

**Soldiers, Pollsters, and International Crises:  
Public Opinion and the Military's Advice on the Use of Force**

Erik Lin-Greenberg<sup>1</sup>  
eriklg@mit.edu

22 October 2020

[5,988 words, excluding title page]

**Abstract:** When advising civilian leaders on the use of force, are non-elected officials swayed by public opinion? Scholars have long debated whether public preferences affect foreign policy, but most studies focus on elected politicians, overlooking the non-elected officials who formulate policies and advise leaders. Bureaucrats and non-elected officials are expected to provide advice based on technical expertise, yet they may have institutional incentives and civic-minded reasons to recommend actions that align with popular preferences. This potentially creates additional channels through which public opinion influences policy decisions. An original survey experiment fielded on U.S. military officers reveals that public opposition makes military leaders less likely to recommend the use of force. The paper contributes to debates on the role of public opinion in foreign policymaking, integrates research on public opinion and civil-military relations, and yields broader insights for scholars studying the behavior of officials who are not subject to electoral incentives.

**Keywords:** Public opinion, civil-military relations, survey, foreign policy, advisors

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Hannah Grant for her excellent research assistance and to Joshua Alley, Christopher Blair, Devin Caughey, Volha Charnysh, Jonathan Chu, Mariya Grinberg, In Song Kim, Asya Magazinnik, Theo Milonopoulos, Richard Nielsen, Lauren Pinson, Sara Plana, Jordan Sorensen, Ariel White, Erin York, and Bernardo Zacka for comments on earlier drafts. This project was reviewed by the American University IRB (IRB2020-315) and preregistered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP 20200409AA).

Political scientists have long debated whether public preferences affect foreign policymaking (Page and Shapiro 1983; Holsti 1997; Jacobs and Shapiro 1999; Aldrich et al. 2006; Page and Bouton 2006; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020). Most of this research examines whether elected politicians are responsive to the public's preferences, without fully exploring whether public opinion influences non-elected officials involved in the policymaking process. While legislators and executives typically select policies, bureaucrats shape leaders' strategy sets and policy outcomes by formulating plans, advising senior officials, and implementing policies. These officials may have institutional incentives or civic-minded reasons to recommend actions that align with popular preferences. This potentially creates indirect channels through which public opinion influences politicians' decisions, raising important questions about the role non-elected officials play in foreign policymaking.

This paper examines whether, how, and why public opinion influences non-elected officials involved with one of the most important foreign policy decisions—whether to launch military operations. Specifically, when advising civilian leaders on the use of force, are military decisionmakers swayed by public opinion? Why do military leaders either consider or ignore public opinion when making recommendations? If public opinion influences the advice military officers provide to their political masters, the public can affect the policy choices of elected officials both directly and indirectly (via bureaucrats' recommendations). If, however, military officers are not moved by public opinion, this suggests their advice is largely insulated from the whims of the public.

Deepening our understanding of public opinion's effects on non-elected officials is important given questions about the role of bureaucrats in increasingly polarized states (Spence 2019) and in democratic society more broadly (Chaney and Saltzstein 1998; Lowande and Proctor

2019). Further, the proliferation of media outlets and new technologies that make public opinion data effortlessly available to government officials magnifies the need for this research (Medvic and Dulio 2008).

I first synthesize research on public opinion and civil-military relations. I document ways that public opinion might affect the advice military officers provide to senior civilian officials. I then use an original survey experiment fielded on 185 current and former U.S. military officers to test the effect of public opinion. U.S. military leaders advise elected officials on the use of force, and because of well-established norms, are generally thought to make decisions based on their technical expertise rather than considerations of domestic politics. The experiments, however, reveal that, all else equal, public opposition makes military leaders less likely to recommend the use of force. Officers generally explained that public support was necessary to ensure successful operations and to protect the military's reputation.

