

Virtue in Our Own Eyes:  
How Moral Identity  
Defines the Politics of Force

Richard Hanania<sup>†</sup> and Robert F. Trager<sup>††</sup>

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Constructivists have argued that the need states have to maintain collective self-esteem has been central to some of the most important trends in international relations. This conflicts with public opinion and experimental research that argues that the public is mainly concerned with security and power. In a series of experiments on representative samples of the U.S. population, we find strong evidence that the need to appear virtuous in our own eyes drives public preferences over foreign policies in fundamental ways. In weighing military options under consideration, the extent of expected foreign casualties can outweigh US casualties as a driver of popular approval, symbolic threat can outweigh nuclear dangers, respect for sovereignty can outweigh the threat of rising power, and the need to present an appropriate image can outweigh concerns over maintaining expedient alliances. Overall, the results contradict previous theories of “folk realism,” and show the important role that concerns over morality play in explaining broad societal phenomena and individual-level variation with regards to support for the use of force abroad.

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<sup>†</sup> University of California, Los Angeles, [richard2@ucla.edu](mailto:richard2@ucla.edu).

<sup>††</sup> University of California, Los Angeles, [rtrager@ucla.edu](mailto:rtrager@ucla.edu).

In 2011, in response to a violent crackdown on protests by the government, the US launched a war on Libya that succeeded in overthrowing the Qaddafi regime. Almost immediately afterwards, the country was engulfed in anarchy and civil war. Critics of the Obama Administration found no shortage of reasons why the war was a bad idea from a national security perspective (Walt 2011; Mearsheimer 2014). Less than a decade earlier, Qaddafi had given up his weapons of mass destruction program in exchange for better relations with the United States. What kind of message did overthrowing him send to adversaries who might contemplate doing the same thing (Lieber and Press 2013:89)? Anarchy in Libya also contributed to the migrant flood that would create deep fissures both within individual states and across the European Union. Most of these results were foreseeable at the time, and few credible strategic arguments could be made for the intervention. In fact, in an op-ed published in major papers in their respective countries, the leaders of the United States, France, and Great Britain made the case for intervention in terms that almost exclusively focused on the moral obligation in question, providing only some idle speculation that if left in power Qaddafi might return to terrorism (Cameron, Obama, and Sarkozy 2011).

If national interest, as the term has been traditionally understood, cannot explain this major war undertaken by the leaders of the largest Western powers, what can? We argue that foreign policy decision making among the American public today is driven mainly by a need for collective self-esteem, which is composed of four main principles. In order to maintain a positive self-image for their country, people desire that their state refrain from engaging in necessary harm to others, that its symbols not be denigrated, that it avoid hypocrisy in its international dealings, and that it respects the sovereignty of others.

This article is among the first works to use survey methods in order to test theories about the malleability of state interests derived from the constructivist literature. We find evidence that arguments about national honor and morality help drive foreign policy decision-making among American re-

spondents. We examine cases where the demands of a desired self-image conflict or are in tension with power and material interest calculations and find that in each experiment, the former triumphs over the latter. Surprisingly, when Americans consider a prospective intervention for security purposes abroad, the number of expected foreign casualties, more so than the number American casualties, drives popular approval. While interest calculations suggest overlooking norm-transgressions by allies, the opposite is the case: Americans favor intervention in larger numbers against a country that is violating the rights of its own citizens when that country is a US ally. In considering using force abroad, the danger of being accused of hypocrisy outweighs the threat of a rising power, and desecration of national symbols outweighs the presence of nuclear weapons. In other words, hypotheses about public opinion derived from the constructivist literature make better predictions than those that assume people are reasoning in strategic terms.

These findings seemingly contrast with those from several other surveys and experiments, which seem to paint a picture of an American public that is realist in outlook (Drezner 2008) and largely responsive to cost-benefit calculations (Kertzer, 2016). Mass opinion is said to be concerned first and foremost with the economic and security interests of the United States, and the public is thought to be distrustful of foreign countries and worried about relative gains. We argue that folk realism is most likely to be correct when national survival is on the line or the nation is threatened with a huge drop in living standards. Since in recent decades few potential or actual American wars have fit that description, the need to maintain collective self-esteem is most likely to drive foreign policy decision-making among the modern US public under most plausible scenarios. Taken together, these findings suggest that ideas matter in international relations either because public opinion influences how leaders behave, or, because with regards to moral reasoning leaders themselves are not too dissimilar from those that they represent. The results also explain the growth in recent decades of advanced democracies undertaking costly humanitarian missions without any conceivable material

benefit (Finnemore 1996; Jackson 1993).

We begin by discussing the constructivist literature on interest formation and the historical research derived from it, focusing on how the need that states have to create and maintain collective self-esteem has driven major phenomena in the international arena. From this body of work and various historians of ideas, we derive what are likely to be the four foundations of a positive self-image in the international arena for people living in an advanced democracy such as the United States. In Part II, we present four experiments, each of which includes one hypothesis derived one of our four aspects of collective self-esteem, paired with a folk realist prediction that contradicts or is in tension with it. Finally, we discuss the results, which show that, in every one of the four cases, the theory based on collective self-esteem finds support while the folk realist hypothesis does not. The paper concludes with some thoughts on how we should think about the old question of whether the public is realist or liberal in its outlook.

## **Collective Self-Esteem and the Folk Realist Public**

More and more, scholars are accepting the role that moral ideals have in international relations. Examining some of the most historically important shifts in the international system by delving into the historical literature and convincingly excluding alternative theories researchers have established the central role that ideas have played in creating phenomena such as humanitarian intervention (Finnemore 1996), the territorial integrity norm (Zacher 2001), and decolonization (Jackson 1993). Similarly, analysis of the historical literature shows that concerns over national honor and prestige are central to understanding many of the great events of world history (O'Neill 2006: 78). This desire to live up to moral ideals is said to stem from the need states have to maintain a positive self-image (Wendt 1999: 233236). This line of research has greatly expanded our understanding of international relations, building on, but sometimes contradicting, theories that took the nature of state interests

for granted and argued for the causal importance of the structure of the international system and the distribution of power above all else (Waltz 1959).

