

Understanding American Public Opinion toward U.S. Military Intervention*

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Abstract

Using a survey experiment, this study investigates two questions regarding American public opinion toward U.S. military intervention: For what foreign policy motivations is the public more willing to support a U.S. intervention? What forms of intervention is the public more likely to support, perhaps conditional on the underlying motivation? Our investigation yields the following main results. First, when a humanitarian crisis has implications for U.S. security interests, respondents were more supportive of some form of intervention than otherwise. Second, the only scenario where unilateralism receives majority support was when a crisis situation poses a risk to U.S. national security; on the other hand, for all motivations, UN peacekeeping and allied actions received a supermajority of support. Third, respondents were most supportive of U.S. soldiers engaging directly in combat when security interests are involved, however, options that are less aggressive received the most support for all scenarios. Finally, legitimacy was the primary concern for respondents when choosing whether to support an intervention; different from a conventional assumption within the literature, we did not find concerns about costs driving support for either coalition building or a UN endorsed mission. These results shed important insights on the Americans' foreign policy preferences.

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The United States has long maintained a capability to project its military power globally, and it has not shied away from using this power to pursue its foreign policy goals. Such military actions have traditionally received bipartisan support and also enjoyed a considerable “rally ’round the flag” effect from the public. However, a consensus of support for military intervention may be increasingly difficult to forge in light of the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as recent reports of U.S. soldiers killed in far flung places such as Yemen and Niger.¹ Because of the explosion of news sources and the ubiquitous presence of social media today, the general public is more timely exposed to complex and diverse information about world affairs than in the past, where such information would be filtered through foreign policy elites (Hays and Guardino 2011).² Consequently, the American voters are likely to demand more transparency and accountability in foreign policy making, and their views on such issues may be electorally consequential (Eichenberg 2005; Tomz et al. 2018).

Against this backdrop, we seek answers to the following two questions in this study. First, for what foreign policy motivations is the American public more willing to support a U.S. military intervention overseas? Second, what forms of intervention is the public more likely to support? In asking these questions we make a distinction between motivations and forms of intervention, taking specific forms of intervention as strategies that actors can choose from given a motivation to intervene. This framework allows us to evaluate separately public support for the use of force based on a motivation and public support for a particular intervening strategy that may be contingent on a motivation. While various studies exist that investigate American public opinion toward U.S. use of force, the majority of this research focuses either on the possible motivations that cause the U.S. to conduct a military intervention, or on the different possible ways that the United States might intervene, typically contrasting unilateralism and multilateralism (for examples see Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton

¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/01/29/u-s-service-member-killed-in-yemen-raid-marks-first-combat-death-of-trump-administration/>

²Reports of news consumption by Americans show that well over a majority of adults check the news several times a day:
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/americans-news-consumption/>
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/12/growth-in-mobile-news-use-driven-by-older-adults/>

1998; Eichenberg 2005; Kull and Destler 1999; Kreps and Maxey 2018; Wallace 2017). While providing important insights, such approaches may miss important nuances in the American public's attitudes toward the use of force and further, cannot explain some of the patterns in public opinion in recent years that seem contradictory. For example, on one hand, Americans have grown weary of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,³ on the other hand, evidence suggests that the public is in favor of the U.S. maintaining an active role in world affairs since the 2016 presidential election.⁴ We believe disentangling the goals and means in the minds of the public when they evaluate U.S. foreign policy can provide a more coherent understanding of attitudes among U.S. citizens toward U.S. intervention and the constraints that the public may impose on such policies.

Based on our framework, we implemented a public opinion survey experiment to investigate the proposed questions. For possible motivations for intervention, we start from a baseline situation where there is a humanitarian crisis that requires military intervention. We then added two treatments to the baseline: U.S. security and economic interests. In other words, the scenarios used for motivations are: humanitarianism, humanitarianism and security interests, and humanitarianism and economic interests. The reason that we considered a humanitarian crisis caused by a civil war as the background situation for all three scenarios is that civil war has become the dominant form of conflict since the Cold War, and humanitarianism has been part of the call for U.S. military intervention in most cases during this period. Explicitly spelling out the humanitarian aspect of an intervention can help us more accurately gauge the additional effects of self-interests on public support. Otherwise, we may overestimate the effects of self-interested motivations as all conflict situations involve some humanitarian crisis and respondents may assume a humanitarian factor in their responses to survey questions. For possible forms of intervention, we considered unilateralism, allied actions, and UN peacekeeping. It is easy to understand the inclusion of unilateralism and allied actions (e.g., NATO actions) which have both been adopted in

³http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/19/iraq-war-continues-to-divide-u-s-public-15-years-after-it-began/ft_18-01-16.iraq-war_2013-18/. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/05/after-17-years-of-war-in-afghanistan-more-say-u-s-has-failed-than-succeeded-in-achieving-its-goals/>.

⁴<https://www.cfr.org/blog/americans-arent-embracing-america-first>.

recent U.S. military activities; the inclusion of UN peacekeeping is less obvious, as it is not known to be a big part of U.S. military experience. However, UN peacekeeping represents a UN endorsed multilateral intervention that enjoys unique international legitimacy as a form of outside intervention and may become a future option for the United States.