This article contributes to and helps integrate two bodies of international relations scholarship. First, the project extends research on public opinion's effects on foreign policy beyond experimental studies involving elected politicians (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Chu 2020) to incorporate the role of advisors (Saunders 2018). I identify an additional, indirect pathway through which public opinion might shape decisions on the use of force, and assess the reasons why non-elected officials consider the public's preferences. Second, the project contributes to civil-military relations scholarship by examining whether public opinion cues the military's attitudes toward the use of force. This reverses the causal arrow from existing research that examines how top-down cues from military leaders shape public opinion (Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2018; Jost and Kertzer 2019). The findings suggest the relationship between elite cues and public opinion might be reciprocal rather than unidirectional.

## **PUBLIC OPINION AND THE USE OF FORCE**

A central debate among political scientists is whether public opinion drives foreign policymaking in democratic contexts. Some scholars suggest politicians adopt policies that follow public preferences. This responsiveness is shaped by electoral incentives (Fearon 1994; Reiter and Stam 2002; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020) and the normative expectation that government officials will represent the public's interests (Dovi 2007). Other research suggests the public is uninformed on policy matters (Almond 1950; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997), and that leaders often care little about the opinions of the masses.

Much of this research examines whether elected politicians respond to public preferences on questions regarding the use of force (Page and Bouton 2006; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020), but politicians are not the only actors involved in decisions on the use of force. National security decision-making in most democratic states is an interagency process in which a large network of non-elected officials—including defense and foreign ministry bureaucrats and military officers—help develop plans and advise politicians (Brooks 2016). These officials are typically expected to base advice on deep subject matter expertise, rather than aligning recommendations with the demands of potential voters (Huntington 1981; Rourke 1992). Existing research has examined how the views of non-elected officials influence public attitudes (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2018; Robinson 2018; Jost and Kertzer 2019), but has paid less attention to whether and how the public influences the attitudes of non-elected officials. Studies that do feature non-elected officials generally focus on senior political appointees, like cabinet members, rather than lower level bureaucrats (Sobel 2001).

Bureaucrats and military officers, however, are not insulated from information about the preferences of the public they serve. Polling data is increasingly ubiquitous in both social and

traditional media, making it easier for officials to access information about the public's preferences (Medvic and Dulio 2008). Officials might even be exposed to public opinion data without seeking it out, particularly on high salience issues like the use of force.

The extent to which non-elected officials are responsive to the public's foreign policy preferences warrants additional study. On one hand, non-elected officials do not face the same incentives as elected politicians. Since their jobs are generally not dependent on election outcomes, they should have few reasons to respond to voters' preferences. Further, providing advice that is informed solely by public demands may "connote inappropriate political bias (Stivers 1994, 365)" and jeopardize bureaucrats' status as apolitical experts. Other studies, however, suggest bureaucrats should consider public opinion when formulating policies to ensure sufficient public support (Powlick 1991) and to represent the interests of the public they serve (Barrett 1995).

Military officers are an important component of the foreign policy bureaucracy, helping to design, advise on, and implement security policies. In the U.S. context the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff serves as the President's primary military advisor, and officers assigned to the Pentagon, Combatant Commands, and other headquarters formulate the advice the Chairman provides to the president. Military officers are also frequently detailed to organizations like the National Security Council where they help develop foreign policy.

In most democratic contexts, the military has considered itself insulated from partisan politics. Indeed, regulations and longstanding norms call for a strict division between the civilian political and military spheres (Brooks 2009). According to Samuel Huntington (1981, 189–92), this division subordinates an apolitical military to civilian control and allows military leaders to specialize in the "management of violence (Lasswell 1941, 463)"— planning and directing operations, and advising civilian leaders on military issues (Huntington 1981, 11). More recent

analysis moves away from an “ambiguous apolitical norm,” arguing instead that the use of force is inherently political (Brooks 2020; Golby and Karlin 2020). Despite planning and carrying out operations with fundamentally political implications, military officers are still expected to avoid actions that could be perceived as partisan or as providing military endorsement for political decisions. As a result, military leaders may continue to view consideration of domestic politics as beyond their purview.