Constructivists argue that leaders act in ways that are consistent with humanitarian principles because of the need to create and maintain a positive self-image. This is fundamental to the development of preferences over the behavior of states, constituting what Wendt (1999, 233236) calls a “universal national interest.” While this need is fundamental, however, its implications vary over time and how it is satisfied depends on cultural conditioning and the nature of interactions with others (Hopf 1998; Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Checkel 2001). Often, gaining or maintaining national honor means behaving in ways that are consistent with great power status (Barnhart 2016), which can mean, for example, acquiring nuclear weapons (ONeill 2001: 2172215) or maintaining colonies (Cohen 2014:3650; Bell 1996). In these instances, national honor is derived from showing strength or demonstrating a certain level of technological or organizational prowess. What brings honor changes over time. While holding colonies may have been a source of pride for the most developed countries in the world a century ago, today it would be a mark of shame (Jackson 1993).

For many constructivists, identities contain information in the form of norms about what actions are consistent with the identity. These actions are called “appropriate” and thus, identity circumscribes a domain of appropriate action. Actors are expected to choose from within this domain (Checkel 2005: 804805). This is why states follow norms, even when they do not have a material incentive to do so (Shannon 2000). To bolster this point, researchers have studied various phenomena and projects undertaken by major states without any conceivable material or security gain. These include humanitarian intervention (Finnemore 1996), decolonization after the Second World War (Jackson 1993), the development of the norm against the seizure of territory (Zacher 2001), the British campaign against the Atlantic and North African slave trades (Kaufmann and Pape 1999;

Lwenheim 2003), the prohibitions against piracy and drug trafficking (Nadelmann 1990), and the non-use of nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 1999, 2005, 2007; Paul 2009). In these studies, the authors bring attention to the recent development of a norm, discover the individuals and countries most responsible for creating and disseminating it, and cast doubt on possible motivations based on economic or security concerns, thereby pointing to ideational factors as the main causal agents behind the practice or process under investigation.

Political theorists and historians of ideas have shown that development of humanitarian norms have taken place across Western societies. We argue that, among citizens of modern developed states, there are four main aspects of maintaining collective self-esteem for their states. First, people need to see themselves as behaving in ways consistent with humanitarian ideals, which means the avoidance of causing unnecessary harm to others. Singer (1981, 2011) has noted what he calls the expanding circle of empathy. Humans have an inherent concern with the well being of themselves and their close relatives. Yet intelligence also gives us the ability to reason abstractly, and see that from the perspective of a neutral observer there is nothing privileged about the interests of that individual. Over time, then, humanity expands its concern from the self and the immediate family only, to the ingroup, to all of humanity, and finally, eventually all sentient life forms. Pinker (2011:174180) argues that this process is responsible for the historical declines we see in torture, slavery, and warfare and the expansion of individual rights. Particularly following the rise of the Enlightenment and humanist values in the eighteenth century, in the contemporary United States and elsewhere, collective self-esteem requires valuing human life across the globe.

Second, there is the desire not to be denigrated, or to see symbols mocked, defaced, or disrespected. Scholars have found conflicts involving sacred symbols to be some of the more intractable in the world (Alderice 2009; Ginges and Atran 2008; Sheikh, Gmez, and Atran 2016). For religious believers, sacred symbols take the form of shrines, temples, holy texts and sacred tombs. Even among

those without religious dogma, nationalism involves giving special symbolic meaning to certain land and objects such as flags (Smith 2010). While nationalism has some negative connotations among certain members of western societies, national flags in particular, along with other symbols, continue to unify different parts of these cultures.

A third component of maintaining collective self-esteem is avoiding hypocrisy, or not acting in ways inconsistent with professed ideals. While individuals can and do engage in self-deception in some cases, when contradictions are made clear or highlighted by others either domestically or abroad, individuals adjust their behavior in order to correct the discomfort that they feel. In thinking about how interests change over time, scholars have therefore stressed the importance of discourse (Hopf 2002:153194; Hansen 2013). This point is easily misunderstood, as discourse does not itself cause anything. Rather, once states - or, more precisely, the individuals who lead them - accept a certain principle, they become prone to accepting a logical extension of that principle (Florini 1996; Legro 1997). In that sense, discourse changes behavior through psychological mechanisms that drive states to avoid hypocrisy and other forms of behavior that would hinder their ability to maintain self-esteem. This idea is similar to what Elster (1998) describes as the "civilizing force of hypocrisy," where actors subject to public scrutiny are more likely to behave in accordance with the public good rather than in a self-interested manner. Providing an example of how concerns over hypocrisy can drive foreign policy decision making, Finnemore (1996) argues that in the 1990s Western powers were sensitive to criticism that due to the race of the victims they wanted to intervene for humanitarian reasons in Bosnia but not Somalia, leading to intervention in the latter before the former. Lwenheim (2003) similarly shows that the British fought against white slavery among the North Africans because it wanted to show that its intentions in stopping the Atlantic Slave Trade were sincere rather than rooted in self-interest. Up to that point, leaders of other states and members of the international community could claim that the British wanted to end the Atlantic slave trade in order to hurt the

economies of its rivals, while the Royal Navy allowed North Africans to continue in similar practices as long as they left British ships alone.

Finally, there is the idea that independent agents should in general not interfere in each others affairs. This assumption underlies discourse on human and individual rights, and similarly undergirds discussion about the sovereignty of nations. Under international law, states are independent and equal (Biersteker and Weber 1996). This concept is taken for granted when we, for example, accept the right of states to tax and regulate the lives of their citizens and not others, or believe that it is completely unremarkable for the navy of a country to be able to sail only in certain waters (Wendt 1992:412418). The idea relates to a sense of positive self-image not only because states should therefore want to protect their own sovereignty; they should also have an aversion towards intervening in the affairs of others. In fact, countries that have opposed or tried to place limits on the principle of humanitarian intervention have done so on the grounds that such wars violate sovereignty (Bellamy 2006), an indication that even those that would violate sovereignty through engaging in these kinds of wars are sensitive to such criticisms.

