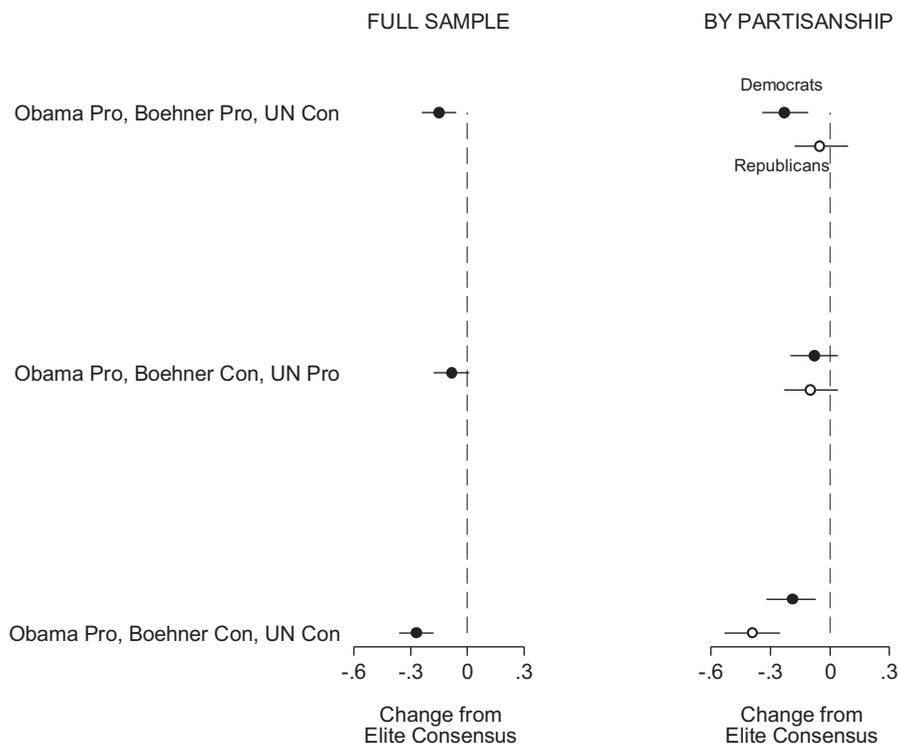
<sup>8</sup>The likelihood of saying “don't know” was not different—substantively or statistically—across the treatment groups. Consistent with previous work on the distribution of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), we found that respondents who answered “don't know” were more likely to be independent, female, and non-White.

<sup>9</sup>Our results are identical if we convert responses into a 4-point scale and run ordered logit models. In addition to partisanship, the models control for education, gender, and race, which are characteristics often associated with U.S. public support for military action (Hayes & Guardino, 2013; Nincic & Nincic, 2002).

Figure 1

*Effect of variations in elite support for air strikes against Iran.*

Note: Figure shows the change in the likelihood of a respondent supporting air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities compared with the elite consensus condition (Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Pro). Negative numbers indicate lower odds of support. In the left-hand graph, predicted probabilities are estimated from the Baseline model in Table A1 in the Supplementary Appendix. In the right-hand graph, predicted probabilities are estimated from the Interaction with Partisanship model in Table A1 in the Supplementary Appendix. Lines around the estimates are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study



support for military intervention, even when domestic elites are united behind the proposal.<sup>10</sup> Switching Boehner from pro to con (an admittedly unlikely scenario in the case of the Iranian nuclear program) reduces that support half as much (0.08,  $p = .07$ ). Turning to the bottom data point, we find more evidence consistent with a foreign voices effect. Opposition from Security Council members, paired with Boehner opposition, depresses the odds of overall support by 0.27.

<sup>10</sup>In addition to demonstrating that foreign voices can move opinion, our findings also suggest that “surprising” signals or events—such as a Democratic president advocating for preemptive military action—may not be as powerful as some work suggests (Gelpi, 2010). When other messages that are consistent with individuals’ predispositions are available, those cues may be much more powerful.

The estimates for Democrats and Republicans on the right side of Figure 1 show results from a model in which we interact the treatments with a respondent's partisanship.<sup>11</sup> A Democratic subject told that U.N. Security Council members opposed air strikes against Iran is 0.24 less likely to support military action than a Democrat in the elite consensus condition. This suggests that if a president—even one basking in the glow of re-election, as Obama was at the time of our study—proposes a policy action at odds with fellow partisans' underlying values, many of them will be reluctant to follow him when they are offered a message from the international community that is more resonant with their predispositions.

In the second row, the effect of Boehner opposition among Democrats is about one-third the size of the effect of U.N. opposition, and is not statistically different from zero. This is consistent with the notion that cue-givers must meet some minimum credibility threshold (Petty, Priester, & Briñol, 2002), as Boehner was unlikely to be viewed as a trusted voice by most Democrats. That interpretation is supported by the last treatment, in which the odds of Democratic support for military action decline by about 0.19, roughly the same as when only Security Council members were opposed. GOP elite opposition to military action does not amplify Democratic opposition in the mass public, but a cue from foreign voices does.