Military leaders in democratic contexts might, however, have at least four reasons to weigh public opinion when offering recommendations on the use of force.<sup>2</sup> First, officers might view public support as necessary to conduct successful military operations. Wavering public support might lead politicians to limit deployments or restrict operations in ways that hinder accomplishment of military objectives (Reiter and Stam 2002). Public approval might be particularly critical for more complex and drawn out missions that involve greater risk and cost.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some senior officers including former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, viewed popular support as a necessary precondition to using force (Campbell 1998). These concepts reach mid-grade officers during professional military education, where they are exposed to the “Powell Doctrine” and learn about the consequences of waning public support to operations in Vietnam and Somalia.

Second, military decisionmakers are bureaucratic actors that seek to safeguard the military’s institutional interests and reputation (Halperin 1974; Allison and Zelikow 1999). According to this “stewardship” logic (Brooks 2020, 19–20), military officers might believe that recommending actions that run askew of public preferences will diminish popular support for the

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<sup>2</sup> Public support is one of several factors that shape military officers’ attitudes on the use of force. For a discussion of other factors see (Feaver and Gelpi 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Golby, Cohn, and Feaver (2016) find the scope of an operation can lead to variation in public support.

military. This could damage the military's prestige and hamper efforts like recruiting or securing a larger budget.

Third, U.S. military officers are indoctrinated with the principle of civilian control, and may therefore offer advice that aligns with politicians' preferences. This could play out in one of two ways. First, military officers might attempt to anticipate the preferences of political leaders. If military officers believe politicians take actions that align with public opinion, they might offer recommendations they believe will be more palatable to their civilian masters. For instance, they might recommend lower risk operations that they expect will face lower levels of domestic opposition, and are subsequently more likely to gain political approval. Second, military officers might look to their civilian masters' strategic and political guidance—which should account for domestic factors like public opinion—when developing military recommendations.

Fourth, military personnel are frequently viewed as representing the values and interests of the American public (Schadlow 2016, 180). Military officers might therefore take public opinion into account to make recommendations that represent the public's interests. Just as civilian bureaucrats have been described as “enlightened trustees” that represent the interests of the public (Barrett 1995), military leaders might feel obligated to act in the interest of those they are charged to defend. Or, they may attempt to serve as “delegates” that act on the public's preferences. To be sure, this need not be the case. Military officers, like other officials, may believe the public to be uninformed and give little weight to their opinions. These four factors are not mutually exclusive, and any combination could simultaneously affect the decision-making calculus of military officers.

If public opinion influences the judgments of U.S. military officers, it will almost certainly influence the judgments of other bureaucrats who are less inhibited by strong norms against

politically-motivated behavior. Findings of empirical tests therefore have implications for bureaucrats beyond military professionals and the national security domain.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To test whether public opinion affects the advice military leaders offer to elected officials and to explore their explanations for considering or ignoring public opinion, I field a survey experiment on an expert sample of 185 current and former U.S. military officers.<sup>4</sup> The sample represents members of all branches of the U.S. military (except the Coast Guard) and includes ranks from lieutenant to brigadier general. Over 57% of respondents hold the rank of major or above, meaning that a majority of respondents had at least ten years of military service.<sup>5</sup>

I recruited the sample by posting notices in military officer mentoring and professional networking groups on social media sites. As a result, this convenience sample is not representative of the U.S. military's officer corps. For instance, it underrepresents Army officers and junior officers in the two lowest officer ranks. It overrepresents Air Force officers and personnel with the rank of major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel. It also excludes officers who are not active on social media.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the sample is useful for theory testing. More senior officers are more likely to be assigned to key command and staff positions or to organizations like the National Security Council, where they develop plans and advise senior leaders. Further, recent studies suggest a majority of U.S. military officers are active on social media (H. Urban 2017, 18).