While the historical record suggests that collective self esteem is important for modern states, the body of work on the topic exists uncomfortably alongside a literature that argues that the American public reasons about foreign policy mainly through the lens of a concern about national security, economic well-being, maintaining superpower status, and relative gains. Following Drezner (2008), we call this folk realism. Americans are said to think in terms of relative gains, especially when the trading partner is seen as powerful or wealthy (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Diascro 2001; Rousseau 2002). Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser (1999) find that Americans become more likely to want to go to war if there is a threat of losing access to natural resources necessary for American prosperity, and conclude that Americans are intuitive strategists with regards to foreign policy in a way consistent with realism. DeNardo (1995) found that there was underlying logic to how Americans thought

about nuclear deterrence strategy, even if this logic did not resemble that derived from formal theory. Finally, Huntington (2004: 324335) argued that on immigration, trade, and the use of force abroad, the general public was inclined towards views he considered nationalist while foreign policy elites were more “cosmopolitan.”

It is important to note that folk realism goes beyond the idea that Americans seek the security of their country and want to avoid drastic declines in the standard of living. According to Kertzer and McGraw (2012:246), while there are many schools of realism, one of the things that all realists have in common is the idea that they stress the importance of prudent self-interest over moral high-mindedness. We argue that folk realism, at the very least, means a concern with direct harm to the nation and its citizens and maintaining relative power with regards to other states through checking potential rivals and maintaining a reputation for trustworthiness in the international arena. Therefore, to be consistent with folk realism, individuals, in forms that are relatively simple compared to formal models, should use heuristics when thinking about foreign policy that are utilized in order to achieve at least these goals (Drezner 2008; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Diascro 2001).

If the public has such an outlook, it represents something of a puzzle, as scholar have shown that developed democracies undertake humanitarian missions that bring no material or security gains and carry high costs (Kaufmann and Pape 1999; Lwenheim 2003), arguing that the need for a positive self-image explains this. Is there a way to reconcile these findings? How do people develop their foreign policy preferences when the need to maintain collective self-esteem is in conflict with the acquirement of security and power? Below, we argue that the need to maintain collective self-esteem has more influence on preferences over the use of force, and have designed experiments to test this theory.

## Why Collective Self-Esteem Should Be Better at Predicting Public Opinion

There are three main reasons to suspect that Americans are motivated mostly by a need to maintain a positive self-image for their country rather than security and power interests when thinking about most kinds of potential conflict. First, research from domestic politics shows that unless the costs and benefits are made absolutely clear and primed, objective self-interest does a poor job of explaining policy preferences (Kinder and Sears 1981; Caplan 2011, chapters 3-4). Scholars have had much more success finding a connection between political views and individual-level dispositions such as prejudice and willingness to endorse abstract moral principles (e.g., Kinder and Sears 1981; Haidt 2012; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Tesler 2012). Theories as to why generally focus on the theory of the cognitive miser, which says that individuals prefer to answer simple questions over complex ones (Orbell and Dawes 1991; Kahneman 2011), and the fact that in political decision making the individual does not have an incentive to arrive at a self-interested answer since the probability of one individual's vote changing policy is practically zero in a modern state (Caplan 2011). Participation in the political process has therefore come to be seen as something that is done not out of individual interest, but as an expressive behavior that brings mainly cognitive rewards (Hillman 2010; Tyrann 2004).

We should expect this to be even truer in international politics, where costs and benefits are less easily discerned and distributed amongst all members of the population, and where sacred values are often at stake and people are least open to reasoning about costs and benefits (Hassner 2009; Goddard 2006). Indeed, investigations into public opinion with regards to issues that involve interaction with the rest of the world, such as international trade (Sabet 2016) and immigration (Lucassen and Lubers 2012; Mayda and Rodrik 2005), confirm what we know from domestic politics and what is implied by economic theories of voting. Interest, even if measured at the level of particular industry in which an individual works, is a second-order effect on attitudes towards free trade, only having an

influence among those that do not have strong feelings either way with regards to foreign cultures (Sabet 2016). In the realm of foreign policy, we may expect something similar, especially since the distributional or economic effects of a given policy are at least as uncertain as they are with regards to trade or immigration policy.

Second, previous work showing that concerns over security and power have a major influence on public opinion usually focus on circumstances in which citizens are threatened with the destruction of the state or a major decline in its standard of living (DeNardo 1995; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Diascro 2001). This is consistent with literature from domestic politics showing that self-interest matters when the costs and benefits of a policy are specific and individuals are primed to think about them (Chong 2013). While sometimes leaders do hype up threats as existential in nature, such as was the case in the run up to the Second Iraq War, most of the time the US public is debating whether to take steps to protect against marginal threats or engage in humanitarian missions. Over the last few decades, it has become vanishingly rare for countries to disappear or be swallowed up by fellow states (Zacher 2001), and the United States over the last few decades fighting has mostly been fighting what are exclusively wars of choice that do not pose a threat to the survival of the state (Aueswald 2004; Freedman 2005). As we are concerned with American public opinion with regards to realistic options that the modern voter is likely to face, our experiments use examples that are derived from or similar to recent American controversies over whether it is appropriate to use force abroad. Under such conditions, concerns over collective self-esteem should be paramount, since there is no existential threat to the country.

Finally, research reveals that as many realists have themselves argued (Mearsheimer 2001:ch. 1), there is evidence that the American public is indeed hostile to realist principles. Among a sample of non-elite Americans, only small minorities would endorse bedrocks of realism such as the ideas that the use of force is one tool of politics among many, that other states cannot be trusted, or even

that increasing military might should come at the expense of opening up trade with other nations (Kertzer and McGraw 2012:248).<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with the emerging anthropological view that in most societies and under most circumstances, when people engage in violence it is because of a moral belief that they are doing so in order to uphold a moral principle or in order achieve some greater good (Fiske and Taje 2014). Once again, foreign policy is likely to be an area where this more general principle is especially likely to be true; since people do not directly suffer the consequences of their actions, the need to maintain collective self-esteem should be the driving force behind decision making. Below, we explain the experiments we have designed to test this theory.