Our study uncovers a conditional nature in American public attitudes toward the use of force. First, when a foreign humanitarian crisis has implications for U.S. economic or security interests, respondents were more supportive of a military intervention than if these interests were not present. Second, the only scenario where unilateralism receives a clear majority of support was when a crisis situation poses a risk to U.S. national security; on the other hand, UN peacekeeping and allied actions received a supermajority of support for all motivations. Third, respondents were most supportive of U.S. soldiers engaging directly in combat when security interests are involved, however, there is much higher support for options that are less aggressive (e.g., sending advisors, mediation) for all scenarios.

These results suggest that security implications for the U.S. are unique in drawing public support for unilateral actions; otherwise the public would prefer allied or multilateral actions led by the UN. What are the reasons behind such preferences? We find that legitimacy was the primary concern for the respondents when they choose whether to support an intervention. Somewhat surprisingly, allied actions were seen as just as good as UN peacekeeping in conferring legitimacy to an intervention. In line with Wallace (2017), but contrary to a larger literature (Gartner 2008; Gelpi et al. 2009; Geys 2010; Karol and Miguel 2007; Kull and Destler 1999; Rechia 2016), we do not find concerns for financial costs or casualties driving support for either coalition building or UN peacekeeping participation; in fact, UN peacekeeping was seen as most costly among those who oppose the option. These further findings provide a nuanced picture of American public support for multilateralism: while existing studies often find that the public favor UN endorsed missions over unilateralism, the public may often prefer allied actions to UN missions when they take into consideration both the legitimacy and costs of an intervention. This preference may explain the high level of support for U.S. led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the Iraq War, where the U.S. intervened with allies without UN authorization.

Finally, our study also reveals what type of policy goals, or mandates, the American public will support. Given a range of possible conflict management and resolution activities that the U.S. could engage in, engagement in combat receives a majority of support only when the motivation to intervene involves U.S. national security interests. Moreover, the other options that we provided, including protecting civilians, sending advisors, brokering a peace deal, and peacebuilding, receive well over a majority of support regardless of the motivation. This finding suggests that the American public would prefer that U.S. interventions use methods that are (well) short of war in most situations and reserve the use of the military for force in very limited circumstances.

With its unique capability to take military actions unilaterally or with coalition partners, the United States can pursue a much broader set of foreign policy goals than most other countries, and thus wields an extraordinary amount of influence on American interests and world affairs. Whether these pursuits are in line with the American public's preferences, and whether the American public can exercise meaningful constraints when they do not are two of the most important foreign policy questions today. We believe the findings of our study go a long way toward answering the first question. A recent survey of 31 U.S. foreign policy experts suggests, the U.S. may be undergoing significant foreign policy adjustments.⁵ In the meantime, due to new communication technologies and social media, information regarding national security challenges and foreign crises reaches the consciousness of the American public in an unprecedented speed and detail. Identifying where the public's priority lies amid the opposite pull of resources and demands for foreign intervention is a must-taken step toward evaluating U.S. foreign policy.

Military Interventions and Public Opinion

In a comprehensive survey of the research on American public opinion toward foreign policy issues and the making of American foreign policy, Aldrich et al. (2006) conclude: “a mounting body of evidence suggests that the foreign policies of American presidents—and

⁵<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2018-02-13/has-us-foreign-policy-changed-dramatically>.

democratic leaders more generally—have been influenced by their understanding of the public’s foreign policy views.” In other words, leaders heed public opinion when determining foreign policy, even if they may not always get the opinion right. Since the publication of their study more than a decade ago, there has been a dramatic increase in news outlets and the emergence of social media, both of which have significantly lowered the barriers for the public to acquire information on foreign affairs. Such a development allows the public to react to foreign affairs in a more timely and vocal fashion, which in turn provides greater incentives for politicians to conduct foreign policy with an eye toward garnering favorable public opinion. Of all foreign policy initiatives, use of military force remains the most controversial and yet frequently contemplated (Schultz 2017). For instance, in both of the nuclear crises involving North Korea and Iran, and the ongoing domestic crisis in Venezuela, the Trump administration has threatened military interventions drawing much attention from the American public.

What motivates U.S. leaders to intervene overseas militarily and how has the public reacted to the justifications that leaders put forth for these ventures? Three main motivating factors have been identified in existing studies, including national security, economic interests, and humanitarianism (Choi 2013; Choi and James 2016; Eichenberg 2005; Fordham 2008b; Peceny 1995; Kreps and Maxey 2018). First, Eichenberg (2005) finds that the American public is generally most supportive of a U.S. military response if it is associated with the interest of national security. Moreover, he also finds that public support for U.S. intervention in internal conflicts was considerably high during the War on Terror in comparison to surveys administered in years prior to 2001.⁶ Similarly, Aldrich et al. (2006, 493) highlight that, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, public opinion toward U.S. military intervention was high and stable as a majority of the public viewed terrorism as a major threat to the United States. Findings from more recent surveys show that the public remains highly concerned about terrorism (Eichenberg 2009; LaFree et al. 2013). This is exemplified by a study in 2018 which found that 73% of respondents believed that terrorism is a top

⁶Other cases of internal war with high public support for military involvement include missile strikes in Sudan and Afghanistan, but he again highlights that this is in response to attacks against the United States.

priority for President Trump and Congress.⁷ These findings seem to suggest that the use of military force by the United States will receive the greatest support from the public when it is motivated by concerns over national security, and terrorism in particular; however, direct comparisons between different motivations are not explicitly tested.