I draw from Tomz, Weeks, and Yari-Milo (2020) and present respondents with a crisis scenario that randomizes information about public opinion.<sup>7</sup> All respondents are told, "A terrorist

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix 1.1-3. describes recruitment, implementation, and demographics.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of navy officers, lieutenant commander and above. On average, it takes 9-10 years to attain the rank of major/lieutenant commander.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible that social media users are more concerned than non-social media users with the opinions of others.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A, Section 4 for the survey instrument.



group based in Somalia launched truck bomb attacks on two U.S. embassies in Africa. The attacks killed 34 Americans and 198 others. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its British partners have confirmed the Somalia-based group carried out the attack, and have located the terrorist group's bases in southern Somalia. The U.S. president is considering launching special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases in an ungoverned region of Somalia.”

I then randomly assign respondents to one of two conditions that vary public support for retaliatory strikes. Respondents are told, “The American public strongly [supports/opposes] taking military action against the terrorists. The media has covered the situation extensively, and polls show that more than 75 percent of voters think the United States [should/should not] attack the terrorist bases. Citizens have started demonstrating [in favor of/against] military action and sending letters to their elected officials.”<sup>8</sup> Because respondents might make different assumptions about the scenario depending on the experimental condition to which they are assigned, I explicitly control for policy outcomes and operational risk—important factors for military planners. Regardless of treatment assignment, all respondents are informed, “Military assessments suggest the operation has a 90% likelihood of destroying the camps and preventing future attacks, but could result in 3-5 U.S. casualties.” Respondents are then told they are Joint Staff planners and asked to recommend whether to launch retaliatory strikes.

If public opinion influences military leaders' decision-making, public opposition should make military officers less likely to recommend retaliatory strikes. Officers will likely justify their actions by citing concerns about maintaining public support for the operation, protecting the military's reputation, or the need to anticipate politicians' preferences or represent the public's

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<sup>8</sup> This is admittedly a strong treatment. It is identical to Tomz et al.'s (2020) description of public support/opposition.

will. If there is no difference in recommendations across experimental conditions, this suggests that military officers leave consideration of domestic politics to elected officials.

## **FINDINGS**

To assess the effects of public opinion, the survey asks for respondents' recommendations on whether to launch strikes on the terrorist bases. Respondents are told they "are members of a Joint Staff planning team at the Pentagon whose recommendations will be passed to senior civilian leaders including the president." Support for taking military action was 14.6-percentage points higher when the public supported operations (97.6 percent of respondents favored strikes) than when citizens opposed operations (83.0 percent of respondents favored strikes). The effect was both substantively and statistically significant (Chi-squared test,  $p=.002$ ), and factors like respondents' past combat experience or branch of service had no statistically significant effect.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, extremely high levels of support for retaliatory strikes exist across both experimental conditions. This might stem from the narrow objectives and low-risk nature of the experiment's hypothetical military operation, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. Yet, given that public opinion had an effect on military officers' recommendations in this mission, it will likely also inform recommendations in cases involving larger, riskier, or more drawn out deployments that garner greater public scrutiny.

### ***Exploring Experimental Outcomes***

To examine what factors informed the military officers' advice, I analyze qualitative data from a question that asked respondents to "write a sentence or two telling us why you chose this recommendation." I manually code responses into one of five categories that shed light on whether respondents claim to consider public opinion or other factors (Table 1).<sup>10</sup> To be sure, these data

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<sup>9</sup> Appendix 2.1 includes balance tests, significance tests, and manipulation checks.

<sup>10</sup> There was a 91.4 percent intercoder agreement rate. See Appendix B for coding guide.

represent respondents' stated *justifications* for behavior, and not necessarily their underlying *motivations*.<sup>11</sup> Still, exploring how military leaders explain their recommendations offers important insights into how they interpret and navigate the apolitical military norm. The results are encouraging for those who believe officers should base advice on their technical expertise of defense issues. Yet, the findings also suggest that some officers consider public opinion when formulating recommendations.