## Experimental Design

This section explains the nature of four experiments designed to test hypotheses regarding the components of collective self-esteem against counterparts derived from the folk realist literature. We conducted a series of four experiments on a representative sample of the U.S. population in July 2016. The questions were part of a larger survey on foreign policy preferences among the American public. The wording of the prompts and questions can be found in our online appendix.

### Experiment 1: Casualty Hypotheses (Humanitarianism) (Italicize or indicate subsection)

Related to the idea that ones state should not cause unnecessary harm to others are what we call the casualty hypotheses. Scholars have highlighted the development of the civilian immunity norm (Traven 2015; Carpenter 2003, 2016). American identity in particular includes a commitment to human rights, and the US military has created mechanisms and institutions to protect non-combatants in wartime (Kahl 2007). A disproportionate response to a threat that killed thousands of civilians would be inconsistent with the self-image that Americans have of themselves.

### ***Hypothesis 1 (Foreign Casualties):*** Higher expected casualties on the other side in

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<sup>1</sup>In this study, of 13 questions designed to test agreement with folk realist principles versus more liberal ideals, a majority endorsed only 3 folk realist principles as more important.

a military operation decreases support for the use of force.

On the other hand, theories based on national self-interest would predict that people would only care about the number of American casualties that are expected to be lost. After all, the most direct harm that can befall a nation is to see its own citizens being killed. The motivation for stopping terrorism in the first place is that it kills Americans, and more expected casualties should make proponents of a rationalist and self-interested foreign policy less eager to take action. Over the last several decades a larger number of casualties seems to be correlated with a decrease in support for specific conflicts among the American public (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Eichenberg 2005). However, this relationship seems to depend on the conflict in question, and it is difficult to say whether this is a directly causal relationship, or that higher casualties are correlated with a decrease in belief about the morality of the cause or the prospects of success.

***Hypothesis 2 (American Casualties):*** Higher expected American casualties in a military operation decreases support for the use of force.

The first experiment tests the two casualty hypotheses by presenting respondents with a scenario in which a dictator is supporting terrorism against the United States. His attacks have led to American deaths, with more to come if nothing is done. Respondents are asked whether they would support going to war to get rid of the dictator. The number of expected American and foreign casualties in the event of a US attack are the two treatments, which are fully crossed. The United States is said to be expected to lose 0, 10, 100, or 1,000 soldiers (American Casualties). The number of innocent civilians that will be killed in the attack is 50, 500, 5,000, or 50,000 (Foreign Casualties). The different scales are chosen because the experiment is designed to understand what drives preferences in plausible scenarios, and to reflect the finding that the historically the American public is sensitive to the log of casualties, not their absolute numbers (Mueller 1973, 1994). There is nothing that precludes individuals being concerned with both American and foreign casualties. Yet

willingness to sacrifice American lives for a greater good does not hurt the collective self-esteem of the nation in the way that a callous disregard for the well being of others does. By manipulating the numbers killed on each side, this experiment is able to determine which casualties matter to the American public in a war for the national interest.

Experiment 2: Physical/Symbolic Harm Hypotheses (Denigration) (Italicize or indicate subsection)

Harm to a nation can take the form of physical or psychic damage. The second experiment is designed to see which is more likely to drive preferences over the use of force. A national symbol such as a flag has no inherent meaning besides the one members of a community ascribe to it (Ross 2006; Saurette 2006). While in the realm of physical reality the flag is no more than a piece of cloth, its symbolic destruction, even undertaken thousands of miles away, should be expected to cause an emotional response that will affect decision-making with regards to whether individuals want to go to war (Adler 2013). Although there is no material interest at stake, because people have symbolic interests we predict the following

***Hypothesis 3 (Symbolic Harm):*** Attacks on symbols of national identity increase support for the use of force.

Folk realism, in contrast, stresses tangible and material concerns such as the potential to inflict harm, and predicts that people would be less likely to want to go to war with a strong state. There is a wide literature on nuclear deterrence that argues that when both states have nuclear weapons, the probability of war decreases (Schelling 2008; Waltz 1990; 2012). If another state is strong, power considerations should make individuals more likely to want to engage in buck passing or avoid conflict altogether, while fighting a weaker state should be an easier way of getting what one wants (Mearsheimer 2001: ch. 1).<sup>2</sup> This leads to the following folk realist prediction.

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<sup>2</sup>Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser (1999) found that American respondents are more likely to want to go to war

***Hypothesis 4 (Physical Harm):*** Hearing that a state has more capacity to inflict damage as the result of an attack will decrease support for conflict.

To test H3 and H4, we examine the relative effects of flag-burning and nuclear weapons on approval of the use of force. A foreign country called Lyko arrests five American diplomats and puts them on trial for subversion. It is clear that these individuals are actually innocent, but were only arrested so that the leader of Lyko can present the United States as an enemy to unite his country. Experiment 2 involves a 2 x 2 matrix. In one condition, Lyko is a state with nuclear weapons (Nuclear Weapons), while in another it only has a moderately strong military. Also, in half the vignettes the Lyko government has a rally where the American flag is burned and the prisoners are humiliated and made to give false confessions (Flag Burned). While the symbolic harm hypothesis would predict that the burning of the flag would have a greater effect, stressing the potential to inflict damage would lead to the conclusion that the country being armed with nuclear weapons would invoke the concerns with harm that individuals are likely to care about.

Experiment 3: Alliance Hypotheses (Hypocrisy) (Italicize or indicate subsection)

What happens when concerns over interest directly conflict with the need to maintain collective self-esteem? A positive self image is threatened when a nation can be accused of hypocrisy. This has led scholars to focus on discourse and noting contradictions as key to progress on human rights norms (Hopf 2002; Hansen 2013). Today, western countries are often accused of hypocrisy when they provide support for regimes that commit atrocities and otherwise restrict the rights of their people (e.g., Mertus 2008). An alliance with such a regime may make Americans fear that their country is behaving hypocritically, which should, if theories of collective self-esteem can predict public opinion,

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against a state that has nuclear weapons, all else being equal, and have interpreted this as being consistent with realism, arguing that respondents are more eager to check a rising power. We doubt that this is a correct interpretation of their findings, because, as we note, most realists who have studied the question have argued that states will be less likely to want to go to war with a stronger country, particularly if it has nuclear weapons. Moreover, the theory that people will want to check a rising power is tested more directly in Experiment 4.

cause a sense of discomfort (Finnemore 1996; Lwenheim 2003). If the question is raised of whether to overthrow such a dictator, an alliance with him may have an effect that is counter-intuitive.