Humanitarianism is the next most examined motivation for U.S. use of force. Eichenberg (2005) shows that voters are generally supportive of U.S. military action for humanitarian purposes, but this appears to be a secondary interest when U.S. national security is in question (2005, 157; also see Jentleson and Britton 1998). Evidence from more recent research and polls are mixed. On one hand, public support for military interventions increases when such actions are motivated by humanitarian considerations (Kreps and Maxey 2018), on the other hand, such support in many cases does not draw a majority unless there is a threat of terrorism as well (Malone 2017). Such findings raise an interesting question of how the public may react differently when some self-interest is involved compared with a pure humanitarian intervention.

Finally, U.S. policymakers have justified increases in military assistance to countries based on economic interests, such as the need to secure access to natural resources. For instance, in response to domestic armed conflict in Nigeria, in 2006 the U.S. government justified increases in military assistance on the basis that “disruption of (oil) supply from Nigeria would represent a major blow to the oil security strategy of the U.S.” (U.S. Congressional Budget Justification 2006). However, it is less clear how the public feels about justifications for intervention on the basis of economic interests. Questions about the role of U.S. oil interests became controversial and received public scrutiny during the Gulf War and the War in Iraq (Colgan 2013; Nye Jr. 1991; Stokes 2007). Other economic concerns that could justify U.S. military activity may also come to the public’s attention such as efforts to prevent vulnerability arising from economic interdependence (Russett and Nincic 1976), and maintaining an open international economic order supported by American global activism (Fordham 2008a).

⁷<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/11/defending-against-terrorism-has-remained-a-top-policy-priority-for-americans-since-9-11/>.

In terms of the forms of intervention, whether in public policy debate or scholarship two of the most often contrasted forms are unilateralism and multilateralism. Public opinion polls repeatedly show that the U.S. public favors multilateralism over unilateralism (Eichenberg 2005; Holsti 2004; Kull and Destler 1999; Fang 2008; Grieco et al. 2011; Sobel 2001). For example, when comparing past survey questions that contained no mention of a multilateral theme to those that mentioned any sort of multilateral effort—such as a coalition of willing, being part of a UN force, a NATO mission—Eichenberg (2005) finds that public support for U.S. military intervention was higher when multilateral partners were mentioned, most notably during humanitarian episodes. However, he also finds that support for the use of force is high across surveys issued during the early years of the War on Terror (and well above a majority at 79%), regardless of whether multilateral participation is mentioned within the question (Eichenberg 2005, 160). More recent studies further confirm that the public prefers multilateralism to the option of the country “going it alone.” The underlying rationale for this preference has been attributed to either a desire to share the burden of intervention or a concern for the legitimacy of the action under consideration (Busby et al. 2019; Geys 2010; Greico et al. 2011; Wallace 2017).

It is clear from the evidence presented above, the American public may support a cause for intervention; at the same time, a significant proportion of the public may condition their support on certain forms of intervention. Conversely, the public may support a certain form of intervention more or less depending on what the motivation behind the decision is. It is thus necessary to conceptually separate motivations and forms of military intervention. Yet, existing studies have largely overlooked such a distinction, with a rare exception of Eichenberg (2005). Eichenberg (2005) considers “citizen support for specific types of military actions, such as air strikes or troop deployments, and for particular purposes, such as peacekeeping or restraining other sovereign states to protect national security interests” (Eichenberg 2005, 141). Despite this excellent effort, it is clear from this quote that a concept such as peacekeeping is treated as a foreign policy objective when it is more appropriate to consider it as a form of intervention motivated by a goal. On the other hand, “restraining foreign rivals” is treated as a goal, masking very different motivations that may lie behind

such a goal and various ways to achieve it (also see Jentleson 1992 and Jentleson and Britton 1998). In some sense, the limitation of Eichenberg (2005) reflects the constraints imposed by actual poll questions, and thus point to the advantage of using a survey experiment to study our questions. Our survey approach can more cleanly address the distinction between motivations and forms of intervention, the differences within each, and finally, the possible connection between the two from the perspective of the American public.

Specifically, we consider three motivations for intervention: national security, economic interest, and humanitarianism. We also consider several forms of intervention, including unilateralism, allied actions, and UN peacekeeping—here, we distinguish multilateral actions based on a coalition and UN endorsed actions so that we can examine a broad set of causal mechanisms underlying public support for multilateralism. While our survey allows us to examine many possible reasons that people may support a certain intervention, below we highlight only three hypotheses that we believe are the most important.⁸

The first hypothesis focuses on the relative importance of the three motivations in public support for a military intervention. According to Pew Research Center surveys conducted since the September 11 attacks, national security has consistently ranked first in the American public’s long-term foreign policy priorities. Most recently, in a 2018 survey about seven-in-ten say that taking measures to protect the U.S. from terrorist attacks should be a top priority for the country. Moreover, the share has remained steady in 17 surveys conducted by the Center since January 2002 (Gramlich 2018). Therefore, we conjecture that public support for a military intervention is the highest if the justification is for national security, which we operationalize as a terrorist threat in our experimental design. Compared with existing studies, we test the relative importance of different motivations explicitly with this hypothesis:

H1 (Motivations): American public support for U.S. military intervention is highest when the motivation is national security compared with economic interests and humanitarian interests.