**Table 1. Stated justification for recommendation**

| <i>Justification</i>   | <b>Public Opposes Action</b> | <b>Public Supports Action</b> |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Recommendation defends U.S. interests and/or reputation        | 58.0%                        | 78.8%                         |
| Risks of launching retaliation is high                         | 4.0%                         | 1.2%                          |
| Public opinion is beyond purview of military officers          | 19.0%                        | 1.2%                          |
| Recommendation accounts for public opinion                     | 9.0%                         | 10.6%                         |
| No response/Respondent needs more information to make decision | 10.0%                        | 8.2%                          |

In line with the expectation that military officers should offer advice based on their specialized expertise, a majority of respondents in both experimental conditions explained that their recommendations were intended to safeguard the United States, without mentioning public preferences. Many respondents suggested “there has to be a response for something that cost so many lives.” Respondents generally explained that the “high likelihood of success, proportionate response, and low risk of friendly casualties” meant retaliation would successfully “deter attacks by this group or others.” Interestingly, the percentage of respondents who describe their

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<sup>11</sup> Divergence between justifications and motivations can exist when respondents are unable to observe or explain the cognitive processes that led to their decision. Instead, subjects might offer justifications they believe are plausible explanations for their choice (Nisbett and Wilson 1977).

recommendation as defending U.S. interests is 20-percentage points higher when the public supports military action. It is possible that officers view public support as a cue that an operation is legitimate or justified, a concept I return to later.

Other respondents acknowledged the public's preferences, but stated their recommendations were based solely on military factors. These respondents generally explained that public opinion was beyond the scope of what military officers should account for when offering advice. For example, 19 percent of respondents who were told the public opposed military action explicitly noted that it was not the military's role to consider the public's preferences. These respondents described how, "military personnel should conduct planning and make recommendations based on tactical, operational, and strategic considerations..., not public opinion.[...] Civilian leadership should then balance [military advice] against competing interests and/or opposing arguments, to include public disapproval." Despite the strong public opposition to military operations, these respondents explained that they focused on providing the "best military advice" to politicians, noting that "domestic political pressure is for others to weigh."

Although respondents generally cited military factors in justifying their recommendations, some respondents explained factoring public opinion into their decision calculus. Of the officers in the "public opposes action" experimental condition, 9 percent cited public opposition as the basis for their recommendation. In some cases, officers said that public opposition led them to recommend against strikes even though they thought targeting the terrorists was militarily desirable. As one Army infantry officer explained, "While I think striking the bases after a damaging attack on our forces is justified, taking an action opposed by 75% of the people will have long-lasting consequences that could persist for decades, and undermine more urgent tasks that are vital to national security." A similar proportion (10.6 percent) of respondents assigned to

the condition where the public supports the operation also claimed their recommendation was informed, at least in part, by public opinion. Some of these respondents stated the public's preferences were of equal importance as military considerations. One Air Force officer, for instance, spelled out his decision-making logic, "The high percent success rate is one reason. What's also just as important is the backing of our American population. As we've learned from the Vietnam War, the US can't just go in with military ops without the support of its people." These findings suggest that some military officers believe that considering public opinion is necessary for instrumental reasons like ensuring mission accomplishment, something I explore in greater detail below.

### ***How much and why do military officers consider public opinion?***

To gain deeper insight into how military officers think about public opinion, I follow Tomz et al. (2020) and directly ask respondents, "When you consider whether to use military force against a foreign adversary, to what extent do you take domestic public opinion into account?" As expected, military officers are less likely than politicians to consider public opinion. Just over 11 percent of military respondents said they considered public opinion to a large or very large extent, compared to 33 percent of politicians in Tomz et al. (2020); 49.7 percent of military officers weighed public opinion to a moderate extent (compared to 38 percent of politicians); 31.4 percent considered public opinion to a small extent (versus 26 percent); and 7.6 percent said they did not consider public opinion at all (versus 3 percent).<sup>12</sup> Critics might worry that military officers are particularly prone to social desirability bias on questions concerning public opinion, and subsequently downplay the degree to which they actually consider public opinion. This risk seems

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<sup>12</sup> Tomz et al. (2020) field their survey in Israel, making this an imperfect comparison. Their study demonstrates, however, that "security policy is a weighty electoral consideration not only in Israel, but also in the US...suggest[ing] that Israeli policymakers should not be unique[.] (Tomz et al. 2020, 127)."

low, however, because respondents completed the survey through an online interface that collected no personally identifiable information and guaranteed anonymity.