***Hypothesis 5 (Hypocrisy):*** When a country violates international humanitarian norms, an alliance relationship with that country increases support for the use of force against it.

On the other hand, to realists, international relations is often conceptualized as an iterated game where a reputation for cooperation is essential to long-term success (Lipson 1984; Greico 1988; Axelrod and Keohan 1985). Maintaining a reputation for reliability is said to be central to accomplishing foreign policy goals (Guisinger and Smith 2012; Tomz 2007). States form alliances, make threats, sign agreements, and otherwise generally rely on other countries believing that they are trustworthy and that their promises are valid. While Americans may be discomforted by the thought of supporting regimes that violate human rights, an alliance in place should make individuals reconsider an attack.

***Hypothesis 6 (Folk Realist, Alliances):*** When a country violates international humanitarian norms, an alliance relationship with that country decreases support for the use of force.

In the third experiment, a foreign dictator is murdering his own people. In one scenario, he is presented as an ally of the United States cooperating in the war against terrorism, while in the other, he only works with the American government out of self-interest. When the dictator is facing an internal rebellion from the people he is oppressing, respondents are asked whether the US should support his overthrow. Unlike the other experiments, in this one the two main theories being tested are irreconcilable; if there is support for one, then there is evidence against the other. We also vary whether the dictator previously broke an agreement with the group in question, to check whether people are generally concerned with punishing bad behavior or influenced by his likelihood of being an unreliable ally.

Experiment 4: Power/Fairness Hypotheses (Sovereignty) (Italicize or indicate subsection)

The idea of respecting the sovereignty of other states, that they are equal in their relations and have proper control over their own territory, is a fundamental bedrock of international society (Biersteker and Weber 1996). In colloquial terms, this is the idea that states should, all else equal, mind their own business by not intervening in affairs that are internal in nature or disputes involving third parties that do not directly affect the interests of the potential intervener. The idea of respecting sovereignty is inherently intertwined with principles of fairness and the desire to avoid hypocrisy. If citizens do not like the idea of foreigners intervening in the affairs of their own state, they should be sensitive to criticisms that they are doing the same.

***Hypothesis 7 (Respect for Sovereignty):*** Framing a proposed intervention as violating the sovereignty of a foreign state decreases support for aggressive action.

Perhaps the most basic idea in folk realism is that states care about relative power (Mearsheimer 2001; Drezner 2008). If the public distrusts other states, then perceiving a potential rival as a rising power threatening American interests should make individuals more aggressive towards that country. This conflicts with the idea of sovereignty, which says countries should stay out of the affairs of others unless there is a direct harm.

***Hypothesis 8 (Power Politics):*** Framing an action as a threat to the power and standing of the country in question will increase support for aggressive action.

The fourth experiment explains the dispute between China and its neighbors in the South China Sea, showing respondents a map of the region. Some participants receive a null scenario, which simply explains the situation. In one vignette, it is the US that is presented as a bully, intervening in the affairs of other countries (US Hypocrisy, testing H7). In another, Chinese expansion is framed as a threat to American power and dominance in the region (US Threat, H8). After receiving their prompt, respondents are asked whether they would favor the US sending ships into the disputed waters in order to stand up to China.

We add two more prompts in order to check whether if we find support for H7, it is actually the need for collective self-esteem is driving the results, rather than a general concern with fairness. In the third vignette, respondents are told that Chinas actions are rooted in a belief about racial superiority (Chinese Race). Finally, an argument is presented about China acting unfairly and pushing around its neighbors (China Unfair). If it turns out these latter treatments also move the needle, we may conclude that general concerns with fairness are what people care about. Yet if there is support for H7 and the latter two treatments do not have a discernable effect, we will find more support for the theory of collective self-esteem, since an argument about the US acting unfairly has an impact, while China violating the sovereignty or rights of others does not. We predict that respondents will only be turned off of intervention by the United States behaving unfairly (see Rothschild and Keefer 2017)

***Hypothesis 9 (General fairness):*** Presenting a potential adversary as violating the sovereignty of or behaving unfairly towards third parties will not have an effect on support for aggressive action.

In summary, odd numbered hypotheses (H1, H3, H5, H7, H9) support the idea that the need for collective self-esteem drives foreign policy preferences, while even numbered hypotheses (H2, H4, H6, H8) are theories derived from the folk realist literature that either contradict or are in tension with their counterpart theories of collective self-esteem in each experiment.