⁸The first two hypotheses were pre-registered through the Open Science Framework, [url omitted in this draft for anonymity](#).

Our next hypothesis tests public support for different forms of intervention conditional on a motivation. Unilateralism has long been a controversial form of foreign intervention, and as we discussed earlier, studies have consistently shown a public preference for multilateralism. What is unclear from the studies is whether such a result depends on the motivation given in a survey—most studies present respondents with a particular scenario that requires intervention. Our survey experiment allows us to identify the independent effects of different motivations on support for different forms of intervention. We conjecture that unilateralism and multilateralism are favored by the public in different circumstances. Multilateralism allows for burden-sharing with other states and provides the greatest international legitimacy, however, it imposes constraints on U.S. actions. It is unclear, though, whether the public views allied actions and UN authorized actions differently. Unilateralism can be more costly for the United States, but it can increase the efficacy of U.S. actions (Drezner 2008). In line with this, some previous research has suggested that the public prefers for the U.S. to undertake unilateral actions in situations that threaten its national interests but wish for the state to seek multilateral options in situations that are more humanitarian (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998).

Based on our framework of separating motivations and strategies to achieve them, we conjecture that unilateralism will attract more public support on issues relating directly to U.S. national security interests in comparison to other motives. Since national security is the top foreign policy concern for the public, Americans may care most about the success of an intervention (Eichenberg 2005; also see Gelpi et al. 2006), and thus are more willing to bear corresponding costs. In contrast, military intervention out of humanitarianism produces international public goods, and thus the burden-sharing and legitimacy aspects of UN endorsed multilateralism, more so than allied actions, may become more attractive to the American public than unilateralism in a humanitarian crisis. Finally, economic interests in a country may not be perceived to benefit all Americans, and therefore, we conjecture that support for unilateralism given such a motivation falls somewhere between the other two motivations. Our second hypothesis thus reads:

H2 (Forms): The American public's support for unilateralism is highest when the moti-

vation is national security, with economic interests coming in second; in contrast, support for UN endorsed multilateralism is highest when the motivation is humanitarianism alone compared with other motivations.

In addition to these two main hypotheses, we are also interested in whether different mandates (or scopes) of an intervention draw different levels of support. By mandates, we refer to different degrees of involvement in a mission, including options such as protecting civilians, brokering a peace deal, overseeing peacebuilding, or engaging in combat. It is worth noting that while different mandates are more appropriate for differently motivated interventions (e.g. protecting civilians is unique to humanitarianism because a humanitarian crisis underlies all three of our scenarios for intervention) we believe it is useful to consider a range of possible mandates in our test. Thus, our third hypothesis reads:

H3 (Mandates): The American public's support for engaging in combat is highest when the policy objective is national security; in contrast, less intrusive mandates receive higher support when the objective is humanitarianism.

Experimental Design

To test the hypotheses, we designed a survey experiment embedded in a public opinion survey. The survey randomly assigns respondents to one of the three motivations for a U.S. military intervention in a foreign crisis. The baseline scenario is a humanitarian crisis, and the other two scenarios added either national security interest or economic interest to the baseline. Upon starting the survey, respondents read through an introductory statement and then the following hypothetical scenario:

Currently, there is an ongoing civil war in country A, which has resulted in a humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of civilians died and many more have lost their home and become refugees. [[None]/In recent years, country A has served as a major source of natural resource exports to the United States./In recent years, country A has noticed an increasing presence of terrorist groups that have threatened

U.S. security interests.]

The mentioning of natural resource exports to the U.S. in addition to the humanitarian baseline is to capture economic interests existing between the country in conflict and the U.S. Likewise, the mentioning of the presence of terrorist groups that threaten U.S. national security interests is intended to invoke concern over national security associated with the conflict. We consider the scenario which describes the humanitarian crisis without either of these self-interests as a baseline condition for comparison (represented by [None] in the above vignette).

After reading the scenario, respondents are presented with three questions. The first question, which is the main one for testing our hypotheses, aims to understand levels of support among respondents for the form of initial involvement that the U.S. could take given one of the above scenarios. It reads: “To respond to the situation, the U.S. government faces a number of possible options. To what extent do you support or oppose each of the following policy options that the U.S. government could choose regarding the situation in country A?” The options provided include:

1. Not get involved
2. Unilateral intervention
3. Intervene with a coalition of allies
4. Participate in U.N. authorized peacekeeping

Respondents were asked to rank their level of support for each option on a five point scale: strongly support, support, neutral, oppose, and strongly oppose. This question tests our first hypothesis, and if the treatment effects on the respondents are in line with our expectations, we should see that respondents who are in the terrorism treatment group are more supportive of military intervention.