As we consider Republican opinion, it is important to note that the proposal by a Democratic president in this instance—a hawkish, national security-focused action—is consistent with most Republicans' predispositions (Holsti, 2004; Page & Bouton, 2006). It is no surprise, then, that U.N. opposition (in the first row) has no effect on GOP support. Nor do we find that Republicans move against their predispositions when Boehner opposes intervention: here is yet more evidence for the limits of partisan heuristics and the power of substantive political messages. It could also be that the absence of movement in response to Boehner's opposition is owing to the strong signal that U.N. support for military action sends. If Republicans view the Security Council as typically disposed to oppose a preemptive strike like the one described in our experiment, then a U.N. endorsement might be seen as a costly, and thus, especially credible, signal (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), keeping GOP support relatively high even in the face of Boehner's opposition. Our experimental design is not suited to distinguish between these mechanisms, but both are consistent with the importance of substantive predispositions as they interact with specific policy signals and messengers.

We do find, however, that the likelihood of Republican support decreases by 0.39 when U.N. opposition is paired with Boehner's opposition. In this scenario, we would not have expected U.N. opposition to matter, as most Republicans do not think highly of the organization and have generally hawkish predispositions. But it is plausible that this unusual Boehner–U.N. alliance merely confirms for GOP identifiers that what President Obama is proposing must be a bad idea. If even the U.N. Security Council is defying Obama and opposing military action against Iran, Republicans may be thinking, then it really must be foolhardy. We cannot say for sure what is happening here. But given the absence of any movement toward opposition among Republicans

<sup>11</sup>Lacking large numbers of independents (75), we restrict the analysis in this model to partisans (including independents who said they "leaned" toward one of the parties [Keith et al., 1992]).

in the “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Con” treatment, we are reluctant to attribute the effects in the final condition to GOP identifiers being won over by U.N. Security Council members’ substantive positions.

Altogether, however, our results suggest that many Americans will respond to policy messages from foreign elites, especially if those messages are consistent with their general predispositions. These influences can be considerable even when people are exposed to a competing message from their own party leader. Taken as a whole, our experiment provides significant evidence confirming that foreign elites have substantial real-world causal effects on U.S. public opinion.

### Conclusion

Our study of public support for military action against Iran shows that cues from foreign elites can move U.S. public opinion, even when domestic elites are unified. Democrats responded to opposition from the United Nations when those messages were consistent with their substantive predispositions. Remarkably, this was true even when a popular president of their own party argued in favor of a preemptive strike against Iran. These findings highlight important limits on domestic leaders’ ability to shape mass opinion, even among fellow partisans. Partisanship is a powerful force in American political discourse and behavior, but its effects are not automatic, unconditional, or wholly determinative.

Our findings are likely to be generalizable outside the context of our experiment in part because American media audiences are increasingly exposed to non-U.S. voices during policy debates. For example, foreign elites comprised as much as one-third of the voices on network TV news during debates over the Persian Gulf War (Althaus, 2003) and military action in Iraq in 2002 and 2003 (Hayes & Guardino, 2010). Our results from a preliminary study during debates over the Iranian nuclear program in 2011 and 2012 show that about 15% of all quoted actors in *USA Today* were foreign officials (Guardino & Hayes, 2013). Despite increasing media consumption choices, foreign voices appear frequently in the news outlets that garner the most public exposure: Broadcast television remains the main source of political and public policy news for the greatest percentage of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2016; Prior, 2013), major traditional U.S. media organizations like TV networks and national newspapers operate a majority of the most popular Web sites, and *USA Today* is the largest circulation daily newspaper in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Our work raises questions about how similar processes might operate in countries other than the United States. We expect two factors in particular to condition the basic processes we describe when they occur outside American borders. First, the structure of party competition varies significantly across nations. Future research might investigate how domestic elite discourse may moderate (or eliminate) the effects on public opinion of foreign elites in multi-party versus two-party contexts, or in parliamentary versus presidential systems. Second, despite some recent convergence, the structure of news media systems varies greatly among nations (Hallin & Mancini,

<sup>12</sup>See <http://www.poynter.org/2014/usa-today-wsj-nyt-top-u-s-newspapers-by-circulation/277337/>.

2004). Because the effects of foreign elite voices on domestic publics depend largely on the extent and nature of news transmission of those messages, close examination of these media dynamics is important. Research on the influence of foreign voices on domestic publics across the world is an important area of work in a time of increasing international political communication flows. Future studies should combine large-N analyses of news coverage and survey data across multiple cases, with experimental work specifically designed with varying scenarios of party competition, media communication, and public predispositions in mind.

Our findings also illuminate important political dimensions of high-stakes debates over military action. Even if other domestic and international factors exert more immediate causal influences on U.S. elites' decisions about using force against a nation like Iran (Oren, 2011), public sentiments can still play important constraining or enabling roles, shaping the political conditions under which military action takes place, and affecting subsequent dynamics of elite accountability for policy outcomes. In particular, our results indicate that presidents have a strong political incentive to win over U.S. allies and international organizations in an effort to build public support for military action (Saunders, 2015). And because the media is the primary vehicle through which ordinary Americans are exposed to the positions of foreign elites, our findings highlight the crucial role of news outlets in shaping the domestic political conditions under which policy debates with major international implications will unfold.

### Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at IJPOR online.

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