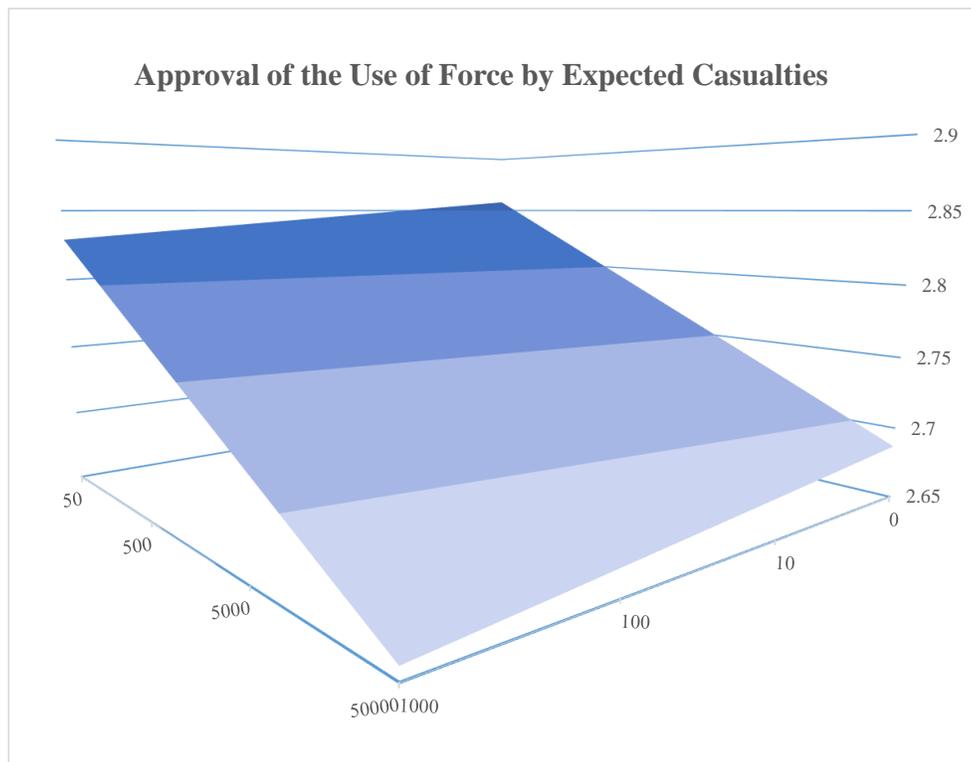
## Results

Table-1 shows two regressions. The dependent variable is support for killing the dictator supporting terrorism on a four-point scale. American Casualties is coded 0 if 0 Americans are killed, 1 for 10 American deaths, 2 for 100, and 3 for 1,000. Foreign casualties is coded as 0 if 50 foreigners are killed, 1 for 500 deaths, 2 for 5,000 deaths, and 3 for 50,000 deaths. Model 1 is an OLS regression, Model 2 is an ordered probit.

Insert Table-1 here, see word file;

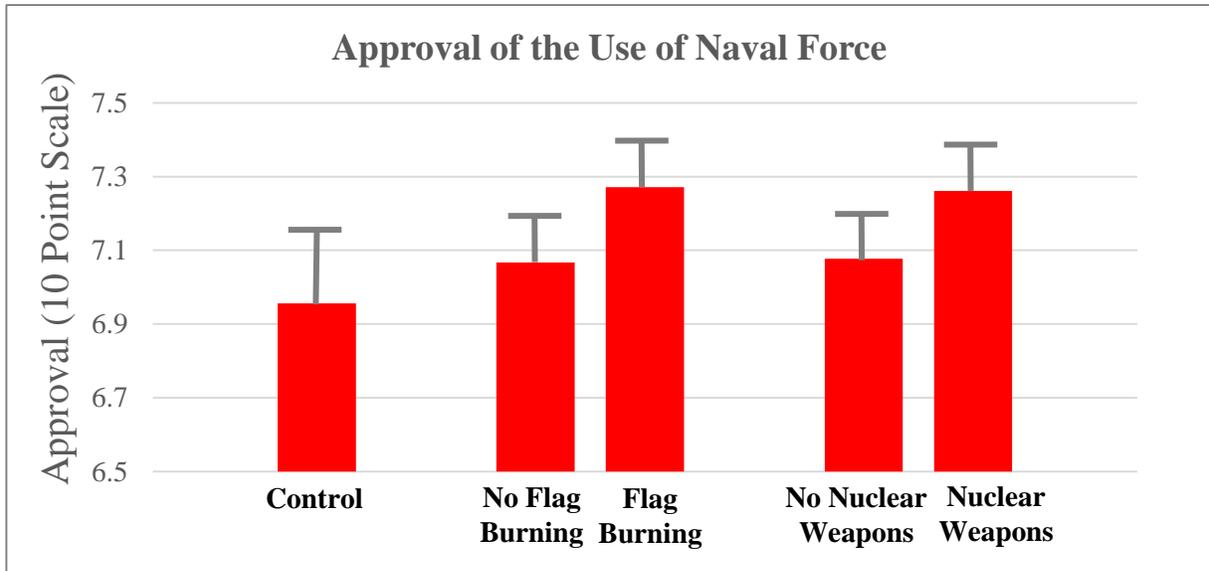
The selection of the model does not matter. In each one, Foreign Casualties is significant beyond the  $p < .001$  threshold while there is no discernible effect of American casualties. When there are 0 American casualties, about 65% strongly or somewhat support killing the dictator, a number that is actually less than the 67% support in the case where we see 1,000 American deaths. Yet going from the minimum number of foreign casualties (50), to the maximum (50,000), drops support for action by 10%, from 72% to 62%. Even going from 50 foreign deaths to 500 deaths reduces support by 6%. This means that even if we make one-to-one comparisons between American and foreign casualties, we still see meaningful effects of Foreign Casualties that simply do not show up in American Casualties.

As predicted, as the number of deaths went up the effects on support were not linear. The biggest effect of Foreign Casualties was going from 50 to 500 deaths; impact of going from 500 to 5,000 and from 5,000 to 50,000 was much less, justifying the logarithmic scale used. Figure-1 below shows the effects of casualties on support for war on the four-point scale.



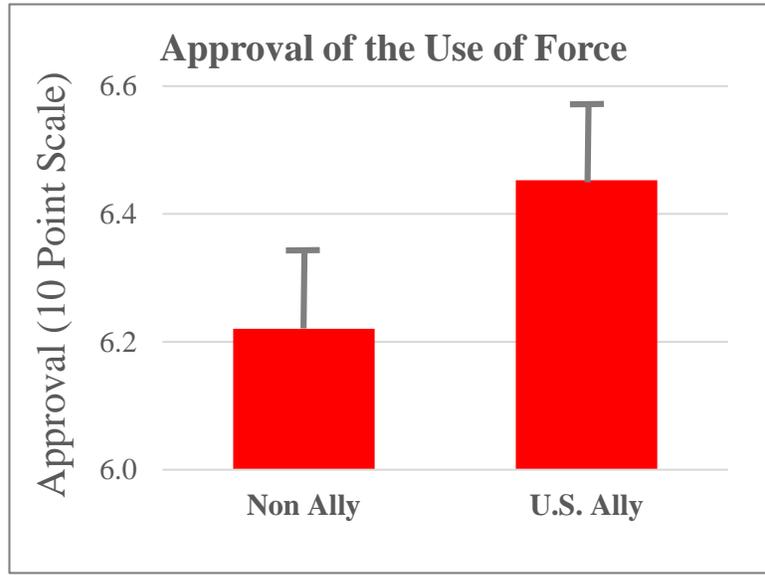
**Figure 2. Effect of Casualties.**

Figure-2 shows the effects of flag burning and nuclear weapons in Experiment 2. Both increase the willingness to go to war, with Flag Burning reaching significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level and Nuclear Weapons being significant at the threshold of  $p < 0.1$ .