The second question complements the first by seeking to understand which considerations hold more sway on the choices that respondents selected in the first question. It reads: “Considering the policy options mentioned previously, in your view, what are the most im-

portant factors that should determine the U.S.'s response toward Country A?" Respondents are directed to rank the following options from most important to least important, according to their opinion:

1. International legitimacy of the mission
2. Success of the mission
3. Timeliness of response
4. Potential casualties of U.S. soldiers
5. Financial costs

With the exception of timeliness, the other four considerations are often identified in the literature as influencing public support for military actions. The rationale behind these options are quite straightforward and does not require much explanation. Timeliness is added to capture a significant difference between unilateral and UN endorsed multilateral actions, which is the delay caused by attempts to forge consensus in multilateral institutions. An allied action may also suffer from a delay to some degree compared with U.S. unilateral actions. As we argued earlier, unilateralism may imply higher costs but more efficiency in achieving goals, while multilateralism may imply lower cost and some inefficiency. To our knowledge, ours is the first study that asks respondents to articulate how they rank multidimensional considerations behind their policy choices; the results will provide additional insights on the foreign policy preference of the public.

The third question tests our third hypothesis, but it also helps us understand more broadly which specific goals, or mandates tend to receive more support once the U.S. began an intervention. The mandates range from protecting civilians, brokering a peace deal, to engaging in combat. These goals may arise no matter what the broad motivation for an intervention may be—whether for self-interest or humanitarianism. For instance, we have conjectured in our third hypothesis that respondents in the terrorism condition are more supportive of the U.S. directly engaging in combat than those in other conditions. The question thus asks: "To what extent do you support or oppose each of the following efforts by the U.S. if it becomes directly involved in the situation?" Included in the choices are

what we have seen proposed and implemented in actual interventions:

1. Protect civilians
2. Broker a peace deal
3. Deploy advisors and assist local factions
4. Directly engage in combat
5. Engage in post-conflict peacebuilding

The second and third questions provide valuable insights regarding the rationale behind public support for military interventions. While many existing studies have speculated about specific rationale, such as the American public’s aversion to casualties, or their lack of interest in nation building, our design allows for more systematic and direct assessment of public attitudes toward a range of relevant factors.

Data and Analysis

The survey experiment was administered by Qualtrics in the U.S. in March and April 2018. A total of 5,690 solicitations were sent to the subject pool, yielding a random sample of 1,623 American adults. To ensure that we gathered answers from attentive respondents we imbedded a simple instructed-response item that directed respondents to click “neutral” in response to a question that mentioned the importance of paying attention to relevant discussion about foreign policy in the news.⁹ A moderate number of respondents failed to answer this question correctly at 18%. For the analysis, we only included respondents that passed the attention check, leaving us with a final sample size of 1,331.

In terms of the (self-reported) demographic characteristics, 42% of these respondents were under the age of 45, 49% were male, and 72% were white. Moreover, 67% identified as urban residents. About 36% of the respondents had annual incomes less than \$50,000 and 23% over \$100,000. In addition, 29% of the respondents self-identified with the Republican party while 39% identified with the Democratic party. Lastly, as many as 80% of respondents answered

⁹See appendix for exact phrasing. The use of attention checks to ensure scale validity has been commonly recommended (see Berinsky et al., 2014, Curran, 2016, Oppenheimer et al., 2009)

that they are very or fairly interested in the U.S.'s international affairs. After reading the introduction, each respondent was given the hypothetical scenario and the subsequent questions as described in the last section. We present the results in this section.¹⁰

Figure 1 presents the results for our first hypothesis. Recall that our first hypothesis anticipates that American public support for U.S. military intervention is highest when the motivation includes a national security component in addition to a humanitarian concern in comparison to that of an economic component or humanitarianism alone. To gauge support for intervention we calculated the average response across scenarios focusing on the two forms that clearly involve direct military intervention—unilateral intervention and intervening with a coalition of allies. Under a pairwise difference in means test (t-test), there is a statistically significant higher level of support for intervention ($p = 0.016$), with a difference of 9%, when a security interest is involved compared with the humanitarian baseline. This mostly supports our hypothesis. However, the difference in average support between the economic and security condition is not statistically significant ($p = 0.29$). As well, average support for intervention under the economic motivation is clearly higher than the humanitarian-only condition but the difference is also not significant ($p = 0.054$). From this, it is clear that Americans are more supportive of a direct intervention when an additional self-interest is at stake, namely national security.

[Figure 1 about here]

Turning to our second hypothesis, Figure 2 shows several interesting patterns. First, support for unilateral actions—the most aggressive form of intervention—was highest among individuals that received the security motivation. This is consistent with the first half of our second hypothesis. As well, those that received the economic motivation displayed middling levels of support for unilateralism in comparison to the other conditions. For the second half of the hypothesis, we find that support is slightly higher for UN peacekeeping among those

¹⁰For all analyses, we dichotomized the answers by combining “strongly support” and “support” into a “support” group, and “oppose” and “strongly oppose” into a “not support” group. The neutral answers were omitted.

that received the humanitarian-only scenario but the result is not statistically significant. Similarly, we do not find that support for allied actions varied based on different motivations. That is, conditional support only occurs with unilateralism: when there is a national security interest involved, support for unilateralism increases.