As a final step, I explore *why* military officers consider public opinion when offering advice on the use of force. To do this, I ask respondents to rate “how important are each of the following reasons for considering public opinion?”<sup>13</sup> Respondents rate the four theoretically-informed logics on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all important” to “Extremely important.” As Table 2 shows, military officers consider public opinion for both instrumental and normative reasons.

**Table 2. Reasons for considering public opinion<sup>a</sup>**

|  | Not at all/<br>Slightly<br>important | Somewhat<br>important | Very/<br>Extremely<br>important | Mean<br>Importance <sup>b</sup> |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Public support is needed to carry out successful military operations   | 38.4%                                | 37.3%                 | 24.3%                           | 2.80<br>(0.07)                  |
| Taking actions that run counter to public opinion jeopardizes the military's reputation  | 39.5%                                | 37.3%                 | 23.2%                           | 2.22<br>(0.08)                  |
| The military carries out the policies of elected leaders who are responsive to public opinion. The military should anticipate/respond to these leaders | 14.6%                                | 24.3%                 | 61.1%                           | 3.66<br>(0.08)                  |
| The military should carry out the will of the public   | 61.6%                                | 25.4%                 | 13.0%                           | 2.74<br>(0.08)                  |

- a. Means and percentages are for the full sample. See Appendix 2.3 for findings by experimental conditions.  
b. Importance measured on a five-point Likert scale

Public support is often seen as a necessary condition for achieving military success. Nearly a quarter (24.3 percent) of military officers stated that public support was extremely or very important for carrying out successful operations. As one respondent explained, “Public opinion has a direct impact on the [rules of engagement] and acceptable risk to force. If there is no public support then we will not want to lose airplanes, get soldiers killed, etc. That leads to a direct

<sup>13</sup> To further mitigate risks of social desirability bias, the question is prefaced with the statement, “Some generals and admirals argue that military decision-makers should consider public opinion when making recommendations on the use of force.” This is intended to signal that senior officers do not believe considering domestic political factors is inappropriate.

influence on how operations will be conducted. More public support means more operational and tactical choices are feasible.”<sup>14</sup> Many respondents believed the “importance of public support increases with [the] complexity and duration of military operations.” As one Air Force officer commented, “For war or protracted military operations, public support is important to ensure adequate funding and legislative advocacy. The longer the intended operation, the more important that public opinion becomes.” This suggests military officers are more likely to account for public opinion when considering missions that are more complex and dangerous than the limited retaliatory strike described in the experimental vignette. These findings support the notion that military officers fear limited public support will lead politicians to cut resourcing or constrain the military’s actions, making it difficult to accomplish battlefield objectives.

Officers also appear to be bureaucratically-minded and prefer to avoid operations that could tarnish the military’s institutional reputation. Indeed, almost a quarter (23.2 percent) of respondents reported that recommending actions that run askew of public opinion could jeopardize the military’s standing among the public. A sullied reputation could pose challenges for future military efforts that require public backing—like recruiting and obtaining funding. As one Army colonel succinctly noted, “Poor support=lack of enlistments.” A Marine Corps lieutenant colonel highlighted broader resource issues, explaining that “negative public opinion can affect budgets [and] support for programs.” Other respondents viewed public support as necessary to ensuring the well-being of veterans after military conflicts. One respondent, for instance, suggested the “willingness of individuals and corporations to support veteran programs [and] partnerships with industry and academia may be at risk” if the military takes actions that contravene public opinion.

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<sup>14</sup> These quotes come from the open-ended question that asked respondents to explain their recommendation.