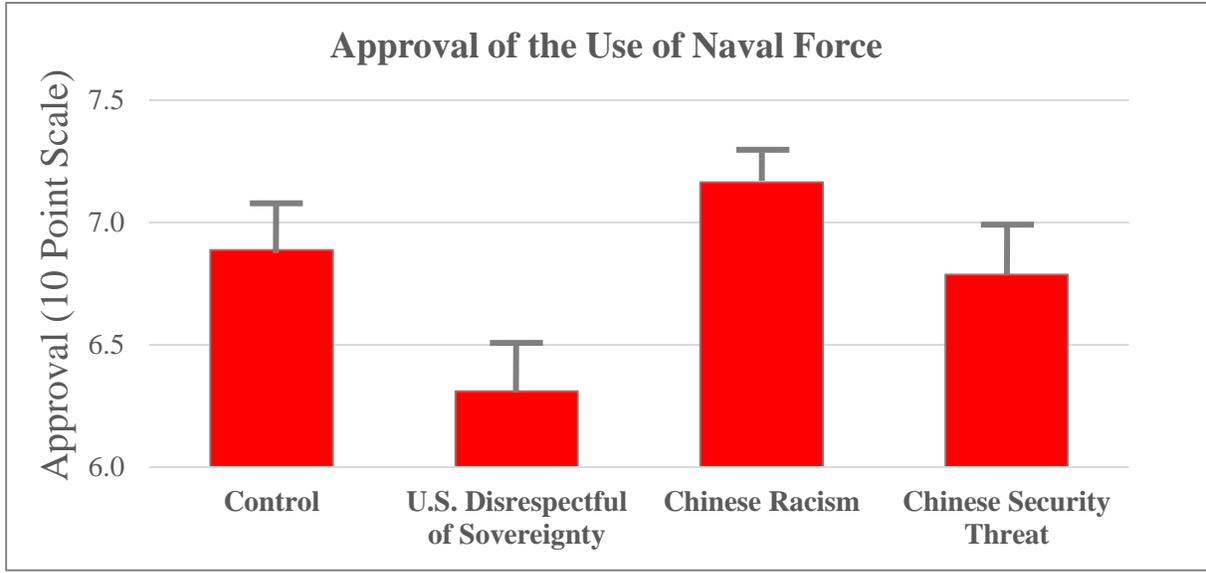
**Figure 5. Effects of Flag Burning and Nuclear Weapons.**

In Experiment 3, we see that Ally increases the desire to overthrow the dictator, with the effect being about 0.1 standard deviations ( $p < .01$ ). The effect of him breaking an agreement rounded to zero. This is consistent with H9, or the idea that people are motivated by their desire for collective self-esteem rather than general moral feelings towards the conduct of others.



**Figure 3. Effect of Alliance.**

Finally, in the last experiment, the effect of US Hypocrite, compared to the control condition, was about 0.22 standard deviations in the less hawkish direction ( $p < .001$ ). The only other treatment coming close to conventional thresholds of statistical significance was Chinese Race, where the effect was .10 standard deviations in the more hawkish direction ( $p = .07$ ). The conditions US Threat and China Unfair were statistically indistinguishable from the null prompt. In the treatment, 56% of respondents somewhat or strongly supported sending ships through the disputed waters. That dropped to 50% when the US was accused of behaving hypocritically, and was as high as 62% when the Chinese were said to be motivated by racism. Figure-3 shows support for aggressive actions under the various treatment conditions.



**Figure 4. Effects of Respect and Threat Treatments.**

## Discussion

We find support only for the odd-numbered hypotheses. In each experiment, predictions derived from the belief that citizens seek collective self-esteem had the anticipated effect, while folk realist hypotheses consistently failed. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that American casualties did not predict support for war across our sample. While this seems to contradict previous empirical work (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Eichenberg 2005), there is some evidence to suggest that the connection between casualties and support for war exists only when elites are divided and there are public doubts about potential outcomes (Larson 1996:2830; Gartner and Segura 1998). By taking a prospective rather than retrospective approach, we attempt to isolate causation directly. A mission to stop terrorism should have widespread support among the American public (Drezner 2008), and our scenario ensured the reader of success. When holding prospects for success and support for the mission constant, then, we find that only foreign, but not American casualties, predict support for war.

While the government in Experiment 2 violated international norms by holding diplomats hostage, the added insult of burning the American increased support for war. Not only did nuclear weapons not lead to more people wanting to attack, but there is weak evidence that they made Americans more eager to go to war. It appears that the infliction of symbolic harm was more important than the potential to cause actual damage in influencing support for conflict. Experiment 3 was designed to test a folk realist theory directly against a hypothesis derived from the belief that individuals seek collective self-esteem in the international arena. When the dictator in question was an ally of the United States, Americans were more likely to want to overthrow him. While realists differ on many points, all of them would likely agree that we would not expect a reputation for trustworthiness to be sacrificed for the sake of humanitarian ideals (e.g., Kydd 2005). Although this result may be inconsistent with rational choice models, it can be predicted by the moral psychology literature that tells us that individuals often engage in acts that can be described as moral cleansing, where they become more steadfast in their moral beliefs when confronted with uncomfortable tradeoffs (Tetlock et al. 2000; Jordan, Mullen, and Murnighan 2011). The findings also shed light on why in American politics there has been a long history of critics accusing our leaders of betraying our allies, particularly when they have questionable human rights records (e.g. Ledeen 2013; Berman 2001).