Significantly, looking across different forms of intervention, we found that respondents in all three motivation groups show considerably higher levels of support for the U.S. to build a coalition with allies (72-77%) or to participate in a UN peacekeeping operation (87-88%). Moreover, the differences in means between support for the two forms of multilateralism and unilateralism are statistically significant. It is clear that overall, if possible, our respondents prefer the U.S. to intervene through multilateral means. Moreover, the fact that support for UN peacekeeping is ten percentage points higher than intervening with a coalition regardless of the treatment also indicates an even stronger preference for the U.S. to operate through an international organization. In contrast, the highest support that unilateralism received is around 50%.

[Figure 2 about here]

What drives the above results? That is, what motivates respondents' preferences for military intervention through coalition-building and UN peacekeeping over unilateral intervention? While we have some intuitive understanding of the reasons, our design allows us to go beyond our intuition. The answers to our second question, which asked respondents to rank the factors that influenced their responses, showed that the greatest concern for the respondents was legitimacy of the action. When asked about their support for unilateral intervention, a plurality (32%) of those who said that they *do not* support this action indicated that international legitimacy of the mission was their top-ranking concern. In contrast, respondents that support coalition-building and peacekeeping also more commonly indicated legitimacy of the mission as the primary factor driving their response (at 32% and 30% respectively).¹¹ Interestingly, among those who supported unilateral actions casualties

¹¹See the cross-tabulations for the first and second question in the appendix for these numbers.

stands out as a clear concern (coming in second in rank at 22% next to legitimacy) while casualties ranks fourth in concern among those who did not support unilateralism. As well, financial cost ranked in third closely behind casualties among supporters of unilateralism while cost ranked last among non-supporters. Taken together, these patterns suggest that perhaps respondents believed unilateral actions would cause relatively fewer casualties and were more cost-effective compared with other options. Consistent with these findings, the proportion of those who ranked financial cost first was the lowest among those who supported coalition and peacekeeping as the form of intervention; in other words, there was no evidence that financial cost drove support for either coalition building or UN peacekeeping participation. In contrast, a plurality of non-supporters of UN peacekeeping ranked financial cost as their primary consideration. These results challenge the usual assumption that multilateralism helps with burden-sharing, or that multilateralism may reduce casualties—at least our respondents did not seem to share these views.¹²

Surprisingly, across each of the rationales, we did not find that success was ever a primary concern among both supporters and non-supporters. On the other hand, as one might expect, those that did not support coalition building ranked timeliness of the mission as their primary concern (at 24%). Establishing a multilateral coalition likely involves a lengthy consultation and bargaining process and would therefore mean a delayed response to a crisis. In summary, out of the six cases of support or not for unilateralism, coalition building, and peacekeeping, legitimacy ranked first for four cases, timeliness ranked first for one case (for those who oppose coalition building), and financial cost ranked first for one case (for those who oppose UN peacekeeping).

[Figure 3 about here]

Our third question attempts to gauge support for different possible mandates given a mission. The options provided range from more neutral conflict resolution tactics such

¹²Several factors may explain the concern about the financial cost of peacekeeping, ranging from a reputation for long and drawn out UN missions to the fact that the U.S. is already the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping which has received some attention from major media sources.

as brokering a peace deal to overt military tactics such as engaging in combat to more long-term options such as peacebuilding. The results lend limited support to our third hypothesis. As we conjectured, respondents were clearly more supportive of U.S. soldiers engaging directly in combat when security interests are involved. At 47%, the difference from other motivations is around 15% and is statistically significant. However, looking at the other possibilities (protecting civilians, deploying military advisors, brokering a peace deal, and peacebuilding), the support for each is significantly higher. The options receiving the most support are protecting civilians and brokering a peace deal—nearly all respondents believed the U.S. should strive to protect civilians and negotiate peace. Sending advisors and supporting peacebuilding also received over 80% support. These findings suggest that U.S. citizens hold a strong preference for the U.S. government to take on an active role in managing and resolving conflicts without engaging directly in combat, even though security concerns would indeed raise their support for combat more than other motivations.

Finally, we conducted multivariate logistic regressions with the different forms of intervention as well as the different mandate options as dependent variables. In each model, the economic and security motivations were the key independent variables and the humanitarian condition was the baseline (omitted) variable. We also selected individual characteristics for controls, including age, male or not, level of education, Republican or not, and whether or not the respondent was interested in international affairs.¹³ An additional control variable accounted for whether respondents believed the U.S. was the greatest country in the world (a measure of nationalism).¹⁴

Table 1 presents the results for the models with the forms of intervention as the dependent variables. The effects of different motivations are generally consistent with our earlier finding for H2, therefore we focus on the effects of control variables on the dependent variables. Regarding no involvement, individuals that identified with the Republican party and individuals that paid more attention to international politics were more supportive of the

¹³For the last variable, higher numbers indicate greater interest, and the scale includes four options, ranging from “not interested at all” to “very interested.”