Finally, a majority of respondents (61.1 percent) said they consider public support to be very or extremely important because the military should respond to elected leaders who, in turn, are responsive to public opinion. As one officer explained, “We serve the people, through the people's elected officials, and [in accordance with] legal orders from the President and the [Secretary of Defense].” Since U.S. military officers are subordinate to civilian control, these findings reveal less about the effect of public opinion than about the expectation that the military carries out the orders of its civilian bosses.

In contrast, military officers generally do not believe that carrying out the will of the public is an important reason to weigh public preferences. Although respondents commented that the “purpose of the military is to achieve national security objectives on behalf of the citizens of the US[, and that citizens] should have a voice in what their military does in their name[.]” military officers—as described earlier—frequently thought “elected officials represent the will of the people.” As a result, military officers generally consider public opinion as something captured by orders from civilian leaders. At the same time, some participants shied away from carrying out the public’s will because “public opinion is so divided that it doesn't matter...plus the public is often ignorant.” Together, these findings suggest that military officers do not view themselves as responsible for directly representing the public’s will.

Respondents were also asked to describe “any other reasons why military leaders should consider public opinion.” Several respondents suggested public support serves as a cue about the appropriateness of a given military operation. This logic goes beyond treating public opinion as a signal that an operation will receive necessary levels of political support, but rather that an operation is justified or proper. As one Air Force colonel explained, “Public opinion may be a good proxy for legitimacy; if the actions seem broadly unpopular, even if lawful and justifiable,



there may be underlying concerns about strategic wisdom.” Similarly, a Navy officer suggested public opinion was important because “Evaluating proposed actions against opposing perspectives helps to ensure all facets are considered. Th[is] avoids the ‘echo chamber’ effect.” This suggests the relationship between the preferences of military officers and public opinion involves more than top down cues in which the public uses elite opinion as a guide (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Jost and Kertzer 2019). Instead, there may be a reciprocal relationship in which the public and military elites respond to each other’s preferences, something that could be evaluated in future research. In sum, public opinion can influence military officers’ recommendations, but, on average, their apolitical, technical expertise appears to guide their advice.

## **CONCLUSION**

The debate over whether public opinion shapes foreign policymaking engages with critical questions about democratic norms, government decision-making, and the factors which drive and constrain the use of force. Although most research to date has studied whether politicians respond to public opinion when making foreign policy decisions, this paper demonstrates that public opinion also influences the advice provided by non-elected officials. Specifically, military officers appear more likely to recommend the use of force when there is public support. These findings suggest that public opinion can influence foreign policymaking through previously overlooked pathways.

Unlike the electoral incentives that drive the responsiveness of politicians, military officers explain that public support is necessary to enable successful military operations and to preserve the military’s institutional reputation. While the findings may raise concerns about the extent to which public opinion influences non-elected officials, they are also encouraging. The experiment shows U.S. military officers continue to recognize the primacy of civilian control and understand

their role in providing sound military advice that helps ensure national security, despite fears of the increasingly politicized and polarized nature of civil-military relations (Brooks 2020).

The findings suggest several opportunities for future research. First, follow-on projects might use additional experiments or observational approaches to explore how elected decisionmakers weigh the recommendations of military advisors relative to direct public pressure and to examine whether politicians think public opinion informs the recommendations of military advisors. Second, future projects might investigate whether military leaders are more responsive to particular subsets of the population and analyze what this means for bureaucratic responsiveness. For instance, are military officers more likely to consider public preferences reported in conservative or liberal-leaning media outlets? Third, researchers might assess the generalizability of findings. Future work could replicate the experiment in a context other than the United States. Or, it could explore how variation in the type, risk, or cost of an operation influences public opinion's effect on military recommendations. Additional experiments might also more explicitly consider domestic political factors by incorporating information about the administration in power, or presenting more ambiguous levels of public support and opposition. Finally, the arguments and findings presented here help inform a broader research program that explores the effect of public opinion on policymaking by officials other than bureaucrats—such as politicians in non-democratic contexts—who are not subject to electoral incentives.

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