Finally, Experiment 4 asked opinions about an actual event. By far, the largest influence, compared to the null scenario, was in the prompt where the United States was accused of violating the sovereignty of another by unjustifiably interfering in its affairs. There was no effect when it was argued that Americans needed to stand up to China in order to maintain its relative power. In order to test our theory of collective self-esteem against the view that maybe individuals are simply influenced by any arguments about fairness, we included prompts wherein China was said to be acting unfairly or out of a sense of racial superiority. In neither of these cases was the needle moved much, implying that when they contemplated action in the international arena what Americans really cared

about was their own collective self-esteem (see Rothschild and Keefer 2017).

Overall, the results were in each experiment consistent with the idea that people seek to maintain a positive self-image in the international arena, doing so through acting in accordance with humanitarian ideals, reacting to the denigration of symbols, avoiding hypocrisy, and respecting the rights of others. Predictions derived from the folk realist literature failed, whether the harm in question was direct (potential military damage, American casualties), or more attenuated (a loss of relative power, a decline in reputation). At least when the existence of the country or its way of life is not threatened, it appears that foreign policy preferences are driven by a need to maintain a positive sense of self.

## **Conclusion**

In explaining important events and phenomena in international relations, constructivists have usually analyzed the beliefs and actions of elites. This means focusing not only the leaders of states, but also international organizations and groups outside of the government that are able to influence the state such as NGOs and the media (Checkel 2005; Sell and Prakash 2004). Until now, however, this body of research has yet to consider the possibility that the mechanisms that constructivists believe operate at the elite level also influence the general public. If, as some scholars believe, public opinion affects foreign policy in the United States and other democracies (Risse-Kappen 1991), then we have a direct link between the variables that determine the level of support for aggressive action and actual state behavior.

While our results contradict with the folk realist literature, should come as no surprise to the most prominent realists. For example, Mearsheimer (2001: ch. 1), for example, argues that Americans appear to have an especially intense antipathy toward balance-of-power thinking, because realism clashes with their basic values. Where he may be wrong is his implicit assumption that elites are

much different from the publics from which they are drawn. We believe that in the short-run and when there are threats to the survival of the state or its living standards, public opinion may resemble folk realism. For example, if a marching army were coming towards the United States, the thought of being conquered would likely overwhelm most moral considerations. But when using realistic examples that resemble decisions faced by the American public in recent history, we find that the need to maintain a positive self-image for the country predominates.

In the future, we suggest that the debate move beyond questions of whether the public is realist or not. Surely, under some circumstances it is, while in others it is immune to the likely costs of a given policy. A better question to ask is when the public puts security and power above all else, and when the desire to maintain a positive self-image is paramount. We believe that one part of the answer depends on what is at stake; the more that the survival of the state and the way of life of its people are threatened, the more self-interested and strategic the public becomes. Yet that is likely not to be the entire story. Other factors that influence how foreign policy preferences are formed are likely to include priming and framing effects (Mintz and Redd 2003; McDermott 2004:3941), the socializing effects of international institutions (Checkel 2005), and individual-level variation in personality and core moral values (Rathbun et al. 2016; Kertzer et al. 2014).

While the sample in this article was demographically representative of the United States and therefore allowed insights into public opinion, it still leaves many questions unanswered. Foreign policy elites have a disproportionate influence over public policy; do they think in terms of national interest, or are they more driven by moral consideration, as the citizenry at large appears to be? The recent historical record, as noted, implies that Americans undertake action in the international arena to serve moral ends. If it turns out that elites, like the public, do not think in terms of traditional national interests, are their symbolic and moral concerns similar to those of the masses or are they different? Future investigations should explore these questions, and also take a more cross-national

perspective. Experiments among foreign publics may show the extent to which culture determines preferences over the use of force in the international arena. Already, historians have shown that what behaviors and actions brings collective self-esteem to states has changed over time (Jackson 1993; Zacher 2001). In the current era, might it be that some regions see more war than others because of cultural differences in the foundations of collective self-esteem?

Our results suggest that, at least among Americans in the wars that they are likely to fight today, objective measures of interest do a poor job of predicting support for aggressive action. Rather, people generally want to behave morally and avoid the feeling that they are acting hypocritically. If this is true, then we may want to think differently about what it means for a foreign policy to succeed or fail. Especially with regards to recent American history, many observers have been puzzled by the discrepancy between the means deployed to achieve certain policies and the goals being pursued. According to an estimate by Stiglitz (2008), the Iraq War cost the United States \$3 trillion, most of which was spent after finding out that there were no weapons of mass destruction, the ostensible reason for the invasion in the first place. In 2011, the United States and its allies bombed Libya, in a war that destabilized North Africa and helped create the migrant crisis that may eventually lead to the end of the European Union. Scholars and commentators who believe that foreign policy should have a rationalist basis have continually felt frustrated by American behavior in the years since the end of the Cold War (Schmidt and Williams 2008).

Unfortunately for these analysts, it may be a mistake to assume that one can influence foreign policy beliefs mostly through consequentialist reasoning. While realists believe that war usually reflects a breakdown of a bargaining process, and the fear that states have of one another (Fearon 1995; Powell 2002), to constructivists, many conflicts take place because an actor perceives an attack on its self-image (Wolf 2011; Lindemann 2011). Our results imply that the goal of most Americans is collective self-esteem in the international arena, not the maximization of power. Therefore, while

American foreign policy may often fail from the perspective of preventing harm or promoting the material interests of the nation, we may have few empirical reasons to believe that those are the only goals being pursued. One may argue that normatively, the foreign policy of a nation should be consequentialist in nature, regardless of how it balances the interests of the domestic citizen against those of people living abroad. Likewise, one could argue that values such as national honor and adherence to consistent principles should not be valued highly in the realm of foreign policy, when thousands or millions of lives are often at stake. Regardless of how we answer these questions, those that want to influence and change foreign policy must first understand the sources of preferences regarding when it is desirable to use force abroad.

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