¹⁴The measure is a five point scale, ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, and thus higher values correspond with a stronger belief in the U.S. as the greatest country.

U.S. not becoming involved in conflict. For unilateral intervention, respondents who were older, who were more educated, and who were more proud of their country were less likely to support unilateral intervention. Individuals who paid more attention to international affairs, or were more likely to view the U.S. as the greatest country, were also less supportive of the U.S. building a coalition with allies. Finally, males were less supportive of participation in a UN peacekeeping mission. Most of these results were intuitive but one in particular stands out. We did not find that partisanship is a good predictor of support for military intervention, which, taken at face-value, seemingly contradicts popular belief about Republican voters being more hawkish. However, it may be that the humanitarian motivation that was present in all three treatments increased support among Democrats and thus removed the potential difference in policy preferences between the two groups.

Table 2 presents the results for the models with the different mandate options as the dependent variables. In line with our earlier finding, security concerns evoke more support for engagement in combat with a very large effect size. The coefficients for a few of the control variables in Table 2 present largely intuitive findings. Older respondents were less likely to support engagement in combat and more likely to support brokering peace. Male respondents were less likely to support protecting civilians, more likely to support engagement in combat, and less likely to support brokering peace. Respondents who paid more attention to international affairs were more likely to support all mandates. Lastly, those who answered that the U.S. is the greatest country were more likely to support engagement in combat and sending advisors.

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

Conclusion

A fundamental foreign policy question remains regarding the conditions under which the American public is willing to tolerate large-scale, U.S.-led military interventions in the future.

Even as the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that started around the beginning of the century have not concluded, different opportunities have continued to arise for the U.S. to consider military options. Just in the last 15 years, the U.S. government has sought to influence crises in places like Sudan, Libya, and Syria, by military means, though often from a more limited posture than in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such limited interventions unlikely reflect a fundamental shift in U.S. foreign policy—only recently the Trump administration threatened that “military action is possible” in Venezuela if Maduro does not step down. Rather, these recent limited intervention are more likely to reflect the constraints imposed by the American public’s reluctance to support wider-reaching efforts aimed at regime change (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1999).

Yet, public opinion polls reveal variation in how the public views the U.S.’s role across these different cases. For example, when asked whether the U.S. has a responsibility to do something about the ethnic genocide in Darfur in 2006, a majority of respondents answered “yes.” In response to the same question with respect to fighting between government and anti-government groups in Libya in 2011, a majority of respondents answered “no.”¹⁵ Moreover, the public’s stance towards U.S. intervention in Libya was consistent across partisan lines. To reconcile sometimes contradictory findings from opinion polls as well as better understand the thinking behind the preferences expressed by the American public, we designed a survey experiment that conceptually distinguishes between motivations and forms of intervention. Without such a distinction, previous work has not provided a coherent explanation for the American public’s attitudes toward U.S. involvement across different cases. Our analysis shows that both the motivations for and the forms of intervention influence the extent of public support.

To summarize our main findings, first, when a foreign humanitarian crisis has implications for U.S. economic or security interests, respondents were more supportive of some form of military intervention than if there were no such interests. Second, respondents who learn that the situation poses a risk to U.S. national security were more likely to support unilateral U.S. intervention. This was the only scenario where unilateralism received a clear majority

¹⁵<https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2011/03/715.pdf>

of support. In the meantime, for all motivations, UN peacekeeping consistently received the highest support (around 85%), followed by a still high level of support for allied actions (75%). Third, respondents tended to be more supportive of U.S. soldiers engaging directly in combat when security interests were involved. But, even in this instance, the proportion fell below a majority. In contrast, given a range of options, there was much higher support for tactics that are less aggressive. The finding suggests that the American public would prefer that U.S. interventions use methods that fall (well) short of war in most situations and reserve the use of the military in very limited circumstances.

In searching for the reasons behind the attitudes, we found that legitimacy was the primary concern for the respondents when they chose whether to support an intervention. This is consistent with the existing literature (see Grieco et al. 2011; Wallace 2017), but surprisingly, allied actions were seen as just as good as UN peacekeeping in conferring legitimacy to an intervention. Even more surprisingly, and different from conventional wisdom, UN peacekeeping was seen as the most costly form of intervention among those who opposed it, even though scholars often associate multilateralism with cost-sharing. Thus, concerns for financial costs, or even casualties, do not seem to drive support for either coalition building or UN peacekeeping participation, while a concern for legitimacy clearly does.

Our findings provide important new insights into the American public's preference toward U.S. use of force. On the surface, the fact that the U.S. has frequently used or threatened to use military means to pursue foreign policy goals seems to suggest that the American public supports such an aggressive approach. Yet, our study suggests that the public prefers U.S. use of force in very limited circumstances where important national interests are involved, and even then, more moderate options than directly engaging in combat are viewed much more favorably by the public. Why there seems to be a disconnect between public preference and government foreign policy is worth exploring further. Our study also offers an important "corollary" to a widely accepted view that the public favors UN endorsed missions over unilateralism (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Grieco et al. 2011; Wallace 2017): the public may prefer allied actions to UN missions when they take into consideration both the legitimacy and costs of a military intervention. In fact, this preference may explain the high level

of support for U.S. led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the Iraq War, where the U.S. intervened with allies without UN authorization.

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Tables

Table 1: Logistic Regressions on Forms of Intervention

	No Involvement	Unilateral	Coalition	Peacekeeping
Economic Motivation	-0.25 (0.165)	0.25 (0.180)	0.15 (0.183)	-0.18 (0.227)
Security Motivation	-0.29 (0.167)	0.51** (0.182)	0.19 (0.186)	-0.11 (0.235)
Age	-0.00 (0.043)	-0.23** (0.047)	-0.01 (0.047)	-0.09 (0.059)
Male	0.27 (0.141)	-0.06 (0.153)	-0.00 (0.156)	-0.49* (0.198)
Education	-0.05 (0.048)	-0.24** (0.054)	-0.00 (0.054)	0.11 (0.068)
Republican	0.53* (0.255)	-0.20 (0.270)	-0.42 (0.263)	-0.52 (0.290)
International Affairs	0.34** (0.092)	-0.04 (0.100)	-0.28** (0.099)	-0.09 (0.125)
U.S. Greatest	-0.02 (0.064)	-0.58** (0.079)	-0.33** (0.065)	0.09 (0.097)
Constant	-0.44 (0.400)	2.85** (0.461)	2.20** (0.455)	2.40** (0.572)
Observations	894	843	964	1056

Standard errors in parentheses. Neutral responses omitted.

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

Table 2: Logistic Regressions on Mandates

	Protect Civilians	Engage in Combat	Send Advisors	Broker Peace	Peacebuilding
Economic Motivation	0.76 (0.439)	0.13 (0.177)	-0.04 (0.237)	0.61 (0.344)	0.25 (0.216)
Security Motivation	0.05 (0.375)	0.72** (0.174)	-0.32 (0.227)	0.02 (0.302)	0.06 (0.210)
Age	0.15 (0.102)	-0.22** (0.045)	0.00 (0.058)	0.39** (0.085)	-0.10 (0.055)
Male	-0.82* (0.351)	0.45** (0.145)	-0.09 (0.192)	-0.24 (0.272)	-0.54** (0.182)
Education	-0.12 (0.119)	-0.10 (0.051)	0.03 (0.067)	0.18 (0.095)	0.04 (0.063)
Republican	0.55 (0.747)	-0.08 (0.259)	-0.40 (0.321)	-0.11 (0.494)	-0.20 (0.306)
International Affairs	0.65** (0.199)	0.30** (0.097)	0.54** (0.118)	0.15 (0.170)	0.33** (0.113)
U.S. Greatest	0.07 (0.141)	0.42** (0.075)	0.26** (0.080)	-0.03 (0.121)	-0.03 (0.083)
Constant	1.13 (0.916)	-2.33** (0.491)	-0.91 (0.564)	-0.11 (0.772)	1.26* (0.561)
Observations	1137	944	960	1044	982

Standard errors in parentheses. Neutral responses omitted.

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

Appendix

1. Crosstabulation between support for unilateral intervention and first choice on ranking question:

(1)						
Support for 'Unilateral' and First Ranking						
	legitimacy	success	timeliness	casualties	financial cost	Total
not support	32.43 (2.22)	18.92 (1.86)	20.27 (1.91)	16.22 (1.75)	12.16 (1.55)	100.00
support	23.81 (2.19)	17.72 (1.97)	16.40 (1.91)	22.22 (2.14)	19.84 (2.05)	100.00
Total	28.47 (1.57)	18.37 (1.35)	18.49 (1.35)	18.98 (1.37)	15.69 (1.27)	100.00
<i>N</i>	822					

Standard errors in parentheses

2. Crosstabulation between support for allied intervention and first choice on ranking question:

(1)						
Support for 'Intervene with...allies' and First Ranking						
	legitimacy	success	timeliness	casualties	financial cost	Total
not support	22.13 (2.71)	18.72 (2.55)	23.83 (2.78)	20.85 (2.65)	14.47 (2.30)	100.00
support	31.77 (1.75)	18.30 (1.46)	16.88 (1.41)	16.74 (1.41)	16.31 (1.39)	100.00
Total	29.36 (1.49)	18.40 (1.26)	18.62 (1.27)	17.77 (1.25)	15.85 (1.19)	100.00
<i>N</i>	940					

Standard errors in parentheses

3. Crosstabulation between support for UN peacekeeping and first choice on ranking question:

(1)						
Support for Peacekeeping and First Ranking						
	legitimacy	success	timeliness	casualties	financial cost	Total
not support	16.54 (3.30)	11.81 (2.87)	20.47 (3.58)	21.26 (3.63)	29.92 (4.07)	100.00
support	30.27 (1.53)	18.96 (1.31)	18.40 (1.29)	16.52 (1.24)	15.85 (1.22)	100.00
Total	28.57 (1.41)	18.08 (1.20)	18.66 (1.22)	17.10 (1.17)	17.59 (1.19)	100.00
<i>N</i>	1029					

Standard errors in parentheses